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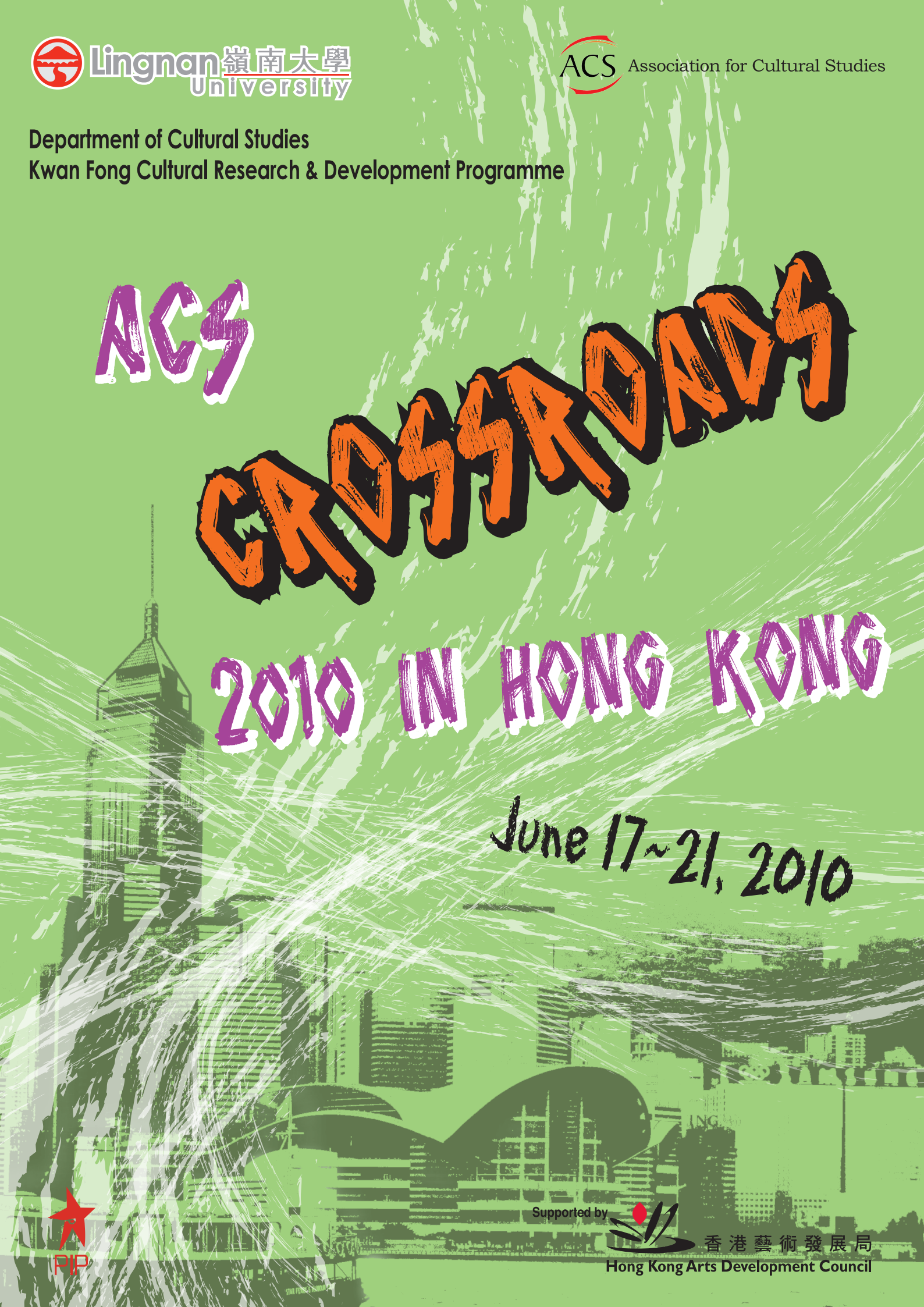
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# Animated Canons: The Canons of Animation between the East and the West

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## Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of animation canons in the East and the West, examining how distinct aesthetic, cultural, and ideological frameworks have shaped the medium from its early industrial modernity to the contemporary global era. The study revisits the formation of the Western canon, built on naturalism and narrative individualism, and the Eastern canon, founded on stylization, emotional abstraction, and symbolic resonance. Against this backdrop, Chinese animation emerges as a unique intermediary field, constantly negotiating between imported models and local traditions. Through a historical and theoretical lens, the article analyzes the hybrid nature of Chinese animation, from the Wan Brothers and the Shanghai Animation Studio to contemporary co-productions such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The argument concludes that animation today is entering a polycentric phase in which the boundaries between East and West are increasingly fluid, creating new global canons that reflect both cultural diversity and technological convergence.

