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DESIGNING FOR FEMALE CHARACTER EMPOWERMENT
WITHIN THE ADAPTATION OF

FLOWERS IN THE MIRROR

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Design(Weta Workshop)

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Abstract

Costume design for Characters within fantasy films can be a significant method to compare the personal growth and development of gendered character roles.

Contemporary filmmakers use concept design to shape a fabricated reality of an imagined world, through characters and storytelling. How a character's outfit changes can demonstrate the personal growth of a character, and suggest a related social and gendered history to our own, in the way the costume responds to story development. In the popular Qing Dynasty story - *Flowers in the Mirror* - the heroine character epitomises the tensions between dutiful daughter and independent woman. The visualisation of the narrative needs to consider both character appearance and mental state, so people may experience self-recognition within the heroine's journey. Similar to the transformative character arcs of Sansa and Arya in *Game of Thrones*. As an aristocratic girl, at first, she hated the cold hometown and prepared to marry the prince with a romantic dream, but later, she lost most of her relatives and was controlled, utilized, and insulted by others. She learned to use power and strategy, and finally became the independent Queen of the North. On the other hand, another Stark girl, Arya, chooses a "masculine" way to become a fighter for revenge.

This research adapts a fantasy novel set with historical Chinese culture, while considering its relevance to a contemporary audience, in east and west. Concept design for a *Flowers in the Mirror* adaptation explores feminism and self-identity, through a case study of character costumes for both genders which will inform the development of evolution of costume designs that encourage female empowerment. From a historical perspective, the study of traditional items within Chinese culture (costume, ornament, weapon, motif) and visual language is necessary to make the characters culturally grounded.

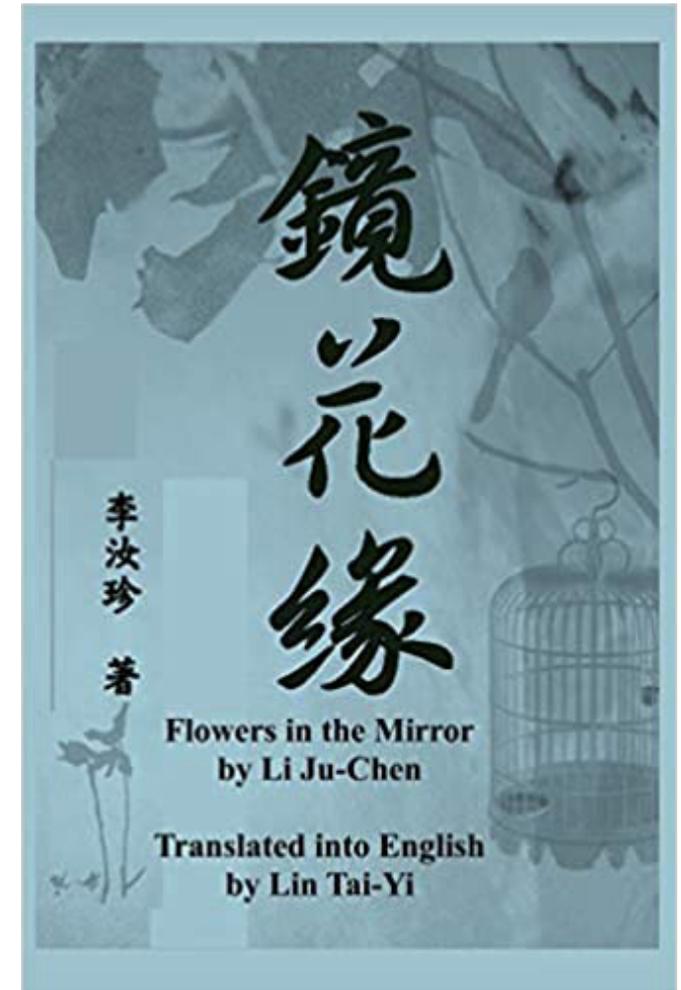


Figure 1. *Flowers in the Mirror*, English version.



Figure 2. Sansa's costume from season 1-6 in *Game of Thrones*.



Figure 3. Arya's costume from season 1-6 in *Game of Thrones*.

My character visualisation will show the evolution of several key protagonists, including Shan and her gendered opposite, the Prince with the intention that the audience can feel personal resonance and empowerment with the female protagonist.

Keywords

Female Empowerment

Costume and Character Design

Chinese Fantasy world

Martial Arts or Xia

Art and Visual Language

Graphic and Colour Meaning

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Figure 4. Poster of *The Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017). Directed by Kaige Chen.



Figure 5. Poster of *The Assassin* (2015). Directed by Hsiao-Hsien Hou.

Introduction

Concept design in China is in its infancy, and environment and costume designers are still developing a level of criticality within concept design. In the film industry in China, they are normally included in two different departments of art and costume. The designers' role is limited because they often don't have the opportunity and autonomy to discuss ideas with the director and art director. But with the development of the film and television industry, more domestic fantasy and science fiction themed projects are being made. Films such as *The Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019), have had huge success at the box office (530 million CNY and 700 million USD, statistics from Wikipedia). The importance and necessity of concept design to frame a cohesive story world has begun to be emphasised, and many Chinese film projects have started to hire concept designers at the preliminary stage of development. Before this master's study, I had several years of work experience as an art assistant in China's film industry, primarily working in environment design. I want to use this year's study to expand my skills and focus on the research of character and costume design, which I've always been interested in. I think that compared with environment design, character design can be closer to the development of the story. I believe designers should consider more factors when they work, such as; cultural identity and history, regions, races, psychological activities, storylines, and character roles. By learning more about these topics, which is a challenge for me, I can gain greater benefit for my future career development.

My master's project focuses on character design for a live-action general audience, historical fantasy film, which is adapted from the well-known Chinese novel – *Flowers in the Mirror* (AC1827, the Qin Dynasty). I find this novel very inspiring as it contains advanced modern thoughts for romantic fantasy. Several excellent works in ancient China have inspired modern artists.



Figure 6. Poster of *The Wandering Earth* (2019). Directed by Frant Gwo.

For example, Mulan's story comes from a poem *The Mulan Ballad* (AC386-581, the Northern Dynasties), and the film *The Assassin* (2015) comes from a short ancient story. However, many more wonderful stories have not been brought to light, I have chosen to adapt an old Chinese story that I believe epitomises a strong female role model. If Mulan can be so popular from a poem, there must be other charming characters waiting to be discovered.

However, choosing an ancient story comes with its challenges. The original fiction is very antiquated with a tedious narrative, and a lack of characterisation. In my adaptation, I have promoted a characters' gender to strengthen the opinion of gender and class equality. Though I am not a screenwriter, I have chosen to use the Hero's Journey story outline to help adapt to this story for my project. Many great famed projects adopted this story structure and achieved huge box office, such as *Star Wars*, *The Hobbits*, proving its maturity in describing stories. I believe in this way western audiences who are familiar with that may be more likely to accept an oriental story with a western structure.



