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The Repressed, the Forgotten, and the Historical Continuity: On the Two Gaps in the Academic History of the Chinese School of Animation

Jifeng Huang[1], Bo Wang[2] and Ruilu Huang[1]

Abstract

Two gaps exist in the academic history of the Chinese School of Animation: the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976) and the 1990s. These two gaps are characterized by relevant studies stagnating in these periods and later researchers doing little to explore them. The gap of the Cultural Revolution period was mainly formed by the national mandatory force. By contrast, the 1990s gap was primarily caused by Chinese intellectuals' voluntary forgetting in the particular social context. The two gaps are the outcome of historical construction, and meanwhile, they generate memories about themselves. Later Chinese researchers tend to construct the historical continuity across the gaps, which enhances the future orientation of the memory of the Chinese School of Animation's past. The major strategies of constructing the historical continuity include the homogenized narrative based on aesthetic identity and the re-interpretation based on the nationality.

Keywords

Chinese animation, Chinese School of Animation, collective memory, cultural memory, Cultural Revolution, historical continuity, Shanghai Animation Film Studio

[1]Nanjing Forestry University, Jiangsu, China
[2]Wuxi University of Technology, Jiangsu, China

Corresponding author:
Ruilu Huang, Nanjing Forestry University, No. 159 Longpan Road, Xuanwu District, Nanjing, Jiangsu 210037, China.
Email: ruiluhuang@njfu.edu.cn

Introduction

The Chinese School of Animation is one of the key concepts within Chinese animation history study. As Huang (2022: 320) describes, 'Most Chinese researchers define the Chinese School of Animation as a set of meishu films with the minzu style.' The term 'meishu film' generally refers to Chinese animated films produced before the 1990s, while 'minzu style' is conventionally used by Chinese animators and scholars to refer to an artistic idea that advocates a return to Chinese traditional culture (see Huang, 2022). Such a definition 'reflects the collectivist discourse, and it canonizes and de-contextualizes the Chinese School and its meishu films, which forms a strategy for Chinese intellectuals to defend the way of the minzu style' (p.328). Some researchers, such as Chen (2015) and Qu (2011) define the Chinese School as a group of animators who share the same artistic idea, and most of them work at Shanghai Animated Film Studio (SAFS).[1] In Chinese animation studies, especially research on the Chinese School of Animation (the Chinese School), Chinese mainland scholars primarily pay attention to the so-called '17-year' period (1949–1966) and the early 1980s. These two periods are referred to as the golden ages (Lent and Xu, 2013) and two creation climaxes (Sun, 2020) of Chinese animation. By contrast, research on Chinese animation during the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976) and the 1990s is largely insufficient and somewhat fragmented, an occlusion that ultimately forms two gaps within the academic history of Chinese animation and the Chinese School of Animation. Here, the term 'gap' comes from Vansina's (1985) term 'The Floating Gap' identified in *Oral Tradition of History*. Vansina notes that:

> For recent times there is plenty of information that tapers off as one moves back through time. For earlier periods one finds either a hiatus or just one or a few names, given with some hesitation. The gap is not often very evident to people in the communities involved, but it is usually unmistakable to the researchers. (pp.23–24)

The two gaps, on the one hand, could be understood as the interruption and stagnation of academic studies due to radical social changes. During the Cultural Revolution, animated films created in the 17-year period were banned, many animators were persecuted, and academics were not allowed to conduct research work. In the 1990s, Chinese scholars focused on Western and Japanese animation, and rarely glanced at the past Chinese School of Animation (Huang, 2022). According to the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), during the period from 1990 to 2004, only one journal article (Chen et al., 1994) and a few publications of Chinese animation general history briefly mentioned the term 'Chinese School of Animation', leading to 'a gap of studies on the Chinese School [that] appeared in the 1990s' (Huang, 2022: 324).

On the other hand, later Chinese scholars have contributed little to the study of the two periods. Most related documents are comprehensive histories of Chinese animation or personal memoirs. These kinds of publications cannot just skip the two periods, yet they usually skim them with brief descriptions and shorter lengths than the 17-year period and the 1980s (see Sun, 2020; Xu and Wang, 2005; Xue et al., 2006; Yan and Suo, 2005). The limitations of such research give further prominence to the gaps within Chinese animation history, while later animation researchers (especially young people who have not directly experienced the Cultural Revolution) have also found it hard to understand these periods.

However, the existence of the historical gaps does not mean the oblivion of memories about these periods; instead, a historical gap is a construction of the memory about a certain period. In other words, forgetting is a kind of memory production, and so both the silence in the two periods and later, a process of voluntary forgetting, are the materials of memory that construct the two historical gaps. By examining the two gaps in depth, we are able to determine that their contexts,

dynamics, and methods involved in the production of memory are different. This article argues that the two historical gaps within Chinese animation history result from radical social context changes and demands by tracing the features of these two gaps and giving particular attention to their connection to the (re-)construction of the memories of Chinese animation. This article discusses the context and reasons behind why the Chinese animation community selectively ignores these two historical periods, 1966–1976 and the 1990s, the reflexive relationship between historical gaps and memory construction, and the construction of historical continuity across the historical gap. The aim is therefore to explore the terms and implications of how the continuity of the Chinese School history is constructed.

