

## Story of the monkey: The modular narrative and its origin of <The Uproar in Heaven>

- I. Introduction
- II. The character-driven strategy and the hero of class struggle
- III. Shifting plotlines and mirror structure
- IV. Influence of the Zhanghui style
- V. Conclusion

Wang, Lei

### 초 록

The essay explores the narrative structure of the classical Chinese feature animation, <The Uproar in Heaven> (a.k.a. Da Nao Tian Gong, 1964). The film is presented with a modular structure which is quite unique compared with the storytelling in feature animated films from other cultures, but could be connected with the tradition narrative structure in Chinese Zhanghui style novels in Ming and Qing Dynasty. By relating the original text of the story, the 16th century novel Journey to the West (a.k.a. Xi You Ji), with the film <The Uproar in Heaven>, the essay addresses the question of how the narrative tradition in Chinese classical literature influenced the Uproar in Heave for its segment narrative structure, character driven storytelling strategy and mirrored repetitive 2 plot lines. The subject of this essay is even more significant after the restored 3D version of <The Uproar in Heaven> was re-released in the spring of 2012 and became one of the best-selling animated feature film in the history of the country.

Key Word : Chinese animation, Non-linear narrative, <The Uproar in Heaven>

## I . Introduction

The stories of the Monkey King(a.k.a. Sun Wukong), the skilled fighter with supernatural strength, 72 transformations into various animals and objects, and super-fast traveling skills of 54,000 kilometers in one somersault, has been the most popular childhood fantasy of Chinese for hundreds of years. The original text, *Journey to the West* (a.k.a. *Xi You Ji*), was written in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty and attributed to Wu Cheng'en, though the visual imagination of the story in a contemporary Chinese mind is usually based on the film <The Uproar in Heaven> produced by the Shanghai Animated Film Studio in 1964, as well as the live action TV series produced by CCTV in 1986. The earlier one is possibly more influential in the animation world than any other adaptations of the story.

<The Uproar in Heaven> was believed to be the peak of the First Flourish Era of Chinese animation<sup>1)</sup> between 1957 and 1965. This era is also known for the new animation style exploration of the artist in the Shanghai Animated Film Studio, under the tenet of “Chinese animation should follow away with ethnical style.” The first half of the film (50minutes) was completed and screened in 1961, but the second half (70minutes) which was completed in 1964 was not allowed to be screened under the political atmosphere before the up coming Culture Revolution(1966-1976). The whole film was finally screened in 1978, which make sit the last important Chinese animation production before the

---

1) Zhang, Huilin, *The history of Chinese animation art in the 20th century*, Xi'an: Shanxi People's Fine Art Press, 2002, p.85. (张慧临, 『20世纪中国动画艺术史』, 西人民美术出版社. 2002, 85页.)

Culture Revolution and the first animated film sensation after it.

In this essay, I am especially interested in the modular narrative structure of <The Uproar in Heaven>, which is an interesting prelude of the non-linear narrative in the contemporary animated films. As scholars as Lev Manovich<sup>2)</sup> and Allan Cameron<sup>3)</sup> argued, modular narrative influenced by the digital data base model has been one of the key trend in cinema since the 1990s. Allan Cameron described the characteristics of the modern modular narrative films as<sup>4)</sup>:

Contemporary modular narratives do not adhere to this definition of classical narrative. Many of the films I will be discussing create their narrative effect by structuring the syuzhet in radically achronological, elliptical or repetitive ways. The characteristic structures of modular narratives can be created through temporal fragmentation, through the juxtaposition of conflicting versions of events or through the organization of narrative material by non-narrative principles. In these films, narrational order (presented by the syuzhet) may differ radically from story order (that of the fabula). These divergences may even impede audiences' efforts to establish causal, spatial and temporal relations within the story.

In <The Uproar of Heaven>, we can find that the syuzhet/plot is treated with juxtaposition of two repetitive parts of very similar structures, and the plot events in the film are merely segments with weak causality relationship. Although the modular narrative structure in <The Uproar in

---

2) Manovich, Lev., *The language of new media*, MIT Press, 2001, p.293.

3) Cameron, Allan, *Modular narratives in contemporary cinema*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp.3-10.

4) Cameron, A., 위의 책, p.4.

Heaven> has a similarity with the works of the contemporary animation artists as Richard Linklater, Satoshi Kon and Masaaki Yuasa, the culture origin of the two trends are obviously very different. The western researchers usually trace the origin of the modular narrative films since 1990s back to the western writers as Laurence Sterne, James Joyce and Luigi Porandello<sup>5)</sup>, while the non-linear narrative tradition in Chinese literature and theatre and the early exploration in Chinese animated films have been long ignored.

