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The Dreamer: An Examination of Chinese Philosophical Concepts and Audience through Animation

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The dreamer: An examination of Chinese philosophical concepts and audience through animation

by

Fei Xue

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Anson Call, Major Professor
Austin Stewart
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2016

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DEDICATION

For Penny, my little dreamer who is traveling this world.
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ABSTRACT

This document accompanies the MFA thesis exhibition “The Dreamer: An Examination of Chinese philosophical concepts through animation” that took place between May 12th-19th, 2016 in the College of Design Gallery 181 in Ames, Iowa. The exhibition was categorized into four sections: animation, textile projection, process work, and script installation. Various influences from philosophical, artistic, psychological areas of the body of the artwork were described and analyzed. The process of the whole animation was also identified.

The intention of this written component is to provide commentaries on the history, development and future of the Chinese philosophical and social norms. These commentaries are viewed from the western audience’s perspective via the artist’s thesis exhibition and its subsequent components. The artwork examines the impacts of the Chinese culture heritage on the global ethnoscape.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE DREAMER

Folktales are used to communicate social norms. Although folktales are common in both Chinese and Western culture, their content and focus are sometimes quite different from each other. The importance of familial structures (e.g. the relationship between parents and their offspring) is one example.

Social norms are communicated quite effectively in Western culture via 2D and 3D animation. In contrast, Chinese-based animation production has nearly no success in effectiveness, which means that very few traditional Chinese story themes have been communicated to either Eastern or Western audiences by way of animation.

I hope to re-tell a classic Chinese story that not only contains a traditional Chinese social value but also is understandable by a Western audience. To show my new Chinese folktale, I have created an animation for my thesis show that includes narration, music, dialogue, and traditional Chinese characters.

The main body of this work is a short animation film, “The Dreamer”. This is a two-dimensional animation that incorporates three-dimensional character rendering. The animation focuses on the storytelling of an ancient Chinese philosopher who dreamed that he became a butterfly and exploration of the butterfly’s dream. Between the dream and reality, there are multiple elements that are incorporated in the story: cultural differences between Eastern and Western countries, past and present, childhood and adulthood, sadness and happiness, and life and death.
The subject was also inspired by an obscure Chinese philosophical motto “mountains are mountains” that originated from Zen Buddhism. It is an examination of conventional truth, ultimate truth, and the process of knowledge acquisition. Throughout the animation, I addressed perspectives related to race, immigrant status, cultural perception, ethnoscape, identity, and nostalgia. My intention is to re-tell a story and interpret traditional Chinese social norms and philosophical concepts to the Western audience.
CHAPTER 2
ARTIST STATEMENT

My goal is to create my work like Alice’s rabbit hole, to open an unexplored world. My work incorporates traditional art methods and computer technology. Traditional arts such as painting and drawing have given me the foundation to use digital techniques, all of which have broadened my view of the world I see. As a creator of imagination, I enjoy integrating multiple methods such as sketch, photography, video and computer graphics to create new art.

Fantasy fictions and fairy tales are often the themes of my works. Albert Einstein said, “we dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams.” I always look for a chance to illustrate my imaginations in the real world, as revealed in dreams, fairytales, and fantastic worlds. Through construing fantastic imageries based on everything around me, I find unprecedented satisfaction.

My inspiration came from everything I saw, felt, and experienced. I believe the beauty of life can be discovered everywhere. Thus, I hope to discover and be involved in it spontaneously rather than to set an intentional goal. I tried to express the goodness of life and beauties of nature through my work, which made me appreciate everything in my life.

William Shakespeare once said, “The world has music for those who listen.” I am still on my way to listen and experience the world (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Fei Xue, Chasing her dream, Cyanotype, 2013
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL BRIEF

Chinese Philosophy

Chinese philosophy has a long and profound history. There are mainly three philosophical genres in China: Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. These philosophical concepts tend to utilize landscape esthetical sentiments to express the feelings to create an atmosphere of being one with nature. For example, as one of the ecological aesthetics of Confucius landscapes, "anthropomorphic idea" transfers human spirits to the landscape.