Figure 7. Three films in The Hero's Journey.



Figure 8. The Hero's Journey storytelling model.

Flowers in the Mirror is set in a real historical period, during the reign of the only empress Wu Zetian (AC690-705) with political rights in the Tang dynasty (AC 618-907). It's an important historical background that supports one theme of my project – female empowerment. The Tang Dynasty has always been the most popular era for Chinese, famous for its unprecedented prosperity in social development, diversified art and culture, and high inclusiveness. Many poets and romantic literary works from the Tang Dynasty have influenced the society even now. According to Chen (2009), in this period, because of the famous empress Wu Zetian's policies, women's social status was not very humble and they were less constrained and oppressed by feudal ethics. As a result, females in the Tang Dynasty had more freedom and greater empowerment than women at other ancient times, with a bright, unrestrained, brave, and lively mental outlook, as well as a unique style and ideology (Hua, 2004).

This story has a strong feminist ideology, and at first I hesitated in pursuing this line of inquiry, because the word “feminism” is still misunderstood in contemporary China. Many people think that feminism is to advocate that women's rights are higher than men's, with some literary and artistic workers being reluctant to be labelled as feminists (Shen, 2019). Worse still some even consider such a label as slander. However, based on my own experiences as a woman working in the film industry, I felt that pursuing this message was important. A chance to promote self-awareness, provide inspiration and challenge audience attitudes towards strong women characters. To show that feminism can be a positive ideology that raises up both women and men to a greater freedom of personality.

My research aim is to explore the relationship between clothing and character roles. Concept design can provide the opportunity to explore this dynamic through appropriate outfit changes that visually communicate the evolution of a character's inner emotional growth and support the character's transformation through the different stages of the hero's journey. Whilst also ensuring the designs are both attractive and grounded in a believable world.

Because of the historical background, I have thoroughly researched historical clothing, props, and the use of ancient Chinese weapons to ensure my designs felt authentic and functional. Armed with this research I began my design process. Starting with a collection of a large number of sketches with supporting visual reference. I began with at least three concept sketches (in black and white) the initial development phase before presenting three further refined drawings in colour version before narrowing my determined direction to choose one as the final design after further modification.



Figure 9. Historical background and images of Wu Zetian in different art works.

Character Evolution Diagram1 - Shan

Keywords

Design Influencing Factors

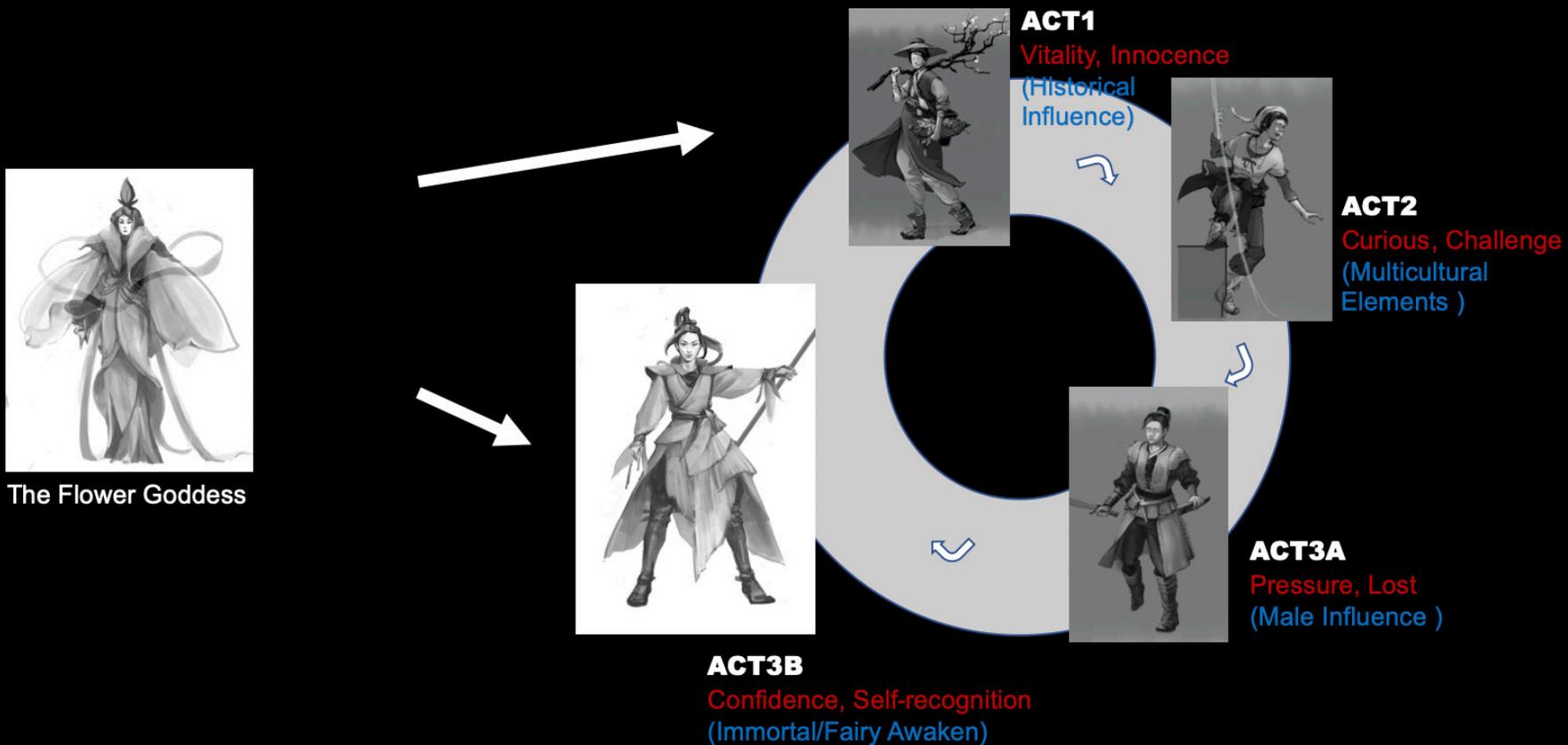


Figure 10. Character evolution diagram 1 of Shan. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

The Tang Dynasty-Lively Artistic Features



My research questions will look at the characteristics of visual language, and the art of ethnic minorities and ancient kingdoms in ancient China, especially in the Tang Dynasty, exotic culture, Chinese fantasy creatures, graphic and colour meaning in Chinese culture, and different national costumes.

Figure 11. Works of art in the Tang Dynasty.

