**The City as Marginalized Space: A History of the Urban in Chinese Socialist Animation (1950s-80s)**

Paul Kendall

The Mao-era puppet animation *Who Sings the Best?* (*Shei chang de zuihao*, dir. Jin Xi, 1958)opens with a shot of two homeless children as they sleep with their backs against a rubbish cart. A narrator initially describes how their story of cold and hunger takes place within “a Western country”, before delineating the more specific parameters of a “luxurious city”. In a second shot, the children roam the city streets at night for scraps while gazing at the tall buildings that surround them; the narrator describes how the children cannot find anything to eat while the monstrous skyscrapers (*guaiwu si de motianlou*) look ready to swallow them up (*ba tamen tun* *xiaqu*). The children also sing for scraps, and their musical talent attracts the attention of a rich woman, who recruits them to compete for a huge cash prize on a televised singing competition. After farcically losing to a singing dog and cat, the children are abandoned by the rich woman; the final shot shows them lying unmoving in snowy weather against the same rubbish cart as in the final shot, with cars zooming past.

This rags-to-riches-to-rags story belongs to a select group of Mao-era animations that were unambiguously situated within cities. In a short history of Chinese animation and urban space, Isabel Galwey has noted the relative absence of the city in early PRC animation.[[1]](#footnote-1) This absence partially reflects wider trends in Maoist visual culture, including live-action films and posters, where the city was often spurned in favour of rural and industrial settings.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, animation also provided the opportunity to create worlds that were far removed from the material realities of everyday life in the PRC, and this included occasional portrayals of capitalist cities. Animation itself is frequently marginalized in film histories, and these portrayals of urban space are further marginalized within institutional histories of Chinese animation, which have instead focused on tales of rural and heavenly space. However, these animations deserve attention, as rare representations of the urban Occident in Maoist filmmaking, which both conveyed and critiqued the dynamism of the mid-twentieth century capitalist city, with its intensities of people, cars, buildings and sound.

This chapter explores these animated critiques of capitalist cities alongside more ambiguous representations of socialist and post-socialist cities from the 1950s through to the end of the 1980s. These animations reflected—and sometimes amplified—a wider discourse in early and mid-twentieth century animation that identified the modern city as a lively but chaotic and corrupt space. Influenced by the state’s ideological suspicion of the city and a search for uniquely Chinese characteristics of animation amid rural folklore, PRC animators went even further than critiques of the city by Disney and Soviet animators, so that the socialist city is barely identifiable in Mao-era works. A modernized socialist environment did sometimes feature, but rarely were its modernized parts—whether work units (*danwei*), docks or schools—unambiguously located within the whole of a socialist city. In animations of the 1980s, the domestic city began to appear more frequently and yet did not experience the same resurgence as in live-action films and propaganda posters. Moreover, whereas some 1980s animations embraced the post-socialist city, others were more negative, presenting it as a site of alienation and emotional turmoil.

**Periodization, Animation, and the City**

By focusing on the 1950s-80s, I align this chapter with the key decades of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS), which was almost the sole producer of animation under Mao and continued to be the main domestic producer during the early Reform era. I also choose this time frame as part of ongoing scholarly attempts to complicate a dominant

periodization that neatly categories PRC cultural history around a 1976 (or 1978) divide. Scholars have already done much to challenge this divide, pointing for example to the ways in which oral histories and even state documentaries complicate the assumption of 1978 as a watershed year, as well as arguing that the cultural production of the Cultural Revolution was not anomalous, but rather evinced links with previous and subsequent decades.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, as Daisy Yan Du has argued, there is a continuing assumption that the 1949-76 period produced propaganda rather than culture, and that genuine artistic works did not emerge until the reforms of the 1980s.[[4]](#footnote-4) For Du, this temporal assumption aligns poorly with the history of Chinese animation and SAFS, whose “golden age” stretched from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s. The studio’s diversity of animation during those years challenges assumptions about the propagandistic, monolithic qualities of Maoist cultural production. It also challenges SAFS’s own institutional mythology, which has emphasized the “national” (*minzu*) qualities of its output, with “national” referring to a self-conscious Sinicization through the inclusion of folktales, regional operas, rural settings, and ethnic minorities. This mythology of a “national style” has been so strong that its deconstruction has been one of the central themes in the small but growing critical English-language literature on SAFS.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most relevant to this chapter, Du has described how the celebrated “national style” of animation emerged at the same time as a little-remembered “international style”, that is, “a more de-sinicized, international, and even modernist style” which was employed to critique the capitalist world.[[6]](#footnote-6) This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which these critiques of capitalism mapped on to representations of the city, as a category of space which existed in tension with both the concept of a “national style” and wider Maoist anti-urban discourse.

