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## The Revival of Animation in the Digital Wave: A Review of Zhao Yang's *Digital Awakening: A Study of Chinese Domestic Animated Short Films in the Internet Era (1998–2023)*

Liu Sujun, Li Maozeng

**Abstract:** Zhao Yang's *Digital Awakening: A Study of Chinese Domestic Animated Short Films in the Internet Era (1998–2023)* systematically outlines the developmental trajectory of Chinese domestic animated short films from 1998 to 2023. Employing theoretical frameworks such as media empowerment and cultural production, the book reveals the profound impact of digital technology on the animation creative ecosystem since the era of “Flash animators”. Breaking away from the limitations of traditional animation research—which has predominantly focused on commercial feature-length films or the history of the “Chinese Animation School”—this work constructs a comprehensive research system for Chinese domestic animated short films in the internet age. It examines dimensions including media transformation, the differentiation of creative subjects, and innovations in artistic forms. Notably, the book elucidates the spiritual lineage connecting short film creation to the current “rise of Chinese animation” (Guoman), arguing that the grassroots creative forces emerging alongside the internet have infused Chinese animation with unique authorship and vibrancy of diverse expression. Thus, it offers a fresh academic perspective for understanding the developmental logic of contemporary Chinese animation.

**Keywords:** Chinese Domestic Animated Short Films; Digital Media; Rise of Chinese Animation (Guoman); Creative Ecosystem

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**标题:** 数字浪潮中的动画复兴图景：评赵洋《数字觉醒：网络时代的国产动画短片研究（1998-2023）》

**摘要:** 赵洋所著《数字觉醒：网络时代的国产动画短片研究（1998-2023）》系统梳理了 1998 至 2023 年国产动画短片的发展脉络，以媒介赋权、文化生产等理论为框架，揭示了“闪客时代”以来数字技术对动画创作生态的深层影响。该书突破了传统动画研究聚焦商业长片或“中国动画学派”历史的局限，从媒介变革、创作主体分化、艺术形态创新等维度，构建了网络时代国产动画短片的完整研究体系，特别阐明了短片创作与当下“国漫崛起”之间的精神谱系关联，指出从互联网萌芽的民间创作力量为中国动画注入了独特的作者性与多元表达活力，为理解当代中国动画的发展逻辑提供了全新的学术视角。

**关键词:** 国产动画短片；数字媒介；国漫崛起；创作生态

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When discussing the “rise of Chinese animation”, scholarly and public attention often focuses on blockbuster commercial feature films like *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, *Deep Sea*, and *Chang'an: 30,000 Miles*. However, the creative communities that have incubated for years behind these successes, as well as the initial fertile ground they found in the internet era, are frequently overlooked. Zhao Yang's book, *Digital Awakening: A Study of Domestic Animated Shorts in the Internet Age (1998–2023)* (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2025), aptly fills this research gap. Spanning over two decades from 1998 to 2023, the book examines the evolution of domestic animated shorts—from their nascent “Flash era” to the current diversified ecosystem—within the broader framework of media transformation, social shifts, and cultural production. It not only outlines an alternative growth trajectory for Chinese animation in the digital age but also reveals the profound value of animated shorts as a creative “testing ground” and a talent “reservoir” for the entire industry. Crucially, the author insightfully points out that “the internet” in this process represents not just a change in distribution

channels but an ontological reshaping. The interactivity, immediacy, and community culture of the internet have, in turn, shaped the narrative logic of short films, endowing them with distinct features: fragmentation, high interactivity, and decentralization. This deep involvement of media-specific attributes means that the “awakening” is not merely a return in content but a fundamental transformation in narrative paradigms and the creative ecosystem.

