Original Article

Discovering Miss Puff: a new method of communication in China

Vincenzo De Masi
University of Lugano, Institute of Media and Journalism, Switzerland.

Abstract: In recent years animation has been considered of one of the pillars of the creative industry by the Chinese government. For this reason both the central and local government has been investing and supporting this sector, effectively becoming the first manufacturer. In parallel with the industrial production there is another kind of production, totally independent, that tries to find its audience on the Internet, creating many interesting animations absolutely different from the traditional ones. This study will attempt to explain one of these famous animations using the case study approach and it will focus on one of the most representative products of these years, that is *Miss Puff*. The Director of this animation is Pi San who is considered, in China, both the master of animation created with Flash and a revolutionary, because of his innovative ideas.This article is based on an interview to the Director Pi San. The interview was conducted in the study Hutoon of Beijing in July 2012

Keywords: Chinese animation, Miss Puff, Soft power, Flash, Youku, Baidu

Introduction

The animation has always been considered a minor art and it has been neglected by the media experts though it has got a very ancient history and it is so successful on the world market. From 2006 to present the Chinese government has considered the animation a key sector for the birth of a new national identity and for the cultural development in China. To reach this goal the Chinese government has promoted and supported the birth of about 6000 animation studios, 1300 universities which provide animation studies and so in China there are more than 500 animation departments. Zhao Shi, deputy director of the State Administration of Radio, Film and (SARFT) said "About 64,000 students majoring in animation have graduated from universities and 466,000 were studying in colleges" (Xinhua NA 2006).
Since 2006 the Chinese government has been boosting and supporting the production of this genre, thanks to a targeted policy and special allowances. In 2004 China used to produce less than 30 titles with about 20,000 minutes of animation products for TV and cinema, but, thanks to the Chinese government's support, in few years China has become the first world

producer of animation with 385 titles produced and 220,529 minutes, breaking the record held by Japan (Social Sciences Academic Press 2011).

But all the animation products are under control by SARFT from the production to the distribution. So this can be considered a kind of prior censorship of the animation products which obviously affects the creativity of the young artists. So there was the birth of new kinds of animation and of a new way to look at the animation, in fact it is considered not only a business for a young audience but also a new method of communication now (Mirabito 2012).

In China lots of independent artists have created some animations which deal with the social life and problems of the country and they use the web to get them about. Pi San (whose real name is Wei Bo) is one of these artists who has "recreated" the way to look at the animation in China. He's well known in the world thanks to his production *Kuang Kuang*, an animation dealing with the Chinese problems. Pi San, together with other artists, is trying to create a new method for communication which goes beyond the traditional one (Benecchi 2011).

The theoretical structure of this article is based on the researches and the theoretical ideas conceived by Thomas Lamarre in his book *The anime machine*. The book takes into consideration the animation theories from the technical point of view because it doesn't consider just "a list or catalog of formal features of animation or anime". Furthermore this study focuses on the socio-economic aspect, in order to understand if the production and the distribution have worked well and added some more values to the animation (Lamarre 2009).

In *Miss Puff* (泡芙小姐, *Paofu Xiaojie*) I have taken into consideration Lamarre's theories, the same he used in *The Anime Machine,* about the technical and economic features of this animated series. In his study, Lamarre particularly focuses on the animation and especially on the Japanese anime. In this article I have used the same theories and adapted them for the web-animation and animation in China.

It was also interesting analyzing the animated series *Miss Puff* from the aesthetic and narrative point of view in order to better understand how the author and the animation studio were successful and what topics and techniques they used to draw the interest of the Netizen. In this section I have followed the theoretic guidelines, related to the analysis of a film, created by Bordwell David and Thompson Kristin and well described in the book *Film Art: An Introduction.*

 But I have adapted them such as a new criterion in order to analyze not only this product of animation but also all those media products which show the images in movement (Bordwell 2010).