This chapter also seeks to explore the urban representation of SAFS animation beyond its “golden age” and up to the end of the 1980s. The early years of the Cultural Revolution brought severe disruption to animation—as they did to wider filmmaking—with frequent production not resuming until the early 1970s. At the same time, the commonplace assertion that Chinese animation enjoyed a “second golden age” from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s adheres too closely to the assumption that 1976 marked a complete break in the political and cultural practices of the PRC. It ignores the existence of late-Cultural Revolution animations, which were often overlong and predictable but nevertheless visually impressive in their socialist-realist attention to detail. It also over-emphasizes a few famous, high-quality animations from the early Reform era, ignoring the significant variation in standards over these years. Ultimately, it fits too neatly with the wider narrative of the Reform era, as bringing immediate improvements to all walks of life after the “ten years of chaos” that had preceded, while also ignoring the existence of the Hua Guofeng interregnum. This study therefore includes late-Cultural Revolution animations—where available— within its analysis, to stretch from the founding of SAFS in 1957 until the late 1980s, after which the events of Tiananmen and Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour ushered in an era of cultural production that gave a far less central role to the already-declining studio.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Throughout these decades, the city does not feature prominently in SAFS animation. However, those few animations that do depict urban space are varied enough in their representations to complicate the very category of “city”. Urban theorists have emphasized the lived intensity of cities, as dense concentrations of people, buildings, institutions, power, wealth and technologies.[[8]](#footnote-8) The city is also often—implicitly or otherwise—defined in opposition to the countryside. Famously, Raymond Williams examined the changing ways in which the countryside and city have been contrasted over the centuries in English literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) During William’s own time, the country could be either positively portrayed as a place of “peace, innocence, and simple virtue” or negatively as “a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation”, while the city could be “an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light” or “a place of noise, worldliness”.[[10]](#footnote-10) While these rural-urban notions of difference have historically varied, the socio-material realities of countryside and city have been even more complex: the countryside has included organisations of space that have ranged from feudal estate to rural commune; and the city has ranged from religious centre to industrial concentration.[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, although a rural-urban opposition is a fairly constant theme in representations of space and society, the terms of this opposition have constantly changed, while also constantly failing to capture the complexities of actual socio-spatial organisation.

At first glance, Maoist discourse appears to reflect a straightforward privileging of the countryside over the city. The Maoist revolution was, after all, achieved through military success in rural regions, and culminated in the occupation of cities which were viewed with suspicion as bourgeois, corrupting spaces. This pro-rural discourse manifested itself in propaganda posters, which tended to celebrate the countryside and marginalise the city. Stefan Landsberger notes that Beijing was an exception, but was represented less as a city in itself than as the site of Tiananmen Square, as “the symbolic and political centre of the nation”.[[12]](#footnote-12) It also manifested itself in live-action film, although with perhaps more exceptions than in posters, including the portrayal of Shanghai’s Nanjing Street as a symbol of the corrupt, bourgeois city, of spies’ ornately wall-papered homes in counter-espionage films, and of urban communities in Shanghai comedies.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Mao-era discourse also emphasised the role of rural—rather than urban—traditions in the construction of socialist culture; the “new wine” of socialist thought was often placed in the “old bottles” of rural cultural practices. In animation, the “old bottles” included rural folktales, which were interwoven with folk arts and theatrical traditions in an attempt to create a “national style”. The subsequent mythology of this “national style” has conceptualized Chinese animation in opposition not only to Disney but also Soviet animation. However, the very idea of a “national style” draws heavily upon foreign discourse, with a similar, earlier move in Soviet animation towards recreating rural folktales for socialist purposes. This chapter thus asserts the importance of understanding Chinese film history as transnational, with a particular focus on the Soviet influence.

Despite discursive privileging of the rural, the city was—as historian Jeremy Brown has argued—a privileged space during the Mao era.[[14]](#footnote-14) While “non-agricultural” workers had access to extensive welfare provision, “agricultural” workers were exploited through grain extraction and confined to a countryside that also served as a “dumping ground” for unwanted urban inhabitants.[[15]](#footnote-15) At the same time, the Mao-era “non-agricultural” worker did not necessarily reside in spaces that align with contemporary notions of the city.[[16]](#footnote-16) Firstly, the socialist city itself generally lacked many of the dynamic features of contemporary Chinese cities, such as dense populations, landmark architecture and city branding. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Chinese city’s essential building block, the *danwei*, functioned not only as a work space, but also as a place of family, leisure and political activities, reducing workers’ need to interact with the wider city and thus also reducing the dynamism of urban streetlife.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Secondly, the category of “non-agricultural” included workers in non-city spaces such as the “rusticated factories” of the Third Front.[[18]](#footnote-18) These “in between spaces” not only “challenge the stock image of a sharp dichotomy between rural and urban China during the 1960s and 1970s”, but also the suitability of the rural and the urban as categories for describing socio-spatial organization.[[19]](#footnote-19) Returning to Williams’ point, binary notions of countryside and city, or agricultural and non-agricultural, hide the complexities of actual spatial organization. Animation, meanwhile, provided the opportunity not only to represent the complexities of Chinese socialist space, but also to imagine spaces in other countries. The remainder of this article examines some of the urban and semi-urban spaces that featured in SAFS animation from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s. It shows that these spaces, although marginalized within the studio’s wider output, were highly varied and cannot be easily subsumed within the singular category of “city”, including as they did limited socialist urbanisation, dynamic but corrupt capitalist cities and ambivalently-portrayed post-socialist cities.