“Mountains are mountains” is another translation of “being one with nature.” It explains three levels of aesthetic conceptions on the realm of life. It originated from Zen master Qingyuansi’s philosophy: “Before I had studied Chan (Zen) for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. However, now that I have got its very substance, I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers. [1]”

It may be confusing when a Western audience reads this motto for the first time. I am not surprised about this because obscurity and symbolism are the features of Chinese philosophy.

In the motto “Mountains are mountains”, the first “mountain” refers to the very first stage of learning. When there is some knowledge needed to be learned or some goals needed to be achieved, Chinese prefer to see these challenges as the mountains that needed to be climbed. After climbing the mountain for a long time, people usually find themselves
reaching a point where they will lose sight and thus believe “mountains are no longer mountains.” This is usually the point that people will lose their original faith and quit from the journey of seeking their goals. However, if they can be persistent in their ways of chasing dreams, the ultimate stage can be reached when they begin to realize that “you are that you seek”, or “mountains once again are mountains.” In this case, the second “mountain” refers to some characteristics that you have in the very beginning, which means, there is nothing to seek and the whole world is the realm of the Buddha. Dream chasers can feel their “return” to the ordinary life but will live in the light of a different level of understanding.

In Chinese philosophy, the things we can feel have no permanence. In the film “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”, there is a saying: “There is nothing we can hold onto in this world. Only by letting go can we truly possess what is real [2].”

In my animation, The Dreamer, the butterfly’s story reflects one’s life process. We are born, experience life, smile, or cry. We leave home, work hard for a goal, and die eventually. The forest reflects our colorful and straightforward childhood. Children’s mood changes fast, just like the rapid transition of the four seasons in the forest. The sea symbolizes the life after we grow up. It denotes freedom, but sometimes, we might lose our direction.

**Chinese animation**

Animated cartoon industry was invented by Eile Reynaud in France in 1888 [3]. However, the connection between animation and Chinese culture has hundreds of years of history. A Chinese craftsman named Ding Huan invented a device “on which many strange
birds and mysterious animals were attached” and could “move quite naturally” [4]. The connection between animation and Chinese culture is very close and profound.

1. Early History (1926-1949)

The history of Chinese modern animation began in the 1900s, inspired by French, German, Russian and mostly American productions. In 1918, one of the first examples of foreign animation titled “Out of Inkwell” landed in Shanghai.

When it comes to the origin of Chinese animation, we think of the Wan brothers. In 1926, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan produced the first Chinese animation lasting 10-12 minutes in black and white. They were then recognized as China's animation pioneers because of this achievement. In addition to being entertaining, the brothers believed that Chinese animation should be instructive, logical, and thoughtful to its audience. They emphasized the development of a unique animation style that can adapt to Chinese culture. They led the trend to combine live action film with 2D animation (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Wan brothers discussing Chinese animation](image)

The early Chinese animation resulted in great success because it followed Chinese aesthetic tradition. Therefore, the early Chinese animation was also recognized as Artistic Film. There
are four types of artistic film: shadow play-animation, water and ink animation, puppet animation and paper-cut animation.

One of most famous animations in this period is Princess Iron Fan (Figure 3). Its influences were far-reaching, and it was exported to Japan in 1942, inspired the 16-year-old Tezuka Osamu to become a comic artist and prompted the Japan's first feature-length animated film: “1945's Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors [5].”

2. Exploration periods (1949-1960)

Since 1950, the northeast artist group combined with another division as Wan brothers came back to China. Shanghai animation film studio was established with the help of government funding in 1957. With the support of the government, the film studio was encouraged to make films by using unique Chinese techniques. During this period, two new forms of animation were invented: origami animation and water ink animation [6]. In 1960, Yu Zheguang produced the first Chinese origami animation “The Clever Duck”. In the same year, Te Wei developed a water ink animation: “Little Tadpole Looking for Mummy” that was inspired by the works of the famous water ink artist Qi Baishi. The film was produced by complicated procedures and shows the unique Chinese water ink skill. “Little Tadpole Looking for Mummy” was recognized in many international film festivals such as Locarno International Film Festival in

![Figure 3. Poster of Princess Iron Fan](image)
1961, Annecy International Animation Film Festival in 1962 and Cannes Film Festival in 1964 [7].