Costume Introduction- Female

Woman's Costume Features

- Upper Garment/Blouse
- Front Opening Collar
- Half-sleeve
- A Loose Silk Cape
- Ru-skirt with Ribbon
- High-top Silk Shoes

Big neckline
High-waisted
Narrow sleeves
High-top shoes

Cross-dressing



Figure 12. Female costume style in the Tang Dynasty.

Literature Review

1.0 Female Empowerment

1.1 Feminism within China is different to Feminism in the West and how this is shown in the stories of young girls in films.

Ancient Chinese women were clearly distinguished from men belonging to subordinate areas. Belden's (1980) research on the relationship between Chinese society and women described that for three thousand years, China's political rights have always been closely related to the control of women (Huang, 2004). The evolution of female imagery within Chinese films can reveal the development of Chinese female consciousness. China's first short film *Die for Marriage* (1913) reflects the harm of traditional marriage to women, but ironically the female leading role is played by men, which shows the low status of women at that time. Then came a large number of films showing the hard life of women at the bottom of society, such as *The Goddess* (1934). Huang (2004) noted that Women were portrayed as victims of feudal society: they struggled silently and suffered physically and mentally, but most of them could not escape the tragic fate.

Unlike that in Western countries, the promotion of women's status in China is mainly due to government policies. After 1949, Chinese political parties called on women to participate in social work, emphasizing that "men and women are the same" and "women can hold up to half the sky" (Mao, 1955). However, this call for equality does not comment on "males" and "females" from the biological perspective. What is more important is the role of "males" or "females" in society and the important role of women as a group. "The



Figure 13. Poster of *The Goddess* (1934).



Figure 14. The slogan of *Women can hold up to half the sky* and ideal images of working female in 1950s China.



Figure15.
Poster of *Sacrifice of Youth* (1986).
Directed by Nuanxing Zhang.



Figure 16.
Poster of *Summer Snow* (1995).
Directed by Ann Hui.

expression ‘men and women are the same’ not only means equality between men and women but also obliterates and cancels the opposition and differences between them” (Dai, 2013). The liberation of women is accompanied by a process of eliminating gender. Therefore, in the Chinese movies from the 1950s to the 1970s, the female image was basically a woman with strong makeup as a man or “female” heroes, like healthy, plain dressed, straightforward revolutionaries, and laborers, such as “The Red Detachment of Women”. Dai (2013) stated that they are close to the image of men but lose the chance to show their original charm because filmmakers excessively added masculinity to show the power. Interestingly, this similar viewpoint also exists in western society, such as female politicians participating in election campaigns. “we have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man” (Bread, 2017).

After the 1980s, with the development of the Chinese social system and the introduction of western feminism’s thought, China’s feminist consciousness has been further developed (Qin, 2019). At the same time, many excellent female directors emerged, like Anhua Xu, Shaohong Li, Yu Li...they provided a new perspective to observe contemporary women with films such as *Sacrifice of Youth* (1985), *Summer Snow* (1995)...

Huang (2004) stated that this trend began to reflect women’s self and needs, and they were eager to obtain freedom of personality. The female roles in the screen were no longer just eye candy or stereotypical masculine female heroes, but mature women with inner changes, self-awareness, and they can wake, explore, and fight.

1.2 Female characters stories - why they are needed

There are still many issues of gender inequalities in current Chinese society. The International Labour Comparison Chart (2012) released on the website of the U.S. Department of Labour states, the labour participation rate of Chinese women in general domestic work is as high as 68%, which is far higher than that of other major economies in the world. The 30-year-old unmarried Chinese women are called Leftover Women, but there is no same saying for men. The social public opinion places the pressure of the declining marriage rate on the female group, even though the number of unmarried men in China is far more than that of women - the ratio of male to the female population in China is 116.9: 100. Israeli filmmakers Shlam and Medalia filmed a documentary *Leftover Women* (2019) which focused on marriage and the life of three contemporary Chinese women. According to Medalia, Their parents push; the whole society pushes them to succeed and go to university. Then they start their career. But then they have to stop everything and get married. Their entire value is based on this one thing. At the same time, outside the family, women also face gender discrimination at work. Many Chinese companies will publicly express their priority in recruiting male employees and women can be asked whether they intend to marry or have children in recent years in the interview stage (Stevenson & Chen, 2019). Modern Chinese women are under heavy pressure in the pursuit of independence, because traditional ideas require them to devote more to their families, while the competition in modern society requires them to be able to compete with men in terms of working hours and abilities.

Fortunately, more film and television projects are describing and reflecting on these issues. *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (2019), a popular TV drama and through the shaping of female roles with diverse identities, the creators pay attention to women's self-awareness and wisdom. For example, at the end of

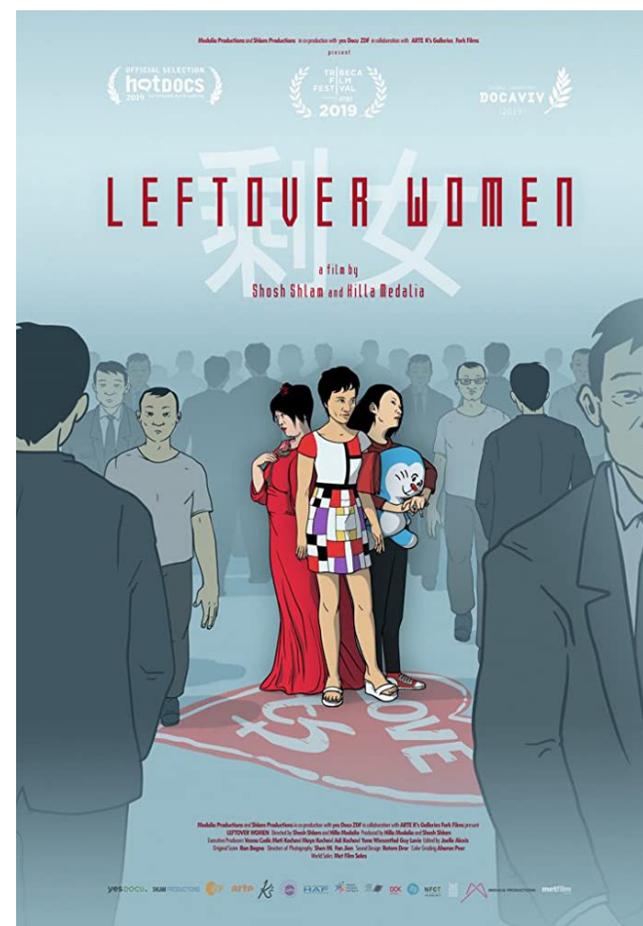


Figure 17. Poster of *Leftover Women* (2019).
Directed by Shosh Shlam, Hilla Medalia.