**Not Quite Urban: Animated Socialist Space**

In early- and mid-twentieth century animation, the city is often treated with suspicion. Despite ideological differences, it is a commonality of Disney, Soviet and PRC animation that the city tended to be either absent or critiqued. In his study of Walt Disney, historian Steven Watts describes Disney’s personal fascination with turn-of-the-century smalltown America, and how his animated shorts from the 1920s to the 1940s tapped into a wider nostalgia for a way of life eroded by rapid industrialization and urbanization.[[20]](#footnote-20) Other scholars have noted the importance of wild nature to feature-length Disney films such as *Snow White* (supervising dir. David Hand, 1937) and *Bambi* (supervising dir. David Hand, 1942), albeit with conflicting opinions as the extent to which these films espoused a humanisation and domestication of this nature.[[21]](#footnote-21) Finally, urban and environmental historian Joe Goddard has identified the anti-urban ways in which Disney shorts from the late 1930s to 1960s imagined the city.[[22]](#footnote-22)

 Despite Disney’s own anti-communist outlook, his animations had a major influence on the Soviet animation industry from the 1930s onwards, providing an adaptable form of animated realism at a time when socialist realism had become the only acceptable artform.[[23]](#footnote-23) The 1930s also saw a nationalist shift in the Soviet arts towards valorising and reshaping orally-transmitted heritage, with animators drawing on fables and fairy tales to educate, entertain and sometimes provide escapism.[[24]](#footnote-24) Soviet animators thus combined the anthropomorphic animals and detailed “realist” style of Disney with premodern folkloric elements, moral teachings and contemporary politics.

There are obvious parallels here with the “national style” of SAFS, which emphasised its Chineseness while at the same time drawing on this prior Soviet model of localising Disney. SAFS animation also shared commonalities with post-war Soviet animation in the depiction of rural and urban space. Art historian Maya Katz describes how 1940s-50s Soviet animation was dominated by the retelling of classic fairy tales set in the idyllic countryside, with rural life functioning as an expression of collective identity.[[25]](#footnote-25) A similar trend can be seen in SAFS animation; no matter whether an animation is about ethnic minorities, socialist modernisation or anthropomorphic animals, it is typically set in some kind of rural environment.[[26]](#footnote-26) The history of post-war Soviet animation is complicated by the artistic thaw of the Khrushchev years, which led to the emergence of animations about the contemporary Soviet city; although often the subject of critique, the city became highly visible.[[27]](#footnote-27) In contrast, SAFS largely ignored the socialist city during the Mao years and continued to marginalize the post-socialist city during the 1980s.

Although SAFS went beyond Soviet and Disney animation in its lack of positive urban imagery, not all animations were unambiguously rural, with a few set in spaces that were not rural but also not quite urban either. The Mao years saw a valorization not only of rural space but also of industrial space, according to the theoretical assertion that industrialization could be achieved without urbanisation. Propaganda posters of the 1960s and 1970s showcased the agricultural space of Dazhai and the industrial space of Daqing as twin models of late-Maoist modernization. The oilfield of Daqing was not just an example of the struggle against nature and human enemies, but also of how industrial production could be achieved without expensive, consumption-oriented urbanisation. Daqing’s rammed-earth structures (*gan dalei*) served as a model for architectural frugality that also influenced the construction of Third Front factories in remote, mountainous locations after 1964.[[28]](#footnote-28)

If Daqing and Third Front factories were paradigmatic examples of spaces that were fully industrial but only partially urban, Maoist cities also generally lacked the built intensity and landmark architecture of capitalist and Soviet cities. Duanfang Lu describes how the Maoist city mainly developed outside of former urban cores, including a “belt of suburban districts, where industrial enterprises, satellite communities and villages existed in juxtaposition with agricultural land”.[[29]](#footnote-29) The key building block, the *danwei*, was a modified version of the US company town which provided housing, canteens, schools, clinics and leisure facilities for workers, making it an almost-independent socio-spatial unit, while old commercial centres declined in importance.

In SAFS’s Mao-era output, industrial and *danwei* spaces never came numerically close to competing with rural space, but did nevertheless feature in some animations. In *Little Carp Jump over the Dragon Gate* (*Xiao liyu tiao longmen*, dir. He Yumen, 1958), the main evidence of socialist modernisation is the dam that the fish attempt to jump. Having finally succeeded in jumping over the dam into a reservoir, they look around the shoreline to see a stone bridge, housing and factories intermingled with mountains and trees. At night, the fish look at what they think are stars, only to realise that it is the sprawling glow of socialist modernization. With its setting on a made-in-China ship, *Trial Voyage* (*Shi hang*, dir. Yan Dingxian, 1976) presents evidence of industrialisation without landmass, with only occasional shots of an industrial shoreline. In contrast to this view of industrialisation from afar, *Two Little Brothers* (*Xiao ge’r lia*, dir. Zhang Chaoqun, 1965) and *After School* (*Fang xue yihou*, dir. Yan Dingxian, 1972) are situated within *danwei­*-dominated urban space. However, the focus of such films is upon parts of urban space—schools in these two cases —rather than upon the city as a whole. Of course, any representation of a human settlement is necessarily partial, and may operate as part of a “strategy of synecdoche”, standing for the urban whole.[[30]](#footnote-30) However, if the *danwei* is a synecdoche, it is a synecdoche of the socialist nation rather than of the city. Certainly, there is no spectacular, landmark architecture to tie these animations to a particular city. In fact, when featured in the animation discussed below, landmark architecture is the subject of critique.