In 1956 Mao Zedong advanced the policy of letting “a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend” [9]. The policy offered additional guarantees for the flowering of science and the arts, resulting in Chinese animation entered its first flourishing golden age in 1960. During this period, many high-quality animations were produced, and some of them were recognized internationally.

One of the most successful animations during the period is Havoc in Heaven. Because it was revised from a classic Chinese folktale and well known among ordinary Chinese, the film received numerous awards in the 1960s. The development of this animation lasted for 4 years from 1961 to 1964, and it ran for nearly 2 hours with some vivid colors that were very advanced at that time. This is because black and white cartoons were mainstream at that time.

The Cultural Revolution took place from 1966 until 1976 in China. During the period, the entire animation industry was committed to making a revolution. The representative works at this time were widely related to the Revolution war before the founding of the People's Republic of China, such as Little 8th Route Army, Little Sentinel of the East China Sea, and the Little Trumpeter.
After the end of Cultural Revolution, China introduced reformation and opened policies in 1978. During this period, Chinese animation was active and flourished. The representative animations include *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (Figure 4), *A deer of Nine Colors* (Figure 5), and *Prince Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King* (Figure 6).

*A Deer of Nine Colors* was adapted from the Buddhist Jataka tale of the same name, which was discovered as cave paintings in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, China. In 1988, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* was produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio under the master animator Te Wei. This film did not contain any dialogue, allowing it to adapt to audiences from any culture.

However, in the 20-year span from 1960-1989, Japan and America dominated a majority of the animation market, while the Chinese animation was stagnant by the influence of the Cultural Revolution (The government blocked the development of animation industry).
From a home-grown animation standpoint, Japan and America have already emerged as the dominant animation provider worldwide.


1990 was a turning point in the history of Chinese animation. Although Japanese and American animation still dominated the market, the quantity of Chinese animation had increased to more than 220,000 minutes annually from 1955 to 1988. By 1980s, color television had gained popularity in the United States. Meanwhile, Japan has already emerged as the dominant animation provider in the Eastern countries. Since 1990, Chinese animation productions show a relatively slow development.

5. Digital Period (1990-Present) [4]

In the last years of the 90’s, a shortage and other problems of animation market construction made the redevelopment go very slowly. Traditional Chinese animation was not based on personal investment but national investment, which caused the loss of motivation of animation artists and inhibited the animation industry due to a lack of peer competition. As a result of the impact of the commercialization and innovation of Japanese and American animations, the traditional Chinese animations were pushed out of the market. Numerous artists even ended up adopting American and Japanese animation styles, especially in comics.
To revive traditional Chinese animation, Shanghai film studio took four years and acquired over 150,000 animation minutes and over 2,000 painted backgrounds to produce an animated feature film *Lotus Lantern* (Figure 7). The animated film came from a traditional Chinese folktale about a mortal boy saving his goddess mother from the control of heaven. The animation became one of the most popular movies in the period because of its popular moral message and meticulous design. In 2001, China produced the first three-dimensional (3D) animation “Little Tiger Bwanban”. Popular contemporary Chinese animations also include *The Blue Mouse and the Big Faced Cat, Qin’s Moon, Pleasant Goat*, and *Big Big Wolf*.

6. Influence of Chinese Animation on My World View

Today, Chinese animation industry still follows the common development pathway as America and Japan. For reviving Chinese animation, a novel industrial chain needs to be developed to adapt to China’s national conditions. On one hand, the Chinese government should value animation as a significant part of the cultural industry. On the other hand, traditional Chinese culture should be creatively integrated into animation.

