

# From 1950s to 1980s: The Formation, Development and Practice of the “*National Style*” Animation Concept of Shanghai Animation Film Studio

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## Abstract

From the 1950s to 1980s, the series of “*National Style*” animations created by Shanghai Animation Film Studio have made Chinese animation famous both at home and abroad, and the “*National Style*” animation concept proposed at that time is also considered to be one of the most influential and representative animation concepts in the history of Chinese animation. By analyzing representative animation, and the books, articles, and speeches on the concept of “*National Style*” animation published by animation directors of Shanghai Animation Film Studio from the 1950s to 1980s, this article aims to explore and summarize the evolution of the “*National Style*” animation concept Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

**Keywords:** “*National Style*”, animation concept, Shanghai Animation Film Studio, development and evolution

## 1. Introduction

The terms, “*Shanghai Animation Film Studio*” and “*National Style Animation*”, which used to be synonyms of Chinese animation, are two keywords that cannot be ignored in the study of Chinese animation. In recent years, “*National Style*” animation has attracted renewed attention with the success of several animated films adapted from traditional Chinese novels or mythology, such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *White Snake* (2019) and *Ne Zha* (2019).

The “*National Style*” animation concept was first formally put forward by Te Wei, the head of Shanghai Animation Film Studio. In 1950, the animation department, originally part of the Northeast Film Studio, moved south to Shanghai and transferred to a newly established studio, Shanghai Film Studio (hereafter referred to as SFS). Under the recruitment of department leader Te Wei, a group of artists with diverse professional backgrounds (animation, literature, music, etc.), such as the Wan Brothers, Qian Jiajun, Xie Tianao and Lai Jinhui joined the department one after another. Together with Jin Xi and other former members from the Northeast Film Studio, they became pioneers in that era in exploring the development of Chinese animation.

In 1957, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (hereafter referred to as SAFS), which was reorganized and expanded from the animation department of Shanghai Film Studio (hereafter referred to as SFS), was officially established with Te Wei as its director. For the following 30 years (Note 1), SAFS has been the most important production base for animated films in China. From *The Magic Brush* (1955) and *The Conceited General* (1956), which are known as the “first exploration of Chinese national style animation practice” (Jin, 1988) to *Three Monks* (1981), which was referred to as a key work embodying a conceptual shift in animation (Qu, 2014), the animators in SAFS have never stopped practicing the concept of “*National Style*” animation.

In addition to the creative practice, Te Wei, Jin Xi and other SAFS animators have repeatedly put forward systematic thoughts on the concept of nationalization of Chinese art films combined with their own animation creation experience in the published articles and speeches, which became an important source for exploring the conceptual changes of “*National Style*” animation in that period.

By systematically reviewing and analyzing related China’s literary and art policies, the representative works of SAFS’s “*National Style*” animation, and the books, articles, and speeches of SAFS’s animation directors such as Te Wei, Jin Xi, and Zhang Songlin regarding the “*National Style*” animation concept from the 1950s to the 1980s, this article aims to explore and summarize the evolution of the SAFS’s “*National Style*” animation concept.

## 2. Nationalization Policy in Literary and Art in the 1950s

The “*National Style*” animation concept in SAFS needs to be discussed in the context of the nationalization of literature and art in China in the 1950s.

In 1940, Chairman Mao Zedong put forward the concept of “*National Style*” cultural concept

in his speech, *New Democratic Politics and New Democratic Culture* (Note 2), at the first congress of the Shaanxi-Ganjiang-Ningxia Border Area (Note 3) Cultural Association. He pointed out that the new democratic culture is “*national*” in form, “the form of the nation, the content of new democracy-this is our new culture today” (Mao 1940). Subsequently, Mao further proposed the theory of “*cultural nationalism*” in his talk, “*Speech at the Yan’an Symposium on Literature and Art (1942)*”, which became the yardstick for thought and action in China’s literary and artistic circles at the time (Qu, 2014) and had a profound impact on the formulation of China’s literary and artistic policies and the development of literary and artistic work thereafter. Furthermore, in the “*Talk with Musicians*” published in 1956, Mao clearly pointed out the importance of nationalization in artistic creation. He believed that “the fundamentals of art have their commonality, but the forms of expression should be diversified, with nationalized forms and styles (Mao 1956), and put forward the task of creating new artworks with unique national forms and styles to literary and artistic professionals.