The representation of the two gaps

Before the first gap (1966–1977), there was the 17-year period during which the Chinese School formed and thrived. The phase continued the principle of 'literature and art serve workers, peasants and soldiers' that was determined in Yan'an, 1942, and emphasized films' functions as propaganda and for education. In 1956, Chairman Mao proposed the slogan 'Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend', which encouraged artists to explore diversified artistic forms and styles. Despite the CCP's policy changing several times during this period, generally, as Daisy Du (2019: 117) describes, 'controls over the cultural scene eased, allowing it to diversify as socialist realism gave way to greater variety and flexibility'. During this period, more than 500 films were produced in Mainland China, and the aesthetic paradigm of revolutionary romanticism was established. Meanwhile, some animators (such as Jin Xi and Wang Shuchen) had already begun publishing journal articles reflecting on their own creativity (see Jin, 1957, 1959, 1962, 1963; Wang, 1960). However, between 1966–1977, Chinese animators and scholars were impacted by the Cultural Revolution, and most artistic and academic outcomes during this period were criticized and refuted. Te Wei recalled this period as follows: 'The (Shanghai) Meishu Film Studio suffered even more severe devastation. Films created in the past 17 years have been almost completely denied, and they were banned for a decade' (recorded in Zhang and Gong, 2010: 128). Animators, including Wan Laiming, Te Wei and Qian Jiajun were also persecuted. After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese animation researchers rarely focused on this period since the Cultural Revolution remained a sensitive topic, with a large number of documents missing or undisclosed. As Xue et al. (2006: 27) describe, 'Nowadays, it is hard to view films in this period, and relevant documents are insufficient.' Xu and Wang (2005) further explain that 'Allegedly, five animated films were created (in the Cultural Revolution), yet all of them were miscarried (to release) since they failed to pass the censorship. We cannot even know the synopsis of these abortive films' (p.83). In short, the major reason for the first gap was the mandatory prohibition, which was decided by the state-level political situation.

By contrast, the marginalizing of the Chinese School of Animation by Chinese animation's academic community seemed altogether more spontaneous. The School itself had declined in the late 1980s, a gradual decline without a singular iconic event to announce its death. In fact, in the 1980s, many animators of Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS) actively participated in academic study and communication (Ada, 1983; Hu, 1983; Qian and Ma, 1985; Tang, 1987; Te, 1982; Wang, 1979, 1984; Zhang, 1979, 1980, 1981). They insightfully developed Chinese animation theory, which is based largely on the minzu style. In 1985, the term Chinese School of Animation was first documented by Zhang (1985: 103), which marks the theorization of the School, however the Chinese academy suddenly abandoned the Chinese School of Animation after 1989, without interference from a mandatory force as had happened during the earlier Cultural Revolution. During the 1990s, the major research interest of the Chinese animation academy had been in the

American and Japanese industries rather than the minzu style, which again contributed to the formation of a gap in Chinese animation history throughout the 1990s. This situation continued until 2004, when two pivotal policies aimed to boost the Chinese animation industry were issued, and with Chinese intellectuals' rapid response to the policy changes, the Chinese School seemed to return to the academy's view in one night (see Huang, 2022: 325).[2]

As a result of the interruption and stagnation of academic studies in Chinese animation, academic publications produced in the two periods are rare. From the present viewpoint, it seems that researchers in these two periods were collectively silenced. The silence of the Chinese animation community during the two periods inhibited the production of materials of memory (which later people use to remember the past) about the Chinese School of Animation, which led to later people forgetting the present. This forgetting is also manifested in the insufficiency in conserving pre-existing materials of memory, where a considerable number of documents were destroyed or lost, and, more importantly, much memory had not materialized or been symbolized since its carrier (the witness of those historical events) did not leave written documents. These memories vanished with the death of the witness. Due to the restrictions upon them or the lack of research interests, scholars in the gaps did little to save memories. When later scholars attempted to search for historical materials about the past, these memories were often unavailable.

This article argues that, after the 2000s, the forgetting of the two periods by many Chinese scholars was not enforced by the government (as during the Cultural Revolution); it was voluntary, even if the state's mainstream ideology has influenced academic studies. For example, the criticism of the Chinese School's idea of minzu style (such as He, 2008; Xu and Ge, 2013) disappeared 'after Chairman Xi proposed the Cultural Confidence in 2014' (Nie, 2021a: 158). The disappearance of the criticism echoes Huang's (2022: 327) argument that the concept of the Chinese School was 'bound to cultural confidence' in 2014. On the other hand, until now, Chinese researchers have generally tended to avoid the Cultural Revolution due to its political sensitivity. Typically, on CNKI, there is no research on Chinese animation that focuses on the period of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, only a few works focus on the Chinese School of Animation in the 1990s, such as Yi (2011) and Liu (2013). Researching the history of the Cultural Revolution is challenging and inefficient in China, as many relevant documents remain undisclosed and are unavailable to common researchers. Publishing institutes also maintain a cautious attitude towards books and articles about the Cultural Revolution, and some memoirs have to be published outside the mainland. For example, Qian Shanzhu and Zhu Ziyin's (2014) book, which contains Qian Jiajun's experience of being persecuted in the Cultural Revolution, has not been published in Mainland China, nor has it been available for sale. Consequently, while the history of the Chinese School has significantly improved in recent years, there has been little progress in research on these two periods. The increasing disparity between research has deepened the lack of scholarly attention given to specific periods in Chinese animation history.