*No Brains and No Way!* (*Meitounao he bugaoxing*, dir. Zhang Songlin, 1962), stands out from other early SAFS animations not only for its urban setting but also for its employment of student animators, a low-detail drawing style, and narrator-character interaction. Following the introduction of the two child protagonists, the absent-mindedNo Brains and truculent No Way!, the animators show the former running through a city. More precisely, he runs along a wide grassy foreground, with a distant background conveying an urban setting through its combination of streetlamps, multi-storey buildings, and factories. After a short segment showing No Brainsand No Way! at school, the latter gets into a conversation with the narrator, who agrees to help him and his friend grow into adults with a little brushwork. No Brains asks to become an engineer. No Way!asks to become an actor. No Brains is subsequently shown working in an architectural office with pictures of Soviet-style skyscrapers in the background. His own design is a long rectangular box of 1000 floors with a Chinese-style big roof on top (see Figures 4.1**)**. Upon completion, owing to No Brains’ scattiness, the building only has 999 floors. More seriously, No Brains forgot to include lifts, so that it is a 14-day journey to the top floor. He enters the building with a group of children, who are going to see a performance on the top floor—starring No Way! as an uppity tiger—and have brought bedding and food with them for the long journey. The children have also brought umbrellas, since No Brainshas installed a fountain that sprays water everywhere in the grand reception hall of his building.

<insert Figure 4.1- two images>

Figure 4.1: *No Brains and No Way!*

A great deal could be said about this fascinating, under-researched animation, but there is only space here to comment upon its relationship with socialist urbanism. On the one hand, it rarely and unambiguously depicts a city. On the other hand, it contains a critique of previous, Soviet-inspired urbanism, including the 1950s creation of buildings according to a slogan of “national in form, socialist in content” (*minzu de xingshi, shehuizhuyi de neirong*), which essentially amounted to Stalinist classicism with Chinese motifs, particularly upturned roofs. Despite mid-1950s critiques of such constructions as reactionary and wasteful, further lavish monumentalism informed the 1959 construction of the Ten Great Buildings in Beijing, including Chinese-style roofs for four of these public buildings.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, these celebrations of the PRC’s tenth anniversary were architectural exceptions rather than rule, and by the time *No Brains and No Way!* emerged in 1962, waste had become an even more serious matter, as China entered a period of economic austerity following the disastrous Great Leap Forward and Sino-Soviet split. The 1960s subsequently saw a plainer architecture dominate, as socialist functionalism came to the fore.[[32]](#footnote-32) Seen in this context, the depiction of a grand but impractical big-roofed building in *No Brains and* *No Way!* is a comic sideswipe at monumental socialist urbanism.

**Degenerate Vitality: The Capitalist City**

With the exception of *No Brains and No Way!*, spectacular architecture and cityscapes rarely featured in the 1950s-80s SAFS animations set in the PRC. However, if SAFS was reticent in its depictions of the socialist city, it was—during the late 1950s and early 1960s—far more willing to depict the capitalist city, including colonial Shanghai. This city type features in four puppet animations, *Who Sings the Best?*, *The Wanderings of San Mao* (*Sanmao liulangji*, dir. Zhang Chaoqun, 1958), *Lobster* (*Longxia*, dir. Jin Xi 1959) and *Dove* (*Gezi*, dir. Chen Zhenggou, 1960), as well as the cel animation *Children of the Sun* (*Taiyang de xiao keren*, dir. Wu Qiang and Xu Jingda, 1961).[[33]](#footnote-33) Emerging within a few years of each other, these animations share commonalities but also certain differences in the way that they convey the atmospherics of the capitalist city. With animators unable to travel to the cities that they drew, their imaginations produced an array of urban spaces, including certain dynamic elements such as skyscrapers, traffic, and jazz music, albeit while also associating these elements with the exploitation, segregation, and decadence of capitalism.

The four puppet animations all constitute political satire (*zhengzhi fengci*), employing tragicomic elements to condemn capitalist society. In *Lobster*, a failing restauranteur falsely advertises a Marxist meeting at his establishment in order to improve business. The advert does not attract any actual Marxists but does attract four groups of spies from different arms of the repressive government. Having arrived separately at the restaurant, the spies fool each other into thinking that they are genuine Marxists, with claims about reading *Das Kapital* and returning from the Soviet Union, then proceed to open fire on each other. In *Dove*, the mayor of a European city is worried about the upcoming visit of a US dignitary and the potential negative influence of a graffiti artist who keeps drawing a dove of peace on the municipal headquarters. Bungling spies eventually catch the perpetrator, who turns out to be an unrepentant child. Despite retaining the child in custody, the arrival of the US dignitary is marked by the reappearance of the dove on the municipal building, as well as an angry crowd protesting against the war-mongering US and its allies.

As theorised by SAFS personnel, the limited movements and expressions of puppets enabled condensed, exaggerated representations of human character that were ideal for political caricature.[[34]](#footnote-34) This can be seen in better-known “national style” animations such as *Ma Liang and His Magic Paintbrush* (*Shenbi*, dir. Jin Xi, 1955), whose determined peasant protagonist vies with a flamboyantly evil local despot. In comparison to Ma Liang and other class heroes, the puppet characters of capitalist cities are morally and physically defective; balding, fat and monocled citizens act in consistently unpleasant ways. The only prominent positive characters are children, with support provided by the undifferentiated masses as they protest against the behaviour of the capitalist elite.