This essay compares and analyzes the narrative structure of the original story in the 16<sup>th</sup> century novel and the 1964 animated film. The main argument is that the modular narrative structure with characteristic s of weak causality between plot events, character-driven storytelling strategy and the mirrored/repetitive plot line, all part of the legacy of Chinese classical literature, has been treated as one of the main approaches of political correction and development of the ethnical animation style in the pre-culture-revolutionary era. The former researches mostly focused on the traditional visual art style revived in <The Uproar in Heaven>, while this essay will explore the storytelling aspect.

## **II. The character-driven strategy and the hero of class struggle**

In order to understand the artistic choices of <The Uproar in Heaven>, it is necessary to explain a little bit on the production background of the film. The key artist behind the film was Wan Laiming, the pioneer of Chinese animation who

---

5) Miller, Carolyn Handler, *Digital storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment*, Elsevier, 2004, pp.10-12.

produced the first Chinese short animation in 1926 with his brothers. In the biography based on his dictation, *Sun Wukong and Me*<sup>6)</sup>, Wan mentioned his obsession of the Monkey King stories since he was a child. Wan and his brothers completed the first animated feature film in the history of Asia in 1941, *the Princess of Iron Fan*, which is also based on Journey to the West. Wan's big dream in late 1950s, while he was working for the newly established Shanghai Animated Film Studio, was to adapt the most famous part, the first 7 chapters of Journey to the West into an animated film. His idea was supported by the studio in the upcoming movement of new animation with ethnical style. *Te Wei*, the director of the studio in that period, once said: "Animation...without respect of the ethnical heritage and style, is reflection of the capitalism thoughts, and lack of patriotism<sup>7)</sup>." The new style with strong Chinese characteristics was not only just an aesthetic need, but also a political task.

<The Uproar in Heaven> is not just an adaption of the 16<sup>th</sup> century novel. It is also a text of political propaganda on the class struggle theory. The production was very politically correct because of another fan of the monkey, Mao Tse-tung himself. Mao used Monkey King to express his political ideas in different occasions. In a talk with representative from the literary and art circles in March 8 of 1957, Mao described the Monkey King as a rebelling hero

---

6) Wan, Laiming (dication), Wan, Guohun, *Sun Wukong and Me*, Beiyue Literature & Art Press, 1986, pp.113-114. (万籁鸣(口述), 万国魂(执笔), 『我与孙悟空』, 北岳文艺出版社, 1986, 113-114页).

7) Wu, Yigong (ed.), *Shanghai film chronicles*, Shanghai Social Science Academy Press, 1999, p.204. (吴贻弓等编, 『上海电影志』, 上海社会科学院出版社, 1999, 204页.)

who fights against corrupted bureaucracy<sup>8</sup>). In Mao's poem To Guo Moruo(1961), he used the monkey again : *"The Golden Monkey wrathfully swung his massive cudgel. And the jade-like firmament was cleared of dust. Today, a miasmal mist once more rising. We hail Sun Wukong, the wonder-worker."* It was obvious that an animated film of the rebelling monkey was politically "safe" enough to be produced and possibly adequate to make Mao happy. In the film, the monkey was treated as metaphor of the revolutionists, and the bureaucratic system in the heaven was metaphor of its counterpart in the reality<sup>9</sup>). According to Wan Laiming, the key issue in writing the script was how to make the Monkey King into a new character, a working class revolutionist<sup>10</sup>). The character-driven structure in film was thus a natural choice. Since the monkey has to be the political correct revolutionist through the whole film, there is no strong objective for the protagonist, the dramatic conflict is weak, and even the continuum of plot events is not important anymore. These artistic choices were very different compared with the storytelling conventions in the western feature animated films. This point gave the film even more political rightness since the Disneyesque films were considered product of capitalism at that time.

As J. J. Murphy's study on American independent cinema argued<sup>11</sup>), the so called classical narrative structure was never the only choice for the storytellers. But the reason to

---

8) Mao, Tse-tung, *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung*. Vol.7, People's Press, 1999, p.123. (毛泽东, 『毛泽东文集』, 第7卷, 人民出版社, 1999, 123页).

9) Wan, L. 위의 책, p.158.

10) Wan, L. 위의 책, p.136.

