

**SEMINAR ANIMATION
(CO-)PRODUCING IN AND WITH CHINA
And the animation-education in China**

Netherlands Film Festival 1 October 2018 by Vera de Lange

Speakers: Becky Bristow, Manuel Cristóbal and Leontine Petit

Moderator: Tom van Waveren

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Summary

Already for the third time, ApN organized a seminar at the Netherlands Film Festival. The goal of these gatherings is to develop and increase expertise about animation. Following the seminars 'Storyboarding & Editing' and 'Producing Animation', this year the focus is on China. Which are the possibilities for (co)-producing in and with China, and how is the animation-education organized in this country? Ton Crone, director of ApN, gave a word of welcome to the audience and the three speakers. Leontine Petit presented Bridging the Dragon, a network of Chinese and European film professionals. There is a growing demand for collaboration at this moment, when the Chinese film market is becoming the largest in the world. The recent co-production treaties between China and multiple European countries have expanded the possibilities to work together. In China, which over the last thirty years has been losing its own creativity by carrying out mostly Western outsourcing work, Becky Bristow teaches her students to develop their unique potential by making their own film every year. Manuel Cristóbal gave a behind-the-scenes look in an animated co-production that he is producing right at this moment: the Spanish-Chinese adventure film *Dragonkeeper*, and shared his experiences working in China. Communication plays a key role and a good translator is indispensable. Moderator Tom van Waveren, CEO and creative director of Cake Entertainment in London, chairman of ApN and vice-chair of Animation in Europe, introduced the speakers and led the panel discussion. There was a small but attentive audience, consisting of film professionals and producers, as well as students aiming to work in this field. During the panel discussion, they asked many questions to the speakers and shared their own experiences.

Biographical notes on the speakers

Leontine Petit is the Dutch CEO and founder of Lemming Film (The Netherlands) and Hamster Film (Germany) and (co) produced many films such as *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, *The Lobster*, *Zama* and *My Giraffe*. Since 2014 she is part of the founding team of Bridging the Dragon, an association connecting European and Chinese film professionals, which has as its main goals creating a network and a community of Sino-European professionals, helping to coordinate actions towards China, spreading awareness and knowledge about the two film environments and supporting the development of suitable content for co-productions. In 2016 she has received the European co-production award Prix Eurimages. Currently she is working on a co-production with China and Taiwan.

Becky Bristow has been involved in the film industry for over 35 years. In the United States she worked as animation director for Disney and the pictures *Winnie The Pooh*, *Tail Spin*, *Duck Tails*. She directed the Emmy nominated *Wild Thornberry's Rugrat Special*. She was responsible for the award-winning animated *RAID* commercials. Her credits include well-known movies as *TRON*, *One From The Heart* and *Poltergeist*, through *Cool World*, *The Chipmunk Adventure* and *Rescue Rangers*. She was the chairperson for the Character Animation Program at California Institute of the Arts. She first went to China in 1988, where she became founding chair of the Digital Arts and Design Program at Beijing University in 2003. Furthermore, she was the chairperson of the Jinan Arts College Animation Program in Guangzhou, China where 140 students are being educated.

Manuel Cristóbal is a Spanish film Producer and a PhD in Film Studies at the Rey Juan Carlos University. He graduated in directing at ARTSS International UK and in the Entertainment Master Class at the Erich Pommer Institute in Berlin. Since 2001 he has produced nine feature films for the international market, six of them in animation, and has won four Goya awards in the best animation feature category. Currently he is working on the Spanish-Chinese co-production *Dragonkeeper*, which will be released in 2020. He is also developing the 2D animation film *Gabo, Memoirs of a Magic Life* with the Colombian company Rey Naranjo. He is secretary of the board in CARTOON, member of the board in the Spanish Film Academy and DIBOOS. He is also member of the European Film Academy, visiting professor at the Jilin Animation Center in China and digital production teacher at the U-TAD University in Madrid. In 2012 he received the CARTOON Tribute as best animation producer of Europe.