Influenced by the above-mentioned and other related literary- and artistic-related policies of the time, some specific policies in the field of film and television promulgated during this period also referred, in varying degrees, to the requirement of “*nationalized*” creation. For instance, the “*1952 Film Studio Production Work Plan*” launched by the Film Bureau in the Ministry of Culture, explicitly required the creation of film and television works to be “popularized and nationalized” (Wu 2006).

In December 1955, Chen Huangmei, then director of the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture, paid a visit to SFS and gave clear instructions on the development direction of Chinese animation of the time. He pointed out that “animations should draw nourishment from the national culture, and get inspiration from folk stories, fairy tales, myths, and fables. Disrespect for national heritage and national style reflects bourgeois ideology, and contempt for national heritage is a lack of patriotism” (Editing group of *Historical Materials of Shanghai*, 1995). Chen’s instructions and suggestions had a direct impact on the formation of the “*National Style*” animation concept of SAFS.

Under the guidance of the cultural policy of nationalization at that time, the trend of “*National Style*” emerged in China’s literature, music, painting, film, and other literary and artistic fields. Accordingly, the “*National Style*” animation concept practiced by SAFS is not only the experience and achievements of animators’ independent art exploration, practice, and creation, but also the response of the artists to the cultural nationalization policies at that time under the special national ideology and cultural environment.

### **3. Preliminary Exploration of “*National Style*” Concept: The Pursuit of Traditional Artistic Forms**

The exploration of nationalized animation began when Jin Xi and Te Wei were still members of the animation department of SFS. In the color puppet animation, *The Magic Brush* (1955), Jin Xi incorporated characteristics of traditional Chinese art forms, wood carving and clay sculptures, into animation character design, scene design and other aspects, and combined those characteristics of Chinese art forms with Chinese folk story, which is an important attempt of early national style animation creation. Besides, Jin Xi is also one of the first

animators to discuss theories about nationalized animation. When talking about the experience of creating *The Magic Brush* (1955), he summarized the keys to nationalized animation creation, including drawing on traditional artistic characteristics in terms of animation design, considering the audience's appreciation habits in the overall narrative of the animation, and thus creating popular art works (Jin, 1988). In his published article, *Trnka's Puppet Art* (Jin, 1959), he further discussed the characteristics of national style animation creation through a review of the artwork of Jiri Trnka, the famous Czechoslovakian puppet animator.

“Another characteristic of Trnka's plastic art is his specific and distinct national style, which is the worthiest of our learning. He faithfully inherited the traditional style of Czechoslovakia's national art. The figures in his works, as well as the technique of artistic exaggeration, are all based on Czechoslovak traditions. You can see without any proof that it is Czechoslovak art” (Jin, 1959).

In 1955, when Te Wei was working on the animation *The Conceited General* (1955), he put forward the slogan that Chinese animation creation needed to “explore the road of national style”. For the first time in the field of animation, the term “*National Style*” was explicitly stated, marking the theoretical origin of “*National Style*” animation. Te Wei's work, *The Conceited General* (1955), is also recognized as the first animation to fully explore the national style. The design of the main characters in the animation is styled with traditional Peking Opera facial elements; the design of the character lines incorporates Beijing Opera's narrative into the dialogue mode of modern drama; the action design refers to the stylized performance of Beijing Opera; featured elements from Peking opera tunes and folk music ancient songs are also applied in the background music of the animation, such as the Chinese Pipa music, *Ambush On All Sides*. “The whole animation (*The Conceited General*) strives to create Chinese characteristics in terms of material selection, character design, scene design, and motion performance” (Jin, 1988), which became a textbook example of “*National Style*” animation creation in terms of form and style design, and developed a decisive influence on the formation of SAFS's animation art style afterward.

As the first animators who explored the concept of “nationalization” in SAFS, Jin Xi and Te Wei's early animation creation and theoretical research established the basic development direction of Chinese “*National Style*” animation afterward. From the representative animation practices and their reflection on the concept of nationalization at this stage, it can be seen that the most significant characteristic of SAFS's idea of “*National Style*” animation is: emphasizing the application of various traditional Chinese art forms in animation, such as the application of woodcarving and clay sculpture elements in *The Magic Brush* (1955), the application of traditional visual elements, action elements and musical elements of Peking Opera in *The Conceited General* (1955), etc.