The Cultural Revolution period: The mandatory forgetting and the production of its memory

The 17-year period was the first prosperous era of the Chinese School of Animation, during which Chinese animators actively explored traditional cultural resources such as fine arts, literature and folklore. It was during this time that the minzu style was shaped, and a number of high-quality animated films, such as *The Conceited General* (1956) and *Havoc in Heaven* (1961), were created. However, this golden age of the Chinese School was soon ended by the Cultural Revolution in 1966. As Duara (2013: 184) notes:

> the Chinese communist revolution sought to remake society and the human beings from below and within . . . The selection and redaction of popular cultural products – songs, stories, drama, ritual – and their circulation through a host of new media accompanied Mao's call to indigenize and popularize (minzuhua) socialism.

The peak of the CCP's efforts to remake society and the image of the human being was the Cultural Revolution. Due to the state-wide political struggle, the artistic achievements of the 17-year period were systematically and totally denied: 'Almost all films were sealed and prohibited from release, and many famous artists were persecuted' (Xue et al., 2006: 26–27). The revolutionary realism aesthetics and the motif of class struggle covered the minzu style that is rooted in Chinese traditional culture. Meishu films were 'characterized by positive heroes and revolutionary content in a contemporary setting' (Du, 2019: 152). For example, SAFS staff had to follow the dogma of the 'model operas' (样板戏, eight revolutionary operas appointed by Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao's wife), which formed the memory of this experience. Meanwhile, the political, psychological, and physiological restraints and persecutions imposed upon intellectuals dominated their comments on Chinese meishu films in the 17-year period. During the Cultural Revolution, the only mode in which people remembered SAFS during the 17-year period was the discourse of revolution and class struggles. For example,

> the achievements of the meishu films from the 17-year [period] were totally denied, a batch of meishu films with healthy content and diversified styles were negatively "demons dancing mad, poisonous weeds grow everywhere" (群魔乱舞，毒草丛生) and "cats, dogs, deities and ghosts" (小猫小狗、神仙鬼怪) and sealed; even those films that represent contemporary life, were convicted "vilifying children" and "twisting reality" and criticized; some universally accepted outstanding artworks were called "the great poisonous weed" (大毒草) and targetedly criticized (Chen, 1989: 141).[3]

Meanwhile, the theoretic achievements in the 17-year period were denied, as Zhang (1982: 14) recalls:

> This kind of (animation) research was interrupted for over a decade due to the influence of extreme-leftist ideology, the research outcome was even titled 'the theory of Bourgeois characteristics' (资产阶级特性论) and thoroughly denied, which causes a theoretic chaos.

Notably, this re-interpretation actually made some memories meet current social demands (even if as a negative example), which enabled them to be 'functional'. The term 'functional memory' is used by Assmann (2016: 151) to describe the memory that is used for legitimization, de-legitimization and distinction. In the case of the Chinese School, the memories that failed to meet the demands by being re-interpreted were mandatorily forgotten. According to Jan Assmann (2011), collective memory could be divided into two types: communicative memory and cultural memory. The media of former is 'Living, organic memories, experiences, hearsay', while the cultural is carried by 'Fixed objectifications, traditional symbolic, classification and staging through words, pictures, dance, and so forth' (p.41). After 1976, the collective memory of the Chinese School during the Cultural Revolution could be divided into two dimensions: communicative memory and cultural memory. The former could be transformed into the latter, which is the major material used by people who have not experienced the Cultural Revolution to remember/construct this history.

In the socialist era, almost all popular products were produced and distributed by national institutions (for example, most animated films were distributed by China Film Group [CFG] and produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio [SAFS], a subdivision of CFG). During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese animators' experiences of reality were stored in their bodies and minds that

worked as the vehicle of communicative memory. If one animator talks about their individual experience (for example, they had to follow the dogma of the 'model operas' in their animation creation), with another, the individual memory stored in the brain is translated into linguistic symbols and forms the communicative memory. According to post-trauma theory, some impactful, traumatic experiences may influence the memory subject and shape a post-traumatic subject, which may, in turn, influence the subject's construction of the memory. For individuals, the trauma in life may be 'related to the body, mind, or spirit, triggering the subject's corresponding reactions in cognition, emotion, and value judgment, and causing varying degrees of impact on the latter's life' (Zhao, 2015: 111). On the cultural level, 'When individuals and groups feel that they have experienced terrible events, leaving indelible marks on their collective consciousness, becoming permanent memories, and fundamentally and irreversibly changing their future, the cultural trauma occurs' (Alexander and Wang, 2011: 23). In the post-socialist era, many Chinese animators and scholars were still in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and many were reluctant to remember or record the painful past. For example, as Wan (1986) (the director of *Havoc in Heaven*) wrote in his memoir, 'I cannot nor [do I] want to describe my encounters, since this would touch my serious emotional trauma' (p.155).

