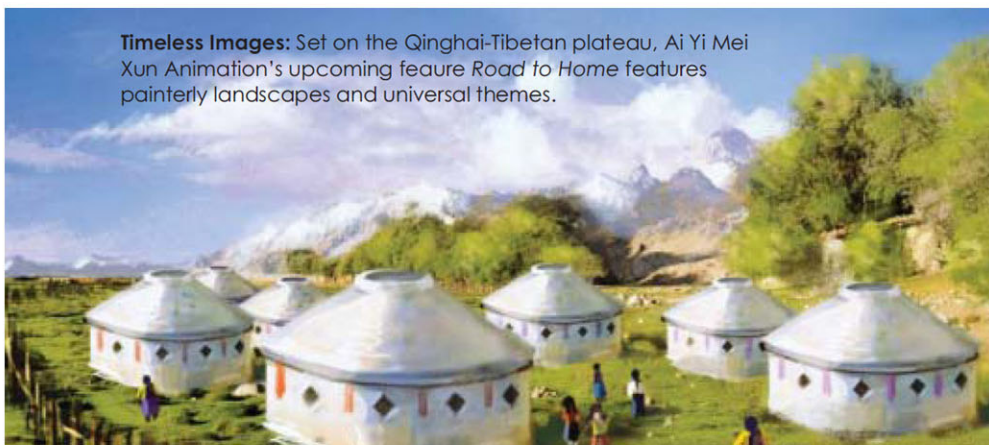


Timeless Images: Set on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, Ai Yi Mei Xun Animation's upcoming feature *Road to Home* features painterly landscapes and universal themes.



Cultural Revolution, Take Two

An American expert looks at Chinese animation's winding road home. *by Kevin Geiger*

When is a nation of more than 1.3 billion people a "scrappy underdog?" When it is China seeking to reclaim the animation legacy pioneered by the Wan Brothers in the early 20th century. Shanghaied by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and then crushed by the juggernaut of Japanese anime, the Chinese animation industry has been reeling for decades (pun intended) in a punch-drunk, outsource-fueled haze of stifled creativity. Until now.

A new generation of Chinese animation filmmakers—versed in influenc-

es from Chuck Jones to Genndy Tartakovsky—has entered the world stage, eager to reclaim lost creative territory with films that are in turn thrilling, hilarious, gorgeous and thoughtful. Among the original animated properties currently in development in China, one receiving serious buzz on the mainland and elsewhere is Beijing-based Ai Yi Mei Xun Animation Company's *Road to Home*, China's first environmentally themed animated feature film. Set on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, *Road to Home* portrays the unique cultural characteristics of Western China while