The emergence of this trend, first, has a lot to do with the fact that the majority of the early animators of SAFS came from a fine art professional background. For example, Te Wei has years of experience in commercial comics creation, while Jin Xi has received an orthodox education in Western painting and used to serve as an art editor and deputy editor of

newspapers and magazines such as *Jinchaji Daily* and *Comrades*, creating a large number of propaganda paintings, oil paintings, gouache paintings, etc. (Cao, 2013). Due to their professional qualities in fine arts, special attention was paid to the transformation and reference of traditional Chinese art forms, especially visual elements, in the creation of early SAFS animations. Second, as the most important state-owned animation studio in China at that time, there were relatively strict constraints on the choice of theme and content for SAFS's animation works in the 1950s. In the article *Film Art: a hundred flowers in bloom* (1956), Chen Huangmei, then director of the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture, pointed out the issue of limited theme selection in film creation in this period and came up with the suggestion of "China's socialist content, China's national form"; but at the same time, he also re-emphasized the importance and necessity to "exert its (film) greater power to serve workers, peasants and soldiers" (Chen, 1956). Similarly, in the article *Talking about the Characteristics of Puppet Films* (1957), Jin Xi pointed out the problem of so-called "Shuo Zhu Ti (preaching)" in China's animation creation, that is, imposing dogmatic content and slogans on animation, turning animation art into "illustrated textbooks"; but at the meantime, similar to Chen, he also indicated that puppet animations should be used as "weapons of social criticism" to expose "those with universal ideological tendencies, such as bureaucracy and conservative thinking, etc." (Jin, 1957). Although the phenomenon of limited subject matter and single theme in the creation of films and animations in this period has been noticed, under the influence of political ideology, animation artists still focused their animation practice on "how to express socialist content while drawing on Chinese folk art, opera art and classical art in form and style" (Chen, 2011).

Taking the integration of traditional art forms as a symbol of animation's "*National Style*", is the main feature of the SAFS's "*National Style*" animation concept in this period, which also determined that for a long time afterwards, SAFS's "*National Style*" animation exploration emphasizes more on the exploration of nationalized art forms and styles.

#### **4. *Where Is Mama?* (1960) and *The Monkey King* (1961)**

After the official establishment of SAFS, the scale of the former animation department in SFS continued to expand. Under the guidance of director Te Wei's animation concept of "*National Style*", SAFS's animation team incorporated various traditional art forms, such as stone carving, mural painting, Chinese ink and wash, paper cutting, Chinese shadow puppetry, traditional opera, etc., into the creation of animation, producing a large number of animations with a distinctive nationalization style. The decade from 1957 to 1966 is also known as the golden decade of Chinese animation.

Adhering to the characteristics of the initial period, SAFS's animation creation continued to focus on the artistic form and style of animation at this stage. In order to achieve better artistic effects, SAFS invited painters with relevant art backgrounds to join the creative team according to each animation style, for instant, painters Zhang Guangyu and Zhang Zhengyu (art designers of *The Monkey King*) from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, landscape painter Fang Jizhong (background designer of *The Cowboy's Flute*) from Chang'an Painting School (Note 4), making animation creation of SAFS reach an unprecedented artistic achievement in



the transformation and innovative application of Chinese traditional artistic styles. In the first ink and wash animation, *Where is Mama?* created by SAFS in 1960 (see Figure 1), the unique animation form and characteristic visual effect resulting from the integration of traditional Chinese ink and wash art and animation represents a breakthrough in SAFS's exploration of "National Style" animation.

"In the production of traditional animations, the active subject can only be painted using single lines and flat color due to the limitation of the animation process. A Chinese ink painting, with different ink tones, brushes, and the ink itself penetrating and presenting a sense of fun on the rice paper, is a very unique art form. It is difficult for traditional animation techniques to express and achieve" (Jin, 1988).



Figure 1. Ink and wash animation, *Where is Mama?* (1960)

The emergence of ink and wash animation realized what has been emphasized in the "National Style" animation concept: to create animation art with unique Chinese national characteristics; besides, in terms of the animation production process, the production of ink and wash animation has also broken the traditional mode of single-outline and flat-color of cell animation drawing, bringing innovation in animation technology.