Figure 18. Poster of *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (2019). Directed by Cao Dun.



Figure 19. Female Characters in *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (2019).

the story, when the heroine was proposed to by the two most important men in her life (one she loves and the other she respects), she refused decisively and chose her dream and pursuit in career. This play demonstrates to an audience that a beautiful female character is no longer just eye candy or a hero's prize, and she exists as another important person with complex thoughts, emotions, and self-awareness. The female protagonist in *The Assassin* (2019) disobeyed the master's order and was not willing to kill her former lover, a lord, not because she was trapped in her personal feelings, but for the sake of morality - the death of the Lord would have led to civilian suffering from the ensuing wars. These fictional works give the female characters more choices and wider horizons and guide the audience to think more deeply.

1.3 Females narrative aspirations

The biopic genre can be used to give experience and warning to contemporary people. The two films *Danish Girl* (2015) and *Suffragette* (2015) are adapted from the true stories, which is an important way to remind the audience that both minority groups and women have been discriminated against and oppressed, and seek the same equality. Even in western countries, the history of women's political rights is only about one hundred years, and New Zealand was the first country to offer women the right to vote. This kind of work raises public awareness and demonstrates that the present wellbeing cannot be taken for granted, but won by brave pioneers, and we still need to strive for it.

In a fictional film, it is often to communicate contentious social issues, rather than in a political space, especially sensitive, controversial, and difficult topics. South Korean film *Parasite* (2019) cleverly described the Korean social class problem as a contrasting story of two families with strong tension and full of suspense. It integrates director Junhao Feng's perception of South Korean Society, and accurately shows the huge gap between the rich and the poor (Kermode, 2020). Moreover, the film has been widely accepted and highly praised among foreign watchers, which demonstrates that the social problems are universal. Many films reflect global problems, not limited to the audience's age, gender, race, and cultural background.

A good fictional film can transform culture, or influence a social custom and hierarchy. I was shocked by the interesting plots after watching *Spirit Away* (2001) for the first time but did not find some deep meanings of it until I began to learn the modern history of Japan. This animation, which has caused a great sensation in Japan and abroad, reflects a huge time background: two decades of Japan's economic depression and the lost protagonist is the lost Japanese economy (Japan's Bubble Economy, 1986-1991). At the beginning of the story,

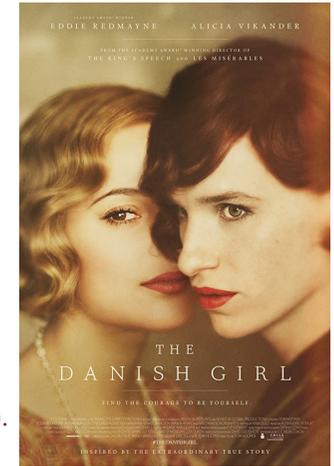


Figure 20.
Poster of *Danish Girl* (2015).
Directed by Tom Hooper.

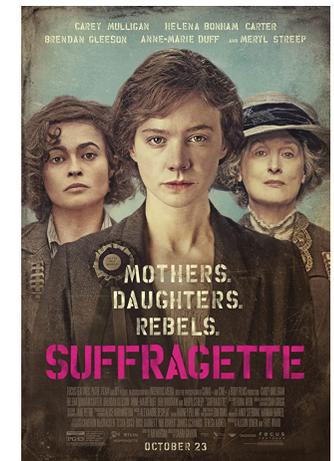


Figure 21.
Poster of *Suffragette* (2015).
Directed by Sarah Gavron.



Figure 22.
Poster of *Parasite* (2019).
Directed by Torej Gerace.



Figure 23. Poster and screenshots of *Spirited Away* (2001). Directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

parents overeat at the food stall, representing the Japanese people's reckless spending on unnecessary luxuries before the economic crisis. The movie is full of historical and political metaphors. Haku, the boy who forgets his name, symbolizes the past and origin of Japan, while the behaviours of the Faceless Man display the blind development of contemporary society (time before Japan's Bubble Economy). The leader of the villain has a Japanese bathhouse with a strong classical style and a large number of employees in traditional

clothes; however, at the top floor of the building is a completely western-style room, and she is also an old Western woman who can transform into an eagle. These details hint at Japan's relations with the United States. The main purpose of *Spirited Away* is not feminism, but it does star the vivid and brave female role-Chihiro. According to Jaich (2017), director Hayao Miyazaki wants to tell the story of the lost little girl to explore his question: how contemporary Japan should find a way out and how the lost generation can redeem itself. This

work fulfilled his purpose well, and I think it is the duty of film and television creators to find appropriate and interesting design methods for stories, to better tell a story and express their opinions.

In recent years, a domestic mode of female empowerment in movies and dramas has become popular in China, which is similar to the story outline of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). It mainly appears in the ancient background, describing the life of the female protagonist who lives in difficulty but struggles to grow up and succeed, such as TV series *Empresses in the Palace* (2011) and , *The Story of Ming Lan* (2018). Generally speaking, the China-styled female empowerment story is a type of play specially designed for female audiences, in which the growth experience and path of the heroine caters to the inner spiritual demand of young women for their self-reliance and self-improvement. There are some shortcomings and one-sided discussions about feminism in these film and television works, but this trend reflects the development of consciousness and spiritual needs of contemporary Chinese women. This is a positive phenomenon, showing that film creators and film themes are also growing.

My story has a historical background and fantasy elements, which play different important roles. Historical condition is the foundation of story setting and the reflection of social problems, and the imaginary part shows Shan's control of her own life.



Figure 24.

Poster of *Empresses in the Palace* (2011).

Directed by Zheng Xiaolong.



Figure 25. Poster of *The Story of Ming Lan* (2018). Directed by Zhang Kaizhou.

1.4 History repeats

In ancient China, “in the Confucian design of society, all the functions of women are within the family” (Xu, 2019). The free and open social atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty made the status of women higher than that of other dynasties, but they still couldn’t be equal with men, because Confucianism always occupied a dominant position in ancient Chinese social thoughts (Weng, 2015). As a concept designer, I need to reference the visual language of the historical reference as inspirational design language but not to copy all the older traditional cultural values. Choosing a story with a historical background is not the recognition of all the characteristics of this period, but the choice of factors needed by the project and the rejection of outdated and incorrect things, like class and privilege.

For the question of how to give the ancient characters the advanced thought, I need to find some viewpoints to provide theoretical rationality to create a female character with equal ideas in an ancient story. My idea of adaptation of Shan comes from Beauvoir (1949) “One is not born a woman, but becomes one”. Some conventional ideas about women come from the shaping of women after birth. I think Herculine Barbin’s bisexual story can also support Beauvoir’s Theory: she grew up as a woman, was forced to change into a male life when she was an adult, was constantly tortured between the secular gender perspective and her desire, and finally committed suicide in despair (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, I imagine Shan is not raised by traditional methods, so she will have a more contemporary worldview, which explains her later brave and unusual adventure, and the audience will also have more understanding of her situation. After leaving home, because she is strong in herself, she works through this confusion during the journey.