An overview on Chinese animation

Miss Puff is an original work and it is just one of the several other works produced in China which has become the first world producer of animation this year, as far as the minutes of production, outdoing Japan for the first time (Variety 2011). With its 1.34 billion people, where the 51,27% live in the cities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, January 2012) and more than 367 million of whom are teenagers, China enjoys a huge potential demand for animation content. Rough estimates say that, by the end of 2006, the demand for animation content accounted for 270,000 minutes of cartoon programs each year yet the domestic animation industry was only able to provide around 25,000 minutes (Pan, 2006). However, some market figures show that the situation has changed slightly. The trend of animation TV program production in China has registered a steady growth in the last ten years: in 1997, 5

animation TV programs were produced, in 2004 this number reached 29, and in 2007 it produced 186 series, for 991 minutes, 21,819 minutes and 101,614 minutes respectively (Blue Book 2008). Domestic animation was the fastest growing sector in China's TV industry in 2007, with output growing to 82,300 minutes of new content.

Furthermore, since 2006 the Chinese government has promoted the development of cinema and TV series with the aim of reaching 1% of GDP in the next five years against an investment of around RMB250-350 million (€29-41 million).

Thanks to these government policies there have been substantial changes in animation production in China: in fact, while only 5 animation TV series for a total of 991 minutes were produced in 1997, in 2007 the number of animation TV series increased to 186 for a total of 101,614 minutes (Blue Book of China's Radio, Film and Television, 2008).

In 2004 the annual production of cartoons could not meet the internal market demand because there were only 29,000 minutes while the market demand was 268,000 minutes. Today, there are 34 TV channels devoted to young people and 4 devoted specifically to cartoons in China. According to the China Animation Industry Report (2005-2006), the production of animation series accounts for 800 minutes of cartoons per day: a remarkable achievement that shows us how China has successfully invested in the animation sector.

In 2010, 220,000 minutes of animations were produced, making China the world's biggest producer of cartoons on TV.

Being aware of the influence of foreign animation products produced for the young audience and, with the task to boost its own animation industry to make it strong enough to compete with foreign players, the Chinese government has been attaching great Importance to Improving ITS cartoon industry. In 2000 Chinese broadcast regulator the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) required local TV stations to obtain approval from the Administration and set quotas for imported cartoons. The 2004 regulation by SARFT required prime time slots (5 - 8 pm) to be strictly reserved for locally produced content on all domestic channels and not more than 40% of the air time could be allocated to foreign animation content. A further regulation issued in 2006 established businesses co-produced cartoons needed the approval by SARFT if shown in first time. SARFT also adjusted the schedule for TV stations under supervision ITS: in a 10 - hour time frame, screened for domestic cartoons would be of seven hours every while three hours of foreign cartoons were allowed. The previous ratio was six to four (Han 2009). In May 2008 SARFT extended by one hour for the first time nationally produced animation content. According the current regulation, domestic broadcast television stations can broadcast only cartoons approved by SARFT or Provincial Authorities during children's broadcasting first time. Broadcasters need to obtain approval from SARFT before airing. TV stations must not buy or re-broadcast unauthorized programs and are expressly forbidden from broadcasting or pirated prohibited foreign animation (De Masi 2011). All these regulations are widely seen as protection for the domestic industry in a bid to promote struggling homemade cartoons. Another policy adopted by the government was the creation in 2004 of 15 animation production bases.

Preferential policies, favorable tax regimes, awards and venture capital investments were introduced to foster the growth of the industry. By the end there were 20 of 2009 authorized animation industrial bases which produced a total 221 series of animation amounting to 132.235 minutes, 77% of the total output and an increase of 30% from 2008. 34 children / youth - dedicated channels and 4 animation channels broadcasting about 8.000 minutes every day. The CCTV channel dedicated to youth, Shaoer CCTV (CCTV Youth), on ITS own broadcasts to an audience yearly 65.000 minutes of 600 million people (Blue Book , 2008).