**Keywords:** animation studies, Chinese animation, cultural hybridization, media canons, East–West exchange

## 1. Introduction: The Idea of Animated Canons

Animation has often been treated as a subgenre of cinema or a children's entertainment form. Yet, as argued by Bendazzi (1999), animation is an autonomous visual language with its own grammars, styles, and conventions. Within this language, the notion of *canon* refers to the codified set of aesthetic principles, narrative patterns, and production models that guide creative practice and audience reception. Unlike the literary canon, animation canons are not determined by institutions but by technological innovation, cultural ideology, and global flows of images.

From the early twentieth century, animation developed distinct traditions in different parts of the world. The Western model, epitomized by the Disney studio, pursued naturalism, emotional

realism, and the illusion of life (Johnston & Thomas, 1981). The Eastern, particularly Japanese, model privileged stylization, abstraction, and affective semiotics (Schodt, 2003; Pellitteri, 2002). Between these two poles, Chinese animation evolved as a third space, marked by cultural hybridization and by the tension between local identity and global aspiration. This study examines how these three trajectories, Western, Eastern, and Chinese, have interacted and redefined one another, giving rise to what may now be described as *animated canons*.

## 2. Western Canons: The Aesthetics of Naturalism and Industrial Modernity

The Western canon of animation emerged in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, shaped by industrial capitalism and the ideology of modern progress. Walt Disney's studio, in particular, codified the principles of full animation, continuous motion, and character psychology. Films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Pinocchio* (1940) established a model grounded in naturalistic illusion and narrative coherence. Disney's motto, "the illusion of life," expressed an anthropocentric vision in which animated figures mirror human emotion and moral development (Thomas & Johnston, 1981).

However, this was not the only Western model. Competing studios such as Warner Bros. and UPA challenged Disney's dominance through alternative canons. Warner's *Looney Tunes* introduced surreal humor, musical experimentation, and self-reflexivity (Jones, 1999). UPA's modernist aesthetics, influenced by Bauhaus design and abstract painting, embraced limited animation and stylized geometry (Stevenson, 1973). The rise of television further diversified the field. Hanna-Barbera, constrained by low budgets, developed economical storytelling emphasizing dialogue, timing, and voice acting over elaborate motion (Peary & Peary, 1980). In these variations, the Western canon revealed an internal plurality, oscillating between industrial efficiency and artistic experimentation.

Underlying this diversity was a shared cultural logic: animation as a spectacle of control and mastery over movement. The Western canon aligned with Enlightenment rationalism and capitalist productivity, celebrating individualism and the triumph of human ingenuity over nature. These ideals would profoundly influence global animation but also provoke reactions in other cultural contexts.

## 3. Eastern Canons: Symbolism, Abstraction, and Emotional Semiotics

The Eastern canon, primarily developed in Japan, evolved as both an appropriation and a critique of the Western model. Early Japanese animators such as Osamu Tezuka drew

inspiration from Disney but adapted its techniques to the constraints of a postwar economy. Limited animation, still frames, and dynamic camera angles replaced the expensive full-motion approach. These techniques, born of necessity, soon became stylistic signatures. Anime redefined motion through rhythm, montage, and emotional intensity rather than physical realism (Schodt, 2003).

The Japanese canon also introduced a new narrative philosophy. Instead of the Western focus on individual redemption, anime emphasized collective identity, moral ambiguity, and transcendence. Symbolic imagery, such as the recurring motif of transformation, reflected both Buddhist cosmology and modern existentialism. Large, expressive eyes and minimal gestures became semiotic devices for internal emotion rather than outward realism. According to Pellitteri (2002), this synthesis of abstraction and empathy created a visual lexicon that global audiences could intuitively decode.

Moreover, the Japanese animation industry developed a vertically integrated model combining television, manga, merchandising, and fandom cultures. By the 1980s, anime had become not just an art form but a system of cultural production influencing global aesthetics. Western filmmakers, from the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* to Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, borrowed visual and narrative codes from Japanese animation, demonstrating that the flow of influence had reversed. The Eastern canon had become global.

## 4. China Between Two Worlds: Historical Hybridization

Chinese animation occupies a complex position within this dialogue of canons. The country's first animators, the Wan Brothers, were initially inspired by American cartoons yet soon integrated traditional Chinese painting, folklore, and opera into their works. Their 1941 film *Princess Iron Fan*, adapted from *Journey to the West*, not only marked a milestone in Asian animation but also influenced a young Tezuka Osamu in Japan (Ying, 2003). From its inception, Chinese animation thus embodied cross-cultural exchange rather than imitation.