2.0 Fictional elements in Chinese film

2.1 Gods, Goddesses, fairies, humans, and mythical creatures in Chinese fantasy world, and how they act in my project. and how to transform them into a modern film.

Chinese mythology is based on real-life and reflects certain social problems. For example, the immortal world has a hierarchy, which corresponds to the ancient feudal system (AC475-BC1860). According to Gorky (as cited in Yuan, 2015), mythology is a way of expressing meaning from the given reality as a whole. It has realism and romanticism, and it can help to arouse the attitude to the real revolution - to change the world. “Despotism against tyrants is a prominent feature of Chinese mythology” (Yuan, 2015). So the fantasy story itself has a function or characteristic of encouraging the audience to feel the intention of the creator to generate a critical response to the work. There are a large number of fantasy creatures in ancient Chinese myths and literary works. “Animals have always had a hold over the human imagination, particularly through folklore and mythology, and have long been used as allegories of the human condition” (3D Total Publishing, 2017). Apart from the criticism of the privileged class, a classic example is the famous fantasy novel *Journey to the West* (Wu, mid-16th century). It describes several protagonists who are constantly attacked by monsters or demons during their journey. The fantasy novels of the Tang Dynasty began to have more personal views, where some stories show that monsters also have good and evil qualities (Ichiro, 2015). The collection of short stories in the Qing Dynasty in China, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Pu, 2015), depicts a romance between demons, ghosts, and humans, and shows strong anti-feudal ideas.

“The appearance of Chinese gods has gone through the changes from animal gods to half-human, half-animal gods and human gods, which can be said to

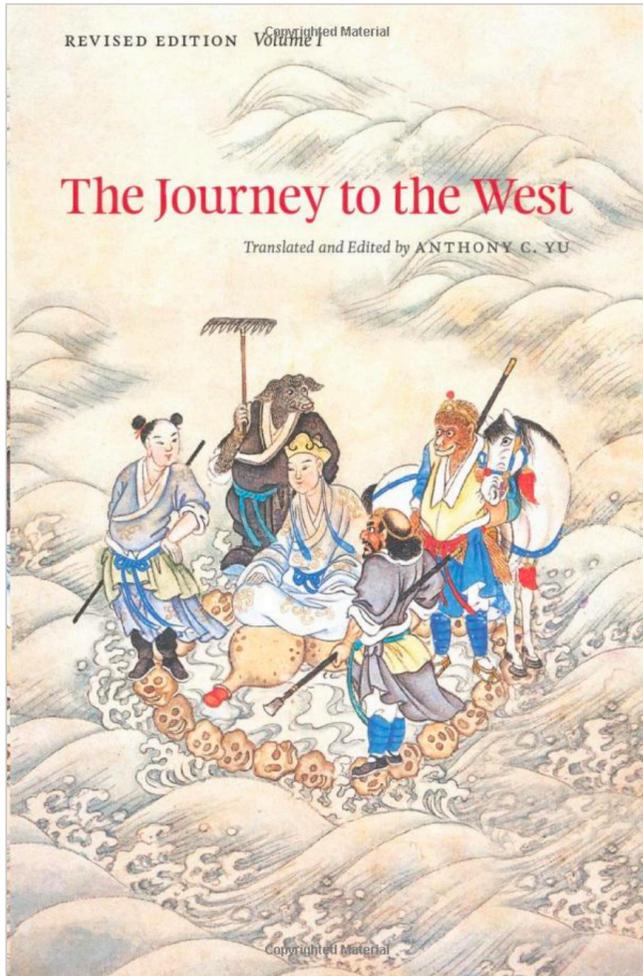


Figure 26. Fantasy novel *Journey to the West*.
Written by Wu Cheng'en (Mid-16th century).

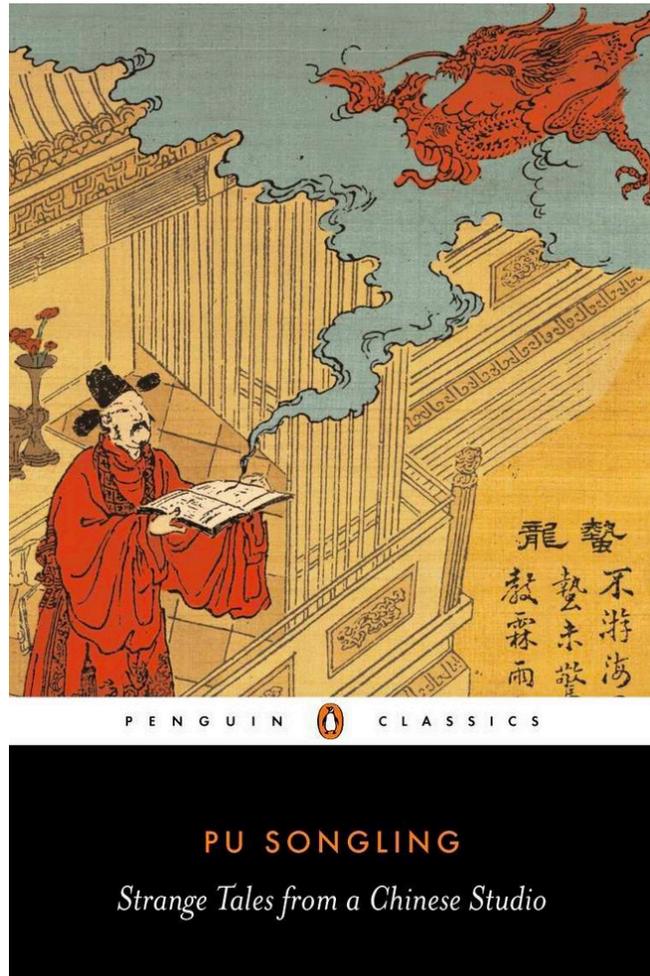


Figure 27. Fantasy novel *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.
Written by Pu Songling.

