

Miffed About Miffy: Feng Feng Stirs Up an Age-old Debate on Artistic *Shanzhai*

Miffy (Nijntje in Dutch) is a cartoon rabbit drawn in heavy graphic lines and primary colours by children's book author Dick Bruna, who introduced the character in 1953. This January, Miffy appeared in Guangzhou, sporting a duck's bill, in the exhibition *Feng Feng: Rabbitduck Egg*, at XY Gallery (學有緝熙). The resemblance between the two "rabbits" was lost on no one, and it sparked heated online debate about whether Feng Feng (馮峰), also the dean of the local experimental art college, had plagiarized Miffy. The hashtag #GuangzhouAcademyofFineArtsprofessorFengFengplagiarizedMiffy soon hit Weibo's hot-topic list with 1.9 million clicks, and the followup hashtag #GuangzhouAcademyofFineArtsFengFengrespondstoMiffyplagiarism received over 150 million views.

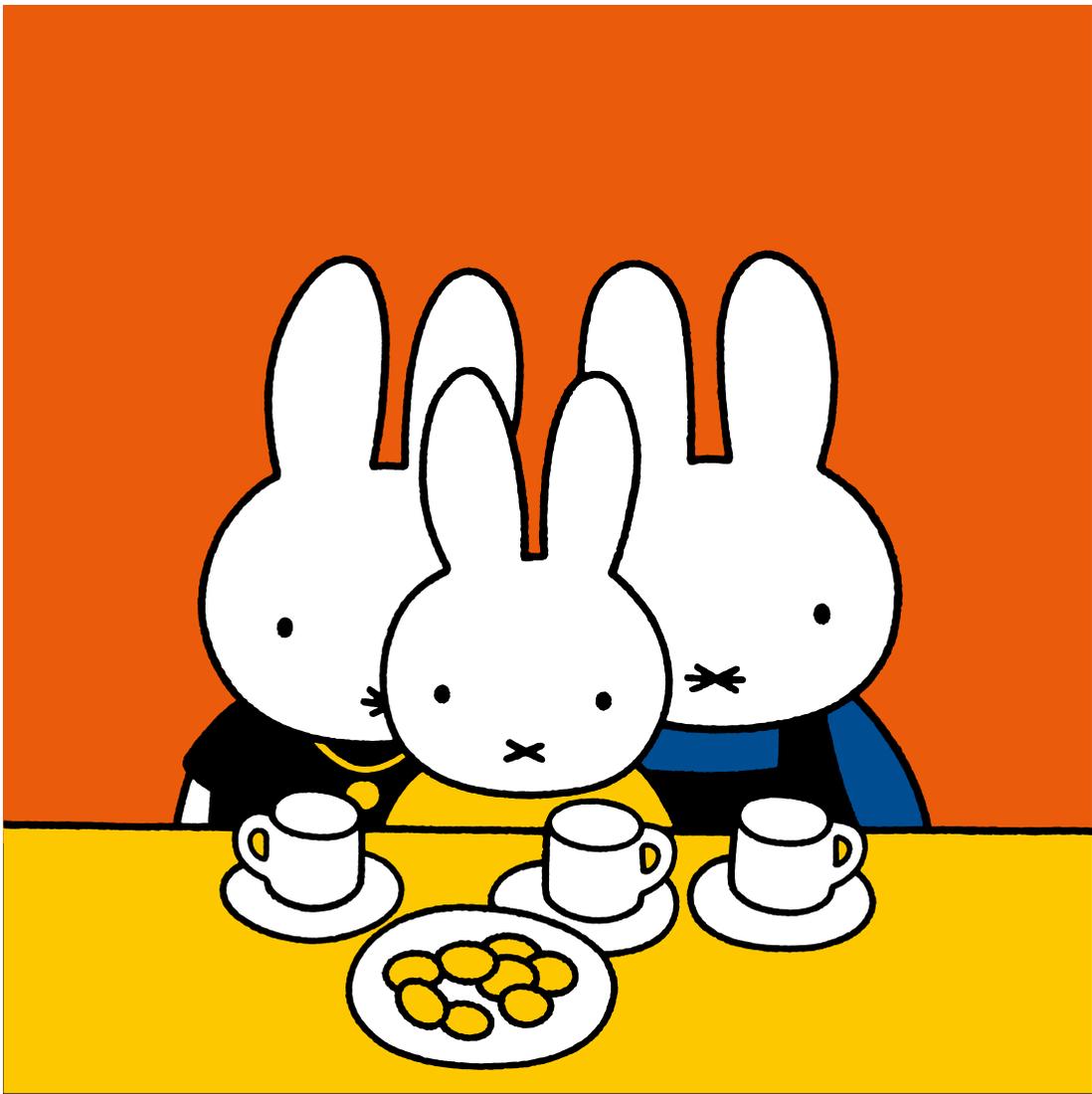
A Plagiarism Accusation

The Weibo user @木子七Mindy broke the news by posting screenshots of a promotional video on the exhibition together with images of Feng's "rabbitduck" and Miffy, writing: "I'm so angry. Look at these hilarious and irritating works. Were these really done by a professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts? This is Miffy the rabbit—a household name whose face regularly appears on stationery and other merchandise! The professor claims that this is his original work by simply adding a duck's bill?"¹ This post went viral and was retweeted by influencers including @王思聰, a Chinese businessman and the only son of Chinese tycoon Wang Jianlin (王健林), who asked, sarcastically, "Is Feng a professor at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and the dean of its experimental arts college? Respect! [thumbs-up emoji]."²

Though Feng was plagued by a rush of accusations, we cannot say that he stumbled blindly into the issue. In fact, the title of the rabbitduck painting series is *Someone Said I Look like Miffy*. But is this arch admission of the problem enough to excuse Feng from plagiarism?