The above-mentioned animation *Where is Mama?* (1960) can be considered as an excellent practical result of the early "National Style" animation concept which emphasized more on the pursuit of traditional Chinese art forms; another animation produced in this period, *The Monkey King* (1961), not only gained high achievements in the practice of nationalized

artistic forms but also tries to break through the inherent framework of “*National Style*” and expand the connotation of “*National Style*” animation theory by integrating Western painting techniques in animation creation. The director of this animation, Wan Laiming, and his brothers, Wan Guchan and Wan Chaochen, who are regarded as the founders and pioneers of the Chinese animation industry, have been involved in animation production since 1920s. Long before the “*National Style*” animation concept was proposed by SAFS, the Wan brothers already expressed their opinions on what is “*Chinese-style cartoon*” in the article *Gossip Cartoons* (1936):

“The image of animation protagonist has different styles in different countries, such as American style, German style, and Russian style...China has its own character style, which is definitely different from other countries. It could be considered a “true” Chinese style cartoon only when it contains Chinese humor and Chinese character style” (Wan et al., 1936).

As the creators of China’s first animated short film *Uproar in the Studio* (1926), the Wan brothers have many years of experience in animation production. Before joining SAFS, the Wan brothers have participated in various projects, including animation for commercials and animation effects for films in the 1920s, and animation for anti-Japanese war themes in the 1930s, etc. Deeply influenced by western animation concepts, many of their animation works show the integration of western animation style and Chinese elements. For instance, the production of their early animation, *Uproar in the Studio* (1926) and *Paper Man Trouble* (1930), is an emulation of American animator Dave Fischer’s unique method of combining live-action film and animation (Wan, 1995). Moreover, during 1946–1948, Wan Chaochen, one of the Wan brothers, also once went to the United States to study animation making techniques. The diversity and complexity of their animation careers have allowed the Wan brothers to take a more comprehensive and objective view of SAFS’s “*National Style*” animation concept proposition. When talking about the experience of making *The Monkey King* (1961), Wan Laiming affirmed the concept of national style animation, but also opposed the blind rejection of foreign culture and art.

“Although animation art is an imported product, it can take root in the Chinese soil and blossom into a bright and colorful flower with careful cultivation. As with all forms of literature and art, the development of animation art needs to adopt advanced technology from foreign countries, rather than promoting a nihilism that denies everything” (Wan, 1986).

The Wan brothers’ animation work, *The Monkey King* (1961), on the one hand, continues SAFS’s exploration of national style animation in terms of artistic forms. The character design, background style, music design and other aspects of the animation are all integrated with different traditional Chinese artistic forms. For instance, the picture and character design inherited the frescoes of Yongle Palace (Note 5) and Dunhuang, and referred to the stylistic characteristics of Buddhism and Taoism (Jin, 1988), and the action choreography references the unique movements of traditional Chinese opera, while the elements of traditional Chinese percussion music were applied in the soundtrack, etc. On the other hand, it also pioneeringly

applies some Western painting elements to the detailed design of animation. For example, the focus stenography technique in Western painting is used in scene design to enhance the extensity of certain scenes in animations. Additionally, it also makes various innovations in the animation narration. For instance, the sequence in which the Monkey King remembers his past is shown with a montage technique.

In the article *Create National Style Animation* (1960), Te Wei summarized SAFS's exploration of "National Style" animation during this period, pointing out that the emergence of new animation forms such as ink and wash animation, and paper-cut animation signified that "Chinese animation has opened up its own new path in terms of form and style" (Te, 1960); in addition, he also put forward further thoughts on the connotation of "National Style", stressing that "using some Chinese ink painting elements in the background, or using some traditional Chinese patterns in the character costume design" could not be regarded as a truly "National Style", but should demonstrate Chinese national characteristics in the "the characters' thoughts and feelings, habits, gestures and language expressions" (Te, 1960). It can be seen from this article that although animators such as the Wan Brothers have made innovative attempts in the practice of national style, the overall animation concept of SAFS at that time was still centered on exploring the way to demonstrate Chinese artistic form through animation.

### **5. Transformation in *Three Monks* (1981)**

In 1978, Te Wei was re-appointed as the head of SAFS, marking the officially resuming of resumption of production operations at SAFS, which had been stagnant for nearly a decade due to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Under the cultural atmosphere brought by China's reform and opening-up policy, animators were able to get rid of the shackles formed by the domestic political system and ideology to a certain extent, expressing their national style animation concept with works of more artistic personality and artistic tension. A passel of excellent works appeared in this period, such as *Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King* (1979), *The Story of Afanti* (1980) and *Three Monks* (1981).