Lijun Sun



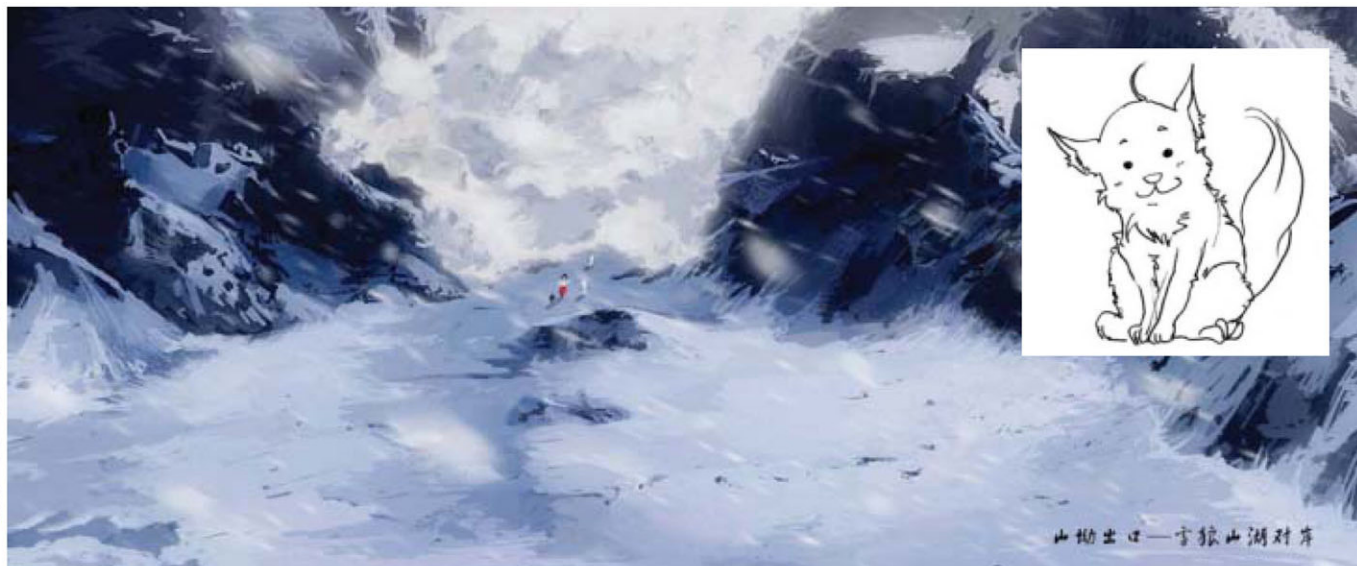
Wen Feng

addressing universal themes, taking the friendship of a young girl and a wolf cub as its throughline in a manner that is both epic in scope and intimate in tone. Directed by Lijun Sun with creator Wen Feng from a screenplay by Yi Yan, *Road to Home* features lush painterly landscapes and engaging characters—including a pair of breakout comic

sheep twins, Gugu and Lulu, who are sure to be spinning off to a TV set near you.

Yet for all their promise, original Chinese films like *Road to Home* have a tough row to hoe as they attempt to speak to their countrymen and appeal to international audiences while also navigating China's state approval process. Although attitudes are evolving, this remains a reality of filmmaking in China. It has been my pleasure to advise the *Road to Home* team for the better part of this year, and I have been impressed with how skillfully they walk this line. *Road to Home* has garnered significant interest in Taiwan and the U.S. at the same time that an official from China's Ministry of Culture referred to it as "the best [Chinese animated] film in development that I've seen." No small feat, that.





The concept of balance extends to mainland studios such as Xing Xing Digital, where Western-educated president Lifeng Wang, renowned creative director Becky Bristow and executive producer Steve Katz meld Chinese and U.S. artistic and business sensibilities into a true East/West hybrid. It even extends across the Formosa Strait to Taiwan, where up-and-coming production companies such as SOFA Studio, creators of the popular *MuMuHug* series, hope to leverage friendlier political relations between Taipei and Beijing to benefit animation creators and consumers on both shores. Within the next five years, I anticipate that we will see an outpouring of high-quality, original content from mainland China, facilitated by closer relationships with established Taiwanese studios and co-produced by American and European animation concerns of all shapes and sizes.

So what does the resurgence of original animated content in China mean to you, the *Animation Magazine* reader? Well, if you're an animation fan, it means that you have some fresh voices and perspectives to look forward to. If you're an animation artist, it means not job losses but job opportunities—the chance to assume an impactful leadership position within companies eager for your expertise. And if you're an animation producer, it means exciting new co-production opportunities in the country that sports one out of every five consumers on Earth. In fact, the

compelling economics of the Chinese animation industry (and even, ironically, China's protectionist ban on foreign animation during primetime broadcast hours) open doors to small and mid-level creators in the West who are willing to collaborate with their friends in the East.

As with any business opportunity, however, there are a few things to keep in mind for best results:

- Chinese co-productions are subject to state approval, with specific requirements regarding the business structure of the enterprise and a critical eye on the content (though based on my experience, this approval is no more restrictive or arbitrary than that of your typical Hollywood animation studio).

- The quantity and quality of the Chinese animation workforce continues to rise, and China's "animation industry bases" can provide attractive facility arrangements to co-pro partners. Nevertheless, despite financial players such as Standard Chartered Bank of Hong Kong (one of the first banks in Asia to provide film and TV financing), Chinese animation studios are not generally flush with cash. As a content creator collaborating with a Chinese studio, you're expected to wrap your great ideas in some funding.

- The Chinese are tough negotiators. I could expound on this at length (and probably will, at some point), but in the meantime I recommend anyone contemplating business in China to read

China Now by N. Mark Lam and John Graham. While not attendant to animation in particular, it contains veil-lifting insights regarding the practical consequences of cultural differences between the Chinese and American negotiating styles.

- The social capital of *guanxi* (literally "relationships") is fundamental to Chinese business: Nothing happens in China without it. The emphasis on relationships means that prospective Western co-production partners must make themselves familiar to the Chinese before any serious business can be conducted. While cultivating the proper *guanxi* in China takes time and money, the long-term payoff is well worth the investment. The barriers and risks of doing business in China are greatly minimized with the right *guanxi*.

As demonstrated by the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese are not at a loss for how to make a profound visual impression. We have much onscreen magic to look forward to from this waking dragon. ■

Kevin Geiger is president and CEO of Animation Options LLC (www.animationoptions.com). He is a 12-year veteran of Disney Feature Animation and guest researcher and professor at Beijing Film Academy.



Kevin Geiger