Feng Feng: It's Not Plagiarism—It's Postmodern Artistic Practice

Feng Feng has denied these accusations of plagiarism, stating on Weibo that he began the series twenty years ago and was inspired by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow's 1899 duck-rabbit drawing, a reversible drawing that looks like a duck when read from left to right and a rabbit when read from right to left.³ The drawing serves to make the point that perception is not only what one sees but also



a cognitive process. Speaking about his work, Feng has further said, “Art creation itself is a kind of social research. All commercial logos or symbols with which we are familiar are in the scope of public knowledge and information. They are the vocabularies of artistic creation, and the subjects of research.” As for whether infringement was involved, he said, “please believe in our laws.”⁴

Curator and critic Feng Boyi (馮博一) supported Feng Feng by posting on his WeChat moments and other popular social media platforms, stating that Feng’s appropriation and parody of Miffy is part of a postmodern method employed by not only visual artists, but also filmmakers and writers. His post on social media stated: “Before people question his ethics, they should know about the development of art history. Though sometimes hilarious, the appropriation and parody of classical works can be transformed into something exciting and inspiring.”⁵

He mentioned Marcel Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a rectified readymade that profoundly transformed the perception of the Mona Lisa (by literally drawing a moustache on her—one of many parodies). He also cited Andy Warhol’s *The Marilyn Diptych* (1962), which used a publicity photograph from her 1953 film *Niagara* as a source image.