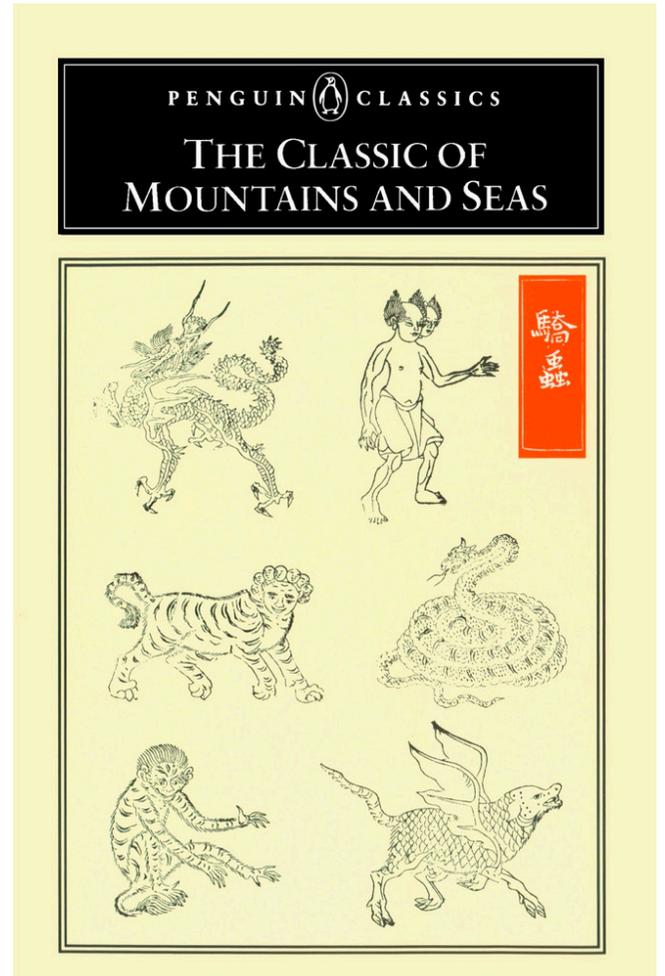


Figure 28. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*
(The Warring States period). Anonymous.

God/Goddess/Fairy—Traditional Impression

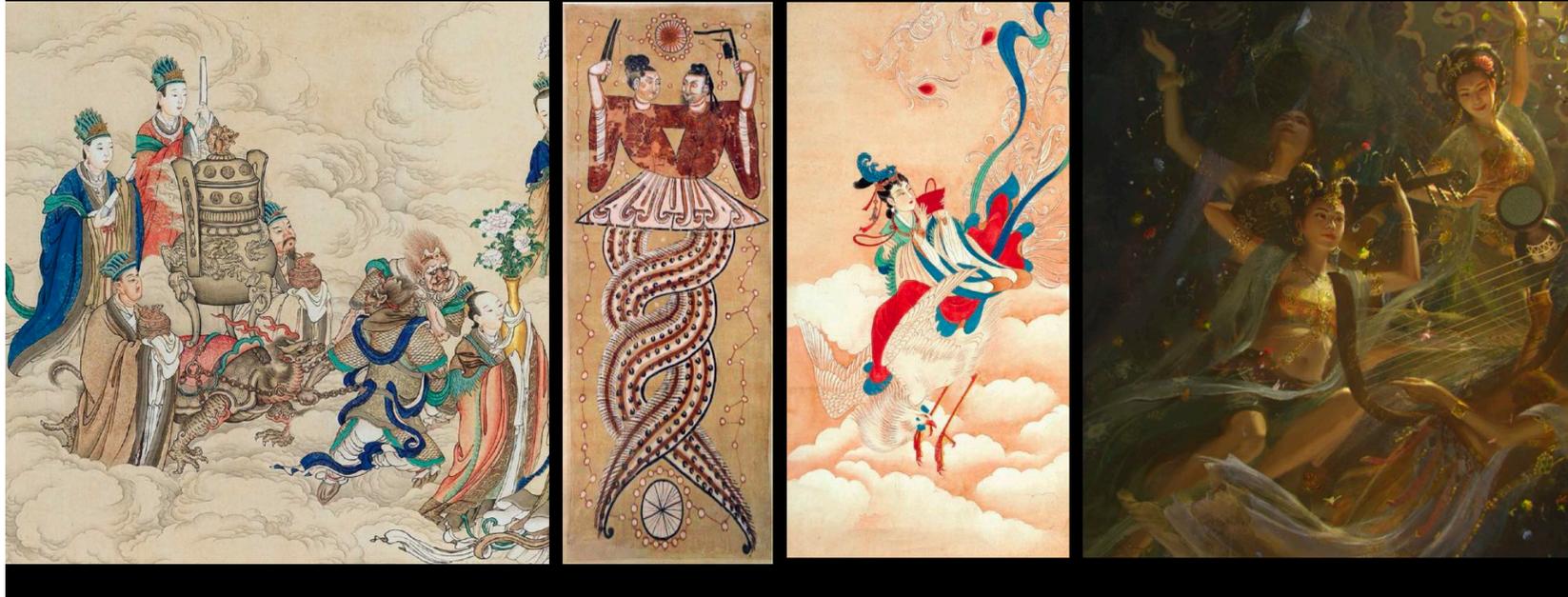


Figure 29. Typical images of god/goddess/fairy in Chinese culture.

be the way of evolution of gods, or the way of the gradual awakening of human self-consciousness” (Huang, 2019). Authors’ name comments that “Creature art and fantasy art draw their strength and allure from playfully straddling the line between what is known and what is invented” (3D Total Publishing, 2017). In different cultures, many fantasy creatures have existing biological characteristics, such as gods or monsters with animal heads and human bodies. The most famous book recording fantasy creatures in ancient China *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (The Warring States period), also influenced the original novel of my project. I would regard the old illustrations of this book as an important visual reference. In my project, there is a combination of different characters who are mortals, immortals, and mythical creatures. My heroine Shan will receive the help of mysterious creatures or immortals to defeat demons and the witch queen. I think a diversity of character designs

will make the story more interesting. Some characters may have multiple identities that affect them. For example, Shan appeared initially as an ordinary human in the story, but she used to be a powerful goddess, and eventually, she will retrieve some special abilities. The process of strengthening and elements of multiple identities needs to be reflected in character design.

Additionally, Chinese fairies are not equivalent to Western fairies, and the former ones can be regarded as low-status goddesses. According to Shen (2017), Chinese fairies are changed by human beings, animals, plants...but in western culture, ordinary human beings can never be fairies, as fairies are hereditary, they are descendants of Gaia or Buri.

2.2 Chinese martial arts movie

Martial arts story is a popular category in Chinese novels, movies, TV series, games, and other industries. Yong Jin, China's most famous martial arts novel writer, according to the statistics of Mtime, his works adapted and derived a total of 117 films and TV plays.

Different from the martial arts or Kung Fu films represented by Bruce Lee acceptable to the western audience, Chinese audiences often prefer ones that happened in ancient times. Xia, a kind of Chinese hero, are loyal and kind with high martial arts skills, protecting the weak, resisting the evil forces, and may sacrifice themselves or leave smartly after completing the task. This theme is similar to American Westerns. Their chivalrous spirit is highly praised, maybe every fan has a dream of being a hero in a martial arts film. Even in the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), one of the reasons for the rich lady to leave from home is to chase the life of being a free swordsman.