The establishment of the Shanghai Animation Studio in the 1950s marked the golden age of Chinese animation. Directors such as Tei Wei and Wan Laiming developed the so-called "ink-wash animation," blending traditional brush techniques with cinematic motion. Works like *The Conceited General* (1956) and *Where is Mama* (1960) illustrated a distinct aesthetic grounded in Confucian ethics and collective harmony. Japanese animator Tadahito Mochinaga's presence in Shanghai during this period further fostered transnational collaboration and stylistic hybridity.

Yet the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution interrupted this flourishing. In the 1980s, foreign animation, especially Japanese anime, flooded Chinese television, reshaping audience expectations. To counter this influence, the Chinese government implemented policies promoting domestic production, imposing quotas on imported series, and establishing animation production bases (Blue Book of China's Radio, Film and Television, 2009). These measures sought to protect cultural sovereignty while nurturing national creativity.

## 5. From "Made in China" to "Animated in China": Cultural Hybridization and Global Ambition

By the early 2000s, Chinese animation entered a new phase characterized by globalization and state-backed ambition. The government's "going-out strategy" aimed to transform animation into a tool of cultural diplomacy and *soft power* (Nye, 2005; Kurlantzick, 2007). Policies encouraged international co-productions and the export of animation rooted in Chinese tradition but adapted to global markets (Sun, 2010).

A key example is the Sino-Japanese co-production *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (2009). Jointly produced by Beijing Huihuang Animation and Japan's Future Planet Corporation, the series illustrates the synthesis of Chinese storytelling and Japanese technique (People's Daily Online, 2009; China Daily, 2009). It consciously avoided the stereotypical anime aesthetic, favoring character realism inspired by Chinese ink art, yet employed Japanese expertise in digital compositing and 3D backgrounds. The project's high production cost, approximately 650 million yen, demonstrates the scale of China's aspiration to compete internationally.

Beyond its artistic qualities, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* symbolizes the emergence of a new business paradigm. Rather than simple outsourcing, it represents co-ownership of intellectual property and shared revenue streams across production, distribution, and merchandising. In this sense, it prefigures the "created in China" slogan, marking the transition from manufacturing to creative authorship.

This hybridization also extends to technology. High-definition workflows, digital color grading, and mixed 2D–3D techniques have become standard in major Chinese studios. Such tools not only modernize production but also enable the revival of traditional motifs in new visual forms. Animation thus becomes a field where technological innovation meets cultural revivalism, a dynamic that defines much of China's current creative industry strategy.

## 6. Challenges and Emerging Directions

Despite rapid growth, the Chinese animation sector still faces structural challenges. High production costs, limited domestic audiences for original content, and persistent imitation of Japanese styles have hindered the development of a distinct national identity (Qing, 2006; Lu, 2009). However, a new generation of creators is increasingly aware of these limitations and seeks to redefine Chinese animation as both culturally specific and globally intelligible.

The digital era also introduces new possibilities. Online platforms such as Bilibili and Tencent Video host an expanding ecosystem of web animations (*donghua*) that blend anime sensibilities with Chinese mythology and youth culture. International festivals have begun to recognize Chinese independent animators experimenting with avant-garde aesthetics. These trends suggest that the canonical frameworks of animation are no longer monolithic but interactive, shaped by cross-border collaboration and audience participation.

The evolution from protectionism to creativity echoes broader transformations in China's cultural industries. As Jimmy Tse, a merchandising executive, remarked during the 2010 Tokyo Anime Fair, "Why are we manufacturing for someone else? Why are we not creating anything ourselves?" (Mainichi Japan, 2010). This sentiment encapsulates the desire to move from industrial imitation to creative authorship, a shift that lies at the core of building a new animation canon.

## 7. Conclusion: Toward a Polycentric Canon of Animation

The history of animation is no longer a tale of unilateral influence from the West to the rest. It is a polyphonic dialogue among multiple centers of creativity. The Western canon, grounded in naturalism and industrial logic, and the Eastern canon, based on emotional abstraction and symbolic minimalism, have both evolved through mutual contamination. Chinese animation, positioned between these traditions, exemplifies how hybridization can generate new visual languages and market strategies.

As animation enters the digital and AI-driven era, the very notion of a single canon becomes obsolete. Instead, we witness the rise of *polycentric canons*, overlapping constellations of style, ideology, and technology that redefine what animation means across cultures. China's contribution to this global conversation lies in its ability to mediate between heritage and innovation, merging the poetic rhythm of ink painting with the computational logic of digital design.

In this new global ecology, animation is no longer an East–West binary but a field of translation. The canons of animation are being rewritten not in isolation but in collaboration, reflecting the multiplicity of voices that now animate the world.

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