Presentation Leontine Petit

Leontine Petit gives a quick overview of the current Chinese film market and presents the network Bridging the Dragon. She experiences the Chinese market as very interesting but also challenging. Counting over 1.3 billion inhabitants and approximately 655 cities, China is an enormous country. There are 160 cities which count more than 1 million inhabitants and 12 cities with over 5 million inhabitants. China has a booming cinema-market: the annual box office in 2017 exceeded 7.6 billion dollars a year and is still growing fast. In the first half of 2018, the box office hit 4.7 billion dollars. The number of screens is also increasing rapidly. With almost 57.000 screens China has exceeded the US, which has 38.000 screens, and is becoming the largest market.

Interestingly, the biggest audience group in China is currently between 19 and 30 years old. Until recently the audience was much younger. Now that this audience has grown older they are also interested in films for their children, so the family market is expanding. Regarding animated feature films, the local production still has the biggest market share, although caused by political reasons the number of animated productions decreased slightly in 2017. There is nevertheless a growing number of films from abroad that are being shown in the cinemas.

The local Chinese animation market

Petit shows some examples of the local animation market. Chinese animation films averagely have a box office result of between 10 million and 88 million dollars. Action films with a fast pace are usually very popular. There is no real rating system, so the films are made to be shown to an audience of any age. The *Monkey King*-films are always a big hit. The latest version *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), took in 139 million dollars, making it the most popular film ever in China. Nevertheless, the variety of films is increasing and also more Arthouse films are being made. There have even arisen some kind of arthouse complexes. Sometimes Arthouse films unexpectedly hit the box office, such as *Big Fish & Begonia*, which took in 82 million dollars. It shows that there is a growing need for different genres. It is clear that China is a place where the American dream can also be realized.

The latest trends

To sum up some of the latest trends that are seen in the Chinese cinema market:

- The landscape has become more diverse. There is a growing interest in other genres, such as animation, fantasy and sci fi
- The audience is quickly becoming more sophisticated
- Regarding animation, there is an increasing number of films imported from European countries such as France, Belgium and Spain, instead of just Hollywood and Japan
- The main audience is still mostly interested in family and children entertainment

Bridging the Dragon

Europe has a lot to offer to China, such as a richness of talent, great stories, professional crews, subsidies, post-production expertise, etc. This advantage was also the reason to start this network Bridging the Dragon. In 2014 a group of European and Chinese film producers had the idea of unifying the European efforts and to share knowledge, contacts and resources. Many producers

would like to explore the Chinese market and collaborate with this country, but do not know how to start or what companies to approach. Since several EU governments have recently set up co-production treaties and China missions to encourage collaboration, the possibilities for collaboration have greatly expanded. Bridging the Dragon's headquarters are in Berlin and Beijing. They organize official events such as panels, matchmaking sessions and labs at major festivals, such as the Berlinale and the Cannes Film Festival, and provide all kind of tools to share knowledge. Bridging the Dragon also tries to bring the Chinese to Europe, and learns about what kind of projects work for both China and Europe.

To conclude, Petit invites everyone in the audience to become a member. There are approximately 85 members from over 15 countries, among which is Manuel Cristóbal who is also a speaker at this seminar. Members are invited to all of the activities that Bridging the Dragon organizes.

Presentation Becky Bristow

Bristow starts her presentation by illuminating China's situation and background. China has been struggling for over thirty years to grow their animation industry. After 1979 China became the world's factory, which included the animation industry. Hanna-Barbera was the first animation studio to outsource work to China, because it was a lot less costly. Because of the increasing amount of such work in China, many skills were developed in this country, but this had also a negative consequence. The ability of the Chinese to invent strong stories was lost. Ever since they have been struggling to revive their creativity.

Bristow proceeds with answering the following questions she has received.

As a producer, what activity did you find the most challenging with Chinese producers?

China is incredibly challenging in itself. But to name one, there is a lack of good producers in China. It is important to find a producer who has worked with Westerners on animated TV-shows. Some of them have also worked on animated feature films.

