ON THE SCREEN

The Princess with the Iron Fan

A United China Motion Picture Company Production. Full-length cartoon directed and produced by L.M. and C.C. Wan.

Intrigued by a huge poster showing caricatures of a monkey, a pig, several queer-looking men, and two very beautiful ladies, together with other strange animals, which advertised the first full-length cartoon to be produced in China, we asked our friend Alfred Zee to take us to the studio that was producing this picture.

At two-thirty one afternoon we arrived at the studio of the United China Motion Picture Company. It is considered to be the largest in China, having brought out many of the foremost Chinese productions during the last few years, among them *The Family*, reviewed in our November issue. It is located in the huge garden of a sumptuous former private residence on Avenue Haig in Shanghai.

Presenting our passes to the gateman, we asked to be directed to the cartoon department, for we had an appointment with the Wan brothers, China's double edition of Walt Disney. We were met by two Chinese gentlemen in their thirties, attired, in the best traditions of Hollywood directors, in turtleneck sweaters and plus fours. Together we went to the reception room. The door was locked, but an efficient messenger got us the key in no time. Entering the room we found the main sofa occupied by a gentleman taking his afternoon nap. It was an easy matter to wake him up and, after his withdrawal, to settle down to our interview.

As we only know a smattering of Chinese, the contents of the interview are recounted by Alfred Zee as follows.

The two Chinese Walt Disneys, L.M. and C.C. Wan, have been at work on cartoons since 1925, when they first saw and were fascinated by Max Fleischer's "Inkwell Imp." At that time they were middle-school students, more adept in the art classes than in any others. They spent most of their leisure time planning to produce a Chinese "Inkwell Imp."

After finishing the middle-school department of Nanking College, they came to Shanghai to study at the Shanghai College for Fine Arts, which at that time had just recovered from the uproar against their employing naked girls as models. Their first chance to produce cartoons was given them by the motion picture department of the Commercial Press, China's biggest publishing house. With far from suitable equipment they produced several shorts which were not successful. They then drifted on to several other motion picture companies, where they made between twenty and thirty short cartoons, among them "Riots in the Studio," a Chinese version of the "Inkwell Imp," "The Camel Dance," featuring a camel, and "The New Life Movement," designed to help that movement launched by Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

In these studios, cartoon production was more of a side line for the Wan brothers than their chief assignment. They were usually kept more busy supervising movie sets or arranging art effects.

It was not till Walt Disney had such tremendous success with his first full-length cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, that Chinese producers began seriously to consider the Wans' pet idea. Finally it was decided to set up a special cartoon department and to go into the production of such features in earnest. The brothers now joined the United China Motion Picture Company as chiefs of this new department, and immediately launched themselves into the task of producing the first Chinese feature-length cartoon, or "ca-tong," as the Chinese call it.

As a subject they chose a legend that is at least as popular among the Chinese as Grimm's fairy tales are among Westerners. This legend, "Hsi Yu Chi" (西遊記), "The Journey to the West," is a fanciful tale founded on fact, as are most Chinese tales. The historic facts in this case are that during the T'ang dynasty (618-917 A.D.) the monk Tang Sheng (唐僧) was sent from Kaifeng, then the capital of China, to India, the "Heaven in the West," to bring back original copies of the Buddhist scriptures. In crossing the Himalayas the monk met with considerable difficulties, and the story of his journey has been woven into an allegory of human endeavor.

In the legend the different traits of human nature are represented by three characters who accompany the monk: a monkey—the mischievous and witty side of man; a rather oafish monk—the coarseness and clumsiness in human nature; and a pig—sensuality and greed.

Tang Sheng encounters all kinds of terrible obstacles corresponding to human temptations. His difficulties are usually augmented by the misdeeds of his companions, although the monkey often helps to extricate him. Of course they are all equipped with magic instruments, and the monkey and the pig have no difficulty at all in turning themselves into all manner of shapes. The monkey, for instance, possesses

The Monk Tang and his disciples on their long trek to the Western Paradise

The monkey investigates the flaming mountain

A poster advertising the film

"THE PRINCESS WITH THE IRON FAN"

The Princess attempts to drive off the monkey with her sword

The buffalo is regaled with wine, woman, and song

The pig has captured the fan and carries it gleefully to his master

The monkey rallies the natives to fight the buffalo

L. M. and C.C. Wan, the Walt Disneys of China

Plaster models of some of the characters of the movie

Movements of the Princess are copied from a living model

a club weighing about 120,000 pounds. This club can be reduced at will, however, to any size desired, and the monkey usually carries it, shrunk to the size of a needle, in the lobe of his ear.

