

Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformation **– Tze-yue G. HU, Masao YOKOTA & Gyongyi HORVATH (eds)**

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020, 318 pp.

Review by Fanhao ZHAN | University College London, UK

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/2023.11.12](https://doi.org/10.32926/2023.11.12)

Date of submission: 30 April 2023

Date of acceptance: 02 October 2023

Date of publication: 20 December 2023

Introduction

Tze-yue G. Hu, Masao Yokota and Gyongyi Horvath edited an impressive anthology in 2020, *Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations*, to examine the relationship between the concept of “the spirited” (or “the spiritual”) as part of our essence as humans and humanistic productions, especially all aspects of animation industries. T.-y. G. Hu is an independent educator and scholar-author based in Northern California with book publications such as *Culture and Image-Building* (University of Hong Kong Press, 2010). Her background in the healing arts programme provides a perspective for this book that explores the value of tapping into psychosocial healing with the spiritual dimension of animation. M. Yokota is a professor in the Department of Psychology, College of Humanities and Sciences, Nihon University, the current president of the Japanese Psychological Association, and the former president of the Japan Society for Animation Studies from 2004–2012. They were co-editors of *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013). As for Horvath, she holds a Master’s degree of Arts in communications, media and public relations from the University of Leicester. When editing this anthology, Horvath was working on her Master’s thesis about comics, violence and humanity.

Different from Yokota and Hu’s previous edited work, *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, this anthology turns more to global perspectives rather than focussing on Japanese and East Asian animations. Centred around the core of “animating the spirited”, Hu, Yokota and Horvath collected 14 essays from contributors

of different vocations, covering educators, artists, filmmakers, animators, curators and scholars, which establishes a solid interdisciplinary background for this book.

The whole anthology is divided into five sections: “Mindful Practices, Creation, and the Spirited Process”, “Objects, Spirits, and Characters”, “Inspirations from the Spiritual-Cultural Real”, “Comics and Children’s Literature: Their Transformative Roles”, and “Buddhist Worldviews, Interactions, and Symbolism”. Each of these five sections discusses the “spirited/spiritual” theme within the field of animation and how it is “studied, researched, comprehended, expressed and consumed” (p. xvi).

Overview: A journey to the spirited through animation

Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations is an interdisciplinary and trans-context animation essay collection whose contributors are from different geographic regions and cultural groups, such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Thailand and Singapore. The diversity of the contributors’ backgrounds provides the book with various perspectives to view the nature of “the spirited” and the animation. Along with the inquiry path of this anthology, even readers who have no background in animation studies can be led to explore the university of “the spirited” and have a taste of the related processes of the animation industry. One salient feature of this anthology is the multiplicity of the genres of the collected writings, containing academic essays, experiment reports, self-reflections, and director logs. Each of these essays of different genres separately demonstrates a bit of how “the spirited” is animated from their own perspectives; however, all of them are organically connected, constituting an incredible journey for anybody to explore the abstract concept of “the spirited”. The notion that the exploration of “the spirited” exists in everybody’s everyday life is a crucial idea of this anthology, which is primarily examined and explored in the field of animation.

The experience of reading this anthology is a Zen-like process, like the essence of the last essay involved, Yin Ker’s *Shadows of the Sun: Animating Buddhist Dharma for Art History*. In this essay, Ker puts forward a hypothetical animated film and game, *Shadows of the Sun*, to explore the potential of the dharma transmission in Buddhist “art” through the use of words, colours, and shapes. The animated or game-like narrative of *Shadows of the Sun* is similar to this anthology’s chapter organisation logic: the order of the essays demonstrates a tendency from the concrete to the abstract and from the micro to the macro. The anthology begins with Graham Barton and Birgitta Hosea’s *Mindful*

Animation for Learning Awareness, an academic essay exploring the relationship between mindfulness and animation making. It is the only essay in this collection that covers the specific animation-producing processes, and it discusses an issue of relevance to all in today's ever-changing social environment: how to deal with stress with mindfulness practice and animation production. Similar to the earthly beginning of Ker's hypothetical animation and game, Barton and Hosea's essay is an excellent introduction to "the spirited" in animation because of its practical concern on mindfulness, collaboration, stress control and emotional rehabilitation. Afterwards, the focus of the following sections is shifted to a broader level, where other factors influencing animation making, such as economics, politics and religion, are foregrounded.