Mandatory forgetting also produces memories about itself. One example is the renaming of SAFS as the Red Guard Film Studio, which separated the studio's historical connection from its 17-year history. This renaming was a mandatory forgetting of the past, which aimed to deny the legitimacy of the minzu style based on traditional culture. SAFS staff, as witnesses, recorded and carried out the experience of this renaming event. Later, when they needed to remember things such as the Cultural Revolution or the history of SAFS, this experience became their material of memory.

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim (1995[1895]) proposed that 'the social fact is a thing distinct from its individual manifestations' (p.7), and 'a social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals' (p.10). The cultural memory theory follows the Durkheimian tradition and assumes that an individual's remembrance is influenced by social context and the rememberer's condition. Therefore, the communicative memory is unstable. The rememberer may modify, hide, or misremember the memory when facing different people, in different contexts, and under psychological or physiological conditions. For example, as Wan Guchan (1995: 30) noted in his memoir:

> the early documents have been lost, and the time and location of many events that must be written down cannot be accurately told. I have to use terms such as 'maybe' and 'perhaps' to show doubt. My brothers who cooperated with me in the early years are also facing this difficulty. Everyone's description of the past relies entirely on memory, so conflicts inevitably arise in the details.

More importantly, since the rememberer's body carries the organic memory, that memory will vanish with the death of the carrier.

To conserve the memory beyond the carrier's lifespan, the memory has to be solidified into physical forms. Assmann (2016) points out that communicative memory can be solidified into physical forms, which transforms communicative memory into cultural memory. Unlike communicative memory, the vehicle of cultural memory would include texts, rituals, spaces and mementos, which would not vanish with people's death, nor necessarily rely on people's narrating in order to communicate. After 1976, some SAFS members wrote memoirs that included their experiences in the Cultural Revolution, such as Wan (1986) and Pu (2014), and this publishing work recorded and expressed the material of memory in their brains in a physical and symbolic form. Younger researchers, who have never experienced the Cultural Revolution, mainly use cultural memory to recall this period.

People have to symbolize and articulate the stored materials of memory in a particular social context, and the symbolized memory is usually censored and edited before being published. Consequently, the transition from communicative memory to cultural memory is, very possibly, a process of reconstruction. Specifically, the Cultural Revolution has remained politically sensitive in China until now. Relevant memory possesses post-traumatic characteristics, which enhance the difficulty of remembering, narrating and communicating its memory. Regarding some ignoble events in the Cultural Revolution, the people involved may attempt to hide the shame of the past, and other witnesses usually avoid directly exposing them due to China's features of the society based on personal relationships (人情社会). For example, in Li's (2011: 39) remembrance of Qian Jiajun, Qian was persecuted for joining the Chinese National Party, and 'the most unacceptable was, among the people who persecuted him, there was Qian's student(s)'. We do not know if it was Qian, Li, or someone else's decision to hide this student's name, yet this record was clearly censored before being published, showing how communicative memories have been modified and reconstructed after being turned into cultural memory.

Alongside the communicative memory with origins from individuals' experience, some files, documents and other archives (e.g. photographs and posters) produced in the Cultural Revolution were preserved, and they were essential materials of the memory of this era. Among them were meishu films produced during the Cultural Revolution, which were primary materials by which people could remember the 1966–1976 Chinese School. There were 17 films, such as *After School* (1972), *Little Trumpeter* (1973) and *Little Sentinel of East China Sea* (1973). However, these films were rarely mentioned or screened after 1976 and were almost forgotten as if they had never existed. This forgetting of these texts is also part of a reconstruction of the Chinese Animation School's history.

The 1990s: Voluntary forgetting in the opening social context

The term 'socialist era' is generally used to refer to the historical period of PRC from 1949 to 1976, which is considered to be 'the result of the new state ideology introduced by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949' (Bolesta, 2014: 55). With Mao's passing and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China has experienced a thorough and in-depth social transformation centred on reform and opening-up. The mental liberation and transformation of the market economy have guided China into the post-socialist/post-Mao era. The drastic social transformation and the importing of Western culture deconstructed the socialist value system established in 1949, and further led the 'cultural great discussion' (also called 'cultural fever' by Zhang, 1996: 35). With the progress of reform and opening, the socialist market economy was established in early 1990, and Chinese society experienced a profound change in its politics, economics and culture. The Chinese School entered a prosperous time in the early 1980s, yet with the deepening of the economic reformation, it rapidly devitalized in the late 1980s, and the Chinese animation market was over-run by foreign animation.

Against this background, and although there were no mandatory forces prohibiting study in the Chinese School, the Chinese animation academy voluntarily kept silent about this issue, forming the second historical gap that covers the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, only a few publications included the Chinese School. The forgetting of the Chinese School's brilliant past could be understood as a result of national pride and as a way to question the current weakness of Chinese animation. Furthermore, the voluntary forgetting of the Chinese School questioned the past planned economy from the current (market economy stage) since the Chinese School was seen as the product of the planned economy and the nationwide system. Researching the dead Chinese School of Animation born under the old system (in Xu and Ge's, 2013, terminology, an institutional art) became ill-timed in the 1990s.

