The animation, the best kept secret in North Korea

Margarita Rodriguez

BBC World Service

They are tender, playful, colorful and come from a country isolated, belligerent and nuclear ambitions. Do not be surprised that any cartoon you see on your screen is a creation of Pyongyang.

Thanks to the business of outsourcing in North Korea, with the low costs and government support to the sector of the animation, the Asian nation has rubbed shoulders with the best in the industry almost in secret, because the end user is often unaware of the origin of product.

The North Korean animation studio SEK occupies position 85 in the ranking of the hundred most influential animation studio of all time Animation Career Review, a website specializing in animation

"For decades, North Korea has been an ethical conundrum, but what makes their strict society more difficult to understand is their extremely docile side for the arts in all its forms," said the website.

Youth in front of computers

Youth in processes of digital animation production. Photo: Paul Tjia.

"This study has shown that Pyongyang 'Light Years' (a science fiction also known as 'Gandahar') (...) and 'Empress Chung' ('Empress Chung')-a fantasy movie simple and beautiful-can compete with the best films for families in the United States if given the opportunity."

Paul Tjia, founder of GPI Consultancy Dutch technology advice and who has visited North Korea, he told BBC News that since 1986 the North Korean animation studios have received orders from abroad for cartoon production in 2D and 3D.

"The state corporation SEK, established in 1957, has more than 1,600 employees working for several European film production studios," Tjia wrote in the report: "Inside the Hermit Kingdom: IT and
outsourcing in North Korea” (“Inside the Hermit Kingdom: IT and outsourcing in North Korea”), published in 2012.

At present more than 70 foreign companies have agreements with animation studios in North Korea, Tjia said. But there are no statistics available that show how that country contributes to global animation market.

"The quality of the animation industry in North Korea is one of the highest in the world, which when combined with low costs in Asia makes the country an attractive destination," said the businessman.

Outsourcing

Programmers in front of computers

Cyber security products, such as facial recognition, are developed in North Korea, according to Tjia, who took the picture.

Some 10,000 professionals working in the field of information technology in North Korea and, every year, thousands of young graduates in careers related to this field, Tjia said.

"In organizations that I have visited, I always find significant proportions of software engineers with doctorates and masters and surprisingly a group of them have studied abroad. In most cases in China and India, but also in Europe," said the employer.

According to Tjia, this panel is behind the growing business of outsourcing the technology sector in the country.

"The requested rates may be lower than $10 per hour, which enables customers to employ software engineers experienced for only a few dollars a month," said the expert.

In most cases, Tjia said, the end customer unknown North Korean involvement in the production process, because outsourcing is done by an intermediary who is in direct contact with the customer.
Thus, for example, start-ups in Pyongyang are developing applications for smart phones, software and computer systems for foreign clients, Tija said.

"My experience with animators in North Korea"

What makes North Korean animation only? Still features artists who draw by hand and are able to draw frame by frame using a vector software such as Toon Toom. That is a strength because most studies use Flash or CGI Asia and really not encouraged.

How has been your experience? Was very positive. The quality is good, the deadlines are respected and the artists are very good. As the study in North Korea is unique, the animators are not passed from one study to another in the middle of a production as in China or South Korea.

How many productions made with North Korean animators’ve directed two productions (26 half-hour episodes).

What asked to do? The study in North Korea was in charge of the layout, key-animation, in-betweens and ink and paint. The color of the funds and the composition were made in my studio.

What is communication? The study has a representative based in this city who speaks our language. At the start of production, the study North Korea sent five people (artists specializing in layout and key-animation and a translator), who remained six weeks in my studio to work with my team. We also had direct communication through emails with the producer in Pyongyang. We used FTP to send the digital material, but I realized that the transfer took more than three days. After making inquiries, I found out that the study did not have access to FTP from Pyongyang. It was uploaded and downloaded in Beijing and sent to Pyongyang on a hard drive that was carried by an airline. At that time, Air Koryo had only three flights a week to Beijing. On one occasion, I traveled to Pyongyang for the study and meet with the animators.

With the current crisis in the Korean peninsula, talk about collaborations with North Korea can be reckless.
"I'm in pre-production process of an animated film in cooperation with some countries that refuse to work with North Korea. Under these conditions, it is impossible to share my experience. Hopefully I know understand. Sorry," he wrote to BBC World, one of the directors of a European animation studio.