In ancient China, there was a close relationship between the order of kingship and the behaviour of Xia. The spirit of Xia can be regarded as a kind of resistance to hierarchy. In the movie *Hero*, the heroes want to revenge and assassinate the king for their families or motherland, and then give up for the sake of overall interests, which are all the embodiment of chivalrous spirit.



Figure30. Photo of Bruce Lee.

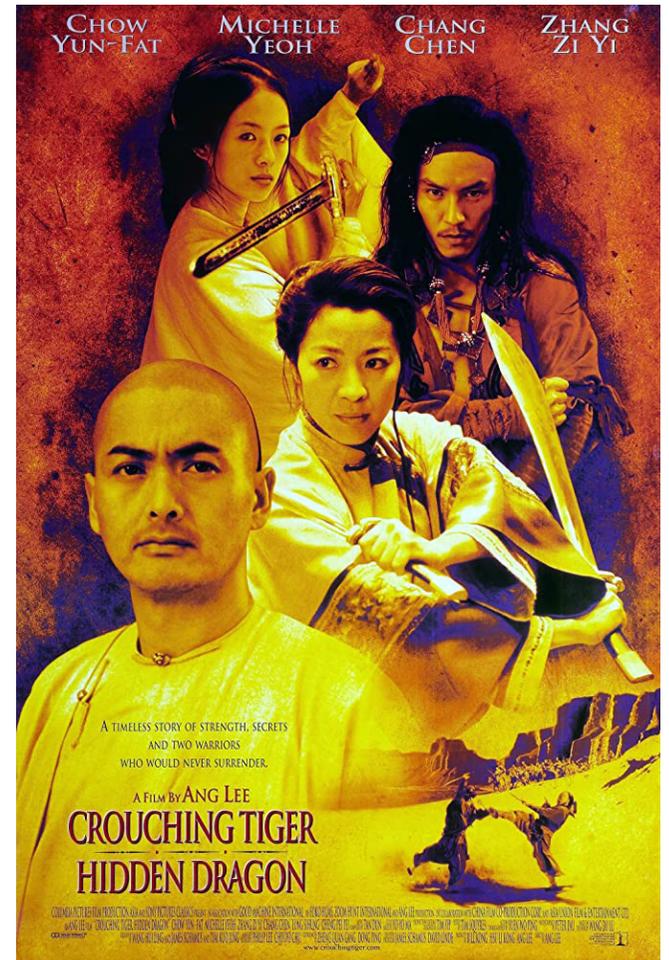


Figure31. Poster of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).

Directed by Ang Lee.

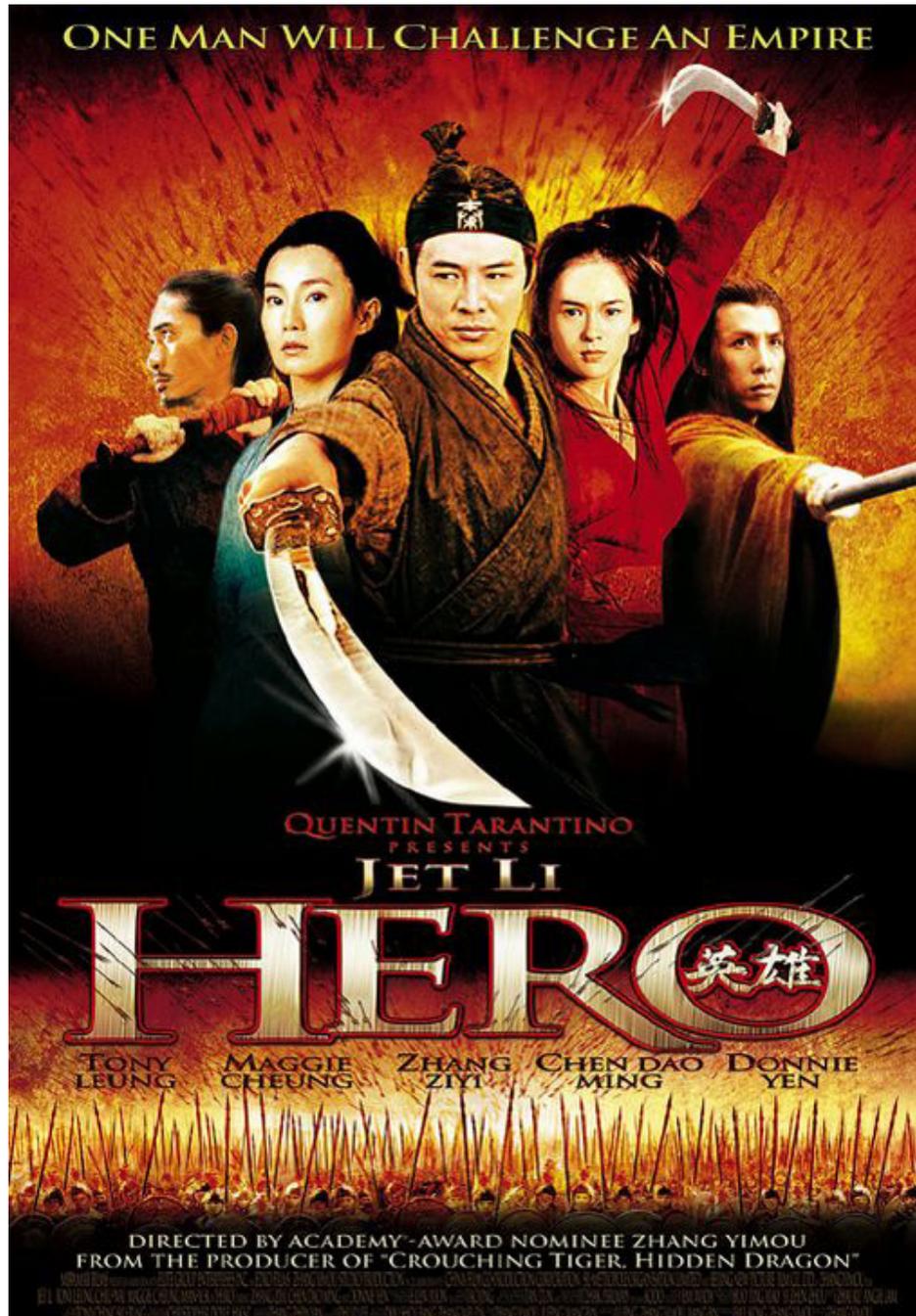


Figure 32. Poster of *Hero* (2002). Directed by Yimou Zhang.