Unlike the mandatory prohibition and political criticism of meishu films during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese School was in the process of being forgotten in the 1990s and early 2000s, and was rarely remembered and expressed. The once-brilliant Chinese School was gone, and SAFS's decline was generally seen as the result of the failure to adapt to the market economy. Before the introduction of the Cultural Confidence policy in 2014, many Chinese intellectuals believed that American and Japanese animation were market-oriented and industrialized, while 'The "Chinese School" remained the animation creation idea of the planned economy era in the 20th century, lacking the driving force for innovation and interest in combining with commerce' (He, 2008: 181) and 'The vicious cycle in the industrial chain led to insufficient investment in funds, making it difficult for domestic animation to strive for excellence in production. The significant decline in artistic quality once again caused audiences' rejection of domestic animation' (Xu, 2004: 8). Nie (2021a: 157) notices that 'Since the system reform in the 1990s, the [quality of] Chinese animation has collapsed . . . Around the year 2000, there emerged an idea that attributes the decline of Chinese animation to its minzu-isation.' Nie further reflects on Chinese animation academia in the 1990s, identifying that 'Some official institutions and authoritative individuals in our country vigorously promoted Western animation theories. The concept of "meishu films" was abandoned and replaced by the Western concept of "animation"' (p.159). However, at that time, most animators of SAFS remained active in animation production and theoretical exploration (for instance, Zhang, 1992, Hu, 1997 and Qian, 1997, all published journal articles during this period). They, too, were attempting to find a way for Chinese animation in the market economy age. For example, *Lotus Lantern* (1999) is seen as a case of learning from the foreign animation industry, and 'The biggest difference between its production process and previous meishu films in China is that it adopts the international mode of animation production' (Xu and Wang, 2005: 178). At the time, this possibly led scholars to avoid directly involving the Chinese School and meishu film animators when they were fiercely criticizing Chinese animation's low quality and weak market performance in the 1990s, and the Chinese School gradually turned into a proud symbol that was far removed from reality and referred to the past glories of Chinese animation (Huang, 2022). As He (2008: 180) comments, 'The fact that the "Chinese School" made a huge impact on the world is something to be proud of and delighted about, but its rapid decline is also regrettable.' In other words, the forgetting of the Chinese School was partially caused by the collective avoidance of quoting this concept, which denied the Chinese School's influence on Chinese animation in the 1990s, and finally separated the (declined) 1990s from the (glorious) history of the Chinese School.

The major rationale for this separation was the low quality of Chinese animation in the 1990s, and its basic logic came from the ontology of the Chinese School. Huang (2022) traces the origins and definition of the term Chinese School of Animation, which was defined by the mainstream Chinese academy as a batch of excellent, international, award-winning meishu films. This definition comes from Zhang's (1985) article (the first written record of this term), which notes 'Many friends in the international cinema industry unanimously agreed that Chinese meishu films "have already achieved the first class over the world", and shaped "the Chinese School of Animation"' (Zhang, 1985: 103). In the 1980s, the theorization of Chinese animation commenced, and it centred on the Chinese School of Animation (Nie, 2021b: 47). As a SAFS member, Zhang's definition of the Chinese School was undoubtedly impacted by the collective ideology and the sense of national pride. However, Zhang's authoritative identity and status in Chinese animation (as a veteran SAFS animator, Secretary-General of the China Animation Association, Chief Editor of the painting magazine *Sun Wukong*, and President of the Jilin Animation Institute) influenced later scholars. Until now, the mainstream Chinese academy has followed Zhang's definition, which, intentionally or unintentionally, has raised the status of meishu films to the level of artifacts (Huang, 2022: 321), which Sun (2020: 147) calls 'artistic animation', the opposite of 'commercial animation'.

The forgetting here provides space for later scholars to interpret this history. Some researchers interpret the decline of the 1990s in a positive light; they highlight the decade's function of connecting links between the 1980s (the second climax/golden age) and the new century (the starting point of the Chinese animation industry). The 1990s were also depicted as a stage of transition, exploration and accumulation. For example, as Sun (2020: 143) records, throughout the 1990s:

> Although American animation brings great impact to Chinese animation, it also accelerates the formation of Chinese animation market and the support of national policies and regulations. The animation industry of this period has trained technical talents for Chinese animation production, as well as promoted the rise of domestic animation series and the standardization of animation education.

This narrative reduces the negative aspects (the domestic market was dominated by foreign animation) but emphasizes the positive influence of the 1990s.

However, this separation denies the influence of the Chinese School on later Chinese animation. As a result, from the perspective of academic history, the Chinese School seemed to vanish in one night, without much heritage remaining. Since the Chinese School's meishu films were classified and raised to the level of artifact, their non-replicability also weakened the minzu style's reference value to later Chinese animation in a marketized and industrialized context. Therefore, constructing a historical continuity that bridges the two ends of the gap of the 1990s became one of the critical issues of Chinese animation research in the new century.

