MIT-Beijing Film Academy Animation (BFA) Project
Liwen Jin   Rena He Huang

BFA Project History

The Collaborative project between MIT and Beijing Film Academy (BFA) to develop a digital archive for Chinese animated films was first proposed by Prof. Jing Wang at MIT Foreign Language and Literature Department and Prof. Henry Jenkins at MIT Comparative Media Studies program in 2002.[1] This project aims at presenting the role of BFA in the development of modern Chinese cinema, and promoting the teaching and research of humanistic subjects at both MIT and BFA.

In the fall of 2005, a delegation from the Beijing Film Academy and its Animation School visited MIT. During this visit, great progress was made to push the collaboration forward. The two sides agreed on building a prototype of animation digital archive to showcase the fast development of the Chinese animation sector and BFA's unique role in promoting the development. With over fifty years of experience in the education of animation professionals, the Animation School of BFA has developed a distinct approach to animation pedagogy and accumulated a large repository of multi-media contents.

According to the first memorandum between MIT and BFA,[2] three areas of interests were identified as the main contents for the prototype archive.

1) An archive of animation films to be used as a teaching resource and the basis for collaboration between MIT and BFA students.
2) BFA students would document their summer field trips to rural China, where they would draw, photograph and film as part of their training in preparation for animation filmmaking.
3) A shared collection of images (photos, drawings, sketches, etc.) that would function as the basis for storytelling and collaboration between MIT and BFA students.

By February 2006, the first prototype archive "BFA Animation School," both in English and Chinese, was constructed. This archive contains a total of 34 award-winning short films from the

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[1] Jenkins, Henry. *A Preliminary Proposal for Collaboration with the Beijing Film Academy July 2002.* File Name: "MIT-BFA Proposal_Henry," in folder "BFA Project Developments."
[2] Prepared and translated by Rena He Huang. *Memorandum 10/27/2005*. File Name: "Memorandum 20051027_English," in folder "BFA Project Developments."

4th and the 5th Animation Academy Awards, 8 PDF files illustrating the textbooks written by BFA faculty and used in BFA, and some miscellaneous documents.

In the fall of 2006, Prof. Jing Wang proposed a larger Asian Animation Project, aiming at integrating more Asian-Pacific animation institutions into this initiative to exhibit the best works of the young talents from a consortium of international schools and to promote the learning, teaching, and research on Asian animation.[3] On the basis of the "BFA Animation School" archive, a new "Animation Resource" prototype archive was set up, which features MIT-BFA Project but aspires to aggregate more international (mainly Asia Pacific) collaborators. More materials including animated films, digitalized textbooks and production materials were uploaded into 'Animation Resource' which picks up new digitization standards and new categories were created.

By the end of Spring 2007, the Animation Resource archive contained approximately 400 multi-media documents, most of which were contributed by the Animation School of BFA. The archive is presented bilingually in Chinese and English. The following is a list of the items within the archive:

1) 150+ animation short films selected from the 1st to the 5th Animation Academy Awards entries are located in the "Student Films" folder. Films from the 6th Awards are still being processed.

2) The "Animation Education" folder contains student exercise materials and BFA teaching materials such as textbooks. The Animation School students' summer field trip materials are designed to be included in this category. A better way of presenting these materials (mainly photographs and a small amount of drawings), and especially their connection with other aspects of the pedagogical activities, needs to be created.

3) In the "Production Materials" folder, archival documents related to the production of animation short films are gathered. These include as character design sketches, storyboard and production stills, and have been contributed to the archive by the students. HS team developed a better way of presenting these materials based on the production process of an

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[3] Wang, Jing. *Asian Animation Project Presentation*. File Name: "Asian_Animation_Project.ppt," in folder "BFA Project Developments."

animated film in order to bring out the inner connections among them and to more vividly illustrate the flow of the creation process.

4) During the past two years, a number of animation artists from BFA were interviewed. They were questioned about their educational experiences at BFA and their artistic creations in and beyond BFA. Interview videos and text transcriptions in both English and Chinese were edited and compiled, but haven't been uploaded yet.