### **I. Media Empowerment: The Creative Crack Opened by the Internet**

The most enlightening part of this book is its systematic examination of the “Flash” community at the turn of the century. To understand the historical significance of this group's emergence, we must revisit the developmental context of Chinese animation in the 1990s: with the termination of the planned economy era's centralized purchasing and distribution policies, the traditional animation production system, represented by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, gradually declined. After 1993, when the state stopped centralized purchasing and distribution of animation films, traditional state-owned animation studios faced immense pressure to transition to market-oriented operations. A large number of experienced animators moved to outsourced animation enterprises in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, leading to a “talent hollowing-out” crisis in traditional animation creation. As articulated in Bourdieu's field theory, the rules of the traditional animation field were shaped by institutional production standards, official broadcasting channels, and professional review systems, severely limiting individual creative expression. However, the advent of Flash software and the widespread adoption of the internet in the late 1990s unexpectedly opened a new creative crack outside the system, fostering a production space entirely independent from the traditional animation field.

As the author points out, traditional animation production relies heavily on collective labor division and high production costs. Flash integrated the entire process—from keyframe drawing, coloring, to post-production—into software that could run on a personal computer. Vector graphics technology further ensured that files were small enough to circulate smoothly in the dial-up internet era. This technological empowerment allowed a multitude of “outsiders” to enter the field of animation creation. IT employee Wang Yunsong used idle time while working night shifts at an internet cafe to create Flash music videos. Medical student Yang Yu (Jiaozi) spent three years at home after resigning from his job to produce *Hit, Hit a Big Watermelon*. Jiang Jianqiu (Lao Jiang), who graduated from printmaking, infused woodcut styles into his animations, and even Qi Zhaohui, a chemistry graduate, became a well-known Flash artist through self-study.

These creators lacked professional animation training and were not bound by traditional creative norms. Their works carried strong personal styles and contemporary imprints. Zhu Zhiqiang (Xiao Xiao) used minimalist stick-figure characters to create fluid and spectacular animations. Bu Hua's *Cat*, with its rough strokes depicting mother-child affection, touched millions of internet users. Yang Zhigang (Busifan) became a legend of the Flash era with *Black Bird*, characterized by its unique dark style. The author insightfully notes that forums like “Flash Empire” were not merely platforms for releasing works but also constructed a new

evaluation system—where click-through rates and user comments replaced professional reviews and broadcasting channels as the core standards for measuring value. This communication empowerment allowed ordinary creators, for the first time, the possibility of independent expression. It also liberated animation from its simplistic, child-oriented positioning, enabling it to convey more complex personal expressions and social reflections.

It is worth highlighting that the rise of the “Flash” community was not an isolated media phenomenon but rather the product of the interplay between Chinese online subculture and youth subculture in the late 1990s. The newly popularized internet at that time provided young people with a public space to escape mainstream discourse, while the low-barrier nature of Flash animation made it an ideal medium for youth self-expression. Many works subtly contained deconstructions of authority, rebellion against commercialization, and a focus on individual emotions, all closely aligned with the cultural demands of the youth at that time. This subcultural nature distinguished Flash animation from traditional, institutionally produced animations from the outset, forming an independent cultural DNA that persisted, albeit intermittently, throughout the subsequent two decades of domestic animation development, becoming a crucial spiritual source for independent animation creation.

## **II. Diversified Shift: From Unregulated Growth to Ecosystem Development**

Around 2006, with the maturity of streaming media technology and the closure of “Flash Empire”, the era of Flash animation came to an abrupt end. However, the development of digital animated short films did not stagnate but instead entered a more diversified phase of differentiation. This shift was driven by profound changes in national policies and the industrial landscape. In 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued the “Several Opinions on Developing China’s Film and Television Animation Industry”, explicitly advocating to “expand the scale of animation education and cultivate animation professionals”. Supported by favorable policies and the expansion of university enrollment, the number of institutions offering animation programs across China surged from fewer than 10 in 2000 to over 1,400 by 2010, producing more than 100,000 animation graduates annually. A large number of formally trained creators entered the field of short film production, becoming the main force of academic animation. The author categorizes the creative ecosystem of this period into four intertwined developmental threads:

Firstly, the rise of academic animation. After 2000, animation education in China entered a period of rapid expansion. Institutions such as the Beijing Film Academy and the Communication University of China established animation schools, and a large number of graduates from these programs became the driving force of creation. Their works demonstrated more refined techniques and more coherent narratives, ranging from sensitive portrayals of youth and growing up—such as *My Magnet* and *My Dead Friend*—to profound reflections on modernity, like *Life Smartphone*, which critiques mobile phone dependency, and *A Finger Town*,

which satirizes urban demolition. Competitions like the Animation Academy Awards also provided platforms for young creators to showcase their work. In 2006, the General Office of the State Council forwarded the “Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of China’s Animation Industry” by the Ministry of Finance and nine other departments, further increasing state support for the animation industry. As a result, animation programs in various institutions received more policy resources and funding. While this promoted the popularization of animation education and cultivated a large pool of professionals, it also led to a certain homogenization in academic works. Some productions began to conform excessively to competition standards, deliberately pursuing specific artistic styles at the expense of the rawness and edge characteristic of earlier grassroots creations.

Secondly, the perseverance of grassroots creators. Although collective creative communities disbanded, scattered amateur creators moved toward more extreme forms of personal expression. Li Yang’s *Li Xianji’s Adventures*, painstakingly produced over two years, captured the existential anxiety of contemporary youth through fragmented storytelling and psychedelic visuals, becoming a classic in domestic animated short films. Similarly, *The Enrollment Exam*, created over 15 months by Tang Boqing and his wife, showcased technical prowess comparable to Pixar’s works, demonstrating the immense potential of grassroots creators.

The third developmental thread is the rise of fan participatory creation. The fan-made animation *Waterdrop*, inspired by *The Three-Body Problem*, skillfully conveyed the worldview of the novel through a 12-minute long take and received high praise from author Liu Cixin himself. The collectively created fan series *My Three-Body* evolved from rudimentary block-figure animations into professionally produced works, eventually gaining official recognition as derivative content—illustrating the creative energy of fan culture.

Most groundbreaking was the integration of animation and contemporary art. Qiu Anxiong’s *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* trilogy uses ink-wash animation to reflect on modernity, juxtaposing mythical imagery with industrial landscapes to construct a metaphorical vision of an apocalyptic world. Wu Junyong’s multi-screen animation installation *Thousand Moons* suspends nine circular screens in an exhibition space, each narrating independently while collectively exploring the motif of “the moon”. This liberated animation from the confines of a single screen, bringing it into gallery spaces and expanding its artistic boundaries. The author particularly emphasizes the role of international animation festivals. Works such as Chen Xi’s “Solar Terms” series and Lei Lei’s *This Idea Is Love*, which won awards at festivals like Annecy and Ottawa, not only earned international acclaim for Chinese animation but also secured continued creative opportunities through art grants. This broke the conventional path where animators felt compelled to transition solely into commercial work.

### III. Spiritual Lineage: The Short-Film DNA Behind Commercial Feature Films

The most valuable contribution of this book lies in establishing the spiritual connection between short-film creation in the internet era and the current “rise of Chinese animation”, breaking the research misconception

that separates commercial animation from independent shorts. Many readers may be surprised to find that almost all leading figures in today's commercial animation landscape have backgrounds in short-film creation. Jiaozi's bold innovation in narrative structure in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* continues the deconstruction of the essence of war seen in *Hit, Hit a Big Watermelon*. The unique dark style and political metaphors in Busifan's *Da Hu Fa* were already evident in his earlier work *Black Bird*. The pursuit of Eastern aesthetics in Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun's *Big Fish & Begonia* can be traced back to their student short *Swallowtail Butterfly*. Pi San's explorations in online animation during the Flash era ultimately gave rise to hit IPs like *Miss Puff* and *Kuang Kuang Kuang*.

As the author observes, these creators, who emerged from the internet era, inherently possess qualities akin to "auteur cinema". They are no longer assembly-line workers trained within an industrial system but individuals who began with personal expression and gradually moved toward commercial creation. As a result, their works retain a strong personal style. This characteristic brings both pleasant surprises and controversies. For instance, the contrast between the stunning visuals and weak narrative in *Big Fish & Begonia*, as well as the bold experimentation with adult themes in *Da Hu Fa*, essentially reflects the tension between personal expression and the demands of commercial genre films. This very tension distinguishes Chinese animation from Hollywood's industrialized system, giving "Chinese animation" a richer and more diverse appearance.