This anthology spends one entire section and several chapters on the Buddhist sources of modern animation, especially Japanese animation, examining how an ancient belief can infuse society with spiritual power through the medium of animation. However, the inquiry perspective of this book is ever-elevating from ordinary people's spiritual practice to cultural production at the religious level; therefore, it is a pity that detailed processes of animation making and educational animation practice are not sufficiently included. One possible reason is that Yokota and Hu have accomplished such systematic and comprehensive work in their previous edited anthology, *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, and their research interest seems to have shifted from holistic Japanese animation studies to a particular topic, "the spirited", but in a broader global perspective.

Section 1. Beginning of the Journey: What Can Animation Do with the Spirited?

Compared to the following sections discussing religious thoughts and historical reflection, the beginning section of this anthology is quite earthly and practical. Both Graham Barton and Birgitta Hosea's *Mindful Animation for Learning Awareness* and Eileen Anastasia Reynolds's *Transforming the Schizophrenic through Cinematic Therapy* focus on the relationship between mental health and the processes of animation/filmmaking. The anthology's editors comment on *Mindful Animation for Learning Awareness* in the introduction: "Though Buddhist meditation techniques are introduced, the context is purely pedagogical and secular, and the objectives are focused on teaching and learning both for the educator and for the student" (p. xvii). The choice of the beginning essay shows the editors' pedagogical concern, which can

also be reflected by Tze-yue G. Hu's *Frameworks of Teaching and Researching Japanese Animation* in her previous animation study anthology. According to Barton and Hosea, combining systematic mental education and animation-making is a valuable direction to unlock the potential of the medium of animation in modern society.

Reynolds's essay is a first-person director log for composing *Sea Fever* (2015), a film competing in the 48 Hour Film Project. In the process of creation, Reynolds recruited her aunt, Maureen, who was suffering from schizophrenia, as the heroine and found that her symptom was significantly relieved. Although Maureen's participation in animation/filmmaking was not the only influencing factor, Reynolds's practice is supportive of Barton and Hosea's conclusion that making animation, especially collaborating, can help with mental issues. These two essays focus on animation's practical values in improving people's mental health and demonstrate them through a degree of practice. Although these essays, even the whole anthology, did not go further in this direction to put forward a feasible framework that can be applied in educational or clinical fields, their values are more in inspiring other scholars to initiate relevant research. Such values correspond to the editors' self-evaluated meanings of this book: "encourage, inspire and support scholarship across the globe on other, less explored areas of animation studies and surely other related disciplinary studies as well, and contribute to our shared knowledge and ever-growing understanding of the creative human spirit and its manifestations" (pp. 277-278).

In *Transforming the Intangible into the Real: Reflections on My Selected Animation Works*, Kōji Yamamura reflects on the psychological aspects of his seven selected short animated films. When reviewing his own experience of making animation works, Yamamura questioned the Cartesian dualism that sets a strict boundary of skull and skin to separate matter and mind. Yamamura claims that it is difficult for him to tell whether the animation works or the inspirations come first because what animation creators pursue is to transform their thoughts, emotions and feelings into images, lights and movements. From this perspective, animation can be seen as an extension of animators' mental worlds where the boundary of matter and mind is blurred. This statement is in line with the "Extended mind" thesis proposed by cognitive philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), which involves inorganic equipment outside the body, such as paper and pencil, personal computers and smartphones, as a segment of cognitive activities. According to Yamamura, making animation can have him immersed and even

lost in the field of the subconscious, and his animation works can be “a memory trigger that can help recall and relive the emotional/mental state of mind that led to the creation of art itself” (p. 40). Thus, animation becomes a vessel of “the spirited” that can extend humans’ minds, connecting the worlds of reality and spirituality.

Sequentially, Barton and Hosea’s and Reynold’s essays are the first and third ones of this section, while Yamamura’s is in the middle. However, ending this section with Yamamura’s essay could have been better because the other two have similar foci and topics, while Yamamura’s work shares similar interests in at more abstract level of “the spirited” of animation with the following sections.

Section 2. Character Cultivating and Storytelling

According to the editors, the second section of this anthology, “Objects, Spirits and Characters”, explores “the uncanny and fantastic dimensions of storytelling” (p. xviii). In this section, there are three essays talking about the significance of animation’s characterisation and plotting, as well as some related classical paradigms.