In his interview with *Yangcheng Evening News* on January 18, 2021, Feng further defended his stance by highlighting his advocacy for individual creativity, “Everyone has the right to reinvent a commercial icon. Copyright is created to protect creativity, not imprison it. For me, the recent public discussion online is a big lesson for everyone to learn about art, about law, and most importantly, about creativity.”⁶

The Netizens: It’s not Creativity—It’s Bad Art, and Feng Is Ignorant of the Law

However, many netizens still did not buy Feng’s explanation, and his implication that they were ignorant of art history only added fuel to the fire, with some comparing Feng’s work to that of more established postmodern artists. Yang Xiaoyan (楊小彥), a critic and professor at Zhongshan University, bluntly told *Yangcheng Evening News*, “Feng’s appropriation of Miffy is too simple and shows a lack of criticality. What’s more problematic is that Miffy with a duck’s bill has already appeared, in the 2015 exhibition *Miffy Art Parade*.⁷ I’m not surprised that so many voices are questioning his rabbitduck.”⁸ The exhibition in Amsterdam featured a large yellow rabbit sculpture with a yellow duckbill. @星河Shinho on Weibo compared Feng’s art to work by garment counterfeiters: “Those factories produce fake luxury brands by changing only a zipper

head, and now professor Feng tells us that it's not *shanzhai*, but deconstruction and the rebirth of public art!"⁹ *Shanzhai* (山寨) literally means "mountain fortress" and refers to counterfeited, imitation, or parody products and the subculture surrounding them. It has become a sensitive word in China given the past forty years of rapid economic growth and China's role as the factory of the world.

Many commentators brought up the 2019 Ye Yongqing (葉永青) scandal, whereby the renowned artist was accused of plagiarizing the works of Belgian artist Christian Silvain, remarking on how both Feng and Ye vehemently denied these accusations. The difference is that Silvain already stated that he was considering taking legal action against Ye for allegedly plagiarizing his artwork over the course of several decades. On January 20, 2021, the *China Intellectual Property News* official WeChat account published an interview with Wang Qian, a professor at the East China University of Political Science and Law, who remarked, "Some artists obviously misunderstand the boundaries of their freedom when appropriating the works of others. Intellectual property law provides the regulations for securing and enforcing legal rights to inventions, designs, and artistic works. Patents give inventors the right to use their product in the marketplace or to profit by transferring that right to someone else. Without proper authorization, Feng's works may risk infringement. When it comes to lawsuits, we'll need to examine the evidence provided by the plaintiff."¹⁰

Voices from Miffy China and Mercis Publishing

@MiffyChina posted on Weibo saying that they had received many inquiries from netizens about the exhibition and thanked everyone for their support and concern: "In 1955, the Dutch illustrator Dick Bruna created Miffy. For over half a century, [Miffy] has been adored by kids all over the world. All of Miffy's outfits were hand-drawn by Bruna, and their colors and lines were meticulously designed... We will keep you posted on updates regarding this event."

The NL Times, quoting spokesperson Marja Kerkhof at Dutch Miffy publisher Mercis, said: "It is very unlikely that these drawings are not plagiarized. Nijntje is very well known in China, and the drawings [Feng Feng] are exactly the same."¹¹ In the end, Mercis announced that they

and XY Gallery arrived at an amicable settlement on the matter. According to a joint statement "Mr. Feng Feng has voluntarily handed over all of the disputed works with Miffy images to Mercis. The XY Gallery has prematurely terminated the exhibition... and all parties have agreed to permanently cease to exhibit or commercialize the disputed works with Miffy images now and in the future."¹²

The Value of Discussion vs. the Value of Art

Critics including Cui Cancan (崔燦燦) and Jiang Jun (姜俊) supported Feng Feng by emphasizing the value of art in triggering vigorous dialogue. At the same time, many netizens were suspicious about Feng's motives, speculating that he was using Miffy to attract attention, both negative and positive, to gain notoriety. And many were also questioning his ethics, given his title of professor and dean, calling him "a master of sophistry."

Appropriation is no stranger to the creative industries. All art is appropriated to some degree, but what matters is whether there has been any meaningful contribution to contemporary art discourse. Copyright aside, Feng's rabbitduck series lacks conceptual rigor. However, it managed to raise popular awareness of the boundaries of intellectual property, making it the centre of public debate while shining a spotlight on the issue of professionalism within China's academic institutions and the art world.