Communication is the biggest challenge in China. It is absolutely necessary to have an excellent translator, to avoid miscommunications. There are very few translators who have knowledge about animation; they need to be trained in animation jargon. An advice is to always test a translator on this knowledge, before you start working with them. Another challenge is that a Chinese person usually don't speak out or criticize, and won't offer something without being asked. If someone doesn't immediately give you the answers you need, you must have patience and not give up. It is a part of their culture; the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. Take time to understand the translators and learn how to get what you need from them. Translators can also become producers. A good friend of mine, Xu Ling, was working in a studio as a translator. After climbing the ladder, she became an animation producer. At this moment she is a top animation producer in China.

In 1988 Bristow was hired by the early American studio Pacific Rim Animation in Shenzhen in the south of China to help the animators learn the US way of animating. That is the studio where most of the strong Chinese producers came from. To show how much China has changed in the last decades, Bristow shows some photos of Shenzhen in the eighties. It was a small fishing village with many bicycles. Now it is one of the fastest growing cities in the world.

What was the most surprising thing about working with Chinese producers and what was the most difficult?

There certainly is a difference between the Chinese and the American mentality. For example, the Chinese can be cagy - especially during negotiations - of which an American may not be aware. Many Westerners who seek to do business with Chinese people, experience them as generally quiet in meetings. Americans then become uncomfortable, and talk to fill up the gaps. In general, it is really hard to get to know China and, in the beginning, this can be very frustrating. After living there for twelve years, there are still many things I don't know or understand. Do not

underestimate them or think you understand them, because you don't. China is an exciting place, but it takes much time to settle down. It is important to show respect, to be patient and listen.

Is the producer in China the same as in Europe or America, someone with the key role- the kingpin in the production process?

Yes, producers do play the key role, but only if they are working in an experienced animation studio that has worked with Western teams and on Western projects. They understand the responsibilities a producer has.

How are the financial aspects handled with Chinese producers in a co-production situation?

In order to produce a co-production in China, the SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) requires a 30% investment, as far as I know. The Chinese state administration of radio, TV et cetera is unique. It is not an open market. The public TV stations are state owned. They do not pay for broadcasting on TV. Chinese producers are cautious about co-productions for TV-series. They will ask that the partner pays for the pre-production, and that the Chinese producer is involved in the developmental stage, so they can be sure the story will pass the censorship. They expect their investment return to come from the international market, because you cannot get it back from local broadcasters. Furthermore, licensing merchandise in China is still very immature, so this is a difficult market, also because there is a lot of piracy. It is a very tricky and difficult process in general. Nevertheless, the market for feature films and internet streaming is different, since they are mainly privately owned. You may have a better chance of co-producing in this field. But it is important to know that Chinese investors expect a fast return. Because of a lack of experience and patience, they don't understand why it takes so much time to develop an animation project.

How much importance does a Chinese partner give to a contract and how do you deal with this?

The strong studios definitely respect the contract. It is important to hire a lawyer who is able to make a Western and a Chinese contract. You can find one on www.chinalawblog.com, and find a lot of information there. China does not accept any non-Chinese contracts.

On this blog you can also read about the important recent developments. On September 20th, China's film and TV regulator, NATR, published a discussion draft of the 'Provisions on Administration of Import and Broadcasting of Overseas Audio-Visual Programs'. The provisions apply to 'overseas' films, TV programs, animation and documentaries. If implemented in their present form, the provisions will seriously impact the streaming and broadcasting of foreign motion picture and TV content. These provisions are part of a process that began in 2014, in which the government supports the domestic Chinese entertainment industry and improves domestic program standards by reducing foreign access to the Chinese market. It is still just a draft, but it doesn't sound good. I am afraid they will really close down the collaboration. This is sad because the Chinese really want to grow in animation, and they can succeed in this with help from Westerners, but the government works against this. When I was teaching at the Guangzhou Arts College, I was astounded how quickly the students expanded their talents just by receiving good education.

What opportunities are there in the Chinese market for European producers and studios?

Chinese professionals are very enthusiastic about working with European studios and producers. I think that, budget wise, European producers match better with Chinese producers. So, at this moment there are definitely opportunities.

What European content is already in China right now?