Constructing historical continuity across the gaps

The concept 'historical continuity' was introduced to the discipline of history by Droysen (2006), in a book first published in 1977 but reprinted as teaching materials in 1982. Historical continuity contains three levels of understanding: (1) the temporal continuity of history based on assumption of linear time; (2) the continuity of the historical process, which involves the driving forces, starting and ending points, and trends of continuous of history; and (3) an epistemological construction of history, which reviews history as a temporally continuous process based on the relevance between history events. Historical continuity plays a significant role in the continuation of cultural traditions. It is a crucial basis by which the memory of the past could provide identity and cohesiveness for the present. On this level, Chinese researchers tend to bridge the two ends of the gaps while skipping or skimming over the gaps. In other words, they attempt to construct a new continuous history of the Chinese School that does not contain the gaps.

For the period of 1966 to 1976, a homogenized narrative was widely used to construct an aesthetic-based continuity in the context of the Mental Liberation (one of CCP's key policies after the Cultural Revolution) in the 1980s, which took the form of literary works that remembered and reflected on the Cultural Revolution. They proliferated after 1976, and they were known as 'scar literature' (伤痕文学) and 'educated youth literature' (知青文学) as they took the Cultural Revolution as the object of memory and narrated their experiences (usually traumatic) in this period.[4] This period was supposed to be a phase for researching the memory of the past Cultural Revolution since at this time Chinese society encouraged people to reflect on the past decade, with many people willing to express their experiences.

During this period, Chinese animators faced complicated situations. Many of them enjoyed the once-lost freedom of artistic creation, and they worked hard to make up for the past decade, which led to the second golden age of the Chinese School. On the other hand, the market economy reforms and the opening up of China brought impacts and influence from foreign animation. Yet the reflections of Chinese animators and scholars, as this article argues, were based on the

condition that animation production during the Cultural Revolution was a detour or represented the wrong way, and it did not belong to the Chinese School. Besides, the Chinese School declined in the late 1980s and the 1990s, so Chinese animation fell into the age of outsourcing. Most Chinese animators and intellectuals focused on learning American and Japanese industrial experiences, and this phase of saving the memory of the Cultural Revolution was not given full attention. Later, in the new century, when some scholars realized the importance of this forgotten history, several oral history projects were launched. For example, the China Film Archive has done much work in collecting and organizing materials on the history of Chinese animation and has also published *Chinese Film Encyclopedia – Animated Volume (1923–2010)* (2012), which includes many interviews and research articles on Chinese animators. However, before that time, much memory had already vanished, due to witnesses of the period suffering from ill health or passing on, and thus this historical gap remained unfilled.

Later animation researchers need to face this historical fracture. Given existing studies of Chinese animation history, we could conclude that Chinese scholars have applied a narrative strategy, namely homogenization, to bridge both ends of this gap to reach a historical continuity. This article borrows this term to describe a systematic and integrative thinking mode of the Chinese School's history. From this viewpoint, if we see the history of the Chinese School as an entirety, it is composed of heterogeneous stages or periods (the 17-year period, the Cultural Revolution period and the 1980s). Chinese researchers tend to emphasize the commonalities of the two stages at the two ends of the gap. By doing so, the two stages are bridged, and a homogeneous continuity is created. For example, the two stages (the 17-year period and the 1980s) are often bridged across the Cultural Revolution period as homogeneous. The typical narrative is to describe the 1980s as 'recovered Chinese meishu films' artistic features and styles' (Bao and Liang, 1995: 25), 'a new era of prosperity once again' (Yan and Suo, 2005: 101), the second golden age (Zhang and Gong, 2010: 142), or 'the second climax (of animation creation)' (Li et al., 2012: 68). These descriptions are based on the assumption that the two stages of the Chinese School are homogeneous and continuous.

Accordingly, the (heterogeneous) Cultural Revolution stage is separated from Chinese School history. This period is rhetorically recorded as a detour. Bao Jigui's (2010: 154) depiction of the Cultural Revolution period is representative, noting that:

> Due to the influences of a series of wrong theories such 'three highlights' (the dogma of art creating promoted by Jiang Qing: highlighting positive figures among all figures; highlighting heroic figures among positive figures; and highlighting major heroic figures among heroic figures), SAFS could only produce extreme-leftist meishu films, and went in the wrong direction in major issues including the aesthetic features, production principles and service objects of meishu films.

The widely used term 'detour/wrong direction' is intended to separate the revolutionary realism films from the Chinese School (the right direction), and defend the Chinese School's aesthetic homogeneity. Other similar records about Chinese animation in the 1980s include: 'the artists' creative passion, which has been repressed for many years (during the Cultural Revolution), erupted, and they created a large number of excellent artworks' (see Yan and Suo, 2005: 102). Zhang and Gong (2010: 142) underline that 'Te Wei regained the leadership position in SAFS, restored to his former post.' These descriptions also bridge the 17-year period and the post-Cultural Revolution age.