BFA Project Development

Phase I (October 2005-May 2007)

From September 2006 to May 2007, Rena He Huang (CMS'07) and Liwen Jin (CMS'08) were in charge of the project. During this period, 132 BFA animated films were uploaded into "Student Film" under "Animation Resource" using new digitization standards. In the spring of 2007, a prototype that contains cultural resources and production materials related to the film "Rabbit's Tail" was also built up. During this period, Rena and Liwen also tried to categorize all of the BFA films according to different facets-character, genre, production, form, transnational influence, and artist, and built up a prototype of the film archive under "Collections" of mmedia named "Animation Collection." But the experiment was not so successful. Besides, the efforts of trying to develop the film selection criteria during this phase also met great difficulties. (The problems will be illustrated again in the following paragraphs)

Phase II (September 2007-February 2008)

In the second phase, Hyperstudio team made several important changes:

1. Hyperstudio interviewed Prof. Ian Condry for the purpose of understanding the real focuses of Asian animation researchers. Prof. Ian Condry is a scholar on Japanese culture and animation at MIT. He talked about the Japanese animation production process in famous Japanese studios like Ghibli where he once did the fieldwork, and also about the global outsourcing trend and inter-cultural influence for Japan's animation industry.

2. Inspired by the interview with Ian Condry, Hyperstudio research team re-designed the module of the animated film Rabbit's Tail-the biggest winner of the 5th China's Animation Academy Awards of-all based on the streamline of its production process—from character design and background design, to storyboard & lay-out, and then to key animation & in-betweens, and post-production.

3. Hyperstudio team compiled a series of documents for cultural references implied in the film so that users can dig further into the profound meanings of the film, and also compare the animation design within different cultural contexts.

The following flow chart illustrates the concept of the prototype. All materials are organized based on the production process:
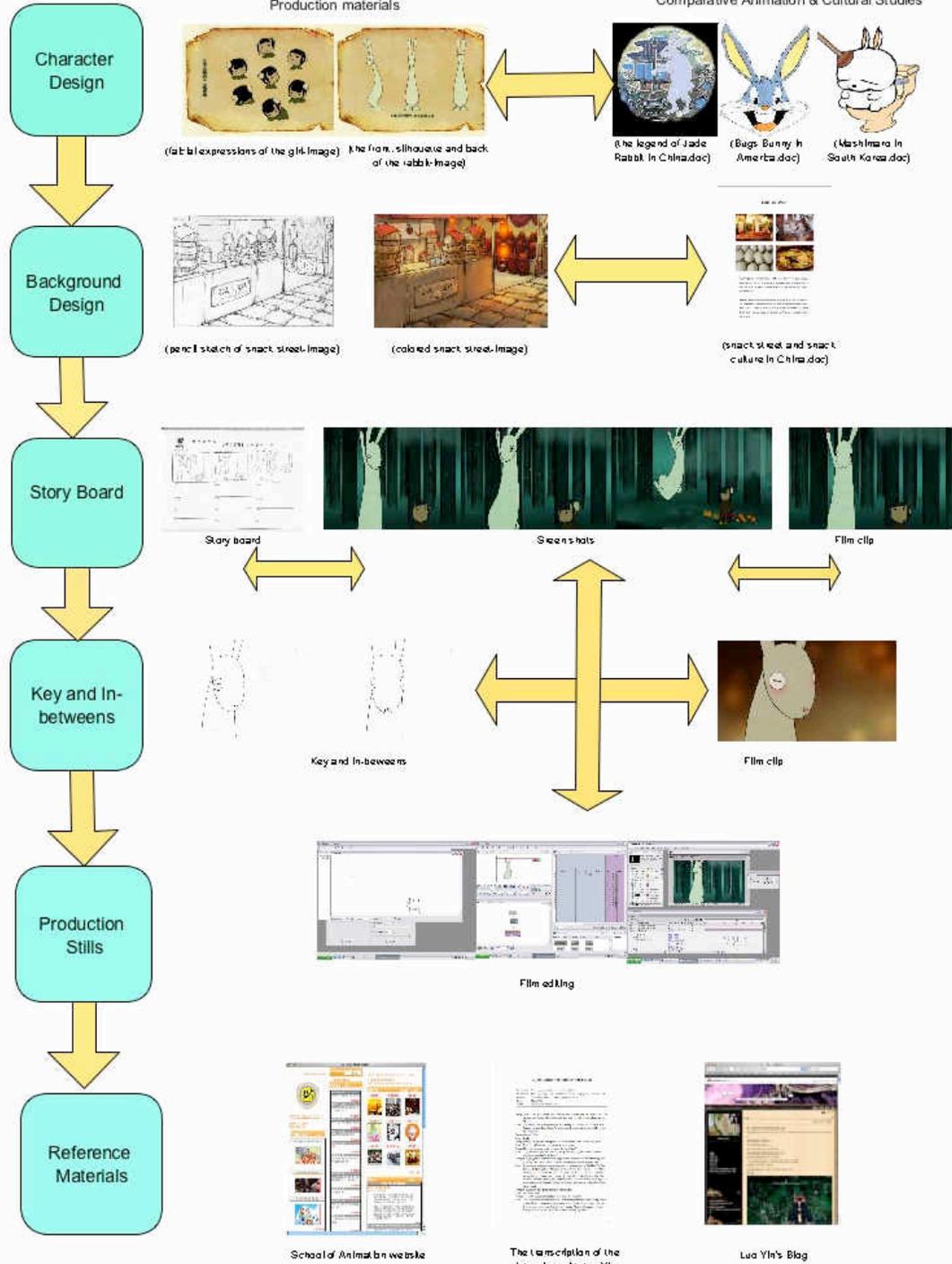
1. Character design → Background design