Some examples of TV series are *Fireman Sam* (my studio produced the first five seasons of the updated series), *The Adventures of Tintin*, *Winx Club*, *Mr. Bean*, *Shaun the Sheep* and *The Smurfs*. Regarding feature films they have *The little Prince*, *Song of the Sea*, *Paddington*, *Loving Vincent*, *Brendan and the Secret of Kells* and many more.

What kind of projects are you working on now with Chinese studios?

With my Chinese friend Xu Ling I am working on a kids TV show about helping others in need. It has

just been pitched and will be created for worldwide distribution. They are still looking for partners.

How do you get in touch with the right Chinese producer, studio or partner?

Tom van Waveren can give you a list of good studios that may be interested.

How is the communication handled with Chinese producers before, during and after the production and how is it different from what we are used to with European/American partners?

The good studios have producers that speak English. It is really not an issue. Most of the studios with experience abroad have the same production pipeline as Western studios.

What are the cultural differences when working together and how are these tackled?

There are always incidents. A confusion can come up of something that is not understood by the Chinese team. But most of the time it is caused by the language difference, which the translators will tackle, for instance a slang word that you cannot find in the dictionary. Mostly you deal with simple problems which can be answered by the client. I never had any cultural differences that affected the work at the studio.

How many animation students are there in China?

There are approximately 100.000 students. Interestingly, California Institute of the Arts is receiving quite a few Chinese students. It is good for China if they go back to China after their graduation or after working a while in the US. They will be able to help the Chinese animation community by showing them what they were taught. There are many of us who are willing to help China with her animation, but the question is if they can help themselves.

Jinan University Arts College

Bristow shows a video about her teaching experiences at Jinan University Arts College in Guangzhou, China. An important aspect of the program is the annual Producer's Show, of which the concept was conceived by Bristow and in which every student is required to make and present his or her own film, every year. This is the only school in China that works this way, with hands-on filmmaking. Many Chinese animation schools focus on theory. This program relies on creativity, storytelling, practice and production. The goal is to inspire students to discover how amazing creating animation stories is. Bristow sees a great potential in Chinese animators and hopes to promote real creativity. The biggest challenge is for students to not give up. The lower grades students in this program have the same opportunities as the higher grades' students. The required level is high, but some will make it to the big show.

Presentation Manuel Cristóbal

Manuel Cristóbal is producing the animated feature film *Dragonkeeper* at this moment. After showing a short video about this project and some general figures about the Chinese market, he shares his experiences in this production process during the last three years, illustrated by visuals from the movie and the storyboard. China is a very promising country, it is the source of great stories and the magic and adventure film *Dragonkeeper* is one of them.

The country

China is a fascinating country with many contradictions. An advice is to be careful; it can be tricky. You have to come closer to get to know China, so you have to be there often to meet the Chinese professionals in their companies. There are many success stories. It is important to have content that is interesting to the Chinese public.

The figures

China is attractive for foreign content. If you look at the biggest box office hits, you see that the numbers are really staggering, and continue to grow significantly. A comparison between the box office in China and in the US of recent Pixar movies, shows that the Chinese market is growing fast and has even exceeded the US with the film *Coco* (2017). There is a new, young audience, that wasn't

there before. The advice is to find a co-production project for a film that works both in China and in your country. That is why we have been relentless on finding the right partner and not to destroy the story along the way.

Producing Dragonkeeper

I discovered the novel series called *Dragonkeeper* at the Bologna children book fair in 2005 and presented to my partner Larry Levene who had extensive experience in China. After that, we got in contact with the author. She belonged to a small publishing company back then, that was not able to do a franchise. But some years later it was taken over by a bigger publishing group. They will now use the film to relaunch the books. These were the most important steps in the beginning of the production:

1. **The dossier**

We started by making the dossier. Sergio Pablos did the first visual development. We went to Beijing to look for partners. The planning is to make three films, but only if the first film is successful. The budget is 20 million euros. Chinese is the main working language.

2. **Concept art**

It is important always to explain everything very visual, to show instead of to tell.

3. **Characters**

For the characters we used a CGI model. We decided not to do a pilot.

4. **Beat board**

We made this for the first time and it proved to be very useful. You can flip through it and see how it looks, without having to read. We also produced a video of four minutes; this is also a way of showing the film visually.