11) Murphy, J. J., *Me and you and memento and Fargo: How independent screeplays work*, Continuum, 2007, p.4.

make the choice varies. The American independent filmmakers may find modular narrative an effective way to tell the story interesting enough under their tight budget, while the artists behind <The Uproar of Heaven> was pursuing a new and non-western animation style under the intense political atmosphere in the early 1960s of China.

### **III. Shifting plotlines and mirror structure**

The opening introductory sequence of <The Uproar in Heaven> suggests that all members of the audience should have known the story of Monkey King quite well. The short prologue showing Sun Wukong(aka. Monkey King) being born out of rock is continued with a sequence of the grown-up Sun Wukong playing in a parade with his monkey soldiers, without explanation of how he gets his supernatural power, where he lives or what they do in their Flower and Fruit Mountain.

The next sequence is actually an independent story of how Sun gets his cudgel. The conflict exposed at the beginning of this sequence gets a full resolution. While Sun is annoyed of not having a suitable weapon, an old monkey suggests him to visit the Dragon King's palace. He creates a riot in the Dragon King, and gets his weapon, the As-You-Will Cudgel. The Dragon King goes to the Jade Emperor and wants him to punish the monkey. But the Jade Emperor decides to give the monkey a minor position in Heaven to keep him under supervision.

The main story of how the rebel fights against the corrupted bureaucracy is the most important sequence in the first half of the film. This sequence is less than 20 minutes

but it has its own beginning, middle and end, similar to what a three acts film script usually does in 90 minutes. The God of the North Star brings Sun to Heaven and makes him the Head of Imperial Stables. Sun sets the horses loose and lets them roam freely .Afterwards the General arrives and is angry for what Sun did. Sun fights back to the Flower and Fruit Mountain. Then the first half of the film is finished by an actions scene of the war between Sun and the army of the Heaven.

Throughout the first half of the film, Sun is a quite passive protagonist. An active character that has clear and strong goals always creates greater drama, and a passive character deals with what he gets without strong inner intention. Sun in <The Uproar in Heaven> is more passive compared with the character in the original novel. In *Journey to the West*, Sun's objective was quite clear. As an outsider of the system of gods in the heaven, he believes "every emperor has his day and my turn is coming by the next year." Nor the film explains Sun's statue in the world of the gods, neither much of his motivation. In the film, Sun is just a playful childish character who is always trying to deal with what happens with him passively. The old monkey tells Sun that he should get a weapon from the Dragon King, and then he goes. The God of North Star tells Sun he should take the post in the heaven, and then he takes. The general of the imperial stables is angry with Sun, and then he reacts and gets out of the heaven. Even in the Wan's 1942 film, *The Princess of the Iron Fan*, Sun is not simplified as this ambivalent Rebel-without-A-Cause monkey in <The Uproar in Heaven>. In the earlier film, he has a simple and clear object which is to defeat the villain Bull Demon King.



With the passive protagonist and the even more passive supporting characters, the sequences which share same characters do not have strong causal connections between them. The first half of the film has 2 relatively independent segments: the story of Sun getting a weapon from the Dragon King and the story of the conflict between the monkey and the heaven bureaucracy. Some of the characters in the former segment disappear in the latter segment, while new characters emerge without much introduction. Meanwhile there is no strong temporal/spatial connection between the 2 segments.

Another recognizable characteristic of the narrative structure in the film is the mirror relationship of the first 1961 half and the second 1964 half. The second half continues the first half, and it also repeats the first half. The war at the end of the first half created a cause for the second half, which is equivalent to the Dragon King Palace sequence in the first half. The next sequence is that Sun is invited to the heaven by the God of North Star again to act as the Saga Equal to Heaven (actually a gatekeeper for the Imperial Garden) and afterwards he is again unsatisfied and fights back to his mountain. This sequence is very similar to the Sun being the Head of Imperial Stables sequence in the first half. Finally, the second half is also ended with a war between Sun and the Heaven's army. The second half simply tells the same story again with a larger scale.

Proceeding from the analysis, there are 3 main modular narrative strategies in <The Uproar of Heaven>.

- 1) Character-driven plot with simplified passive characters without obvious objectives;

- 2) Relatively independent sequences without strong causal connections between them;
- 3) Mirrored / repetitive relationship of the first and second half.

The interesting thing is, these 3 characteristics are very similar to how the plot lines in the Zhanghui style novels are usually organized.