Among them, the work of animator Ada, *Three Monks* (1981), is a pivotal work reflecting the transformation of SAFS's animation creation concept. It represents two new significant characteristics in SAFS's "National Style" animation exploration during this period.

Firstly, in terms of artistic style, it no longer confines to the transformation and presentation of traditional Chinese artistic forms and no longer rejects the application of Western elements, but instead selects appropriate artistic forms to present according to the characteristics of different subjects. In animation, it is becoming common to combine multiple artistic expressions, whether they belong to traditional Chinese artistic forms or are of Western origin. Actually, Ada, the director of *Three Monks* (1981), mentioned the importance of learning from foreign animations in his article *Trip to Zagreb* (1983). He believes that the creation of animation "cannot be done behind closed doors; with and without reference would lead to significant differences in animation creation. Animations are foreign arts, and without reference, there will be no Chinese animations" (Ada, 1983a). Therefore, in the animation *Three Monks* (1981) directed by him, in line with the comedy of the story itself, artist Han Yu



drew on the “simplicity, symbolism, and single-line flat painting” characteristics of Western cartoons when designing the characters and used exaggerated techniques to highlight comic characteristics of the character image (Jia & Tian 2018); in terms of composition, the animation adopts “a blank background and a flat composition” (Ada, 1983b), which are commonly used in traditional Chinese folk painting, ultimately presenting a unique visual with a fusion of Chinese and Western artistic styles.

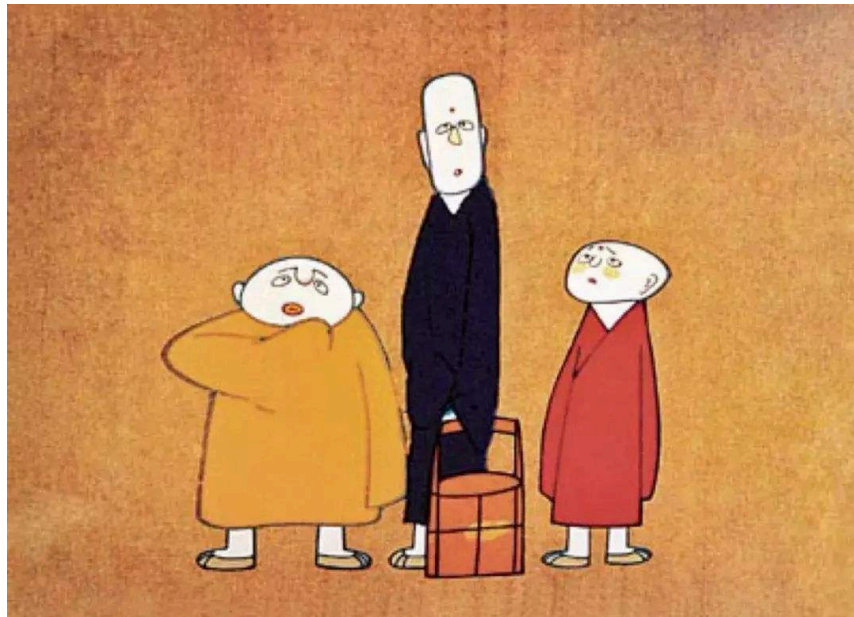


Figure 2. Character design of *Three Monks* (Ada,1981)

Secondly, in the animation narrative, SAFS’s animation began to gradually get rid of the predicament of “Shuo Zhu Ti (preaching)” proposed by Jin Xi in 1950s; diversified themes, novel narrative techniques, especially some storylines that are closer to daily life, reflections and concerns about real life, began to be shown in the animations of this period. While writing the script of *Three Monks* (1981), Bao Lei, a famous child writer in China, expanded the original simple proverb (Note 6) by adding rich and interesting details, thus successfully creating three characters with distinctive personalities, and expanding the classic plots such as mouse trouble and temple fire. The film art theorist, critic and playwright Chen Jianyu has highly recognized this change in narrative and content in his article.

“When the artists incorporate their life feelings into an allegorical story, it makes the whole work overflowing with life interest. It is not so much a traditional subject, but rather a realistic subject. Although the characters in the film are dressed in monk’s robes, the ideological connotation embodied in are highly realistic” (Chen, 1982).