The first work in this section is Akiko Sugawa-Shimada’s *Animating Artifact Spirits in the 2.5-Dimensional World: Personification and Performing Characters in ‘Token Ranbu’*, which analyses the success of the browser game *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-* and its derivative cultural products, such as musicals, plays, TV anime and manga. In this essay, Sugawa-Shimada focuses on the traditional Japanese *yōkai* (genie) concept *tsukumogami* (artefact spirits) and its unique values in enhancing characters’ appeal and influence. According to Sugawa-Shimada, *token danshi* (sword male warriors), the personified famous Japanese sword in *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-*, is a special kind of *tsukumogami* possessing the qualities of sanctity and restraint of evil spirits, while the rest of them are mostly harmful or hostile to humans. Although Sugawa-Shimada emphasises the importance of personification in 2.5-dimensional culture, the practices of cultural interaction between the virtual and the real, I think that the actual value reflected by the case of *Token Ranbu* lies in tapping into new directions of application of traditional culture in modern society. *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-*’s dual commercial and cultural success is a convincing example to demonstrate the feasibility of the media mix strategy, which involves franchises across multiple platforms, both online and in the material world. This model can be applied to the animation industry on a global scale, as the local traditional culture can provide a solid cultural foundation for the

implementation of such strategies. At the same time, “the spirited” elements of the local traditions and history can be explored in animation, contributing to the popularisation of traditional cultures among youths and the preservation of local cultural resources.

Raz Greenberg’s *Heaven and Earth: Traditional Sources of the Dual Identities of Anime Heroines* and Richard J. Leskosky’s *Metanoia in Anime: Rehabilitating Demons, Turning Foes into Allies* examine two classic types of animation characters: heavenly women and ex-villains who have gone through a special kind of character arc of metanoia (turning from evil to good). The commonality in the characterisation of these two types is the emphasis on contradictions and transformation. Besides, both Greenberg and Leskosky mention the religious sources of these characters and plots worldwide, such as Shintoism, Daoism, and Christianity. Characters’ transformation of self-identities between rival forces is the essence of such characterisation and plotting. Although Greenberg’s examples of heavenly women, Sheeta in *Tenku no shiro Laputa*, Kusanagi Motoko in *Kōkaku kidōtai*, and Fujiwara Chiyoko in *Sennen joyū*, are not typical examples of metanoia, they all have heavenly origins and attempt to fit within the earthly world, which reflects a desire to transform their identities.

The concept of “the spirited” in this section is rooted in traditional cultures and flourishes through modern cultural practices. However, the actual situations vary from region to region. For instance, according to Leskosky, the plot of metanoia is not as popular in the West, especially Hollywood animation, as it is in Japan. Therefore, one possible strategy for the animation industry is to focus on and draw from the local culture, for which the local markets generally have a stronger acceptance and preference.

Section 3. Religions, Cultures and Animation

Section 3 has the most ingenious arrangement of the essay. Entitled “Inspirations from the Spiritual-Cultural Realm”, it explores how cultural heritages, especially religions and politics, influence all aspects of animation-making.

M. Javad Khajavi’s *Animating with the Primordial Pen: Mystic and Sufi Inspirations in Calligraphic Animation*, Tze-yue G. Hu’s *Interpretations and Thoughts of the Animated Self in Cowherd’s Flute: Highlighting the Daoist Elements in Te Wei’s Watercolor-and-Ink Animation*, and Masao Yokota’s *Interpreting Buddhist Influences in Kawamoto’s Puppet Animation: A Psychologist’s Reflections and Readings of His Animation* share strong symmetrical correspondences. These three essays choose three nations with millenary

traditions, Iran, China and Japan, to explore the relationship between their special forms of animation and their representative religions: Islamism, Daoism and Buddhism.

According to the editors, published English papers on Central Asian and Islamic animation are very rare; therefore, Khajavi's essay is an excellent reflection of this anthology's global perspective. Khajavi examines the relationship between Iranian calligraphic animation and Sufism, an Islamic form of mysticism and claims that there is a threshold of religious background knowledge to appreciate this type of animation. Therefore, the promotion of calligraphic animation necessitates that scholars popularise the basics of Islamic mysticism and the symbolism of the letters to help the public understand the content of the animation. This exchange between the academic and artistic worlds through the medium of animation contributes to the preservation and development of this traditional Islamic culture in the new age.