In the 'character design' part, we list the author's sketches of the designs for the girl and rabbit in the film. Side by side we add the compiled articles about the story of Chang'E and the Jade Rabbit in traditional Chinese culture for our users to get some understanding of the cultural context of Rabbit's Tail. Furthermore, we juxtapose the documents about the origins and stories of Bugs Bunny in America and Mashimaro in South Korea, through which our users can compare the designs of various animated rabbit images across different cultural contexts. The same idea was applied to the part of 'background design', in which we include the Chinese cultural references about the lantern festival, sugar-coated haw on the stick, snack & snack street, and lotus flower & lotus lantern, all of the Chinese traditional elements represented in the film.

2. →Storyboard→Key and In-betweens→Production stills→Reference materials
In the storyboard part, we added the pencil sketches, the translated written story lines, corresponding screenshots, and the relevant film clips. In the key&In-betweens part, we have the pencil sketches of the key animation of specific scenes, image sequences, and the film clips. Furthermore, we also listed relevant production stills to show the whole production process of the film. The last part, reference materials, is composed of the transcription of the interview with the director, the webpage of BFA animation school, and the blog address of the director-Luo Yin. These reference materials expose the users to external miscellaneous content about China's animation, and also to the author's own thoughts about her film-Rabbit's Tail, Chinese traditional culture and the overall Asian animation industry.

Production Process

Prototype-Rabbit's Tail

Production materials

Comparative Animation & Cultural Studies

Character Design

(facial expressions of the girl-image) (the front, silhouette and back of the rabbit-image)

(the legend of Jade Rabbit in China.doc) (Bugs Bunny in America.doc) (Mashimaro in South Korea.doc)

Background Design

(pencil sketch of snack street-image) (colored snack street-image)

(snack street and snack culture in China.doc)

Story Board

Story board

Screen shots

Film clip

Key and In-betweens

Key and in-betweens

Film clip

Production Stills

Film editing

Reference Materials

School of Animation website

The transcription of the interview with LuoYin

Luo Yin's Blog

Phase III (February 2008 to May 2008)

The focus of this phase was the 6th award BFA animated films. Two problems popped up when Hyperstudio were selecting films for the BFA film archive:

First, Hyperstudio team does not have clear criteria of selecting films for its archive. When Rena and Liwen were working on the 5th award films in 2006, this problem had already existed but did not get well solved. Liwen thus consulted Jing Wang in the spring of 2008. Jing made some suggestions about the criteria. For example,

1. Films that mainly target children (too childish) should not be selected [because the goal of the archive is for animation education and research].

2. Films that do not have clear story lines should not be selected [because it is too difficult for audience to catch up with the meaning of the film].

3. Films that pick up 3-D or other advanced technologies, even if they do not meet the above two criteria, should still be selected [because they stand for the progress of animation technologies)

However, these criteria were denied after careful discussion on Hyperstudio's group meeting because we should not use the 'negative' words in defining the criteria.

After that, Hyperstudio was re-considering the selection criteria but still did not overcome this problem very well. Liwen began to watch the 6th award films, and hoped to get more inspiration from the films themselves. Due to limited time, Liwen did not continue the selection of the 6th award films in May. Up until then, 36 films were selected and put in the folder Porject→BFA→6th awards. There are two kinds of naming in the folder, for example, 6_12_10 and bfa000624. 6_12_10 was named by Liwen and means the 10th film in disc 12 of the 6th award films, while bfa000624 was named by Rena and is the actually the identifier. It is suggested that the following RA does not name the films according to the current identifier number because the identifier numbers have been changed. (Please go to see the spreadsheets in the folder of metadata and figure out the identifier numbers for the 6th award films).

