

Chinese creative industries, soft power and censorship: The case of animation

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Abstract

The interrelatedness of Chinese economic and cultural reforms since the beginning of the new millennium, most particularly and importantly with regard to the acceptance and deployment of the concept of creative industries as an extension of China's 'soft power', needs to be considered in light of two factors: firstly, and at a conceptual level, it derived from the development of the highly influential notion of the 'creative industries' in the UK; and secondly, it was linked to what we could term the 'cultural politics' of China's relations with neighboring cultural powers such as Japan and South Korea (and to a certain extent and more broadly, with the United States). In 2005, the creative industries concept was embraced by Beijing, but with a caveat: it opted to use the hybrid term 'cultural creative industries' in the official document, due to the sensitivity of the term 'creative' (Keane 2007). One part of the field of cultural production that was strongly impacted by these developments was the animation sector. This article will provide an account of the various political, economic and cultural contexts that drove and informed these changes and how they have played out within the contemporary Chinese animation industry.

Keywords: creative industries, Chinese animation, soft power, censorship.

Introduction

In 2004, the notion of 'creative industries', promoted by the new British Labour government headed by Tony Blair, arrived in one of China's most internationalised cities, Shanghai, via a series of Creative Industries Mapping Documents: it was quickly adopted by the Shanghai municipal government as part of their economic development strategy in 2005 (O'Connor and Gu 2014, p. 1). Championed by a leading economist Li Wuwei from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the idea of creative industries was soon taken up on a wider scale at national level.

However, the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2001, p. 5) definition of creative industries was based on notions of individual creativity, skill and talent, and this emphasis posed difficulties for China's central government. Jing Wang writes that: 'the thorniest question triggered by the paradigm of creative industries is that of "creativity"—the least problematic in the western context. How do we begin to envision a parallel discussion in a country where creative imagination is subjugated to state surveillance?' (2004, p. 13). By way of example, Wang refers to the regime of censorship

that is applied to the Chinese media industry, most particularly the internet, which as ‘the medium theoretically most immune to boundary policing and centralised monitoring devices ... is highly symptomatic of the Chinese problematic’ (2004, p. 13). After reading the *Baseline Study on Hong Kong’s Creative Industries*, Li Longyin, the Director of Cultural Affairs of the Chaoyang District Government in Beijing, asked Desmond Hui, chief author and editor of this baseline study, to conduct a similar one for Chaoyang District. The original title of the report was *Study on Cultural and Creative Industries for Chaoyang District, Beijing*. In the English version of the report, the word ‘creative’ was omitted. However in the final published version, both Chinese and English versions of the report made use of the term ‘cultural and creative industries’. Hui suggests this marked the official endorsement of the ‘cultural and creative industries’ in China (Hui 2006, p 319).

This development had an immediate and profound effect on cultural policies and practices in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Most significantly, private capital was allowed to invest in the cultural industries after legislation of multiple forms of ownership of the cultural industries was approved in the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in 2005. A speeding up and extension of the cultural system reform was called for in a document issued by the State Council in January 2006 (Communist Party of China [CPC] 2005, Para 36). This document urged a transformation of more Cultural Public Service Units into industrial ones, and the building of a modern cultural market, including ‘new cultural markets’ based on multiple ownership consisting of state-owned and private-owned. It encouraged ‘outward-oriented’ cultural enterprises and the implementation of a ‘going out’ strategy, with the aim of building a cohort of cultural enterprises with international competence. The ‘going out’ strategy was echoed by former President Hu Jintao’s talk at the 17th National Congress in 2007 (CPC 2007, Para 6), when he stated that China should strengthen its cultural industry as part of the strategy for the country’s ‘soft power’, a term borrowed from Joseph Nye (1990). From this time on the cultural industries became a key element of China’s economic strategy, with a ‘Revitalization Plan’ released through the State Council in 2009. In The 12th Five-Year Plan of 2011, culture was given the tasks of raising the people’s holistic quality (*suzhi*). Cultural innovation (*wenhua chuangxin*) was encouraged, with the aim of creating prosperity in both cultural institutions (*wenhua shiye*) and cultural industries (*wenhua chanye*) (CPC 2011, Para 9). Later in October 2011, the sixth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was solely dedicated to the discussion of cultural system reforms and the strategies that were required to carry out

the plans outlined in the 12th Five-Year Plan in relation to the cultural sector. CPC resolutions were passed with regard to accelerating cultural system reform, and promoting socialist cultural development and prosperity (CPC 2012, Para 4).