5. **The deal**

The stamp is very important in China, to make the contract official. The first deal we made was on the work split. We insisted on most of the storytelling, because the project came from us, and you need to have a director you know and trust.

6. **The script**

The writing of the script took much effort. We made sixteen drafts of the script. The story got better each time. We managed to listen carefully and convince our partners of our vision of the story. The story had to be relevant for both partners. We kept in mind that if the film would not work outside China, it would not be a good business for us.

7. **The Chinese signing ceremony**

After many months there it was finally: the signing ceremony. These ceremonies are something very important for the Chinese people.

8. **CARTOON Movie presentation**

Then, after a long development process of 2,5 years, we presented the project in Europe.

9. **Art co-development**

We insisted on the fact that the film had to be relevant to China audience, but also needed to be understandable for a Western audience, for which the Han dynasty is not so well known. Bjarne Hansen, a Danish production designer, produced pictures we could use to sell the project. We made the animatic, after which we produced a second version of it based in the agreed script with significant changes.

Communication

In China there are many junior professionals who are eager to learn, but it was important to communicate well. For example, the design of the fortress they made, was too neat and tidy. We had to explain that we wanted something very different. It was indeed a high-tech prison. We wanted to show a China that was very technological at the time. But it was forgotten and abandoned at the time, so it had to be darker. It is very important to have a good line producer who is able to communicate all this information. The communication can be difficult, but it's no rocket science. It is nothing more than talking and listening. We agreed that whoever was responsible had to provide their information both in English and Chinese.

Research

Because of the historical setting of the film, research is very important and we also worked with Chinese researchers. They let us know what is relevant, for instance what kind of cutlery and pots had to be in the kitchen. The team is very young and very open to suggestions.

Cristóbal concludes his presentation by saying that the main thing is find a project that is relevant to you and your partner. Collaboration with China is possible and he would definitely encourage it.

Panel discussion

Tom van Waveren leads the panel discussion. The following questions are asked.

Van Waveren: *I heard from different companies that sometimes they thought that they had a deal with a Chinese partner, but that after that they had to negotiate a long time. Is it true that in China the deal is just the decision to work together, in the sense that they have a looser understanding of this?*

Cristóbal: We had different deals for different stages of the production: for the story, the script, and then we signed the long-term agreement. We would see that we would split the animation, because it would not be good for the project having to share the pipeline. After a lot of negotiations, we ended up with some Chinese animators.

Petit: For a couple of years China Film Animation and China Film Group are quite eager to find the right co-production projects. This is different for smaller and less established companies. There are a lot of companies that have money. And having money is one thing, but you should also find companies that have the distribution or production contacts. The combination of these three factors is important. Many producers gamble and loose often, so often they don't exist for long. It is important that you get good information about someone. So, money isn't the first problem in China.

Cristóbal: It is clear that you will not gain money from China. We had an agreement in which it was written that the revenues in China would be for the Chinese partners. The Chinese market is not shared.

Van Waveren: *Is it true that you have to be in the Chinese animation market for the long term and not for the quick win?*

Bristow and Cristóbal: Yes.

Petit: But isn't that generally the case for making film?

Cristóbal: It is important to go there often and invest much time in the country. The Chinese would also visit us in our country, but later in the project. Their trips abroad are restricted, so they have to have a good reason to travel.

What language is spoken in the initial animation you make?

Cristóbal: The lip-sync is English. This is not always the case; for *Kungfu Panda 3* they made it in both languages. But economically that is not viable.

But wouldn't the Chinese feel neglected then?

Cristóbal: You have seen the figures of animation film in English lip-sync. In an ideal world, it would be perfect to have both languages.

Bristow: China are used to lip-sync and subtitles; for years they have had pirated DVD's. There were seeing all of the Western films and became fans.

Cristóbal: For the animatic that doesn't have lip-sync, we will make one in English and one in Chinese.

China is becoming more expensive. I visited some North Korean animation studios, and they were working quite actively for Chinese animation studios and also for Southern European clients. Have you encountered European clients outsourcing to North Korea?