When concluding the creation experience of *Three Monks* (1981), Ada demonstrated new thinking on what “National Style” is. He summarized ten characteristics of *Three Monks* (1981): “National”, “Allegorical”, “Popular”, “Modern”, “Comic”, “Humorous”, “Refined”,

“Comedy”, “Action” and “Musical”. He believes that the above ten characteristics form the unique artistic style of this animation, making it different from any other animation, whether Chinese or Western.

“It is indeed ‘national’, but it is also ‘new’ and ‘international’. One British filmmaker considered the animation (*Three Monks*) ‘very International’ after watching it. What he said makes me have a deeper reflection on the “*National Style*” animation concept” (Ada, 1983b).

From the three keywords “national”, “new” and “international” put forward by Ada, it can be seen that the “*National Style*” animation concept of SAFS has already stepped out of the limitation of the early application of traditional Chinese artistic forms as the benchmark for nationalization of animation and started to have a new expansion. In his article *Animation Should Go to the Next Level* (1982), Te Wei summarized SAFS’ exploration regarding “*National Style*” animation from the 1970s to the 1980s as, “we gradually figured out a path to develop animations on the basis of profound national traditions and new social life” (Te, 1982).

## 6. Conclusion

From emphasizing the exploration of traditional artistic forms and styles to seeking a combination of nationality with internationality and realism, the evolution of SAFS’s “*National Style*” animation concept is the result of the interaction of multiple forces, including animators’ free exploration and overall volition of the state under the specific political and cultural context of China. Its success is distinctly contemporary and unrepeatable. As Jin Songbai (1988) pointed out, the animation practice of SAFS in different periods embodies “animators’ aesthetics, and people’s psychology, desires and requirements in that period. If we still follow the same old methods today, we will undoubtedly not be able to surpass the achievement of *The Monkey King* (1961) or *The Cowboy’s Flute* (1963)” (Jin, 1988). In the analysis of the formation, development, and practice of the “*National Style*” animation concept in Shanghai Animation Film Studio from 1950s to 1980s, what we need to pay more attention to is the choices and explorations made by animators in different periods, and the thinking behind these choices and explorations.

After the state abolished the unified acquisition of animations in the 1990s, due to the lack of commerciality and the misalignment of creation and operation modes caused by the different systems (Qu, 2020), SAFS and the “*National Style*” animation constructed by it inevitably went into decline after encountering the challenges of marketization. Until a few representative animations in recent years, such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *White Snake* (2019), etc. began to explore the combination of “tradition and modernity, antiquity and fashion, myth/legend/fable and modern life” (Pan, 2018), becoming an important exploration and practice of the “*National Style*” animation concept in the new era. How to promote the concept of “*National Style*” animation concept to be in line with the times and international in the current context and under the background of marketization, is a topic worthy of further discussion. If Chinese animation is to prosper again, it is also necessary to take this as the starting point for consideration and complete transcendence.

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## Notes

Note 1. From 1966 until 1976, the animation production of SAFS had held up during the ten years of Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Note 2. The original speech was published in *Chinese Culture* on February 15, 1940, and was retitled as “New Democracy” when it was co-published in the 98th and 99th issues of *Liberation* on February 20 of the same year.

Note 3. The Shaanxi-Ganjiang-Ningxia border area was a revolutionary base established by the Communist Party of China during the Anti-Japanese War, including parts of northern Shaanxi, eastern Gansu and Ningxia.

Note 4. The “Chang’an Painting School” is an art group represented by Shi Lu, Zhao Wang Yun, Li Zisheng and Fang Jizhong, whose painting subjects are mainly landscapes and figures, as well as flowers and birds.

Note 5. Yongle Palace, located in Richeng, Shanxi Province, was founded between 1247 and 1358 A.D. It is the largest and best-preserved Taoist temple in China. The frescoes of Yongle Palace, covered in three main temple halls with a total area of 960 square meters, are rich in subject matter and superb in painting techniques, inheriting the excellent painting techniques since the Tang and Song Dynasties, and are masterpieces of ancient Chinese frescoes.

Note 6. *Three Monks* (1981) is adapted from a Chinese folk proverb, the original sentence is “One monk draws water to drink, two monks carry water to drink, and three monks have no water to drink”. The moral of it is to do a job, if there is no system as a guarantee, responsibility is not implemented, but more people can not get things done.

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