As a Chinese artist who grew up in China, I have a strong desire to make animation blending with traditional Chinese features but easily understandable by Western audience. Traditional Chinese animation influenced my entire childhood. When I decided to make an animation as my thesis projects, the vivid colors, delicate patterns, water-ink brushes came to my mind because these classic visual elements appeared in traditional Chinese animation.
Meanwhile, I hope to integrate traditional Chinese philosophical concepts and social norms into my animation. I feel this will be an important method for the development of Chinese animation industry, which will give the Western audience an opportunity to understand a comprehensive Chinese culture in an efficient and enjoyable way.
CHAPTER 4
INFLUENCES

Personal Influences

I was born in Shaanxi, China, growing up in a traditional Chinese family in a traditional Chinese town (Figure 7). When I was a child, I loved to draw and read literature. Reading historical stories was always one of my favorite hobbies. At that time, I had a dream to be an artist or writer. However, adhering to traditional Chinese values, my father, who is a high school Chinese teacher, insisted that learning traditional subjects and going to college are the only ways to success.

As a result, art became only a dream in my heart. I followed my parents’ will step by step: went to college, met my husband, got married, and had a baby. For numerous days and nights during my high school life, I have drawn many sketches in my textbooks. These sketches become subtle dreams hidden in the bottom of my heart.

Figure 8. Fei Xue, Over the mountain, Photography, painting, digital, 2014
From 2011, I went to the United States along with my husband. I was so excited that I could leave my parents and travel in a new world. Before I left, my father encouraged me to continue pursuing my academic career. He told me that he agreed that he would not interfere with my choices anymore, and he told me: “If you are not happy, just let us know. We will always be here waiting for you.” At that time, I did not understand my father’s words. In my memory, he had always been silent and stuffy. I just wanted to escape from him and fled from my familiar hometown.

During my second year in the United States, I have taken a painting class at Iowa State University. This was my first time to take professional painting training. Surprisingly, I performed very well in the class. All of my three paintings were selected to be shown in the NASAD exhibition in 2013.

I was greatly motivated, and I decided to study art as my major. When I entered in Integrated Visual Art program, I just had some vague ideas of creating fantastic and historical stories for my work. I was not sure what medium I should pick to focus. I just felt it should be something related to storytelling, narrative, historical, cultural, and fantasy. So I began to take more animation courses with my future advisor, Anson Call. At that time, animation was an entirely new world for me to convey my ideas. I was obsessed by the process of making virtual imageries (Figure 8).
In most of my works, I prefer to build dreamlike atmosphere and use historical/cultural subjects (Figure 10). After a period of technique development and discussion with my major professor, I decided to tell a story about the dream, home, culture and ethnoscape from the Eastern to Western countries. The story The Dreamer is my outcome.

The animation The Dreamer was adapted from a traditional Chinese story: A philosopher Zhuangzi dreamed that he was a butterfly, and he became confused about whether it was Zhuangzi dreaming that he was a butterfly, or whether it was the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhuangzi.

In my adapted animation movie, the butterfly plays a very important role. The butterfly is traveling around the world for finding the mountain, and the trip is a reflection of
my biography. My earlier childhood was full of pure pleasure from a traditional Chinese family. Then I tried to escape from my parents’ supervision and conventional Chinese

Figure 10. Fei Xue, Jue, Digital Rendering, 2015

education. When I traveled to the United States, I began to miss my parents’ annoying discipline; I began to think which social value is more suitable to me; I began to doubt my original choices…

To incorporate my ideas, the nostalgia, ethnoscape, cultural perception, space-time changing, and Chinese philosophy “Mountains Are Mountains” were hinted in the movie. For the animation style, various traditional Chinese patterns were illustrated to represent the philosophical Chinese mountains and waters.

Philosophical Influences

My personal background inspired the initial ideas of my work, while a variety of philosophical concepts influenced the perspective of representing my work. The discussion
of dream-work, simulacra and simulation, cultural perception, and global ethnoscape shaped my creation method, and all of these concepts formed my storytelling approach.

**Sigmund Freud: Dream-work**

Sigmund Freud wrote: “the dream work differs from classical dream interpretation in that the aim is to explore the various images and emotions that a dream presents and evokes, while not attempting to come up with a single unique dream meaning."[10]” The process of dream-work includes three achievements: condensation, displacement, and visual representation[11].

