

“Animation offers a medium of story telling and visual entertainment which can bring pleasure and information to people of all ages everywhere in the world.” (Walt Disney)

Dear Chinese Film Bureau,

I am a student at Dartmouth College, who has been studying Chinese animation for the last several weeks. What follows is an attempt to explain the difficulties of marketing Chinese animation to American audiences, with suggestions on how to overcome them.

You may well wonder what insight I can offer, having spent a relatively brief period of time studying your country's cinema. However, what I lack in knowledge of Chinese film I make up for with a deep understanding of American culture and cinema, which can come only from immersion in it.

The failure of Chinese animation in penetrating American and international markets is at first perplexing, especially given the overwhelming success of Japanese works. Aesthetically, Chinese animation is very advanced, meeting and often surpassing Japanese animation. I will argue that the difficulties in marketing Chinese animation internationally stem not from a lack of visual technique, but from a misalignment between cultures. By making a few modifications to the work they produce, Chinese animators can navigate within the precepts of Western cinema, without compromising their style or cultural history.

The first step to understanding American culture is realizing that Americans — as a whole — do not understand Chinese culture. Although the idea that Chinese animation will be unfamiliar to most Americans is likely obvious, the level of unfamiliarity may well surprise you. Virtually no Americans have seen Chinese animation. Moreover, they have a very vague idea of Asian culture, and will have great difficulty differentiating between Japanese and Chinese works. Chinese animation will either have to work hard to differentiate itself from anime, or accept that it will be viewed as part of the same category.

Another key difference between China and America is that American audiences do not view animation as primarily for children. In fact, animations targeted at adults and teenagers may well be more successful on the whole, given the success of television shows like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* and the growing popularity of more mature Japanese animations like *Full Metal Alchemist*. Even shows originally intended for children — such as *My Little Pony* — have gained a cult following of older viewers who appreciate humor and subtle plot elements which are lost on younger viewers. This trend has carried into the theatre, where surprisingly adult audiences have turned out for Disney and Pixar animated features. So, Chinese animators need not worry about catering specifically to younger audiences. In fact, I would suggest that the best strategy for penetrating the American market is the exact opposite —

since the market for children's animation is already so thoroughly saturated, and many adults in the United States enjoy animation, Chinese animators are more likely to succeed by catering to older audiences. Counterintuitively, I do not mean making films with more sex and violence, nor those primarily driven by humor — but I'll get there shortly.

Another key difference between Western and Chinese animation is timing. American animations are — simply put — more action-packed than their Chinese counterparts. Less time is spent between plot developments, and more frequent cuts are made between environments. Indeed, the characters tend to move differently in Western works, almost as if they are made out of stretchy rubber rather than flesh and blood. I happen to think that the attention to more realistic biological movement is one of Chinese animation's great strengths, and that it will serve to differentiate them from American works. However, in order to appeal to Western audiences the pace of the story will have to speed up somewhat. Additionally, attention will likely have to be shifted slightly from the environment to the character's actions. Much of this could be done in post production, especially if a film is being released originally in China before being exported.

Music is another consideration. Western audiences are quite simply not going to accept Asian music, which sounds discordant to their ears. In order to

appeal to audiences abroad, Chinese animations will necessarily have to use primarily Western music. This doesn't mean that other music and sound effects should be excluded entirely, merely that they must be used judiciously with the knowledge that they may be jarring to viewers.

By the same token, you might assume that my the next suggestion will be to avoid Chinese language in the film's soundtrack. While I predict that it would be nearly impossible to get mainstream Western film culture to accept a movie whose dialogue is primarily Chinese, it would be a grave mistake to make films completely without dialogue. Even background untranslated dialogue which is non-essential to the plot would likely be more tolerable than the effectively silent void left by a purely musical soundtrack. Of course, by far the best option would be to dub over the dialogue sound — but anything other than a perfect translation with skilled voice actors will distract the viewer, and will likely draw criticisms of the film as poorly executed. Subtitles are a surprisingly attractive middle ground. They can be ignored (or turned off) by viewers who don't want them, but quickly make the film accessible to foreign audiences at a low cost.

Humor is another area of mismatch between cultures. Chinese humor is largely verbal, where Americans prefer situational irony and slapstick-style comedy. These types of humor quite literally do not translate across borders.

For this reason, Chinese animators will likely find that their success lies in drama rather than humor. This is largely where Japanese animators have found their niche. Again, since the category of humorous animation is already very well-populated by existing American animations, foreign animators have little hope of displacing them, and are better off making more serious, better-animated works than their Western competitors.

What need not be changed much is the content itself. Contrary to the popular cry that Americans will only watch shows with sex and violence, in reality they are quite willing to watch works without them. Although there may initially be some resistance to purely dramatic animated films, I think it is the only viable future for the export of Chinese animation. In order to be successful as a genre, it is imperative that Chinese animation stay true to its roots. Pure emulation of Western works will only produce shadows of the originals, which will be unable to stand up the sources of their inspiration. The best — if not only — path is to preserve as much as possible of the current style of Chinese animation: the attention to detail and movement, the themes and moral messages, the color palettes and visual style.

Having largely answered the question of what kind of animations should be produced, we come finally to the question of distribution. You may well find (or have already found) that television producers and film studios are unwilling

to buy Chinese films without proof that the American public will watch them.

This leaves only a few options. The first is to submit works to international film festivals, in the hopes that Chinese films will earn prizes and then be purchased by international markets. The disadvantage here is obvious, you would be making films to the preferences of critics, rather than their ultimate mass-market audience. But film studios and television no longer have the stranglehold on American film that they once did, and their influence is waning daily. Therefore, you may well find that the best option is to skip them entirely at first, and market more directly to American audiences through film platforms such as Youtube and Vimeo. Although there will be small initial profits unless the films become very popular, the audience you will build in the process will be valuable for demonstrating to the traditional marketing channels that Americans want to watch Chinese animation. This would be a relatively low cost option, and would likely not compete with domestic releases, as many of these platforms are unavailable in China.

Yours Sincerely,

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