Unlikemany “national style” puppet animations, nothing magical happens in the animated capitalist city. As noted not long after their release, *Dove* and *Lobster* could have been performed with real actors, such was the absence of magic in their plotlines.[[35]](#footnote-35) What could not have been achieved so easily in live-action film was the realisation of these animations’ cityscapes—with the exception of colonial Shanghai—which provided the exoticism that magical transformation, talking animals and ethnic minorities provided in rural animations. *Who Sings Best?* and *The Wanderings of San Mao*, with their shared focus on homeless children, give prominence to a dynamic cityscape packed with buildings, cars, advertising, people, and noise. *The Wanderings of San Mao* opens with a shot of the *Bund* during a stormy night. The animation cuts to two billboards, one for foreign milk powder and one for Coca Cola, the latter showing a bikini-clad woman on a beach. It cuts to a street full of vehicular traffic, returns to the billboards, and finally settles upon the homeless San Mao as he seeks a building entrance to shelter from the rain. In *Lobster* and *Dove*, there are more indoor scenes, yet their position within a wider cityscape is frequently emphasized. In *Lobster*, the door of the ground-floor restaurant is open to reveal towering buildings. When a spy reports to his boss’s office about a Marxist meeting, further skyscrapers can be seen from the window. In *Dove*, multiple scenes take place within the mayor’s office, with a map of the city prominently displayed on its wall.

In their analysis of Soviet post-war animation, Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova argue for the importance of the skyscraper as a symbol of the capitalist enemy.[[36]](#footnote-36) The same applies to PRC puppet animations, in which the skyscraper and other grand buildings serve as not only the spatial symbols of inequality under capitalism but also as reproducers of this inequality. The capitalist city is experienced as three-dimensional by the exploiting classes, who scheme in the upper reaches of the built environment and dispatch spies to do their bidding at street level. Child heroes, in contrast, are mostly confined to the street. In *The Wanderings of San Mao*, the protagonist is twice driven away from the sheltered entrances of buildings, which serve as access points to the elevated dwellings of the rich. After San Mao finds shelter for the night in an alleyway, he stares wistfully at the upper floor of a building, where a woman is putting her child to sleep. In *Who Sings the Best?*, the two homeless children are only elevated above street level when they are temporally taken under the wing of a rich patron, whose apartment is located in one of the city’s skyscrapers.

The wider masses are also confined to the ground level of the city. Maoist theory asserted that capitalist societies existed in a state of class struggle, with the masses resistant to the warring machinations of an imperialist-capitalist elite.[[37]](#footnote-37) In *Dove*, the mayor sits in his top-floor office worrying about ground-level protests; he consults photos of leftist, anti-nuclear demonstrations in squares and looks down from his window at spies operating in the square below. Thinking that he has successfully cleansed the streets of protest, the mayor descends to ground level with his Washington guest only to encounter the angry masses. The other animations lack this theme of overt political protest but the verticality of class-based antagonism nevertheless remains. In the singing competition for *Who Sings the Best?*, a small group of judges occupy the box seats of the theatre, while the masses occupy the seats below. The judges are lampooned for their bad taste, as they praise an effeminate man boogieing to jazz before choosing a cat and dog as winners for their meowing, barking accompaniment to a jazz trumpeter. The capitalist elite, spatially segregated from the masses, lack not only a moral compass, but also basic common sense in the appreciation of literature and art. The masses, on the other hand, have an instinctive appreciation for moral correctness and good art, booing the effeminate male and yelling out their disapproval when the cat and dog win instead of the two homeless children.

Riabov and Riabova further argue that the skyscraper serves as a symbolic contrast between Soviet and US urban space, pointing to the distinction in *Mister Twister* (dir. Anatoliy Karanovich, 1963)between the “monstrous skyscrapers” of New York and the proportionate architecture of Leningrad.[[38]](#footnote-38) However, as their own description suggests, there is more than a mere contrast of tall and low buildings in *Mister Twister*. The built environment of New York is dense, cold, and machine-like whereas Leningrad’s is beautiful and spacious, including grand and ornate multi-storey buildings. There is not so much a distinction here between skyscraper and low-level buildings as between soulless capitalist architecture and neo-classical Stalinist grandeur. Monumentalism was a key element of the Stalinist city, and Stalin’s buildings continued to enjoy representational power after his death, despite Khrushchev’s condemnation of architectural waste. Although the socialist city does not appear much during the animation of the post-war Stalin years, shots of the towering Seven Sisters feature in *The Flower with Seven Colours* (dir. Mikhail Tsekhanovskiy, 1948), and of further grand buildings in *Fedia Zaitsev* (dir. Valentina Brumberg and Zinaida Brumberg, 1948). Following the Khrushchev Thaw, the city appears more regularly; the Seven Sisters appear again in the *Passion of Spies* (dir. Yefim Gamburg, 1967), together with an overhead shot showcasing the planned grandeur of Moscow. The Soviet city is also critically appraised in animations such as *The Story of a Crime* (dir. Fyodor Khitruk, 1962), *There Lived Kozyavin* (dir. Andrei Khrzhanovsky, 1966), and *The Window* (dir. Boris Stepantsev, 1966).

In comparison to this diversity of capitalist and socialist cityscapes in post-war Soviet animation, the city is not-Chinese almost by default in 1950s-70s SAFS animation, allowing a condemnation of urbanisation to the extent that neutrally-presented elements of the animated Soviet city sometimes appear as negative elements of the capitalist city. This can be seen in the blurring of the lines between inhuman US skyscraper and grand Euro-Soviet buildings in *Dove*,where the imperialist enemy dwells in multi-storey buildings with ornate features such as pillars, spires, and statues (see Figure 4.2). In their appearance, these buildings are not far removed from the classicism of Stalinist architecture, or the buildings of animated Soviet urban space, albeit shrouded in darkness and oppression. Although Daisy Yu Dan describes the animation as about US military bases in Italy, the representation is an inconsistent hotch-potch of “Western” markers, including nonsensical Latin script on posters, a regional map locating the city somewhere in a reimagined Southern Europe, and a city map with a kremlin-like building at the centre of a ring-and-radial pattern.[[39]](#footnote-39) In short, there is an indiscriminate Occidentalism on display; the Other is the generically *urban* West against which China is implicitly defined.