- 1 @木子七Mindy, @木子七Mindy 2021. "Wo chulai fennu le... [I am angry that...]," Weibo, January 1, 2021, 9:54 AM, <https://m.weibo.cn/5271191150/4593765304764577>.
- 2 @王思聰 [Wang Sicong], "Jiushi guangzhou meishu xueyuan jiaoshou... [This professor from the Guangdong Academy of Fine arts...]" Weibo, January 16, 2021, 12:19 PM, <https://m.weibo.cn/1826792401/4593983026371055>.
- 3 @馮峰FF [Feng Feng], "Xiexie da jia de guanzhu... [Thanks everyone for following...]" January 16, 2021, 7:07 PM, <https://m.weibo.cn/1813364944/4594085803594283>.
- 4 @馮峰FF [Feng Feng], "Xiexie da jia de guanzhu... [Thanks everyone for following...]" January 16, 2021, 7:07 PM, <https://m.weibo.cn/1813364944/4594085803594283>.
- 5 Feng Boyi's personal WeChat account, "Feng Feng's 'misappropriation' or 'parody of Miffy,'" January 7, 2021, 10:49 AM.
- 6 Zhu Zhaojie, "Guang mei jiaoshou feng feng daodi shi bushi yong gonggong fuhao zai chuangzuo?" [Feng Feng, A Professor from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Using Common Symbols to Re-Create?], "'Ya tu zuopin' bei shou zhuanye zhiyi jiejong 'fuhao' bu ying hushi guize" ["Rabbitduck" Work Under Scrutiny from Professionals About the Unlawful Use of "Icons"], *Yangcheng Evening News*, January 21, 2021, http://ep.ycwb.com/epaper/ycwb/html/2021-01/21/content_5_352876.htm.
- 7 Catherine O'Dolan, "Miffy Art Parade*," April 30, 2015, <https://mylittlestylefile.com/destination/miffy-art-parade>. For the exhibition, see <http://www.miffyartparade.com>.
- 8 Zhu Zhaojie, *Yangcheng Evening News*, "Guang mei jiaoshou feng feng daodi shi bushi yong gonggong fuhao zai chuangzuo?" [Is Feng Feng, the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts Professor Really Using Commonly-found Symbols to Make New Creations?], "'Ya tu zuopin' bei shou zhuanye zhiyi jiejong 'fuhao' bu ying hushi guize" [Professionals Question Whether the Artwork Rabbitduck's Use of 'Symbols' is in Line with Regulations], January 21, 2021, http://ep.ycwb.com/epaper/ycwb/html/2021-01/21/content_5_352876.htm.
- 9 @星河Shinho "Bushi, dian kai qian wo yiwei zhishi 'jiejian' le 50%," ["Before I clicked on it I only thought he 'borrowed' 50%"], January 16, 2021, 10:25 PM, <https://m.weibo.cn/1577665611/4594135619085269>.
- 10 Dou Xinying, "'Ya tu' chaoxi 'mi fei tu'? Ting, zhishi chanquan zhuanjia zheyang shuo" ["'Rabbitduck' a plagiarism of 'Miffy'? It is according to Intellectual Property Experts"], *China Intellectual Property News* official WeChat account, January 20, 2021, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/npltEBoFI8c5JuPRQxgNbg?v_p=87&WBAPIAnalysisOriUICodes=10000010_10000327_10000003_10000002&launchid=10000365--x&wm=3333_2001&aid=01A052z6IUiphWpL9EKV6Vwf3GIJeW3oKN7AuvIzrdmVYm2aE.&from=10B1193010.
- 11 "Chinese artist accused of plagiarizing Nijntje for exhibition," *NL Times*, January 20, 2021, <https://nltimes.nl/2021/01/21/chinese-artist-accused-plagiarizing-nijntje-exhibition>.
- 12 From a joint publication issued by Mercis Publishing bv and Fan Lin, the Curator of XY Gallery on February 5, 2021.