In my work, to show the connection and confusion between reality and dream, I explored the topics of dreams from a person to a butterfly. The butterfly as the secondary revision represents the obscure pieces and makes the connection between the dream and dreamer. Through the animation, I hope to motivate the audiences to make connections to their life experience by perceiving the Eastern culture.

**Olu Oguibe: The culture game**

An Africa American Art Professor Olu Oguibe discussed the difference between the perception and treatment of the Western and non-Western artist. He claimed that the truth of culture game is that the Western appetite is dominating the global cultural discourse of contemporary art, while the non-Western artists are minorities [12]. Non-western artists have to represent their backgrounds or regions to get perception from the mainstream of Western vision.
I was born in China, which now is a socialist country and has experienced semi-colonialization for hundreds of years. Then I came to the United States to study art as a foreign student for three years. I experienced various cultural values, ideological differences between East and West, different perceptions from different cultures. These perceptions made me more and more cautious about viewing the historical and present development of China.

Our skin color, background, and social status decide who we are, how we can be perceived by others, and how our works are viewed by the mainstream voice. A lot of successful Chinese artists have won international favor and popularity on the Western stage. Most of their works addressed the Chinese politics or Chinese historical pain. This phenomenon reminds me what Olu Oguibe said: “contemporary art would like to embody non-Western art as it deals with the ramifications and residues of the colonial encounter as well as its own historical and cultural past. [13]”. However, for traditional Chinese artists, it is relatively difficult to be successful on the international stage. This might be because their artworks lack this kind of confusion, hostility and anxiety to cater to the Western appetite.

In my work, I adapted a traditional Chinese folktale and re-told this story using modern animation technique integrated with a traditional Chinese pattern. By examining Chinese philosophy through animation, I would like to deliver traditional Chinese values to my Western audiences. I hope they could sense the value of Chinese culture and incorporate what they perceived into their own life.
Simulation and Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard developed the philosophical concepts Simulacra and Simulation in which he tried to examine the relationships between reality, symbols, and society. Simulacra refers to copy the things that had no original. Simulation refers to the imitation of the operation of a process or system for a long time. Baudrillard claims that “today’s world is a hyper-real which is a generation by models of a real without origin or reality. [14]”, which relates to the Chinese philosophy “mountains are mountains,” suggesting that the things we are seeking might not exist or/and can be some characteristics that we always possess from the very beginning.

In my animation, the butterfly refers to a copy of Zhuangzi. However, after Zhuangzi wakes up, he is confused about if he is a butterfly or a man. In this situation, the story implies that Zhuangzi might not exist. The animation tries to ask a question that how one determines what is real and what is their goal. To the best of our knowledge, these types of method are very limited.

Artistic Influences

My work was influenced by different groups of the artists and various art mediums. Although my work evolved over time, the following artists and artwork had a deep impact on my work.

Maggie Taylor

Maggie Taylor is a photography artist who works with digital images. “She uses Adobe Photoshop software to produce surrealistic montages by scanning objects into a
computer and layering and manipulating images using software [15].” I am fascinated by her creative imagination and rich color usage.

She demonstrates how a variety of space and medium can impact the viewers’ experience. She affected me with her understanding and utilization of colors, materials, dreamscapes, and atmospheres (Figure 11). The combination of real and imaginary objects in her work has greatly influenced my work.

Figure 11. Maggie Taylor, The Experinece, Digital Photography, 2009
The Tale of the Princess Kaguya

Japanese artist Studio Ghibli has produced an animation film named *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* in 2013. The film is based on a folktale *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (1592) and tells a story about how Goddess Princess Kaguya was raised by a human couple and finally returned to her moon palace.

The movie illustrates the changeable nature of living: birth, growing of age, choosing a path, joy, grief and departing this world. It expresses a deep grief atmosphere throughout the movie, coupled with implicit oriental style. Sharing with the similar historical influence, I am fascinated by the scene composition of the movie such as eastern brush painting, watercolor washes, grainy texture of the paper, and charcoal strokes.
CHAPTER 5
THE WORK

Animation

*The Dreamer* is a two-dimensional animation that incorporates three-dimensional character rendering. The whole working process is long and challenging. The process could be classified into six steps: visual research, script, storyboards, character design and layouts, and production.