Hu concentrates on Chinese animation director Te Wei and his watercolour-and-ink animation. This form of animation is profoundly influenced by the Chinese Daoist ideas of purity and nature. These Daoist ideas have been rooted in the Chinese's everyday life since ancient times, but the attitudes of the state apparatus towards them have fluctuated. The impact of the shift in the will of the state falling on individuals and humanistic works is immense and profound, which can be reflected by the destiny of Te Wei and his animated film *Cowherd's Flute*. Hu's essay turns to the example of Te Wei and Chinese watercolour-and-ink animation to demonstrate the vitality of Daoist thought under the influence of the state apparatus.

Yokota's essay is mainly about the famous Japanese puppet animator Kawamoto Kihachirō and his last work, *The Book of the Dead*, which focuses on "the embrace of repentance and the virtuous offering of compassionate acts and prayers" (p. xx). Although Buddhism is not a native religion of Japan, its influence in the country has grown tremendously throughout history. According to Yokota, Kawamoto's puppet animation reflects Buddhist beliefs in both its creation and completed form. As a clinical psychologist, Yokota focuses on Kawamoto's spiritual motives and intentions of understanding the essence of the Japanese people and cleansing the pain caused by World War II through creating animation. Under this circumstance, the animation is Kawamoto's way of exploring the spirit of the Japanese and the cure for psychological trauma caused by the war.

This section introduces the direct influence of three religions on their local particular forms of animation. Such an influence reflects the exploration of “the spirited” in religious beliefs through animation, which can impact both individual mental activities and public cultural tendencies. However, it is a pity that the essays of this section only cover Asian regions and religions, neglecting the rest of the world, which possesses quite diverse spiritual values in animation-making.

Section 4: Humanistic Productions and Practices for the Children

In this section, Gyongyi Horvath’s *“We Are All Humans”: Children’s Transformative Interpretation of a Comic on the Rwandan Genocide* suddenly moves away from the exploration of the spiritual realm in the previous sections to an extremely heavy-handed real tragedy. This essay shows the anthology’s concern for humanity and reality by researching a children’s comic about the Rwandan Genocide, *100 Days in the Land of the Thousand Hills* (2011) and children’s reactions to it. Horvath’s research explores the capability of comics to convey serious narratives, eliminate prejudices and humanise individual and collective tragedies. According to Horvath, the characteristics of comics can help children understand violent incidents, enhance the audience’s engagement and blur images unsuitable for children’s viewing. However, the form of comics might also lead to inaccurate understandings, denial and distortion of history to some extent. As a comparison, the previous sections’ essays represent a spiritual quest into the past, while this section focuses on improving and fertilising children’s spiritual world, which is the foundation of humans’ future.

The other essay in this section is Giryung Park’s *The “Spiritual” Role of the Media? Heidi, Girl of the Alps in Japan and Korea*, which examines the adaptation path of the novel *Heidi* from Swiss children’s literature to Japanese animation (1974) and later Korean animation. The current worldwide recognition of Heidi’s story proves the success of the animated adaptations in Japan and Korea, showing the aesthetic commonalities in humanistic products of consumers around the world. Most of the essays in this anthology emphasise the importance of exploring the potential of local cultures; however, Park’s essay fills the gap in adapting foreign cultures and cultural products, proposing the necessity and advantages of conducting intercultural communications of the spiritual dimension.

Section 5. Buddhism and Animation: An Asian Perspective

In Asia, Buddhism enjoys a very high status and reputation and has branched out into different schools in different regions, such as Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia and Theravada in Southeast Asia. Cultures of different Asian regions have been influenced by Buddhism to varying degrees. Naturally, their animation is also influenced, which is discussed in this section, “Buddhist Worldviews, Interactions, and Symbolism”.