The term ‘cultural industries’, according to the Ministry of Culture of People’s Republic of China (MCPRC), refers to industries that produce cultural products and provide cultural services (MCPRC 2003, Para 2). In the *Notice on the 12th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Reform and Development*, the MCPRC characterised the development of cultural industries as one of the new pillars of China’s economy; as an important means of promoting a ‘new cultural image’ of China; and finally, as a mechanism for increasing cultural exchange (MCPRC 2012, Para 3). The animation and the comic industry (*Dongman Chanye*) was identified as one of the key cultural industries, and a Five-Year Plan was specifically put in place to foster its development. The current Chinese government under the leadership of Xi Jinping seems more determined to extend reform. On 15 November 2013, the CPC pursued the idea of making comprehensive reforms. The market system was endorsed as having ‘the decisive role’ in the allocation of resources. In the cultural sector, the government’s role was to change from initiating to administering cultural activities. The document encouraged an enhancement of the opening up of culture, a strengthening of the capability of international communication, the maintenance of cultural security and the promotion of Chinese culture to the world.

These developments constitute the political and policy background to this article, which will look at the case study of Chinese animation, and more specifically the success of the *100,000 Bad Jokes* series. There are three main points of focus: firstly, the article will provide an introduction to Chinese cultural industries and explain and analyse the policy changes that have already begun to influence cultural production in China; secondly, an account will be provided of the Chinese animation industry and how it has developed and responded with regard to policy changes and initiatives; thirdly, there will be a description and analysis of one particular animation series, *100,000 Bad Jokes*, which will be used to show how the most recent policy developments, based on a concern about issues of soft power, have influenced and been played out in terms of the production and content of animation texts.

Creative industries

The reforms in the cultural system since the new millennium, the promotion of cultural industries, and the emphasis on cultural security and cultural soft power: these developments are best understood in light of the rise of the ‘creative industries’ in the UK, and with regard

to China's neighbouring cultural powers such as Japan and South Korea. Tony Blair had promised to build a 'New Britain', in contrast to Britain as an old industrial empire (Li and Huang 2009). After he was elected, he changed the Department of National Heritage to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and set up a Creative Industries Task Force. Chris Smith was appointed secretary of state for DCMS, which published the first Creative Industries Mapping Document in 1998. In this document, 'creative industries' was defined as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.' In alignment with Standard Industrial Classifications (SICs) thirteen industrial sectors were mapped as creative industries, namely advertising, architecture, art and antique markets, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, and television and radio (DCMS 1998, Para 3).

These industries were mapped because they were found by the Blair Government to be generating a growing amount of economic value, which might help Britain thrive in the post-industrial age. John Howkins elaborated upon the concept of 'creative economy' in this book bearing the same title (2001, p. xiv). Howkins discussed the characteristics of creativity and how creativity had been and could be utilised and changed into economic value. The UK DCMS Mapping Documents are considered to be the first to officially adopt the term 'creative industries', despite much criticism. By way of example, Potts et al (2008, p. 2) criticised it for only extending the prior notion of cultural industries by incorporating the copyright industries. Potts et al (2008, p. 5) suggested that creative industries might be better understood and defined in terms of social network markets, where the decisions regarding production of consumption of creative content highly depended on 'the choices of others'.

Despite controversies, the term 'creative industries' were quickly picked up by governments in other parts of the world, especially in Asia. In 2003, the report of the *Baseline Study of Hong Kong's Creative Industries*, commissioned by the Central Policy Unit of Hong Kong, was published by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Hong Kong.

Prior to the arrival of the concept 'creative industries' in China, national research institutes dedicated to cultural industries had been set up in China not long after the release of the first UK mapping document. The first National Base for Cultural Industries Innovation and Development Research, approved by the State Council, was established in Shanghai's

Jiaotong University in 1999, in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; a second Base was later approved and located in Peking University in 2002 (Keane 2007, p. 83). The establishments of research institutes paved the way for the first creative industries symposium, which was held in Shanghai in December 2004. This symposium, with the theme ‘Creative economy: pilot of Chinese city development’, was jointly organised by government offices and academic research institutes. In 2005, the creative industries concept was embraced by Beijing, but with a caveat: it opted to use the hybrid term ‘cultural creative industries’ in the official document, due to the sensitivity of the term ‘creative’ (Keane 2007, p. 88). The cause of this sensitivity needs some explanation. The Chinese word for ‘culture’ is *Wenhua*. *Wen* refers to the interlacing texture of an object, for example, the texture of a stone; and *hua* refers to the changing and evolving process of something (He 2012, p. 2). The earliest co-appearance of these two characters can be found in *I Ching* (or *The Book of Changes*), signifying civilisation and cultivation (ibid. 2012, p. 3). Keane (2009, p. 434) observed that under the tradition of Confucianism, the Chinese definition of culture in effect discouraged creativity. Confucian culture emphasised obedience to the ruling government and the elderly. Consequently, ‘thinking out of the box’ was not desirable, and could even be dangerous.