Visual Research

Before setting about the thesis project, I did a test about stop-motion animation of Chinese folk tale. It was my first attempt of stop-motion animation (Figure 12). Each step of the process challenged my technical skills and creative thinking. However, this stop-motion practice helped me understand how to adapt traditional Chinese folktales into animation.

*Figure 12. Fei Xue, Selected scenes from stop-motion animation, 2014*

When I did the visual research of interpreting traditional Chinese values and cultures to the Western audience, the story of Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream came to my mind. The original story tells that Zhuangzi dreams that he is a butterfly. When he wakes up, he is
confused if he is a man or a butterfly [16]. By analyzing the source, retrieving “mountain are mountains” philosophy, and integrating my personal experience, the adapted story *The Dreamer* shaped up.

I hope my animation will share traditional Chinese animation style: vivid colors, symbolized patterns, and brush painting styles (Figure 13), while the Western cartoon style is also expected to be incorporated into my animation. The reason is that the story occurs throughout culture, time and space between East and West, ancient and modern, nature and industry.

Over a long term visual research for both traditional Chinese animation and modern Western animation, I decided to illustrate my characters and layouts digitally. The visual presentation is mainly inspired by the traditional Chinese line-drawing and early watercolor animation in China (Figure 14&15),

**Figure 13.** *One scene from Chinese watercolor animation A Deer of Nine*

**Figure 14.** *Unknown Artist, Traditional Chinese liner drawing*
Figure 15. Fei Xue, Visual Research with founding footage: In the Mountain, 2016

Script (Narration)

Zhuangzi sits in the middle of Penglai Mountain. He is reading a book and drinking a cup of hot tea. This mythical mountain surrounds him with mist and clouds. The breeze gently moves the leaves on the trees. The tea is steaming hot.

After a while, Zhuangzi falls asleep. He dreams that he is in an egg. With feelings of wonder and curiosity, he hatches from the egg as a caterpillar. The little caterpillar climbs the tree and looks around its surroundings, finding that she is in a magic forest. She climbs the tree and enjoys the beautiful spring. When she arrives at a branch and stops by, she finds the trees bursting into blossoms. The spring has changed into summer! Soon, autumn comes; the flowers fall; the excited caterpillar becomes sad. When winter comes, snowflakes fall in
silence. Everything changes to white. More and more snowflakes fall onto the caterpillar and wrap her to form a chrysalis. The caterpillar feels sad and closes her eyes. Suddenly, the chrysalis melts and the ground is green again; spring has returned. The caterpillar becomes a beautiful butterfly. She flies in the forest and enjoys the course of nature.

The butterfly flies in the forest joyfully and beautifully until she falls asleep again. She dreams that she is on a mountain in clouds. It appears that she dimly sees a philosopher sitting on the mountain. When she wakes up, she is surprised by her dream. She starts to feel bored of the forest and longs to fly out of the forest and find the mountain in her dream. As she flies, the butterfly finds a glazed paper with a poem, hanging on a branch in the forest. She eats the glazed paper. Suddenly a magical portal appears. The butterfly jumps into the portal and flies out of the forest.

Outside the forest, there is a vast expanse of sea. The butterfly feels free and flies over the sea, and she meets various species of animals there. However, she keeps flying forward because she believes that she has to find the mountain-in-clouds from her dream. The sea seems endless.