As a result of regulatory and industrial policies, many animation production companies have flourished: today, their estimated number is 1500 - 2000 companies (state, owned and private). In 2007, in the framework of a number of measures adopted for the promotion of national creative industries, SARFT and the Ministry of Commerce jointly issued "A guiding to the catalog of cultural export products and services"(Wenhua chanpin he fuwu chukou zhidao mulü). This catalog includes two important documents: one is the "Catalogue of companies for the export of important national cultural products 2007 - 2008" (2007 - 2008 niandu guoji wenhua chukou zhongdian qiye mulu), the other is the "Catalogue of important items for the export of national cultural products 2007 - 2008" (2007 - 2008 niandu guoji wenhua chukou zhongdian xiangmu mulu). The former animation production companies Indicates 14 national companies as "crucial" to export cultural products, while the latter includes animation Such TV series as "3000 Blue Cat's whys " (Lan Mao guqi sanqian wen) and "Journey to the West "(xiyouji) as products to be exported national animation worldwide.

Original Net Animation Series (ONAS)

Miss Puff is considered as an Original Web Animation (OWA), anyway there is much confusion about the definition of OWA and ONA (Original Net Animation), so I would like to clear up this misunderstanding. When I speak about ONA I refer to "a product of original animation which was created to be broadcasted straight on internet (Web TV and streaming video), it was consequently intended for a production for the online market".
The origin of the word ONA appeared for the first time in 2001 in Japan for a pilot episode, but never published for the series *Lingerie Senshi Papillon Rose*. This series was created by Japanese amateur authors in search for a market and for fame on Internet, but this episode, due to various reasons, has never been broadcast, anyway their idea had a quite good success since the beginning (Lamarre 2009).
Some of these anime have aroused the interest of the big Japanese animation production houses and from now on some Japanese studios begun to take into consideration the idea of creating original animated series only for the web, so it would be more exact to say that these episodes are ONAS, that is an Original Net Animation series.
The first ONAS created by a real animated studio was in 2002 with the launch, for the first time online, of *Maho Yugi*, a series composed by 23 episodes, produced by AIC (Anime International Company Studio, Japan). After this first experiment, also the big distribution houses have started creating some products intended for the web, such as *Mobile Suit Gundam SEED C.E. 73: Stargazer* whose the first three episodes were distributed first online and then in the complete version in DVD. In China this phenomenon is quite new, even if the experiment of the ONAS happened actually in the same period of that in Japan with the same features (Tomino 2012).
As far as *Miss Puff*, the Director Pi San became very famous not only in China but also abroad for his independent productions broadcast on the social networks, Youtube and other video sharing websites. These productions had different points of view from the Chinese government, Steve Aranguren, Vice President of Global Original Programming at Disney Channel Worldwide said "The Chinese government is no different in a lot of respects to the Hollywood studio system (People's Daily 2012). They want commercial movies that entertain, that show people in a positive light, that aren't too violent or sexual" (Cineuropa 2011)*,* in fact Pi San's animations are sometimes provocative creating clashes with the Chinese control system.

To promote his videos, the author decided to choose not only some actual and even provocative themes against the Chinese government (Larmer 2011) but also to analyze some social issue that will be discussed ahead. His productions were intended for internet consumers viewers (People's Daily 2012).

Before *Miss Puff*, Pi San became popular for his animated character called *Kuang Kuang*, created by his small independent animation studio on the outskirts of Bejing. *Kuang Kuang* like *Miss Puff* is an ONAS but it is very different from *Miss Puff* especially because it tells about a little primary student called Kuang Kuang and his adventures during his primary school life and Chinese society in general. Kuang Kuang show is indeed much more oriented to analyze Chinese social issues than *Miss Puff*, moreover the episodes of this series are sometimes very violent (Larmer 2011).

Beyond the new surviving model *Miss Puff* established for other animation production of how to engage into the video sharing market, the success of *Miss Puff* can also be tracked back to the relevance between its storyline and the social background. Setting as an animation for Internet consumers, especially online video viewers at the beginning of the production, the plot of *Miss Puff* was "ordered" to keep closest concern with the ongoing social topics and fashion information according to the Director Pi San. Thus, studying with how *Miss Puff* is involved in the huge social/cultural background, and why it can arouse such a big feedback from its viewers may also provide us another process to understand its success.