Michael Keane (2009, p. 435) notes that prior to the creative industries discourse, it was the discourse about ‘innovation’, particularly related to science and technology research and development, that had dominated in Chinese policy debates. Desmond Hui (2006, pp. 317–19) also suggests that this hesitation has to do with connotations associated with ‘artistic and imaginative’. As Justin O’Connor and Xin Gu explain:

the term feeds on a form of ‘artistic’ sensibility and practice – breaking the rules, ‘thinking outside the box’, ‘coming from left field’, etc. – which links to the aesthetic of the ‘revaluation of all values’, ‘the shock of the new’ and the agonistic struggle with the existing order which characterises the modernist and avant-garde tradition. (2006, p. 273)

The incorporation of ‘creative industries’, then, has practical implications in relation to the role of the state. In cultural industries in China, the state has a tendency to be interventionist: large media companies and conglomerates are the key players. In contrast, creative industries in the UK are more focused on small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (O’Connor 2009, p. 397).

The animation and comic industry

One part of the field of cultural production that was strongly impacted by these developments was the animation and comic sector. The introduction of the Open Door Policy in 1978 opened the Chinese market to foreign businesses and effectively allowed for and encouraged competition in the Chinese animation and comic industry. Prior to this, the majority of Chinese animation was produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which was set up by the pioneers of Chinese animation in 1957 (Lent and Ying 2013, p. 23). The production was directly guided and financially supported in full by the government, and consequently the texts that it produced tended to reflect a fairly narrow ideological perspective.

After the political, social and cultural instability that characterised the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a period of reform in political, economic and cultural sectors was initiated. The reform officially started from the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee. At the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, production of animation was divided into three sections after 1976, namely, puppet animation, cut-paper animation and celluloid animation. Hu Xionghua's cut-paper animation *Fox Hunts the Hunter* (1978) was warmly received at the 1980 Zagreb Animation Festival, while two years later, Zhou Keqin's *Monkeys Fish the Moon* (1981) won a prize at the 1982 Zagreb Animation Festival. While drawing on a story painted on the Mogao Caves, or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, located in Gansu Province in the Northwest of China, Qian Jiajun produced *Spotted Deer* (1981) using cell animation, with colors similar to the paintings on the caves. A Da's *Three Monks* (1981) was also produced in this period, and won awards at the Berlin, Odense and Cinanima film festivals. As David Ehrlich comments, 'It is one of the finest examples of the integration of traditional Chinese painting and philosophy with western values of characterization and experimentation. The three monks, like Disney's seven dwarfs, are perfectly individualised, each with his own way of walking, eating and solving life's problems.' (Ehrlich 2001, p. 19). It became a household story for children growing up in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the same time as the animation sector was flourishing, the Chinese media started to import foreign animations. The first to appear on Chinese television screens was the Japanese animation *Astro Boy* directed by Osamu Tezuka, and imported by China Central Television (CCTV) in 1980. Two years later, CCTV imported Osamu Tezuka's *Kimba the White Lion*, an animation series produced in the 1960s. In the same year, Shanghai People's Press released the manga (comic books) version of *Astro Boy* and *Kimba the White Lion*. This marked the first time a Japanese manga had been translated and published in China. In

addition to increased imports of foreign content, this period is also characterised by the establishment of joint venture animation studios and foreign animation studios, which posed a serious challenge to the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (Lent and Ying 2013, p. 29). The first animation joint venture was opened in Shenzhen in 1985. Jade Animation, owned and operated by a Hong Kong broadcast group, provided an ink and paint service for Japanese Studios. Two years later, Pacific Rim Animation opened, competing with Jade Animation in exploiting the business potential of setting up a studio in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. What was distinct about the Pacific Rim Animation Studio was that it was a wholly owned foreign company. It produced over 5000 half-hour animated shows, and worked on feature films and TV projects as well. By 1990, several other joint venture studios had opened in China (Ehrlich and Jin 2001, p. 24).