The butterfly feels tired, but she keeps flying. She finally arrives at a sandy beach, passes a little girl and her mom who are wandering around the beach. The butterfly lands on the girl’s head and relaxes. The butterfly wants to rest for a while. Suddenly, she hears the little girl say: “Mommy, look! A mountain in the clouds!” Looking at the direction where the little girl points, the butterfly unexpectedly finds that the mountain is her original home – the mountain where she was born, where she grew up and turned into a butterfly, where she dreamt her “mountain-in-clouds” …

Surprised by what she sees, the butterfly feels joyous and sad, grateful and depressed,
optimistic and defeated, all at the same time. The butterfly tries to fly back to her home – the mountain-in-clouds. However, she no longer has the strength to fly, because she almost spent her whole life working towards achieving her dream of finding the “dream mountain,” which turns out to be her original home. With feelings of attachment to her birthplace, the butterfly falls dead onto the beach.

Zhuangzi awakes from his dream. He is terrified and confused. Looking around his surroundings he finds they are nearly no changes. He is still in a mythical mountain of mist and clouds. The only change is that his tea is already getting old and no longer steaming, which implies he has been asleep for a while.

Although no longer dreaming, he cannot help but want to ask himself whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or he is actually a butterfly dreaming he is a man.

**Story boards**

The storyboarding process is one of most significant and essential steps in animation production. The story boards could be displayed in sequence to show my animation frames, and guide my next working steps, such as character design, concepts sketching, scene building, and layout development (Figure 16).
Figure 16. Fei Xue, Storyboards, 2015-2016
Figure 16. (continued)
Figure 16. (continued)
Character Design and Layouts

After setting up storyboards, a general storyline sequence begins to shape. I realized there are many facial expressions (Figure 18) that I needed to deal with. Because the animation represents the butterfly’s experiences during her whole lifespan, I started to collect different facial expressions and try to figure out how to use these facial expressions to create my characters’ facials.

The philosopher Zhuangzi and the butterfly are related to each other as two main characters. To highlight the connections between Zhuangzi and butterfly, I used a red color as their main color plate. Meanwhile, I used the orchid pattern to decorate Zhuangzi’s robe and applied same elements on the butterfly’s wings.

There are also two characters appearing near the end of the animation – a little girl and her mom. For their images, I took reference from my two-year-old daughter and myself, which fits my personal experience into the story (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Fei Xue, Character Design, 2016
1. Sleep in the egg

2. Wake up, look around the world

3. Surprised by spring transit to summer, happy

4. Summer to Autumn to Winter,

5. Snowfall covers her body, fall in sleep
6. Change to a butterfly

confused  curious

Happy  excited/cute

7. Fly cross the forest

Happy  surprised

sleepy

Figure 18. Fei Xue, Facial expression for butterfly, 2015-2016
Production

After my storyboards, characters, layouts are finalized, Work has started on the production stage. There are two main processes in this stage: two-dimensional animation (Figure 19) and three-dimensional character animation.

![Figure 19. Fei Xue, 2D Animation Still, 2016](image)

I created two-dimensional animations (Figure 20) for the layouts, concepts, scene transitions in my animation. Usually, I worked with Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator to create scene layers, and then grabbed these layers into Adobe After Effects to animate them. During this process, I have also manipulated some scanned images, hand drawings, and found footages to make the animation visual imageries more vivid. The two-dimensional animation process is fun and challenging. I enjoyed manipulating multiple mediums using different software. I also loved to learn new techniques to overcome each challenge.
Because the character animation and facial animation are featured in my animation, after discussing with my advisor, we decided to animate characters in 3D software first, and then brought these animations as alpha channel merged into 2D layers. In this stage, the character animation is one of most challenging parts of my whole work process. I have no character animation experience before, and I have never tried rendering 3D characters into 2D animation. My major professor altruistically assisted me with this stage. He helped me to set the 3D character rigs in Cinema 4D (Figure 21), and taught me how to animate them. Under his consistent help, I finally overcame these problems, successfully rendering my characters’ facial changes, and brought them into my final 2D animation.
Textile Projection

My textile work serves as the supplements of my animation. Three motion graphics animation are projected into three pieces wide-format inkjet printing on canvas tapestries, to focus on the topics of three Chinese characters - 梦(Dream), 旅(Travel), 人(People) (Figure 22). When putting these three words together, they become the Chinese title of the animation The Dreamer.