<insert Figure 4.2 here-one image>

Figure 4.2 *Dove*

In all four puppet animations, the stories are confined to urban space. Despite sharing other commonalities, the cel animation *Children of the Sun* visually situates its capitalist city (of “gold-dollar country” (*Jinyuanguo*) i.e. the United States) within the wider world. It also contains magical elements, with the benevolent Grandpa Sun (*taiyang gonggong*) sending out a fire pixie to invite children to a gathering at his heavenly abode on International Children’s Day. The fire pixie, or “emissary of light” (*guang zhi shizhe*), subsequently visits sub-Saharan Africa, China, the Soviet Union, and the Arctic region, where he is happily received by various children. The happy mood abruptly ends as the pixie descends into a US city; discordant music accompanies a dizzying shot of skyscrapers below, before a descending pedestal shot immerses the viewer into the depths of the city, surrounded by buildings and billboards.

The rest of the film focuses on a group of poor urban children and their efforts—having received Grandpa Sun’s invitation—to escape the oppressive verticality of the city. They subsist at ground level, scavenging among the dirty streets for tradable goods while evading the brutal local police. The children discuss how to reach the heavenly abode of Grandpa Sun, with one suggesting that they can simply climb the highest skyscraper. They decide upon attaching a wicker basket to multiple helium balloons so that one of them might rise above the verticalized cityscape. However, with tyrannical elements of the city endeavouring to bring down this balloon, only (socialist) magic can prevail over capitalist evil, with Grandpa Sun sending a flying chariot to save the airborne child. Mao Zedong did not, of course, ride a flying chariot. However, Maoist discourse did portray him as a sun-like leader of both China and a worldwide alliance of anti-capitalist, anti-racist forces, including civil justice movements in US capitalist cities.

These imaginings of the capitalist city in the late 1950s and early 1960s have received little mention in Chinese-language histories of animation, sitting awkwardly as they do with the continuing mythology of a “national style”. In their condemnation of urbanism, these animations also sit awkwardly with the contemporary realities of the Chinese city, with its skyscrapers, advertising, traffic and class-based segregation. And yet, as the final section of my chapter argues, early elisions and critiques of the city did not simply disappear with the passing of Mao but rather continued to resonate in 1980s SAFS animation.

**Epilogue: Post-Socialist Cities**

Appearing at the beginning of the 1980s, *Ding Ding Fights the Monkey King* (*Ding Ding zhan houwang*, dir. Hu Jinqing, 1980) suggested the possibility of a decisive break in SAFS’s imagining of urban space, as well as a move away from its focus on a “national style”. Whereas the Monkey King had previously successfully defeated all heavenly opponents in *Uproar in Heaven*, (*Danao tiangong*, dir. Wan Laiming, Tang Cheng, 1961, 1964), he found himself unable to defeat Science, as wielded by model child Ding Ding. Although their struggle ranged across multiple landscapes, Ding Ding’s futuristic home is notably set within a bright, modern city of skyscrapers. For perhaps the first time, the contemporary city was unambiguously and positively portrayed in SAFS animation.

As noted by Hua Li, *Ding Ding Fights the Monkey King* was one of several science-fiction animations that appeared in the early 1980s, with *Yuan Yuan and the Robot* (*Yuan Yuan he jiqiren*, 1980) also positively imagining a futuristic city of cars and skyscrapers.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, the 1980s also saw—more than ever—the assertion of a “national style” by SAFS;[[41]](#footnote-41) the Monkey King returned to the pre-modern world to enjoy constant victories over his enemies and rural environments remained the norm, as the studio stuck to a style that aligned well with the Orientalist inclinations of international film festivals. The contemporary Chinese city did appear more frequently than before while the Occidental city largely receded from view. However, animators continued to emphasize the urban part rather than the city whole, and some were quite negative in their appraisal of the post-socialist city.

As with previous decades, it was often unclear whether or not an animation was set in a city, suggesting a continued ambivalence towards spaces that did not align with the rural or heavenly emphases of SAFS’s “national style”. *Stories of Pipi* (*Pipi de gushi*, dir. Jian Gu, 1988) was a ten-part cel animation series that attempted to instil good hygiene by portraying the woes of child protagonist Pipi, whose bad habits lead to dental decay, temporary deafness and even an emergency hospital trip to treat a mosquito-borne disease. Pipi lives in comfortable, middle-class surroundings but much of the action is situated indoors, and it requires close attention over the first three episodes to confirm that he lives in a city; in episode two, when he is rushed to hospital, there is an extremely brief shot of an ambulance speeding through a city at night. Only in episode four is there an extended depiction of the city, which serves to spatialise the issue of poor hygiene; Pipi runs down urban streets fleeing flies attracted to his dirty hair and taking refuge behind open rubbish bins which attract the flies away from him. The remainder of the episode takes place within a large park-like space with anthropomorphic animals which would not look out of place in SAFS’s more “national” animations.