Cultural Industries and Soft Power

In 2007, this growing cultural trade deficit was identified as a problem by the government: Cai Wu, director of the News Center of the State Council of China, admitted that China's cultural trade deficit was 'huge' (Jie Bai and Xuejing Hou 2007, Para 1). The ratio of imported to exported printed publications, for example, was 10:1, and the situation was similar with films and other media content. This increased the emphasis on the notion of cultural security, a concept that had been highlighted in 2000 by Hu Huilin from Shanghai Jiaotong University. Concern was raised prior to China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, which would lead to the loosening of restrictions on cultural imports (2000, pp. 115–17). According to a survey, among the top 20 favorite animation characters among the Chinese, 19 were from Japan and America, and only one (the monkey king) was from China (Li 2010, p. 190). A perception developed that these cultural imports posed a threat to China's cultural soft power (Keane 2013, pp. 17, 82, and 193).

In *Bound to Lead* (1990), Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of soft power as an alternative yet important aspect of international relations. The Chinese translation of this book was published in 1992. Since that time the term has been frequently used by Chinese Government think tanks; it was officially incorporated into policy documents in 2005 and put forward by then Chinese President Hu Jintao at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Zhang 2010, p. 383–84). Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi have provided detailed accounts of how Japan and Korea enhanced their respective soft power through the promotion of pop culture in Asia, with China being one of the most obvious target markets (Chua 2012, pp. 119–43 and Chua and Iwabuchi 2008, pp. 1–11). According

to Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, there is empirical evidence that the cultural soft power of Japan and Korea influenced Chinese attitudes toward Japan and Korea, whether in the form of a yearning for the lifestyle represented in those texts, or in terms of an increased interest in travelling to the production scenes where the programs were made (Chua 2012, p. 122; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008, p. 9). The Chinese government recognised that populations, both at home and abroad, were likely to be influenced in their ideas, opinions and ways of seeing the world through their exposure to the meanings generated, naturalised and disseminated in cultural texts. In other words, they understood that the production and naturalisation of meanings in cultural texts (film, television, computer games) was not a politically neutral activity: rather these texts constituted the sites where ideas (about political systems, notions of human rights, and questions of sexuality and gender identity) were spread and authorised, and ‘taken on’ by those populations. If China was not producing cultural texts that were effectively ‘spreading the ideas’, it was ceding important socio-cultural and political ground to countries such as the United States and Japan: if this was the case, cultural texts from these countries would influence Chinese audiences to ‘think against’ the authorised policies and ideas promulgated by the Chinese government. A further concern was raised when Korea started claiming ownership and copyright regarding many areas of cultural heritage where ownership had long been taken for granted by China, such as Chinese medicine and the origin of the Dragon Boat Festival (Yu 2014, Para 4). Cultural security became an urgent issue for China.

Joseph Nye defines soft power as ‘the ability to shape the preferences of others’ (Nye 2004, p. 5), or ‘the ability to attract’, which often leads to acquiescence (*ibid.*, p. 6). Keane observed that the term soft power has a history in China. Writing in 1988, Zheng Bijian contended that ‘cultural power is an important national power and is an important component of comprehensive national power’ (cited in Keane 2013, p. 14). Keane then argued that China appropriated the term to fit into its scheme of ‘comprehensive national power’ (2013). At the 17th National Congress of the CPC on 15 October 2007, then President Hu Jintao emphasised that China should enhance cultural creativity to increase the nation’s soft power:

We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country in order to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests, to enrich the cultural life in

Chinese society and to inspire the spiritual outlook of the people to be more elevated and more progressive. (Hu Jintao 2007, cited in Keane 2013, p. 15)

Anthony Fung and John Erni have shown that national interests are prioritised in the development of China's cultural clusters over local interests (Fung and Erni 2013, p. 644), and that the Chinese authorities have been 'taming' Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular music in China to serve nationalist ideologies (Fung 2007, p. 435). Keane contended that the desire to enhance soft power had not been due to the fear of Westernisation, but was more directly related to the nearby and intimidating Japanese and Korean cultures, which had not only exerted a strong influence in East Asia, but throughout the world. The need to seek 'modern expressions' of traditional Chinese culture to win back the hearts of Chinese youth became ever more evident and urgent (Keane 2013, p. 17).