However, after insisting and ensuring anonymity, agreed to talk about how he worked with the studio in Pyongyang.

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The concern generated talk of cooperation with North Korea is understandable considering the sanctions imposed on the country by one of the main consumers of animations in the world.

"The main end user is the United States. This is why companies tend to maintain connections with North Korea secretly," he told the BBC, Tim Beal, a professor at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

"Animation is a global market. Once the product leaves as an international commodity, stripped of their national origins, the main customers are those with the largest markets. U.S. That would make the client end of the North Korean animation" said Professor of International Marketing and Business in Asia.

Customers

Youth in front of computers

Programmers graphic design projects. Photo: Paul Tjia.
The British magazine The Economist noted in 2011 that some U.S. companies have used entertainers “cheaper” of North Korea. “Jing Kim, a businessman based in Beijing, says it has helped a number of companies to outsource animation studio artists 500 SEK in Pyongyang”.

According to Beal and Tjia, France and Italy are among the countries that have appealed to the North Korean animation.

"The French are probably the main users of the film industry in North Korea. Them excited traditional animation techniques (hand drawings) above modern digital techniques. In his fascinating novel 'Pyongyang', the French-Canadian animator Guy Delisle recounts the process through which a French company subcontracts work to Pyongyang, "he told the BBC, Simon Fowler, British writer on Asian cinema specialist and author of the blog" North Korean films "(" North Korean Movies ").

But the appeal of animation nocoreana not new.

Already in 2003, commending the ability to complete numerous orders SEK, producer Dominique Boischot said in a Forbes magazine article: "In terms of the relationship between quality and price, is one of the best in the world (...) It is totally impossible to do (certain types) of animation in France, the price would be five, six or seven times what SEK cobra, three times what China or South Korea charge ".

BBC contacted a European producer and distributor of entertainment for its experience and asked permission to use images of some of his collaborations with SEK study.

"We can not give any permission. We do not work with North Korea," they replied.

We asked them for documents issued by the same study who had access. "They mentioned collaborations with SEK study. Could you please explain that to include it in the article?"

"We will not give any interviews about it," they said.

With the neighbor
Two people walking

According Tjia, author of this photo, in this building in Pyongyang does a company focused on information technology.

South Korea is one of the meccas of world animation. The nineties and the first decade of the century saw a boom in the industry in that country.

The study AKOM and its founder and president, Nelson Shin, are a global benchmark. "I could say that was the golden age of AKOM. We produced hundreds of animated television series like 'The Simpsons', 'Tinytoon Adventure', 'Taz Mania', 'Animaniacs', 'X-men', 'Pinky and the Brain' ('Pinky and the Brain') and 'Arthur'" Shin told the BBC.

Shin was the director of "Empress Chung", a film that in 2005 became the first film to be shown at the same time in cinemas North Korea and South Korea. The production and the soundtrack were made in Pyongyang.

"Working with the studio in Pyongyang was an artistic and cultural exchange between North Korea and South Korea, it was not a political issue at all. For me it was a valuable experience in terms of thinking and working together to implement a creative work. Dimos our best to produce the best picture and for sharing our artistic and express emotion through animation, "said Shin.

According to Shin, industry representatives of North Korean animation attend international festivals and events to network and realize orders. "I imagine that reach agreements with countries that have diplomatic relations."

Cooperation

Pororo

The first episodes of a popular South Korean character, Pororo, North Korea had a touch.
One product icon export and South Korea North Korea also had a touch. Several episodes of the first season of Pororo, whose TV series is broadcast in over 100 countries-were produced with the help of animators in Pyongyang.

However, cooperation ended. Iconix Entertainment, the studio that produces the character Korean, confirmed to BBC News that the last time I worked with leaders in North Korea was for "almost 10 years".

The cartoons have been a key tool to teach North Korean children revolutionary values. But in recent decades, also seem to have become one of the lifeline of a country suffering blackouts and food shortages in a country targeted by human rights organizations.

He had already said Kim Jong-il, father of the current North Korean leader in 1987: "The cinema occupies an important place in the overall development of art and literature. By itself, it is a powerful ideological weapon for the revolution and the construction ".

Source:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/noticias/2013/04/130424_corea_del_norte_animacion_mr.shtml

Original in Spanish, this machine translation by Google