This homogeneous narrative raises a question: should we consider revolutionary realistic meishu films created during the Cultural Revolution, for example, *Little Sentinel of East China Sea* (1973) and *Trial Trip* (1976), as belonging to the Chinese School? According to existing publications, revolutionary realistic meishu films are seemingly not considered as belonging to the Chinese

School since they are dominated by Jiang Qing's dogmas. Zhang and Gong (2010) describe revolutionary realistic meishu films as being 'strangely linked to class struggles', and even Te Wei's (1976: 138–142) paper-cut film *The Golden Wild Goose* (*jinse de dayan*) is 'influenced by the extreme leftist ideology and violated the aesthetic principles of paper-cutting films'. As Yan and Suo (2005: 95) note, 'even little heroes had to "stand on high hills" (站高坡) and "sing in high tune" (唱高调) . . . (which) completely breaks the pattern of animated films.' 'This wrong opinion . . . made meishu films increasingly similar to live-actions' (Qian, 1984: 130) and finally shaped 'a strange kind that was neither akin to meishu film nor akin to live-actions' (Bao and Liang, 1995: 25). Even the celebrated film *Heroic Little Sisters on the Grassland* (1964) is commented on by Qian (1984: 132) (the director of the film) as an exception:

> Though *Grass* has won an extent of success, it can never be used as a proof that the meishu film is not necessarily particular about (artistic) characteristics . . . The method of serious drama, like *Grass*, as an experiment is acceptable, yet should not be too much.

Du (2019), from another viewpoint, concludes that a key feature of Chinese animation in the Cultural Revolution was the dis/appearance of animals. She argues that 'Animals as both biological creatures and representations in film disappeared . . . Their disappearance marked the start of the Cultural Revolution and its return ten years later marked the end' (p.179). This depiction of aesthetic returning also shows the features of homogeneous narrative, and the Cultural Revolution, as a heterogeneous part, is excluded from the history of the Chinese School. Accordingly, the memory of the Chinese School may exclude the period of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, many artists of SAFS were persecuted, or had to give up their artistic idea of the road of minzu style (also the core of the Chinese School). For them, the Cultural Revolution was wasted in vain. Some animators, such as Wan (1986) and Wan (1995), recalled that, after the Cultural Revolution, they became old, their health was weaker and they did not have the energy to create meishu films as before. However, the homogeneous narrative tends to ignore the Cultural Revolution's influence on animators' physical and mental conditions.

The construction of historical continuity across the 1990s, on the other hand, is nationality-based, mainly by recalling and re-interpreting memory. In 2004, two policies were issued, and this is the year defined as the 'birth of the Chinese animation industry' (Pan, 2021: 14). As a rapid response to the political and industrial change, the Chinese School returned to the academy's view scope, and the second gap in the Chinese School's academic history was at an end. The end of this gap seems to reflect the accomplishment of the marketization and industrialization of Chinese animation. In another dimension, from the 1990s onwards, Chinese intellectuals 'began to reflect on the radicalism caused by separating tradition since the 4th May movement' (He, 2016: 43) and, as a result, the traditional discourse reemerged as dominant. Under this social and cultural context, the Chinese School, as the symbol of minzu style and traditional culture, was recalled from the repository of culture to provide the theoretical basis for the current direction (return to the minzu style instead of imitating foreign animation). In other words, Chinese animation transitioned from the stored memory to the functional memory.

The two gaps in the history of the Chinese School were formed due to drastic social changes. In the Cultural Revolution and the 1990s, new social demands rapidly covered previous demands, which led to the forgetting of the Chinese School. However, the previous demands, such as the 'two hundred (a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend)' policy and the traditional discourse, were covered but not eliminated. With the social mainstream changes again the once-covered social demands would return to the mainstream, ending the historical gap. This spiral variation of social contexts and demands is rooted in the dualistic tradition–modern/

China–Western discourse structure that formed after the May Fourth Movement. The circle of social demands allows people to find similarities between the two ends of one age(gap) and, furthermore, construct a historical continuity that bridges the two ends. This approach could be supported by Chinese intellectuals' description of the revival of discourse that was once mainstream (in the further past) but was repressed in the recent past. For example, 'The traditional culture and nationalist discourse regain the advantage' (He, 2016: 43), 're-implement the policy of "a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend"' (Bao, 2010: 160)', 'Te Wei re-affirmed "the national is the global"' (Zhang and Gong, 2010: 108), and the widely used descriptor 'the second climax/golden age'.

This detour metaphor for the historic gaps of the Chinese School, usually marked with 're(-)' or 'the second', implies recalling the once mainstream to the current, which forms the continuity across the recent historical gap. For example, at the beginning of the new century, the national style regained dominance and the Chinese School was remembered. Therefore, at that time, 'authors tend to quote "the Chinese School" to serve as the contrast to the current work's unsatisfactory status quo' (Li, 2007: 142). After 2014, depictions such as the return/revival of the Chinese School were used in commenting on those outstanding animations with Chinese themes and visual styles (such as *Return of the Monkey King*, 2015). The intertextuality between the past Chinese School and the current animation bridges the two ends of the recent heterogeneous age (the gap) and constructs the historical continuity. The narrative strategy below could be traced. Firstly, as discussed above, scholars define the Chinese School as a group of meishu films, which classifies and decontextualizes these films. This turns the Chinese School into a wholly nostalgic symbol that is directed to the once-glorious minzu style that is waiting for revival. The dark 1990s is re-interpreted as a stage of transformation and accumulation, which accrues talented animators and production experience for the Chinese animation industry of the new century. Finally, based on the preparation above, scholars in the new century could announce that it is time to make Chinese animation brilliant again, which links the past golden age of the Chinese School to the current. This narrative separates the dark gap of the 1990s from the history of Chinese schools, and it bridges the two ends of this gap by underlining the artistic proposition of the minzu style.