Out of the innumerable episodes of the legend, the Wan brothers chose one which they felt would have the strongest appeal to a modern audience. In telling the story they have given it a slight twist, putting the emphasis not so much on the Buddhist significance as on the idea that co-operation and internal unity are required to overcome great difficulties and accomplish a big task.

Briefly the plot of the cartoon is as follows. On their way to the West in search of the Buddhist scriptures, the monk Tang Sheng and his disciples reach a place barren of any growth. The temperature is oppressively warm. From the natives they learn that there is a mountain a few miles ahead which is occupied by a monster. Flames leap out all over the mountain. In the immediate vicinity it has not rained for years and all the land lies waste.

There is only one way to subdue the flames. In a mountain near by there is a palace built in a great cavern where dwells a beautiful young princess. She possesses a magic fan. If someone were to use this fan on the flaming mountain, the fires would be put out immediately, rain would fall on the parched earth, and plants would grow again. This is the "Princess with the Iron Fan."

The first emissary sent to borrow the fan is the oafish monk. He is a tough fellow, utterly devoid of tact. The Princess refuses his request in no uncertain terms. The pig is too lazy to go, so the duty falls on the monkey. The Princess realizes that the monkey is her enemy. She draws her sword and lashes out at him, without effect, as the monkey's body is immune to ordinary weapons. Hard pressed, the Princess produces her fan, not to lend it to the monkey but to fan him just once. The fan releases so terrific a storm that the diminutive monkey is blown to the "Border of the Earth." There he meets an old friend who gives him a pearl with the miraculous power of stopping all winds. With the pearl in his pocket, he returns to the cave-palace of the Princess.

Discovering that her fan is now of no avail against the monkey, the Princess locks herself in. Undaunted, the monkey transforms himself into a tiny insect and slips in through a crack in the door. He finds her in her inner chambers enjoying a cup of wine. Diving into an air bubble in the wine, he is swallowed by the Princess. In her stomach he performs a thousand and one acrobatic stunts, till the Princess, now aware of the cause of her sudden stomach-ache, yields to his demand. She gives him a fan, and the monkey leaves triumphantly to conquer the mountain of fire.

But, alas, it is not the real fan. As he fans the mountain, the flames only shoot higher and higher.

Now the lazy pig wakes up and remembers that the Princess is none other than the wife of his friend the buffalo who has now also attained supernatural powers. On his way to the buffalo's cave-palace he meets an almond-eyed beauty, but his coarse attempts at flirtation frighten the belle and she rushes to her doting master, the buffalo. Angered by her story, the buffalo flatly refuses to help the pig and threatens to give him a hiding.

Beating a hasty retreat, the pig steals the "golden-eyed beast," a dragon that serves as the buffalo's mount. Turning himself into the buffalo, the pig rides straight to the Princess and, in his disguise, obtains the genuine fan. Meanwhile, however, the real buffalo has discovered the theft of his mount and turns himself into the monkey, in which shape he intercepts the pig. Proudly the pig hands over the fan to what he believes to be the monkey, who then reveals himself as the real buffalo.

The three disciples are downhearted and ready to give up, but not so their master, the monk Tang Sheng, who explains to them that the reason for their failure is that all attempts so far have been made individually. He urges them to a concerted effort, gaining at the same time the support of the poverty-stricken population. In a grand finale they manage in united endeavor to vanquish both the Princess and the buffalo. They obtain the fan and put out the flaming mountain once and for all.

Such is the story, every character in which is familiar to Chinese audiences. The Wan brothers worked on it for three years, although the actual production took only sixteen months. This in itself is a long period, inasmuch as most of the Chinese "super productions" take no more than a few weeks to produce.

The process used in making this "ca-tong" is a somewhat rudimentary replica of that used by the Disney studios. Clay models of all the characters were first made. This part of the job was handled by the Wan brothers themselves. About 300,000 pictures were required to produce the 7,500 feet of film which reached the screen. Each picture is a composite of two or three sketches, one showing the background and the others the "actors." As these sketches are done on transparent celluloid plates they may be piled one on top of the other to form a composite and complete scene.

The Wan brothers deplored the fact that they could not produce their film in technicolor. There is no studio in China, either in Hongkong, Chungking, or Shanghai, which has the equipment for producing color films. A few hundred feet of colored film were once included in a "super production," shot in Shanghai. The negative, however, had to be rushed to Hollywood for processing and printing and back again to Shanghai for insertion in the black and white picture.