The point was not that Japanese and Korean cultural texts were working in the same way as propaganda: if they were, they doubtlessly would not be very effective. The point is that all cultural texts are produced through and by the cultural system of their home country or culture: they do not have to accept all the ideas and values that dominate that system: many texts can work against or at least problematise dominant cultural ideas or meanings. However, generally speaking, there are certain basic tenets (in the United States we can think of individualism, democracy, capitalism) that underpin cultural texts and narratives. Whereas propaganda is usually ineffectual because it tends to state things in relatively unsophisticated ways ('We are good, the other is bad'), the core values that underpin cultural texts are presumed and naturalised: there is no need to state anything, because there is no question or issue at stake.

The animation industry, soft power and censorship

Within the context of these policy developments, the challenge for the animation industry was to claim back 'territories lost'; that is to say, they needed to find a way of recapturing audiences lost to American and Japanese animations. If 'attraction' is the means by which soft power works, Chinese animation's soft power had to be able, in the first instance, to attract domestic audiences. However two of the ways that local animation companies attempted to achieve this goal involved, firstly, making animations that were more 'adult' (that is, sexually oriented) in content; and secondly, making them more openly critical of internal Chinese policies. Both of these developments constituted a problem for the government: while the need to attract local audiences was one of the cornerstones of the soft power policy direction, the opposition to incremental 'Westernisation', and the spread of

Western ideas and values, meant that the means being used to attract audiences to Chinese animations (sexual references, criticism of the government) at the same time constituted a (different kind of) threat to Chinese soft power. China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) has regulations regarding what kinds of content can and cannot be shown on Chinese media (SAPPRFT 2010). Television and the Internet are among the most closely regulated sites; and erotic content is certainly banned. However, unlike Hong Kong, Japan, or the United States, China does not yet have a content-rating system. Moreover, there is no specific guideline indicating the degree or form of sexual content that constitutes 'erotica'. In practice, before screening, all television dramas and films are assessed by the SAPPRFT. Recently a television historical drama, *The Empress of China* (2015), was removed from programming just a few days after its premiere in December 2014. The official explanation was that this was due to 'technical reasons'; however the SAPPRFT censors doubtlessly disapproved of the strongly 'sexualised' content, specifically, the considerable amount of female cleavage that was shown. The solution was that all those scenes that displayed cleavages were censored: images below and including the cleavage were edited out. This event was not only controversial within China, but also attracted the attention of the international press including the New York Times, the Telegraph, and the Sydney Morning Herald. What should be noted is that this drama had been censored before its premiere. However after the screening the SAPPRFT clearly had 'second thoughts'. The regulations governing China's Internet were comparatively loose, in comparison; however it was decided that the same standard of rules applying to television content should be applied to the Internet as well (Guan 2014, Para 1).

The impact of 100,000 Bad Jokes

The comic *100,000 Bad Jokes* (hereafter *The Jokes*) was launched on a website called 'U17 Original Comics Dream Factory' (hereafter UI7) in 2010. The website was launched in September 2009, and is dedicated to providing original Chinese comics and animations. A series made up of a number of stories with multiple dramatis personae, *The Jokes* quickly became a drawing point for the website. The stories are independent from each other, but there are links between them. Many of the stories are based upon stories that are familiar to Chinese audiences, some of which are from ancient Chinese classic novels; for example, the story of Ne Zha draws from *Feng Shen Yanyi* and *Xi You Ji* (*Journey to the West*); some stories are based on western stories such as 'Pinocchio' and 'Snow White'; others are modern Chinese animation stories, such as *Hulu Xiongdi/The Calabash Brothers*.

Multiple characters and structures are not the only ways in which *100,000 Bad Jokes* differs from other contemporary Chinese animations. What is particularly distinctive about it is its genre. This comic was referred to by the press as the Chinese version of the Japanese manga *Gag Manga Boyori*, a manga that is famous for its ‘hyperactive, random and nonsensical style that revolves around various plots and characters throughout the series’ (Gag Manga Biyori, n.d., Para 3). In other words, what appears new to Chinese audiences is the genre of this comic, which is playful and intertextual.

The playful characteristics of *The Jokes* are to be found in the images of the characters, the plot of the stories and the dialogue. The playfulness of this animation’s narrative is derived mainly from its intertextuality. John Frow defines intertextuality as: ‘the range of process by which a text invokes another, and the way texts are constituted as such by their relationships with other texts’ (2015, p. 52). Frow argues that texts are more or less necessarily intertextual. All texts are to some extent derived from or influence by their antecedents. By repeating and transforming those texts, a new text is created. What Frow is particularly interested in, however, is how ‘complex’ genre, including everyday conversation, is built out of allusions to and stylisations of other genres, and how texts construct their authority and credibility on this basis (2015, p. 52).