Recently, Chinese scholars such as Pan (2021) and Zhou (2024) have proposed the concept of 'the Chinese School of New Animation'. For Pan (2021: 17), this concept is 'not the theoretical system construction of a creative genre in Chinese animation, but the theoretical system of the entire mainstream animation in China in the "new era"'. Sun (2024: 4), on the other hand, proposed 'The Cultural Vein of Chinese School of Animation', which emphasizes 'tracing the origination of the concept "Chinese School of Animation", re-underlining its practical significance . . . [and] conducting contemporary exploration of the succession and innovation of the "Chinese School of Animation"'. These concepts, similarly, recall and underline the current meaning of the past term 'Chinese School' based on the historical intertextuality between the present and the past, significantly enhancing the future orientation of this memory.

Conclusion

In summary, Chinese scholars generally do not regard the Cultural Revolution period as a section of Chinese School history. The detour metaphor and the homogenization narrative are intended to bridge the 17-year period and the 1980s to maintain the aesthetic identity of the Chinese School. Meanwhile, since the Chinese School had declined in the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals tend to exclude this period when recalling the memory of the Chinese School as a symbol of a brilliant history of Chinese animation. This article concludes with several methods that are applied by the Chinese academy to construct the continuity of the Chinese School academic history. The first one

is to define the Chinese School as meishu films rather than animations, which classifies, decontextualizes and de-diachronizes the Chinese School to produce a temporally homogeneous history of the Chinese School. The second is to maintain the aesthetic identity by separating out the heterogeneous historical stages. The heterogeneous stages (such as the Cultural Revolution) are described as a detour or the wrong way, and films produced in the heterogeneous stage are regarded as nonconformist with the aesthetic features of the meishu films (the noumenon of the Chinese School). The third is to re-interpret the heterogeneous stages as a phase of transformation, preparation and accumulation. By doing so, a causal continuity is established between different stages.

Memory is based on the present-based and future-oriented social construct of the past, and the historical gaps are a form of the construction of memory. Both the beginning and the ending of a historical gap are the results of drastic social changes. When these changes happen and the Chinese School declines, scholars forget the Chinese School, due to either irresistible force or voluntary choice. Similarly, while the Chinese School is being revived, it is recalled by the academy and its memory shifts from reserved memory to functional memory. The historical intertextuality between the present and the past constructs historical continuity, which supports the legitimacy and righteousness of the current ideologies, policies and opinions.

Ethical approval

This study is a theoretical analysis of the academic history of the Chinese School of Animation, which does not involve human participants, animal experiments, or any procedures requiring ethical approval. Therefore, no ethical approval was sought for this research and no informed consent was necessary.

Author contributions

Huang Jifeng carried out the writing–original craft work (of the CRediT) and wrote the major initial draft.
Wang Bo carried out resources works, collected and sorted various related documents.
Huang Ruilu carried out conceptualization, writing-review and editing. She provided the major idea and frame of this article, and improved the first edition of the draft.

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Data availability statement

This is a theoretical and historiographical study that primarily relies on the analysis of existing academic literature, published works and publicly available archival records. No new primary data were generated during the research process. All referenced sources are fully cited in the manuscript and are accessible through standard academic databases.

Declaration of definitive version

The authors confirm that this article is the definitive version.

ORCID iD

Jifeng Huang https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4313-7552

Notes

1. This article adopts the original Chinese order (family names, given names) for Chinese mainland authors' and animators' names.
2. CPC Central Committee and the State Council's Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Ideological and Moral Construction of Juveniles (*zhonggongzhongyang, guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin weichengnianren sixiangdaode jianshe de ruogan yijian*) and Several Opinions on Developing Chinese Film and Television Animation Industry (*guanyu fazhan woguo yingshidonghua chanye de ruogan yijian*).
3. This citation is translated from Chinese, with the original text of the Chinese literature in parentheses.
4. The scar literature is a type of literature that once dominated Chinese mainland literary circles in the 1980s and 1990s. It comes from Lu Xinhua's short novel *Scar* (1978). The scar literature reflects on the experience of the Cultural Revolution and possesses a strong tragic theme. The 'educated youth literature' describes the educated youths' lives in the Cultural Revolution. During this period, educated youth on the Chinese mainland were ordered to leave the city and go to the poor countryside or frontier. The educated youth literature mainly depicts their painful experiences and also expresses their complex emotions about that period.

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Author biographies

Jifeng Huang finished his PhD programme at RMIT University in 2015. His research interests cover animation, installation art and communication. Dr Huang is currently working at the College of Humanities and Social Science, Nanjing Forestry University.

Bo Wang is currently a lecturer at Wuxi Institute of Technology. Before his academic career in Digital Media Studies, Dr Wang worked in the Chinese media industry for more than five years and graduated from Victoria University of Wellington as a PhD in Media Studies. His expertise and research interests focus on digital media, user analysis and media culture.

Ruilu Huang, obtained a PhD in Film Studies from Communication University of China, and is a Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Sciences, Nanjing Forestry University, with her research focusing on the history of Chinese cinema and Cultural Studies