"We haven't given up hope yet of producing a technicolor 'ca-tong,'" the Wan brothers assured us.

We were then taken to the cartoon department of the studio. We found it to be rather cramped, the kitchen and servants' quarters of the former private house having been converted to make room for it. As the picture was practically completed at the time of our visit, we only found a few girls working in one small room, tracing some additional scenes. The celluloid plates showing the action against a black and white background are painted in shades of green, which, we were told, when photographed come out in different shades of gray, thus giving an illusion of depth.

Although the quarters were not extensive (every foot of floorspace was used, rows of tracing desks being built in even in the corridors and on the steps of the narrow staircase), they seemed quite comfortable. The tracing desks all have built-in lights and glass tops, and, although small, still have room for the inevitable cup of tea. Here an army of 200 artists worked in two shifts for sixteen months.

The camera, which is mounted in what was formerly the kitchen, is an ingenious construction built along the lines of the special Hollywood equipment. Most of the technical details, however, for instance the method of moving the camera up and down for close-ups etc., were worked out by the Wan brothers.

On leaving the studio we felt much like Robert Benchley in *The Reluctant Dragon.* We had our hands full of casts of the clay models, children's toys based on characters and scenes from *The Princess with the Iron Fan,* and a batch of photographs which we hope our readers will enjoy.

Yet it was with a slight feeling of apprehension that we went to see the *première* of the cartoon. This apprehension was based on three counts. First of all, never having seen any Chinese cartoon we were a bit nervous about the technical side of it, fearing that it would probably be much like early American or European attempts, where one reel was usually as much as the eyes could stand. There was the question of the theme, an old Chinese legend, which might, and then again might not at all appeal to the Westerner. And finally from the advertising we knew that two important characters of the story were beautiful girls. We remembered that the one weakness in an otherwise so masterly a picture as *Snow White* were the non-caricatured figures of Snow White herself and the Prince. Somehow in their movements these human figures were unnatural and almost irritating in their awkwardness.

Our first pleasant surprise was that in technique the picture was well up to Hollywood standards. We only regretted that it was not in technicolor. On the other hand we were not at all bothered by its being black and white, just as one is not bothered when one sees a black and white photoplay after a technicolor feature.

The story has just as strong an appeal to foreigners as it seems to have to the Chinese. However, we would advise those who do not understand Chinese to get acquainted with the plot before seeing the picture, as otherwise they might be confused by those parts where some of the characters turn themselves into others.

And finally we were amazed at the technical handling of the human figures, especially of the two beautiful girls, which was definitely superior to anything we have seen that has come out of Hollywood. Perhaps it is that the more stylized Chinese stage gestures lend themselves better to the medium of a cartoon than our casual movements. At any rate at no time during this picture did we have that feeling of uneasiness that comes over us when watching "straight" figures in Hollywood cartoons.

The appeal of every cartoon lies in its humor, and *The Princess with the Iron Fan* should rank high in this respect, In the treatment of the humorous situations, as well as in the characteristics of many of the figures, Hollywood's influence is felt strongly. Of course there are standard comical effects which appear over and over again even in the Walt Disney series, for the very reason that they are reliable laugh-getters, just as in the old days hardly any slapstick comedy was complete without a pie-throwing sequence. There are quite a few of these stand-bys in this picture, but the Wan brothers have also thought up many original and very amusing ideas of their own. We were particularly delighted by the transformation scenes — for instance, when the monkey (who, by the way, is very well observed in his simian movements) gradually turns himself into an insect, pulling his wings around him like a coat and drawing spare legs out of his pockets and antennae out of his forehead. Or the scene where the pig, stumped for a moment as to how to get the huge dragon out of the stable of his foe without attracting too much attention, solves the problem brilliantly by simply deflating the monster by letting the air out of the tip of his tail and rolling him up like a carpet. Once outside it is an easy matter to blow the dragon up again like a balloon.

From every point of view the Wan brothers are to be congratulated on a first-rate and very entertaining production. We hear that they are already well under way on their second full-length cartoon, which we look forward to seeing, now not only without apprehension but with pleasurable anticipation.

A Hollywood producer might smile at the apparent inadequacies of most of the technical equipment with which the film was produced. Yet the result obtained is one more example of the Chinese ability to produce a maximum with a minimum.—V.