The city was also either semi-present or associated with poor hygiene in the cel animation series *The Adventures of a Slovenly Boy* (*Lata dawang qiyuji*, dir. Qian Yunda and Yan Shanchun, 1987). The first episode opens with the eponymous slovenly boy being messy in a park, before he gets tricked into drinking a shrinking potion by an anthropomorphic rat. The boy spends subsequent episodes trying to escape an underground rat kingdom, as well as foil the rats’ plot to create a disease that will wipe out humankind. The rat kingdom is the product of waste from the human city, and quite city-like in its own appearance, with discarded food boxes resembling modern urban buildings. However, the human city itself is largely absent, with overground scenes restricted to a park space.

If these two semi-representations of the city were ultimately more concerned with health education than urbanization, *The New Doorbell* (*Xinzhuang de menling*, dir. Xu Jingda, 1986) was a direct critique of city life, despite confining its visual scope to an apartment room and the communal stairwell outside the apartment’s front door. The five-minute animation shows the apartment’s inhabitant return home with a new doorbell, which he quickly installs. He then sits down near the front door, eagerly anticipating the first ring of the new doorbell by a visitor. However, he is disappointed, hearing the approaching footsteps of people who come close to his door only to proceed up or down the stairwell to other apartments. One visitor does call, but knocks rather than ringing the doorbell, frustrating the resident so much that he refuses to answer (see Figure 4.3). Finally, he smiles with anticipation upon hearing the motor of a stationary motorbike below and ascending footsteps, indicating the arrival of a deliveryman. However, the deliveryman also knocks, reducing the resident to restless pacing as he waits for the ring of the doorbell. Hearing the pacing, the deliveryman knocks harder, and the furious resident knocks back, the two exchanging blows against the door. Finally relenting and opening the door, the resident is pleased to receive a telegram, but more concerned with getting the deliveryman to ring his doorbell, offering cigarettes, pointing to the doorbell and closing the door again. He is left disappointed as the deliveryman is heard descending the steps to his motorbike and driving away.

<insert figure 4.3 here>

Figure 4.3 *The New Doorbell*

Despite its visual simplicity, brevity and lack of dialogue, *The New Doorbell* manages to say a lot about everyday life in the contemporary city. It conjures up an impression of the city not through visuals but through the usage of environmental sound; the resident and the viewer can hear but not see the ongoing bustle of the city, with the low-level hum of traffic interspersed by car horns, as well as the sound of footsteps moving towards and away from the apartment. If Richard Sennett once famously defined the city as “a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet”, *The New Doorbell* shows the alienation that occurs when closely clustered individuals do *not* meet.[[42]](#footnote-42) If SAFS’s earlier representations of the capitalist city relied mainly on the visualization of cityscapes, with occasional references to jazz and other sonic elements, *The New Doorbell* relies mainly on environmental sound to evoke the post-socialist Chinese city, while also eschewing dialogue and musical sound.[[43]](#footnote-43)

A less creative but similarly negative imagining of everyday life in the post-socialist city occurs in *Money* (*Qian*, dir. Xiong Nanqing, 1983), which revolves around a boy’s discovery of money hidden in a park. A similar discovery occurs in the earlier *New Deeds on the Road* (*Lubian xinshi*, dir. Wang Shuchen, 1964), where socialist certainties enable the finder to unthinkingly do the right thing and track down the money’s owner. However, in the morally grey landscape of post-socialist urban China, some animators had become interested in exploring inner emotions, and the boy in *Money* is unsure what to do. He initially resolves to leave the money but is later driven to take it by the temptations of an emerging consumerism. He tries to buy fruit and then a Rubik’s cube, but is racked by fear and guilt, the emotional turmoil making him physically ill. He tries to return the money, but the filmmakers make it clear that this is insufficient; only full disclosure to the authorities is sufficient to end inner turmoil.

Such a story could also take place in the countryside. However, the city is more than an inert background in *Money*, with its many stores providing temptation and its crowds of strangers enhancing the boy’s sense of alienation; burdened by secret knowledge of wrongdoing, he is physically among people but emotionally alone. The sense of a bounded community so often present in SAFS rural animation is absent until the boy becomes ill. Until that point, he wanders listlessly around the city with minimal adult guidance, while foreboding music further enhances the sense of being alone amid the city.

When characterizing 1980s SAFS animation, works such as *The New Doorbell* and *Money* must be balanced alongside alternative representations of the post-socialist city, such as the optimistic *Ding Ding Fights the Monkey King* and the light-hearted *Mum, Please Rest* (*Mama, qing xiuxi*, dir. Liu Huiyi, 1988). However, they do indicate continued ambivalences in animated representations of the city, long after the death of Mao. In the preceding decades, these ambivalences usually manifested themselves through an absence, with animators rarely exploring the socialist cityscape. Nor was a brief flurry of animated capitalist cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s the norm for SAFS, which instead focused on creating rural, often magical, spaces. There were also occasional forays into industrial and *danwei* spaces that were not clearly marked as parts of wider cities, and this focus on modernised part rather than the urban whole continued into the 1980s. Taken together, these representations—of limited socialist urbanization, dynamic capitalist cityscapes and ambivalently-portrayed post-socialist cities—complicate the category of “city”. They also complicate histories of PRC state animation that emphasize a “national style” of animation rooted in an idyllic countryside of magic and minorities. Finally, they complicate the drawing of a neat dividing line between Mao and post-Mao visual culture, as well as an accompanying understanding of the 1980s as the decade when urban cinema re-emerged; in animation at least, the path from countryside to city was not straightforward.