The visual elements of the textile are taking inspiration from traditional Chinese patterns, such as butterflies, branches, flowers, woods, clouds, Opera masks. All of these elements are classic and symbolic in traditional Chinese culture. I hope audience could get more understanding of Chinese culture behind of these visual imagery.

Figure 22. Fei Xue, Concepts design of Textile Projection, 2016
As textile imageries are developed, I started to explore the relationships between projected imageries and the textile surface. I hung these textile prints from the ceiling as three tapestries. Meanwhile, I set three projectors in front of each tapestry. After adjusting the position, lighting, and angle, I started to do motion graphics projection on the textile surface. Through this project, the audience will experience an unusual dreamlike atmosphere, and explore the connections between still and moving imageries.

The *Dream* (Figure 23) Piece indicates the cycling of four seasons: leaves sprout, flower bloom, butterflies fly across forests, then all the beautiful things are suspended, until fading to nothing. This life circle of nature is just like one’s dream of life. We are born, we cry, we smile, we are sad, and finally we die.

*Figure 23. Fei Xue, Dream, Motion Graphics projection on Textile, 2016*
The second piece Travel (Figure 24) delivers a message of travel intuitively. The hanging canvas tapestry incorporates butterflies, repeated clouds patterns, and Chinese calligraphy. The motion graphics are projected on the surface as moving clouds. In the motion graphics, the moving clouds are divided into two parts as black and white, which imply the Ying and Yang concepts in Chinese culture. “Travel” also reflects my passage and perception between East and West.

In the third piece People, the hanging canvas tapestry imagery was inspired from a traditional China Bai tie-dyeing. I manipulated it with repeated patterns and fringed hems to create a founder appearance – implied fettered suburban existence.

Then a looped animation is projected on the surface, which shows instant transitions between a man’s face and a butterfly’s wings. The man’s face was illustrated in the way of Beijing Opera masks to imply that we lonely play ourselves in daily life. In contrast, the
fluttering butterfly wings symbolize our dreams – we wish to escape from the real life and fly in our dreams.

Figure 25. Fei Xue, People, Motion Graphics projection on Textile, 2016

Figure 26. Textile Projection in Exhibition
Script Installation

The exhibition also shows my script installation (Figure 27) to help the audience to understand the storytelling in the animation. The whole installation includes twenty-eight hanging script bags with bookmarks inside of each bag. On each hanging point, a butterfly was set up to make the whole installation looks like a scene that butterflies holding the bags.

Figure 27. Fei Xue, Script bags installation, 2016
I broken my script up into twenty-eight sentences, printed each sentence out, and made twenty-eight bookmarks (Figure 28) with Chinese red tassel. Then I put these twenty-eight bookmarks into twenty-eight bags. On the surface of each bag, a corresponding imagery (Figure 29) is shown to incorporate the sentence on the bookmark. Because these script bags are arranged in orderly rows, the audience could read these bookmarks inside of bags while they are watching the imagery on bags.

The inspiration of the script bags came from a traditional Chinese proverb – drop your knowledge bags. “Drop your knowledge bags” is a literal transition because it means to tell a story straightly from text. I manipulated this metaphor and re-tell a story from traditional Chinese culture.

**Figure 28.** Bookmark inside of bags

**Figure 29.** Details of Script bags
Figure 30. Initial Concept Design for the Script bags installation
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

My studies for the thesis show have revealed my own learning process and how I responded to the cultural globalization. My explorations started as I began to question my identity in the context of becoming an international student at Iowa State University.

Like many other art students, in the past four years I have taken a wide range of studio courses across the disciplines of painting, drawing, textile, photography, graphic design, web design, 2D and 3D animation. My artistic exploration for the thesis began in hand-drawing, digital illustration, and 2D/3D animation. I gradually developed myself and ended up with have the capability to integrate various medium into my work process.

Through my artworks, I attempted to emphasize the pre-existing Chinese social, philosophical, and cultural perception in the context of cultural globalization. Although in our current society, culture communicates through the popularization of a wide array of cultural symbols, I still hope to address emotion reaction from my view in the context of experiencing Chinese philosophical animations.
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