About "City Background" and the dimension of *no-place*.

From the technical and artistic point of view the analysis of this series, as stated by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's theories related to the criteria of lighting, narrative, color, shots, takes and editing described in the book *Film Art: An Introduction*, we can see that *Miss Puff* has been made in flash animation, one of the most used programs for the animation intended for the web. The author has thought to produce a hybridization of animation and reality (live- action) using real videos as background and moving his animated characters in real places: this is not a very new technique in fact it was used since the beginnings of the animation cinema, but it is new for the effects. Using real backgrounds has a lot of positive aspects, in fact it makes the production saving time in the creation of the format and it also gives a "touch" of realism to the series. Jill Nelmes in *An Introduction to Film Studies* argues that the use of the live-action as background in the animation is a "representation of what is 'real' in recording the concrete and tangible world." This realism has been exploited for advertising purposes above all, in fact we can see real places, and objects only for the publicity. The realism becomes much more real thanks to the use in the live-action of sequences created with a hand camera, so the image is less steady but more real.

In *Miss Puff* back-ground images and those of the characters created in animation never clash, and this is due to a fine photographic research of the director of photography in the live-action which integrates with the colors and the light used in the series and in the characters in a perfect way. In some sequences the background and the animation mingle creating a new form and it's difficult to understand if there's the animation in the scenes.

This series usually uses a language that, especially for the first five episodes, can be presented also in Western cultures without any kind of misunderstandings. The first five episodes of the first series were set in the modern city, a "no-place", with just some references to the Chinese culture, and there are some clear references to Beijing , however they can be codified only by a Chinese public or by someone who has a deep knowledge of

the Chinese culture, this strategy was initially picked by Pi San's team in order to create an hybrid products. But what is a hybrid product?

A hybrid product is the one that doesn't have an explicit cultural reference in the language, in the context and in the background. The writer Marc Aurgue is the inventor of the word "no-place" (non-place) which appears for the first time in his book entitled *Non-lieux*, published in 1995. Marc Aurgue gives us a careful explanation of this phenomenon by explaining that *non-places,* that is, all modern public spaces, are sometimes anonymous and stereotyped, lacking a historical dimension and the warmth of the living, only frequented by individuals or groups of people in transit, who don't relate to each other (Moscon 2010).

This book accurately portrays the place of the first episodes of *Miss Puff*, that is, a city that can recall in your mind the place where that movies are exhibited: the multiplex.

The multiplex are often called "*no-places*" or spaces which lacks specific national characteristics, as stated before. Similarly to airports and the major hotel chains, once you are inside of them it is difficult to see in which country you are. Likewise, the blockbuster products are products culturally hybrid and culturally not well defined, designed as such to reach a wide international audience. Both *no-places* and blockbusters thus represent spaces (physical in the first case, symbolic in the second) that belong to everyone and yet no one (Cucco 2009).

Analyzing the whole series of *Miss Puff* , it's interesting noticing that from the first episode to the fifth one there's a little of references about Chinese culture, in fact *Miss Puff* lives in a house that looks like a house designed by IKEA, the location is in modern metropolitan places (*non-place*), she goes into places which are similar to the European ones rather than Chinese, she rides expensive autos in the city, she uses a Macbook and iPhone, she watches European football matches on TV and most of the video references and contributions, the photos refer to a Western culture and not the Chinese one, it is thus possible to argue that the series seems to be located in a global village (Augue 1995). But I'd like to clear up, once again, that in the early episodes of the first series there are various Chinese cultural references, which seem to be clear and explicit from the point of view of a Western audience, but actually the series was intended for a Chinese audience, who, while watching the movie, perceives a city totally different from the Chinese typical and modern ones and so doesn't have the perception of being set in China. Referring to the interview that I conducted to the Director Pisan, he told me that he wanted to highlight what stated before and in fact he said "at the beginning I didn't want to set the series in a Chinese city, because I wanted to create a new and fashionable city. When the audience started to love the series, I have included many more elements of the real city, even though, actually, the city of Beijing, that we see in *Miss Puff*, is much closer to a Western city than to the real Beijing ".