Cristóbal: I agree that China is not very cheap if you are demanding a certain quality.

Bristow: The animation is not cheap in China. You can have a better deal in for instance Canada.

Petit: There are different possible reasons for going to China. Do you see it as a low wages-country, or do you see it as an opportunity to produce together? Today we are talking about the second approach.

Van Waveren: There has been an increase of high-end productions in China. Good quality animation may be more expensive in China than in France. North Korean studios have been there for at least fifteen years, but I haven't seen them working on high-end productions. Interestingly in China there is a large group of companies that are investing in IP and distributing it through either theatrical or television-based intellectual property. The opportunity for producers to work with those parties can really help create and distribute interesting projects.

Petit: In China there is an enormous hunger for projects in general. If you look at the film markets in Berlin and Cannes and Toronto, you see the Chinese keep on buying and offering the biggest prices for feature films. They were behind and still have to buy a lot.

Do they also show shorts in Chinese cinemas? The Short Film Festival in China has just been cancelled because the sponsor contract was cancelled.

Petit: No, and most of the theatres show the same films. It is all about earning money and private investments. Nevertheless, slowly you see more arthouse chains coming.

Cristóbal: A friend of mine told me that China is like Hollywood in the thirties: anything is possible. You buy your ticket online with your mobile. This makes a huge difference. They know who you are, what kind of films you like, you get a special price, see trailers etcetera. This is a big difference with other markets.

Bristow: Shorts, clips of three to five minutes, are becoming really popular. People watch them in the train on their mobile phone. They circulate on WeChat. This is a Chinese app which combines e-mail and WhatsApp and many other functions. You can buy your ticket with it.

It is not happening on the theatre screens, but online. My compliments to Manuel Cristóbal that they are doing so much research to make the film culturally accurate. A question about the co-production aspect of Dragonkeeper: how is the work divided between Spain and China?

Cristóbal: Both partners have 50% in the co-production, and the mutual investment is also 50%. I am looking for more Chinese talent; there is talent everywhere. But as a producer you need to have a relationship with your talent, for example with the director: you have to know him and have faith in him. Furthermore, the project came from us. Therefore, we did most of the creative work. We do have a Chinese composer. The script was done by both partners, but we had the final authority. We do the animatic here and the whole animation, but we have Chinese animators coming on board. We kept the sound design; but the modelling, shading, lighting etcetera was done in China. The most important thing is to choose what is best for the film. We also encourage China artists to train in Europe to join our projects.

What is the budget of Dragonkeeper?

Cristóbal: The budget is 20 million euros.

Petit: *I am currently in the final stage of financing an arthouse film with China. I discovered that it is quite difficult to combine the European funding system with the China way of investing. Is there public money in the 10 million euros you collected in Europe, and how did you combine that? Did you have problems with the timing?*

Cristóbal: Yes, but we are using mostly tax-related schemes. The timing is indeed very difficult.

Petit: China always want to move very fast, but they also have things that take much time, for example the understanding of the story and the censorship.

Van Waveren: It helps that you each keep the money in your own economic area. Otherwise it would be much more complicated.

Cristóbal: We didn't even try to combine the money. But probably in three or four years this will be very different.

Van Waveren: If money needs to leave China, the government decides, and not your partner.

Did the European Union trade deal with the Chinese government help in any way? Would the deal with the Dutch film fund help any co-production between The Netherlands and China?

Cristóbal: The co-production treaty definitely created an opportunity. There were no co-productions before.

Petit: The good thing about the treaty is that both countries give a sign that they want to work

together. If you send in a co-production to for example the Dutch Film Fund they will definitely check if this is a country with which they *prefer* to work. They don't want to work with just any country. Van Waveren: It is a mutual expression of interest and respect for each other's country and culture.

Most of the audiences in China watch animation from the US and Japan. China is therefore really struggling to find the Chinese way to tell a story. What do you think about this contemporary question?

Bristow: The Chinese youngsters are really fond of anime. I always said to my new students: you need to develop your own style, so you cannot use an anime style. Most of them eventually did start to create their own characters and story. It is hard, but little by little they will start to feel confidence to create that unique form of China and to be proud of that.