The release of Busifan's commercial feature film *Heavy Rain* in 2024 serves as a typical case of this creative lineage's continuation. Compared to *Da Hu Fa*, *Heavy Rain* adopts a more accessible narrative and broader audience appeal. Yet, its metaphorical worldview, dark and eerie visual style, and subtle critique of social stratification all trace back to his early short films from the Flash era, such as *Black Bird* and *Xiao Mi's Forest*. Although the film's box office performance fell short of expectations, this creative path of insisting on personal expression within a commercial framework precisely demonstrates how the auteur qualities formed during the short-film era can enrich commercial animation with greater cultural depth and unique artistic identity. It also offers Chinese animation a differentiated development possibility distinct from Hollywood's industrialized productions.

#### IV. Overall Evaluation and Recommendation

As the first systematic study of domestic animated short films, *Digital Awakening: A Study of Domestic Animated Shorts in the Internet Age (1998–2023)* lays an important foundation for future research and opens up new academic possibilities. Subsequent studies could further explore emerging forms such as animated content on short-video platforms and short films produced by commercial organizations, deepening analysis with audience reception data and industrial policy perspectives. Furthermore, the empowering effects of digital media on the creative ecosystem revealed in this book can provide historical context for research on the transformation of animation production in the current era of generative AI.

This book fills a significant gap in the field of domestic animation studies. For a long time, research on Chinese animation has either focused on the historical legacy of the “Chinese Animation School” or on the industrial development of contemporary commercial animation, often overlooking the twenty-year period of short-film practice at the turn of the century. This forgotten history is precisely key to understanding the spiritual essence of today’s “Chinese animation”. When we celebrate the breakout success of Yao-Chinese Folktales, we should not forget that its format as a short-film anthology and its diverse creative styles originated from the explorations initiated over two decades ago by the “Flash” communities on the internet. In this sense, what has undergone a “digital awakening” is not merely animation technology but the independent consciousness and desire for expression of a generation of creators—a force that remains the most precious asset in Chinese animation today.

This book is a pioneering work in animation studies. It not only comprehensively reconstructs a history of animation development overlooked by mainstream narratives but also theoretically reveals the profound impact of digital media transformation on China’s animation ecosystem. While affirming that digital technology lowers barriers to creation and empowers individual expression, the author maintains a critical perspective, warning of the risks of aesthetic homogenization and hollowed-out content that may arise from an obsession with “technology-first” approaches. The emphasis is placed on true awakening as mastering technology rather than being alienated by it. With rich firsthand materials, solid case studies, and a broad theoretical vision, the book achieves both academic depth and readability. For animation researchers, it provides a crucial framework for understanding the transformation of Chinese animation in the new century, filling a gap in the field. For animation creators, the documented growth paths and creative experiences of earlier practitioners offer significant inspiration. For general readers, the book enables a deeper understanding of the cultural DNA and aesthetic origins of contemporary Chinese animation, illuminating the historical logic behind the “rise of Chinese animation”. At a time when domestic animation continuously seeks breakthroughs, this work reminds us that genuine creative vitality never resides solely within industrialized production systems; inclusivity and support for individual creators remain essential sources of innovation in animation art.

In the current context of Chinese animation accelerating its global outreach, the research findings of this book also hold significant practical reference value. The path documented in the book, through which independent animators reached international audiences via global animation festivals, offers an alternative to commercial feature films for the international dissemination of Chinese animation. Short films with strong personal styles and local cultural characteristics often more easily break through cultural barriers and gain recognition from international audiences. This dissemination path, rooted in individual expression, can not only enhance the international influence of Chinese animation but also help establish a local theoretical framework for Chinese animation distinct from Western discourse, providing theoretical support for its sustainable development. In summary, this is not merely a history of stylistic evolution but a multidimensional

diagnostic report encompassing media technology, cultural subjectivity, and industrial ecology. It is reasonable to believe that, driven by both technology and humanity, Chinese animated shorts are entering a true “golden age” of their own.

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