The second problem is how to categorize all of the films from the 1st award to the 6th award. In fact, there are no systematic and theoretical classifications of animation art. At current stage, Hyperstudio just categorized all of the films chronically based on which award they belonged to.

But there are still potential to categorize the films in a more informative and explicit way. Rena and Liwen made some experiment of classifying the films according to character, genre, production, form, transnational influence and artist in 2007 (Please go to mmedia and see the categories in the folder of 'Animation Collection' under COLLECTIONS). But the experiment was not very successful because it is very hard to define each category and the border between various items under one category is vague. For example, under the category "Genre", the definition of 'poetica' is very blurry, and the items of 'robot' and 'science-fiction' are overlapping. But these categorizations are still very inspiring for people who will resume the BFA work.

MMEDIA Categories of BFA films (by Rena and Liwen)

- Animation Collection
  - Prototype-Rabbit's Tail
  - Character
    - Concept Character
    - Archetypal Character
    - Round Character
  - Genre
    - Allegorical
    - **Anti-modernity**
    - Childhood Nostalgia
    - Historical Story
    - Myth & Classical Tales
    - Poetica
    - Robot
    - Science-fiction
    - Socialist Nostalgia
  - Production
  - Form
  - Transnational Influence
  - Artist

BFA in Classroom

Since the beginning of MIT-BFA collaboration, we have been trying hard to find ways of integrating this digital repository into the existing curricula at both BFA and MIT. The Chinese language instructors here at MIT have taken the lead in experimenting with the animation materials in their Chinese classes. In Spring 2007, two classes used the animation films as the basis of Chinese composition and storytelling. Students are actively engaged in the comprehension, critique, oral and written discussion of the films they watch and collect. Both instructors and students believe that the use of the digital archive has added an interesting dimension to their teaching and learning experiences. This kind of application of the digital technology to the classroom further enhances the communication between the Hyperstudio research group – the "producer," and the faculty and students – the end user, and benefits both the content and functionality development.

COLLECTIONS:

- ⌄ 21F108/158 S07
  - ⌄ 10am Section
    - › Edwin C.
    - › Erica C.
    - › Karen C.
    - › Alicia D.
    - › Christina F.
    - › Tiffany G.
    - › Christine H.
    - › Nancy H.
    - › Shenwen H.
    - › Yuan K. S.
    - › Weiyang S.
    - › Raymond T.
    - › Alyse W.
    - › Xiao X.
    - › Ellen W.
    - › Alyse W.
  - ⌄ 1pm Section
    - › Ethan B.
    - › Richard B.
    - › Christine C.
    - › Jizi D.
    - › Scot F.
    - › Mingwei G.
    - › Esther H.
    - › Christine L.
    - › Kevin M.
    - › Christine N.
    - › Sarah H.
    - › Vivian T.
    - › Joanna T.
    - › Joshua V.
    - › Lily W.
    - › Jennifer W.
    - › Clara Y.
    - › Grace Y.
  - › Selected Animation Items
  - › 老师's Personal Collection

The following is a detailed record of how the class uses BFA animated films in classroom in the fall of 2006.

1. Story-telling

Time: 50 minutes, or a class period

Animated film used: *The Thief,* chosen for its manageable length, storyline, and the ending that is open-ended for interpretation.

Step 1: Students, divided into groups of 3 or 4, were shown *The Thief*.

Step 2: The teacher asked the students to narrate the very beginning of the film. It was very important here for the teacher to get the students to be more observant and pay attention to details in their narration. The teacher, for instance, asked students to describe the color of the sky, the color of the bench at the bus station, the time when the bus is in service, etc.

Step 3: The film was shown twice in three parts, which all together took about 15 minutes. In the mean time, each group got prepared, in Chinese, for a collective story-telling, also in Chinese.

Step 4: The groups took turns to narrate the story in front of their classmates while the film was being played.

Step 5: Each group explained their interpretation of the ending and what they thought the moral of the story was.

Step 6: The student voted for the interpretation of the ending that made most sense to them.