#### **IV. Influence of the Zhanghui style**

The modular narrative strategies of <The Uproar in Heaven>, including the character-driven plot, the segmented sequences and the mirrored/repetitive structure, are mainly adopted from the Zhanghui Style novels and traditional operas. Researchers in the western countries usually argue that the origin of disrupted narrative or non-linear narrative in literature is from writers such as Laurence Sterne, Thomas Carlyle or James Joyce. But there is also a non-linear narrative tradition in the Chinese Zhanghui Style novels. Zhanghui, which means “chapters and sections” in Chinese, is a style of fiction developed from the Shuohua (“talking”). Shuohua was popular entertainment in the Song dynasty (10th–13th century), in which the performers tell(sometimes sang) the story for the audience in the public places such as a tea house or a restaurant. Every show was only a few hours long but the whole story in the Shuohua could be much longer. So the story was usually divided into independent chapters. Since the audience of every show could be different and some members may not know what happened in the former part of the story, the storyteller will

simplify the character into fixed personalities and weaken the connections between the chapters. At the end of each chapter, the performer usually leaves a “hook”/suspense, to lure his audience back for the next time<sup>12)</sup>.

The Zhanghui style novels in the Ming and Qing dynasty adopt same principles of Shuohua. Early Chinese literature researchers such as Hu Shi, has analyzed the narrative structure of the Journey to the West<sup>13)</sup>. Hu noticed the segmented structure of the story. Same characters appear in different chapters repeatedly with fixed personality or unchangeable goals. This modular structure is very typical in 2 novels, the Journey to the West and the Water Margin (aka. *Shui Hu Zhuan*, 14<sup>th</sup> century). The 17<sup>th</sup> century literature critic Jin Shengtan described this type of structure as “Snake in the Grass and Thread on the Ashes<sup>14)</sup>.” When snake passes the grass, or a thread is pulled over the ash, only blurry marks are left, but these blurry marks are the trail which links the whole motion.

<The Uproar in Heaven> followed the methodology of the “Snake in the Grass and Thread on the Ashes” for its character-driven segmented structure. The protagonist Sun, which acts as the “snake” or the “thread”, appears in all the segments of the films, but he does not have a clear character development arc. The supporting characters, also

---

12) Lu, Xun, “The brief history of Chinese novels”, *Selected works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 9, People’s Literature Press, 1924, Reprinted in 1981, pp.295-323. (鲁迅, “中国小说史略”, 『鲁迅全集』, 第九卷, 人民文学出版社, 1924, reprinted in 1981, 295-323页.)

13) Hu, Shi, *Research on the Chinese Zhanghui novels*, Shiye Press, 1934, pp.315-380. (胡适, 『中国章回小说考证』, 实业印书馆, 1934, 315-380页.)

14) Wang, John Ching-yu, *Chin Sheng-t’an: His life and literary critics*, Shanghai Guji Press, 2004, p.65. (王靖宇, 『金圣叹的生平及其文学批评』, 上海古籍出版社, 2004, 65页.)

without development arcs, appear and disappear in the segments. The whole film is a collection of several relatively independent short stories which share a same protagonist, just as the chapters in the Zhanghui Style novels.

The mirrored repetitive structure of <The Uproar in Heaven> is not usual in cinema, but it is common in the Zhanghui Style novels. The 13–99 chapters of the Journey to the West repeat one plot again and again with an episodic nature. Each episode consists 1–4 chapters and usually begins with Tang Sanzang being captured by a demon. And then the 3 followers of Tang Sanzang, mainly Sun, defeat the demon and rescue Tang Sanzang.

The mirrored structure is also the standard narrative structure of traditional Chinese opera for centuries. 17<sup>th</sup> century literature critic, Li Yu, addressed that an opera script has three parts: beginning, small resolution (“Xiao Shou Sha”) and big resolution (“Da Shou Sha”)<sup>15</sup>. In Li’s theory, there is a small resolution at the end of the first half of the plot, “to temporarily hold the spirit”. The second half of the plot develops to the climax with a more emotionally intensive big resolution. In many cases, the big resolution repeats the small resolution on a larger scale. The Peking Opera version of <The Uproar in Heaven> followed the two resolutions structure.<sup>16</sup> The script has 11 acts, starts with the first act in the Dragon King’s palace, and ends with Sun defeating the second wave of attack from the heaven. The small

---

15) Li, Yu, *Xian Qing Ou Ji*, Ha’erbin Press, First printed 1671, Reprinted 2007, p.30. (李渔, 『闲情偶寄』, 哈尔滨出版社, 康熙十年刻刊, Reprinted 2007, 30页.)

16) Weng, Ouhong, *Selected script works of Weng Ouhong*, China Theatre Press, 1994, pp.179–226. (翁偶虹, 『翁偶虹剧作选』, 中国戏剧出版社, 1994, 179–226页.)

resolution is located at the 5th act, which is approximately the mid-point of the whole opera.