The genre that we can ascribe to *The Jokes* invokes a lot of other genres and texts, some though direct citation, others by way of allusions. What is distinctive about the intertextuality here is its playfulness as exemplified in the characters of the Calabash Brothers, the snake demon, Pinocchio, etc. All of these characters are popular with young Chinese audiences; however, they are variants of the original versions. The Calabash Brothers appear as handsome adults instead of little children; and the snake demon in the Calabash Brother story appears with a sexy body and eye-catching breasts; and Pinocchio has grown up to be a teenager.

There might be an issue of intellectual property rights here: whether or not the ‘reusing’ of characters from other works constitutes a form of copyright violation? Laikwan Pang (2012, pp. 161–182) has documented the prevalence of pirated Japanese *anime* and *manga* in China. Lucy Montgomery and Jason Potts (2008) have shown that a weaker intellectual property rights protection is actually helpful to the development of creative industries in China, and their view derived partly from Michael Boldrin and David Levine:

Intellectual property has two components. One is the right to own and sell ideas. The other is the right to control the use of those ideas after sale. The first, sometimes called the right of first sale, we view as essential. The second, which we refer to as downstream licensing, we view as economically dangerous. (Boldrin and Levine 2002, p. 209, cited in Montgomery and Potts 2008)

Our study of *The Jokes* is supportive of this argument: instead of pirating: that is to ‘clone’ the original and distribute the ‘cloned’ products without official licensing, the intertextual allusions to many other animation characters in *The Jokes* can be considered as a form of reuse and re-creation.

These playful images are followed by equally playful stories and dialogue. In some cases the new stories are radically different from previous stories. Pinocchio is no longer the brave little boy with a kind heart: in *The Jokes*, he has grown up displeased with his nose, to the extent that he wants to destroy the earth. However, when he comes across Snow White, he falls immediately in love with her, and his nose, which has the ability to become longer and shorter, impresses Snow White. The two of them live (sexually) happily ever after. The Chinese words for ‘sexually happy’ and ‘happy’ sound the same; they are both pronounced as ‘xing4 fu2’. The subtitle of this line first appears with ‘性福(sexually happy)’ and is quickly replaced with ‘幸福(happy)’, while the sound in the background clearly indicates ‘sexually happy’.

The same ‘changed situation’ is to be found in the relation between the Calabash Brothers and the snake demon. In the 1986 version of the Calabash Brother stories, the seven Calabash Brothers join together bodily and became a Little Calabash King Kong, with the superpowers of all the seven brothers, and defeats the snake demon in the end. In *The Jokes*, the Calabash Brothers also become a Little Calabash King Kong: however instead of being transformed in a stove, they are put into a rice cooker with a logo of a brand, which is clearly a form of product placement. The snake demon is attracted by the Calabash Brother and they live happily after as well. These stories break genre expectations associated with or derived from the previous stories. What this story (and its changes and developments) demonstrates is that cultural texts are expected to gain and maintain an audience’s attention, which is the case with films and television shows from other countries. In other words, instead of just repeating and reproducing older stories, the idea now is to bring something new or different to the texts. This change is very much in keeping with the changes to Chinese creative industries: instead of a set of reversed traditional texts which are repeated in order to teach a lesson or provide

an example, cultural texts now have to attract audiences by entertaining them with something new, strange, different or outrageous.

There is also something new in the animation aesthetics of *The Jokes*: unlike animation works that were produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which embraced the ‘national style’, the visual style of *The Jokes* is akin to Japanese anime: characters often have big eyes and colourful hair. Besides, it is mainly created with Adobe Flash, an economic digital webpage creation software. The visual style is significantly different from analogous animations, shot from cut-papers, water and ink paintings, etc. This shift in style cannot be elaborated in detail here, but to put it simply, it has to do with the pursuit of quantity over quality of animation production in China: digital forms are cost-friendly and can produce more in terms of quantity.