Another important example about not Chinese references is the use of sequences of the Japanese *Super Mario* and *Street fighter* videogames and furthermore the sequences alternating of the closes up of the characters makes us think of the Japanese series live-action *Densha Otoko* (電車男, Train Man), and last but not least most of the soundtrack of this series comes from the Western tradition or even refers to soundtracks of well famous films (Cohn 2012).

From the fifth episode on we can notice a change above all in the locations, in fact here there are more references to the Chinese way of life, in fact there are different places and people and there are even the outskirts of Miss Puff's city, a map of Beijing and the very famous building of the CCTV in China; anyway it is in the eighth episode that the viewers realize the Miss Puff experiences her adventures in Beijing. This period is quite relevant and matches with a wider strategy, it is possible to argue that in the first five episodes the task was

oriented to create the main character and allow audience to take confidence with the show, it is the same strategy that was used in the product placement case, once the show obtained a first and fixed base of viewers, plot, product placement strategies and background as well are all defined and very well decoded by Chinese viewers.

The strategy followed by Pi San and his team can be included in the City-based screen story (including films, TV series, animation) style that has less than 30 years of development in China (Xue Jinwen, 2009), which can be seen as the result of the social change after economical-politic reform begun in 1978, and the overwhelming urbanization following this reform. In the last five years, there has been a huge increase of the amount of city-based screen story (Bing 2009), and these stories provided a spiritual resource from "entertainment amusement" to "understanding life philosophy" for young audiences who are born after 1980s or 1990s (China news agency 2011). *Miss Puff*, in this way, is not an exceptional case among other city-based screen stories which get success among Chinese audiences.

Concerning the main character characteristics it is possible to confirm that Miss Puff is a young lady living in a modern city, or if more precisely, in Beijing. The role of the city is quite relevant also because as the same Pi San confirmed in an interview "the new series will be shoot in Beijing but it is also true that Youku is evaluating some sponsor proposals that ask other *Miss Puff* episodes to be set in other cities" (People's Daily Online 2011).

Concerning the character, Miss Puff works for a magazine, live independently as a typical "white-collar". This identity setting gives Miss Puff an easy reorganization from young people living in cities, since most of them hold the same life standard as Miss Puff. Different stories expanded on Miss Puff's life with the background of the city, for example, the subject of episode 11 of the first series is around "renting home". This is one of the most common issue "Bei Piao" people (those one who are "floating" in Beijing) are facing for living in a big city, since they are coming from other places, having no root in Beijing, and the real-estate price raised too high for young graduates or a common "white collar" to afford to buy a home, they can only rent to stay. "Everyone who rent a home used to be an angel with a broken wing in their previous life, when fall into current life, they became ants." The conclusion of this episode of *Miss Puff* can be traced back to a hot social topic in China in recent years—"Ant Group" (Shi Taoyang 2010).

Yuan Si, who gave out the name of "Ant Group" defined it as the one who are graduated from colleague within low income and Inhabited by groups. Another prominent blogger and scholar, Han Han, defined "Ant Group" with a more detailed idea based on his research of "Investigation on Ant Group in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong": Ant Group are people who are graduated from college in the recent 10 years, aged between 22-29, coming from poor family from small cities or villages, and are working in the first-level city where the lowest salary standard is more than 800 RMB (99 Euros). Their income is generally less than 3 times of the lowest salary standard of the city, and 70% of the income need to be used to pay for the renting and the basic living expense. The Engel's Coefficient (Liu Chen Xiang 2008) of this group is much more than the average standard of other people, and they are mostly living in big cities or places with advanced economy like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Dalian, and similar. The total amount of "Ant Group" people is around 3 million around China based on the official data (Shi Taoyang 2010).