The influence of the traditional literature can also be found in other Chinese animation films in the 1960s and 1980s. Both of the other 2 most important feature animated films in the Second Flourish Era, including *Ne Zha Nao Hai* (aka. *Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King*, 1979) and *Tian Shu Qi Tan* (aka. *Legend of the Sealed Book*, 1983), are adaptation of other traditional Zhanghui style novels *Feng Shen Yan Yi* and *Ping Yao Zhuan*. The similar influence of traditional literature on these 2 films is still obvious, but not as typical as in *<The Uproar in the Heaven>*. Most of the practices of the ethnical animation style were only from the Shanghai Animated Film Studio. When the government funding for the studio dropped dramatically in early 1990s, similar productions totally stopped. The narrative style of Chinese animated films since 2000 is more close to American or Japanese ones. Until recently, the so-called classical films gain the attention of public again by their restored versions in the theaters or in DVDs.

## V. Conclusion

The esthetic origin of the narrative in *<The Uproar in Heaven>* roots in the Zhanghui Style novels and traditional opera. Until now the film is still the most significant exploration toward an animated film with a unique narrative structure based on Chinese literature.

The synthetic worlds in the animation films are always revelation of the inner world of the artist, as well as the reality they are living with. *<The Uproar in Heaven>* is a

product of the zeitgeist of China in early 1960s. The restored 3D version of the film was released in early 2012 and gained 42.05 million RMB from the domestic market<sup>17)</sup>. After almost 50 years, the charisma of its story and style still remains. Nowadays there are more than 30 feature animated film produced in China every year, but most of them are only trying to follow the storytelling recipe of Hollywood. It will be beneficial for us to look into the tradition of Chinese animation and find its uniqueness again.

## References

- Manovich, Lev., *The language of new media*, MIT Press, 2001.
- Miller, Carolyn Handler, *Digital storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment*, Elsevier, 2004,
- Murphy, J. J., *Me and you and memento and Fargo: How independent screeplays work*, Continuum, 2007.
- Hu, Shi, *Research on the Chinese Zhanghui novels*, Shiye Press, 1934. (胡适, 『中国章回小说考证』, 实业印书馆, 1934.)
- Li, Yu, *Xian Qing Ou Ji*, Ha'erbin Press, First printed 1671, Reprinted 2007. (李渔, 『闲情偶寄』, 哈尔滨出版社, 康熙十年刻刊, Reprinted 2007.)
- Lu, Xun, "The brief history of Chinese novels", *Selected works of Lu Xun*, Vol.9, People's Literature Press, 1924, Reprinted in 1981. (鲁迅, 鲁迅全集, 『中国小说史略』, 第九卷, 人民文学出版社, 1924, Reprinted in 1981.)
- Mao, Tse-tung, *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol.7, People's Press, 1999. (毛泽东, 『毛泽东文集』, 第7卷, 人民出版社, 1999.)
- Wan, Laiming(dic.), Wan, Guohun, *Sun Wukong and me*, Beiyue Literature & Art Press, 1986. (万籁鸣(口述), 万国魂(执笔), 『我与孙悟空』, 北岳文艺出版社, 1986.)
- Wang, John Ching-yu, *Chin Sheng-t'an: His life and literary critics*,

17) Data from the EntGroup website(2012). <http://m.entgroup.cn/596405/>

- Shanghai Guji Press, 2004. (王靖宇, 『金圣叹的生平及其文学批评』, 上海古籍出版社, 2004.)
- Weng, Ouhong, *Selected script works of Weng Ouhong*, China Theatre Press, 1994. (翁偶虹, 『翁偶虹剧作选』, 中国戏剧出版社, 1994.)
- Wu, Yigong (ed.), *Shanghai film chronicles*, Shanghai Social Science Academy Press, 1999. (吴贻弓等编, 『上海电影志』, 上海社会科学院出版社, 1999.)
- Zhang, Huilin, *The history of Chinese animation art in the 20th century*, Shanxi People's Fine Art Press, 2002. (张慧临著, 『20世纪中国动画艺术史』, 陕西人民美术出版社, 2002.)
- Data from the EntGroup website, 2012, <http://m.entgroup.cn/596405>.

Wang, Lei  
Assistant Professor  
School of Animation and Digital Arts  
Communication University of China  
+86 1370-138-8974  
wangleiani@cuc.edu.cn

논문투고일 : 2012.11.01

심사종료일 : 2012.12.14

게재확정일 : 2012.12.14.