From nostalgia to ‘testing the limits’

What is at play with this kind of content? One important aspect is the notion of nostalgia. Jing Wu of Peking University has noted the strong level of nostalgic appeal in Chinese cultural industries, especially in television dramas (2006, pp. 359–68). Wu argues that nostalgia became popular as a form of cultural sensibility in the contemporary Chinese screenscape due to three main reasons: first, as China developed economically from 1979 onwards, social and environmental problems also arose, which created doubt and discontent; second, the government wanted to maintain an ideological meta-narrative of revolution and progress, which led to investment in productions that glorified the past and present contributions of the ruling party, culminating in a genre called ‘the mainstream melody’, which represents the ‘dominant message’ of the CPC; third and finally, screening nostalgic content attracts market acceptance and avoids political censorship. Wu refers to three key historical objects for nostalgic appropriation: the revolutionary past; imperial China; and the short-lived period of colonial modernity in Shanghai (2006, p. 362). However, instead of providing a direct representation of a historical past for nostalgic appropriation, what *The Jokes* does is play out what Angela Ndalianis refers to, with regard to contemporary media in general, as a ‘lack of respect for the limits of the frame’ (2005, p. 25). As Angela Ndalianis explained:

Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favor a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, expanding their narrative universes into further sequels and serials. Distinct media cross over into other media, merging with, influencing, or being influenced by other media forms. (2005, p. 25)

By extension the phrase ‘limits of the frame’ can be translated with the Chinese word ‘jiecao’ and ‘xiaxian’ in this context. This practice of ‘going beyond limits’ constitutes a distinctive textual characteristic of this animation.

Playing with censorship

How does *The Jokes* ‘go beyond the limits’ of socio-cultural (and by extension, political) proprieties in China, and how does it manage to do this without attracting censorship? Censorship of the media is a significant factor and is relatively common in China. Baohui Xie (2014, p. 54) suggests that censorship in China usually takes the form of ‘the direct or indirect blocking of communication and access to certain information’, and can be defined as ‘any attempt to limit or present free exchange of information’ (Steel 1999, p. 7). All these forms and practices of censorship have a political basis, in one way or another. However Xie makes the point that China’s censorship apparatus, and the practices it engages in, lacks transparency because there are very few formal or explicit rules or regulations. Consequently, the representation of stories, meanings and ideas in Chinese media texts always requires a delicate balancing act. By and large it manages this very delicate balancing act by being consistently ‘playful’ about the issues and content with which it deals. Tony Schirato, following Johan Huizinga (1966) and Roger Caillois (2001), identifies four core aspects of play: firstly, it is possessed of its own generic qualities; secondly, it does not serve anything other than play; thirdly, and following closely from the second aspect, it has no moral or ethical function; fourth and finally, it is both a catalyst for imaginative activity and stands in opposition to a mood or culture of seriousness (p. 32). Much of the content of, and associated textual practices relating to or derived from, *The Jokes* can be understood as a form of play.

One of the great virtues of playfulness is that, along with the comic and the humorous, it often takes a position or provides a representation (for instance, of a political or sexual nature), while simultaneously denying that such a position or representation was ever made or given. In Season One, Episode Two, Pinocchio intends to kill off the human race because they laugh at his nose. However, when he comes across the beautiful Snow White, he falls in love with her; Snow White, learning that Pinocchio has the ability to lengthen and shorten his nose, blushes. What follows is a wide shot of the forest where Pinocchio and Snow White live together, with Pinocchio constantly telling both truths and lies, accompanied by Snow White’s moans and Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*. The subtitle indicates that they live (sexually) happily ever after. A few unexpected anomalies are referred to here. Firstly Snow White, who is supposedly innocent and pure as snow, is attracted by an expandable male organ. Secondly,

how is it that the size of Pinocchio's organ is the basis of the couple living 'happily ever after'? Both these developments violate audience expectations regarding the story (and genre) of Snow White and Pinocchio. What is more, the moaning sound of Snow White, which clearly indicates sexual activity and pleasure, comes close to exceeding the limits of the content regulations promulgated by the SAPPRFT. However, the sound is accompanied by Pinocchio's utterances, such as 'I never lie' and 'One plus one equals two'. These utterances, together with the background music, serve as a cover for the moaning of Snow White so that there is no unambiguous, explicit or overt aural reference to sex. Audiences thus accept this scene as a joke, instead of treating it seriously.

Something similar happens in Episode Six, when the snake demon successfully defeats the Calabash Brothers and is boiling them in the rice cooker in the hope that a godly dragon will materialise, a handsome young man emerges instead—the Little Calabash King Kong. The snake demon blushes and has a series of fantasies, which is shown in a montage made up of 'sexual metaphors': a football flies into a goal, a basketball drops into a net, a golf ball rolls into a hole, a train enters a tunnel. This montage, accompanied by background saxophone music, clearly indicates sex. What should also be added here is the cleavage of the snake demon: it is in no way less noticeable than the cleavages shown on the historical drama *The Empress of China*. Moreover, other female characters in this animation, such the girl from the Planet Tucao and Snow White, all have eye-catching bodies. However, and somewhat surprisingly, this animation was not censored.