2. Comparing and contrasting 2 stories with the same title

> **Time:** 50 minutes, or a class period
>
> **Animated film used:**   *The Frog in the Well*, chosen for its title and the director's unconventional interpretation of the fixed expression "the frog in the well". The students had just finished a chapter on 成語, or fixed expressions, before the class.
>
> **Step 1:** Students, divided into groups of 3 or 4, worked together, in Chinese, to sort out the order of the conventional story of "the frog in the well" with all the sentences shuffled.
>
> **Step 2:** Students were shown a Flash of the conventional "the frog in the well" story downloaded from the web.
>
> **Step 3:** The teacher led a brief discussion on what the frog would say and how it would behave if it ever got out of the well.
>
> **Step 4:** The students were shown the BFA *The Frog in the Well*.

Step 5: The students compared and contrasted the two interpretations. They also discussed if the frog's decision to jump back into the well in the BFA film was the best solution.

21F.109 Chinese III (Streamlined) (Taught by *Jin Zhang*)

1. Collaborative story-writing

>**Time:** After class. Students wrote stories in collaboration with each other in the class forum on the Stellar site for 21F.109 Chinese III (Streamlined).

>**Animated film used:**
>1. *The Thief*
>2. *The Son and the Father*
>3. *Memories by the Street*
>4. *So This is Life*
>5. *Marrying off Princess Mouse*
>
>* *"No-Me",* was also selected at first, but later we decided not to use it.

>**Step 1:** Students were shown a segment of each of the 5 films in class and told what the teacher's expectations regarding what the students would write were. The

teacher tried to make the students to understand the importance of being more observant and paying more attention to details.

Step 2: The teacher asked the students to narrate the very beginning of the film of *The Thief*. In order to make the students more observant and pay attention to details in their narration, the teacher asked students to describe the color of the sky, the color of the bench at the bus station, the time when the bus is in service, etc.

Step 3: Students followed the instructions below and wrote stories in the class forum on the Stellar site.

Pick 2 of the 5 BFA short animated films. For each of the 2 films, write 2 postings of no less than 50 characters each in the Stellar *Forum* under *Class Discussions*. Finish your 1st posting by 8pm, Saturday, September 30th and the 2nd by 8pm, Sunday, Oct. 1st.

1. Do not finish the last sentence of your postings. The unfinished sentence is a cue for the next person as to what to write. Of course, you will also need to follow the cues your classmates leave you.

2. For each film, post your 2nd posting when there are at least 5 new postings after your 1st posting.

Step 4: When students met for class again, the teacher first asked them the difficulties they had encountered and the lessons they had learned in the collaborative story-writing. Then the teacher asked the students to nominate the best piece of 50-character-long writing in their opinion and explain why they thought it was the best.

2. BFA materials used as supplementary materials

Time: after class

Animated film used: *The Rabbit's Tail*, and *Interview with Luó Yin*, chosen as supplementary materials for background knowledge.

The students were asked to read 2 entries of Luó Yin's blog in Chinese before class. Even though not required to watch them, most students watched *The Rabbit's Tail* before coming to class, and some also watched the entire interview. They had more to say when a discussion on the 2 entries of Luó Yin's blog was conducted in class.

Indeed, this kind of application of the digital technology to the classroom further enhances the communication between the Hyperstudio research group – the "producer," and the faculty and students – the end user, and benefits both the content and functionality development.

A note on the project collaborators

BFA project, since its launching, is pretty different from other projects of mmedia. It is the collaboration between Hypertudio and an external and foreign institute. Therefore, it is very difficult to maintain the contact and communication between the two parties. Furthermore, unlike other projects, BFA does not have specific targeted users in the MIT community since MIT does not provide animation classes. These differences actually cause the problems of the project.

First, it is hard to get suggestions from the BFA part. BFA is very aggressive in trying to lead international animation collaborative projects in China. But they are unclear of Hyperstudio's goal, strengths and weakness. Neither do they have an explicit idea of what the archive should look like. Without their suggestions, we can only work by ourselves. But it is suggested that Hyperstudio strengthen the communication between the two parties as much as possible in the future when this project is resumed.

Secondly, no audience means no specific directions. Although we tried to involve the BFA project in the Chinese language class of MIT, the project was still not originally targeted at language learners and thus made it hard to perfectly cater to the needs of those classes.

Therefore, a possible direction of BFA project is to gear toward Chinese language teaching at MIT. For example, some animated films have a lot of colloquial dialogues, and some have good story lines for students to understand the real society and culture of China. Please see the details of the **BFA in classroom** part.

Besides, the 6th award films need to be selected and uploaded to the film archive. If any possible, please interview more animation scholars to hear their suggestions on the whole project.

GOOD LUCK! ☺