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3. For complications of 1978 as a watershed year, see Harriet Evans, *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital’s Center* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 70; Paul Kendall, “Third Front as Method: Mao, Market and the Present in CCTV Documentaries,” *The China Quarterly*, Forthcoming 2024. For continuities of cultural production, see Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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6. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Over 350 animations were produced by SAFS and the animation department of the Shanghai Film Studio (SAFS’s predecessor) from 1950 until the end of the 1980s. I have been unable to locate 45 of these animations, with many clustered around 1958-60, 1964-65, and 1974-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, eds. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (1903; revised edition., London: Sage Publications, 1997), 174–85; A. W. Southall, *The City in Time and Space.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4, 8–9; Steve Pile, “What Is a City?,” in *City Worlds*, eds. Doreen Massey, John Allen, and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1999), 3–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Williams, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Williams, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Landsberger, “The City’s (Dis)Appearance in Propaganda,” 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), chap. 2; Qi Wang, “Those Who Lived in a Wallpapered Home: The Historical Space of the Socialist Chinese Counter-Espionage Film,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5, no. 1 (2011): 55–71; Krista Van Fleit Hang, *Literature the People Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), chap. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jeremy Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao’s China: Negotiating the Divide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brown, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. C. Cindy Fan, *China on the Move: Migration, the State, and the Household* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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18. Barry Naughton, “The Third Front: Defence Industrialization in the Chinese Interior,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 115 (1988): 351–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao’s China*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 5–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL•E*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2016); cf. Ralph H. Lutts, “The Trouble with Bambi: Walt Disney’s Bambi and the American Vision of Nature,” *Forest & Conservation History*, volume 36, no. 4 (1992): 160–71; Patrick D. Murphy, “‘The Whole Wide World Was Scrubbed Clean’: The Androcentric Animation of Denatured Disney,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 125–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Joe Goddard, “Celluloid Cityscapes: Kids, Cars, and Cartoons in the United States, 1938–1965,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 14, no. 2 (2021): 294–312. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. David MacFadyen, *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges: Russian Animated Film since World War II* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), chap. 3; Laura Pontieri, *Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s: Not Only for Children* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2012), 38–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Pontieri, *Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s*, 45–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Maya Balakirsky Katz, *Drawing the Iron Curtain: Jews and the Golden Age of Soviet Animation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 96; see also Birgit Beumers, “Comforting Creatures in Children’s Cartoons,” in *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, eds. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 159–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Although largely beyond the scope of this article, it is worth stressing that these rural environments differ hugely according to animation subject, type, decade and director. For example, ethnic minority films such *A Zhuang Brocade* (*Yi fu Zhuangjin*, dir. Qian Jiajun, 1959) and *The* *Long-Haired Girl* (*Changfa mei*, dir. Yue Lu, 1963) often feature rugged, magical terrain that contrasts with the ordered socialist countryside of *New Deeds on the Road* (*Lubian xinshi*, dir. Wang Shuchen, 1964), and *The Picture on the Wall* (*Qiang shang de* hua, dir. Wan Laiming, Li Keru, 1958), while socialist and ethnic minority markers intermingle in the *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan yingxiong xiao jiemei*, dir. Qian Yunda, Tang Cheng, 1964). Some non-socialist rural settings also feature pre-modern towns and heavenly kingdoms. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Pontieri, *Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ju Li, “How It Was/Is Told, Recorded and Remembered: The Discontinued History of the Third Front Construction,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, volume 28, no. 3 (2015): 322–23; Li Hou, *Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Duanfang Lu, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Doreen Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Jianfei Zhu, *Architecture of Modern China: A Historical Critique* (London: Routledge, 2009), 95–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Zhu, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. My analysis does not extend to the more town-like nineteenth-century setting of *The Fishing Boy* (*Yuzhong,* dir. Wan Guchan, 1959), or the capitalist but not clearly urban setting of *The Dream of Gold* (*Huangjin meng,* dir. Wang Shuchen 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jin Xi, “On the Distinguishing Characteristics of Puppet Films” [in Chinese], *Meishu,* no. 5 (1957): 32–36; Wu Lun, “Problems in the Reflection of Contemporary Life in Animation Film” [in Chinese], *Dianying yishu*, no. 4 (1963): 54; see also Sean Macdonald, “Artifice, Fantasy, and Exaggeration: The Boundless Limitations of Puppets,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema & Media Studies*, volume 59, no. 3 (2020): 114–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Wu, “Problems in the Reflection of Contemporary Life in Animation Film” 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, “Images of Urban Space in Constructing the Cold War Enemy: American Skyscrapers in Soviet Animation,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 15, no. 2 (2021): 122–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See, for example, Mao Zedong, “U.S .Imperialism is a Paper Tiger”, *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung: Volume 5* (People’s Publishing House: Peking, 1977), 308-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Riabov and Riabova, 130–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 127. On ring-and-radial patterns in Russian cities, see R. Antony French, *Plans, Pragmatism and the People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today’s Cities* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 10–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Hua Li, “Animating Science and Technology: From Little Tadpoles to the Space Monkey (1950s–1980s),” *Association for Chinese Animation Studies,* last modified August 31, 2017, https://acas.world/2017/09/01/animating-science-and-technology-from-little-tadpoles-to-the-space-monkey-1950s-1980s/. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Wu, “In Memory of Meishu Film.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hu Yihong, “ ‘A New Doorbell’ and ‘Super Soap’: The Self-Transcendence of A Da” [in Chinese], *Dangdai dianying*, no. 4 (1988): 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)