The function of the playful textual references to sex in this animation is fourfold. Firstly, it allows sexualised content without directly engaging in overt sexual representation, which serves as protection from censorship. Secondly, the meaning of the text is polysemic, which relies on the active engagement and imagination of the audiences. Thirdly, these sexual references establish a tacit connection with the audiences: the audience is expected to get 'the unsaid' that is said. Fourthly, it also serves as a challenge to the regulatory power of SAPPRFT. Chinese media audiences have long been displeased with the regulations in relation to censorship (He 2014, Para 2). Sexual references in this animation thus work as a form of refusal; as a demonstration of an unwillingness to 'toe the line' on this issue. This playful challenge can be found in other cultural forms in China. In writing about the Taiwanese popular music star Jay Chou's popularity in China, and the element of rebellion in Chou's songs, Lin Wei-Hsin notes that Chou's revolt against officialdom is not as forceful as that of Chinese rock music in the 1980s; the message is that outright confrontation, as

exemplified by the failure of the 1989 democracy movement, ‘hardly goes a long way’ (Lin 2013, p. 215). These playful textual references to sex can be understood as tactical reactions against the regime of censorship. This form of tactic is now part of the practice of everyday life of the young Chinese, as they watch ‘uncensored’ videos on YouTube by way of crossing the firewall, or producing comics or videos such as *The Jokes*. On U17.COM, the genre of horror comics is also popular, but it has been banned from Chinese television by SAPPRFT. Therefore, and in the spirit of the more general arguments made by Janice Radway (1984), we can suggest that the production and consumption of these animations constitutes playful resistance against the regulation of content in Chinese media, for the sexual connotations of the texts rely on the active decoding of the audiences who are ‘in the know’.

The effectiveness of these textual allusions relies on the literacy of the audiences with regard to the relevant issues. Therefore, although the lines are often simple and straightforward, they can be rich in connotations. Playful and nonsensical as it might seem, there is a form of social criticism at play in these texts, which is achieved collaboratively by the author of this animation and the audiences. The playful allusions protect the animation from censorship. Audiences also play an important role in the joint production of this kind of criticism, as the meaning of the relevant texts depends on mutual understanding. This kind of collaborative production between content producers and audiences is encapsulated by ‘convergence culture’, the central theme of the Cultural Studies theorist, Henry Jenkins’s (2006). This notion extends beyond the mere convergence of media technologies, to the phenomenon that media audiences and consumers become producers of media content via various ways of participation and ‘collective intelligence’ (Jenkins 2006, pp. 1–4). In the case of *The Jokes*, audiences are involved in various aspects of content production: they can leave comments right on the online comic pages on U17, and provide voice-over recordings for the dialogues of the comics. More importantly, audiences financially sponsored part of the production of the film version of *The Jokes*. In view of the success of the comic and animated series, U17 decided to make a film out of it.

Conclusion

Despite the success of *The Jokes* and other similar animations, the Chinese animation market is filled with much uncertainty (Chen Liaoyu 2013, p. 1). This is a consequence of the twin, and to some extent, mutually exclusive, imperatives associated with its role as a player in the soft power game. Chinese animations have been charged with playing a part in resisting the ‘foreign cultural invasion’, a phenomenon usually associated with Japanese and American

popular cultural texts; and to an extent it has achieved this aim. However at the same time Chinese animation is meant to be ‘taking the fight’ to foreign territory, and helping to spread Chinese cultural texts (and by extension, Chinese cultural values) globally. To this point the Chinese animation industry has been less successful, partly because the stories and textual innovations that characterise *The Jokes*, for example, are quite culturally specific to, and presume, a Chinese context: this is likely to limit their appeal to global audiences. There is also a second issue that problematises the relationship between the animation and the soft power imperatives: one of the most significant reasons behind the success of *The Jokes* has been its willingness to ‘perform’ criticism of cultural politics in China, and to tread a line that threatens to bring it into conflict with state censorship. In a sense the strategic policy of the PRC with regard to the animation industry and soft power runs the risk of producing the kinds of cultural texts (playful, critical, ideologically problematical) that are in conflict with state ideology.

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