Most of the "Ant Group" people are born after 1980s, it came into the lens of the media in 2010 because one of the place – Tang Jia Ling, where a lot of "Ant Group" people are living, is facing to be demolished, which means more than 50000 "Ant Group" renters from that little village of Haidian district of Beijing needed to relocate themselves. Afterwards "low-income College graduates" started to be concerned as the fourth vulnerable group living in

cities after farmers, immigrant workers, and laid-off workers (Baidu). Because of those structural change of the society in recent years such as the urbanization, the transformation of the population structure and the labor market, and especially because of the industrialization of education system since 1999, young graduates are facing a severe situation to survive in the city after their graduation.

The "video game" part of this episode describes the "Ant Group's " living situation in a simple but obvious way, they live in a tiny cell, but need to move out time and time again because of the rise-up of the rental, they are shaped like an ant, and there are a lot of them. Miss Puff talked about the "curse of home" with her "Ant Group" neighbor that one need to relocate 11 times till he find his own home, but her neighbor had already moved 11 times, while still without a place to stay. Not only discovering "Ant Group" who are poorly renting home in the city, this episode of Miss Puff also refers a little to the "house-slaves" group of people who had already bought a "home", but couldn't afford the loan and expense of living inside, thus they rent their own home to others, and they rent small cell to live as "Ant Group" again.

Topics about "home" and real-estate market is one of the most typical topics relates to "city" in China. *Miss Puff* chose this kind of theme as the storyline and so it touched the resonance of its audiences in the most direct way. Reviewing those comments of this episode online, most of the viewers had the same experience of moving and renting, thus, they love to see the shadow of themselves into the story of *Miss Puff*. Although Miss Puff herself is a kind of "ideal" model with a visible "perfect" life style, the stories around her are realistic and they always arouse or discover a kind of "pain" of the city life, and it is because of this realistic relation between the real life and the story: *Miss Puff* won the heart of the audience.

Conclusions

Miss Puff success represents one of the first most successful ONAS product created by a Chinese video sharing company gaining both a relevant commercial success, provided by very accurate product placement strategies, and a cultural consensus especially among the most young and urban viewers who saw some of their problems that have to face everyday reflected in the show.

Considering the lack of dedicated literature on the Chinese ONAS production, the authors decided to prove one Chinese animation industry and Chinese video sharing overviews in order to understand in which context the 2009 "Plan for Boosting the Culture Industry" and Chinese international image building will take place.

This article tried to describe the ways *Miss Puff* was ideated, created and presented to the public analyzing when and how new form of profitability were involved in the show. More detailed studied could be confirm or negate Zhang and Neelankavil empirical results according whom US consumers will be more accepting a product placement than Chinese consumers (McKechnie 2003).

On the artistic and socio cultural side the authors decided to first clarify the difference between OWA (Original Web Animation) and ONA (Online Net Animation) for moving then to the match between the city based background and the hybrid stile used in the first series. The video sharing service is the *Miss Puff* context represented an important platform both for describing artistically and commenting some Chinese social issues and phenomenon such as "ant group and housing price", "leftover lady Identity", "latest social relation", "life philosophy". Very interesting especially under the SARFT "anti-vulgarity" campaign issued to crack down on populist programming.

From a production point of view it will be interesting to see if in the future ONAS productions follow the path drawn by *Miss Puff*'s success and consequently if product placement strategies revenues is competitive or even replaces revenues forms provided by traditional media. According to the author's point of view, the huge presence of Western values present in the show through product placement, but also through quite explicit references, soundtracks and quotes as well as the first five episode hybrid strategy, could represent an attempt of the Chinese ONA production to gain success also in other Asian markets in a more general purposed oriented to a stronger more Chinese soft power image.
With this article I hope that Chinese ONA could be studied both from an economical and a cultural approach and it will be a very interesting step to check if the Chinese "Plan for Boosting the Culture Industry" is able to gain the expected results as well as if the Chinese soft power international image building is also be positively confirmed (Gates 2006).

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