Millie Young, in her essay *Understanding Thai Animation Narratives: The Presence of Buddhist Philosophy and Thai Cultural Ideology*, examines the influence of Buddhist thoughts and native Thai ideologies on Thai animation. Thai animation mixes up Western narratives, Buddhist philosophy and Thai traditions. According to Young, Thai animation narratives selectively borrow from American and Japanese references and involve unique Thai elements, such as the monarchy and Thai folklore. From the selected animated films, Young infers four key themes of Thai animation: “Thai folklore”, “Thai historical context/Thai love of the Monarchy”, “Buddhist spiritual belief”, and “The Thai-Thai, ไทยไทย spirit” (p. 217). These narratives constitute the unique voice of Thai animation, which is a mix of local and foreign ideologies, reality and fantasy. Through the example of Thailand's animation-making practices, the chapter explores the possibilities of animation as a cultural and ideological melting pot. Along these lines, scholars can study the ideology of cultural subjects through animation, while the state apparatus often wants to use animation as a propaganda tool to cultivate nationalism, which are both practices, in different ways, utilising the spirited values of animation.

Yuk Lan Ng's *Veiled Zen Journeys through Early Muromachi Flower-and-Bird Paintings* reviews the development of Zen Buddhist paintings, especially flower-and-bird paintings. Initially, this chapter seems a bit out of place because the anthology's focus is modern animation, while Zen paintings are an ancient form with decorative purpose and a philosophical background. However, the editors claim later, “We believe that the present only makes sense if we pay due attention to the past, including the continuum of knowledge and matters that concern the mind, spirit, and cultural environment” (p. xxii). From this perspective, Zen paintings are relevant because they are a source from which modern animation can draw inspiration. Such a point of view of the editors aligns with Young's idea that animation inevitably reflects its creators' ideologies, which come from their history. For instance, Thai animation usually has many elements highlighting Thai culture, such as Thai Kings, Buddhism, elephants and

Thai ghosts. These elements effectively show the local culture, enjoying high recognition among the locals and potentially attracting foreign audiences. Therefore, extracting the value of the “past”, whether this wealth is intangible, like religious ideas, or tangible, like Zen paintings, is crucial for the creation of animation.

The last chapter of this anthology is Yin Ker’s *Shadows of the Sun: Animating Buddhist Dharma for Art History*, which proposes a “film-and-game” hands-on educational project using elements such as sounds, colours, shapes, character figures and textures to guide the audience to experience the essence of Buddhist dharma. The hypothetical work *Shadows of the Sun* is based on a narrative in which a boy visited many Buddhist superior beings to look for a cap dropped by a Buddhist pilgrim. The long journey reflects the importance of the “experiential” as a core of Buddhist teachings, which can be effectively accomplished in the form of animation and games.

Conclusion

As an animation research anthology with a focus on “the spirited”, *Animating the Spirited* has the potential to engage with a wide range of readerships, including animation and religion scholars, communication and cultural industry practitioners, educators, mental therapists, and animation culture enthusiasts.

However, although this anthology covers several cultural groups, due to anthological space limitations, the diversity of the collected essays’ contents leads to a relatively limited exploration of the particular directions that each of its sections introduces. It is a pity, for example, that the anthology does not go further in areas such as animation-aided mental therapy and media-mix strategy.

Otherwise, *Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations* is a well-organised anthology of excellent essays about “the spirited” of animation. What is included in the anthology is richly diverse in its contexts and covers various forms of humanistic products related to animation. While reading it, I felt like the boy in *Shadows of the Sun*, looking for clues to the intellectually “spirited” in each essay. After this spiritual journey, what I have learnt from it was that animation is just a vessel, and we need to fill our understanding of it with the spiritual footprint of past culture, matter, and knowledge. Indeed, as an illuminating collection about “the spirited” in animation, this book is an excellent work through which a reader can enjoin a mutually spiritual and intellectual exploration of the culturally-inflected animation modalities it observes.

REFERENCES

CLARK, ANDY — CHALMERS, DAVID J. (1998), The Extended Mind. *Analysis* (Oxford), 58(1), 7–19.

YOKOTA, MASAO — HU, TZE-YUE GIGI (eds.). (2013), *Japanese animation: East Asian perspectives*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fanhao ZHAN is an MA in Philosophy of Education from the Institute of Education, University College London. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Applied Linguistics from the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China, with an academic background in the humanities and social sciences. His current research interests lie in the comparative study of the development of animation in China and Japan. His background in education and applied linguistics has led him to pay more attention to the attitudes and mental states of consumers of animation products.