Women's role in ancient social life is rarely recognized and displayed. However, in martial arts stories, women have received extraordinary respect. Female Xia is as strong as the male counterpart, resolute, superb in Kung Fu, and has a high moral character, showing the energy suppressed by the feudal society. Compared with the male, the heroines' characteristics are not only reflected in the amazing martial arts and energy, but also for the belief, justice, the fearless sacrifice spirit of the loved ones, such as *The Assassin* (2015).

Apart from the fantasy factor, another feature of my project is the martial arts. This is an action movie, and Shan is a typical female hero. She looks for relatives, helps the Prince with a sense of justice, protects her friends, and resists the evil queen. She is independent and brave, which is in line with the characteristics of female Xia.

3.0 Costume and Character Design for empowered characters

3.1 Comparison of artistic and visual language in different cultures, and how to transform and use them into a fantasy film.



Figure 33. *Game of Thrones* Houses infographics sigils & mottos.

Art is an important connotation and component of culture, a representative of the culture it belongs to, which can reflect the change and development of human life. Signs and symbols play an important role in visual language. “A symbol... is a visual image or sign representing an idea- a deeper indicator of universal truth. ... life becomes enriched and meaningful.” (Mitford & Wilkinson, 2008).

This kind of visual language is also applied to fantasy stories, such as the TV drama *The Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) where different family sigils are represented as Wolves, Roses, Deer and, Lions. In the movie *Alien: Covenant* (2017), various symbols or hints of death appear repeatedly alongside the appearance of robot David and the introduction of his living environment: The building looks like a huge tomb, and there is a scene that is almost a copy of the work of the Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin, named *Isle of the Dead*. All of that suggests that people who believe in David will go to the grave, and almost everyone is killed eventually.

In the primitive tribal period of China (before about BC1100), some ethnic groups also chose an animal or natural image as a totem (Yan, 2014). According to *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (4th century BC), the Dragon totem clan is based in the South of China; the bird totem clan is mainly distributed in the east of Henan Province and the west of Hubei Province. Because of primitive worship, sacrificial activities, distinguishing friend from foe, and dividing classes, they choose a certain creature or a natural thing to represent their ethnic group. Because of frequent changes of dynasties and totalitarian rule in ancient China, the aristocracy did not develop a symbol that was dedicated to a certain family, but the emperor and officials' clothing had meaningful hierarchical decoration.

Several significant figures in my project have their unique symbols that

represent their due to multiple identities, which can provide design ideas and visual language.

Shan was the Flower Goddess, so definitely there is something related to flower hints her identity, but the form is changeable, depending on her state. The symbol of Flower Goddess would be distinct but that of Shan might be veiled as she is a human.

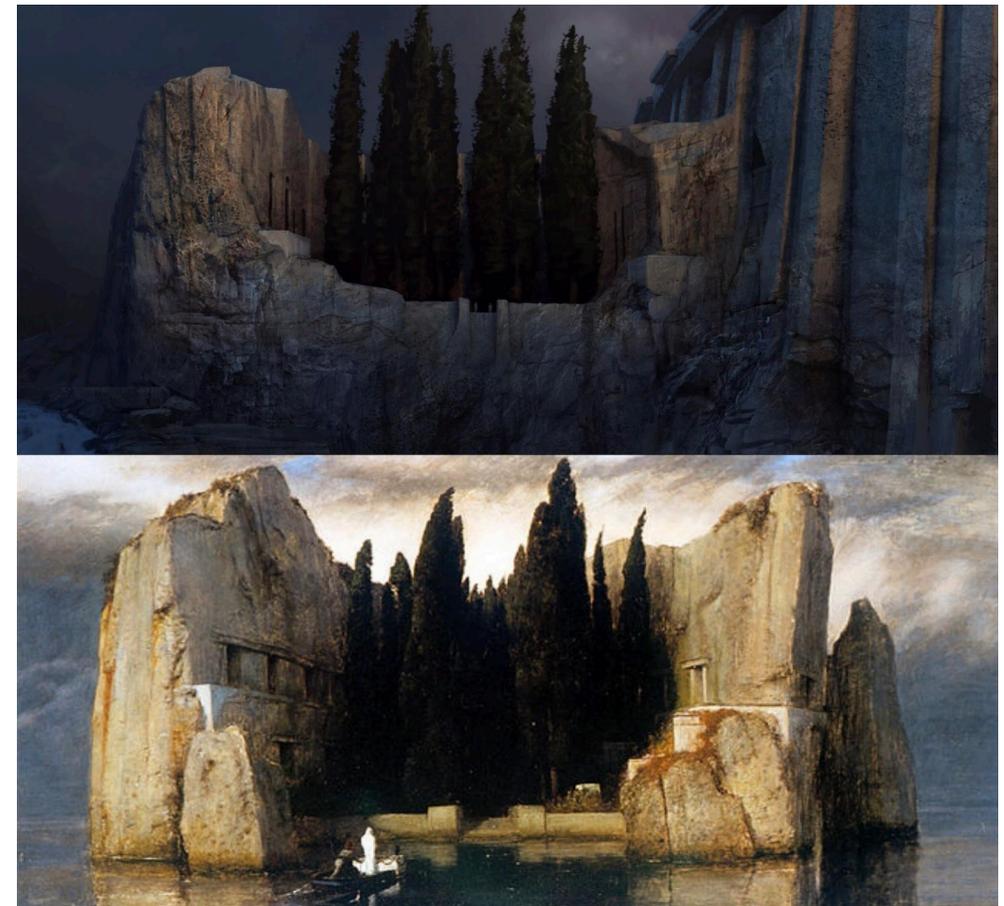


Figure 34. Concept art to *Alien Covenant* (above) and the painting *The Isle of the Dead* (below) by Arnold Böcklin.

3.2 Transformation of traditional colours, costume within character design in fantasy project.

The symbolic meaning of colour in Chinese culture is very rich. “The traditional Chinese colour system covers the social life of ancient China and plays an important role in the construction of politics, society, and ethics systems”(Hongtangmeixue, 2019). Throughout Chinese history, there were colours exclusive to different statuses and classes. For a long time, in ancient China, only emperors and monks were able to use yellow. Clothing is also an artistic symbol and is one of the channels to communicate and display people’s psychological activities, personalities, and needs. Clothing or costumes reflect many aspects of society and culture, like nationality, occupation, religion, trait, thought, and class. ...”Membership” is symbolized by costumes, ceremonies, celebrations, and cultural symbols-all of that bind people together (Mitford & Wilkinson, 2008).

“Clothing most directly reflects the basic appearance of social and historical changes and



Figure 35. Poster of *The last Emperor* (1987). Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

Yellow means imperial power in ancient China, and the yellow sunset here also implies the end of the empire.

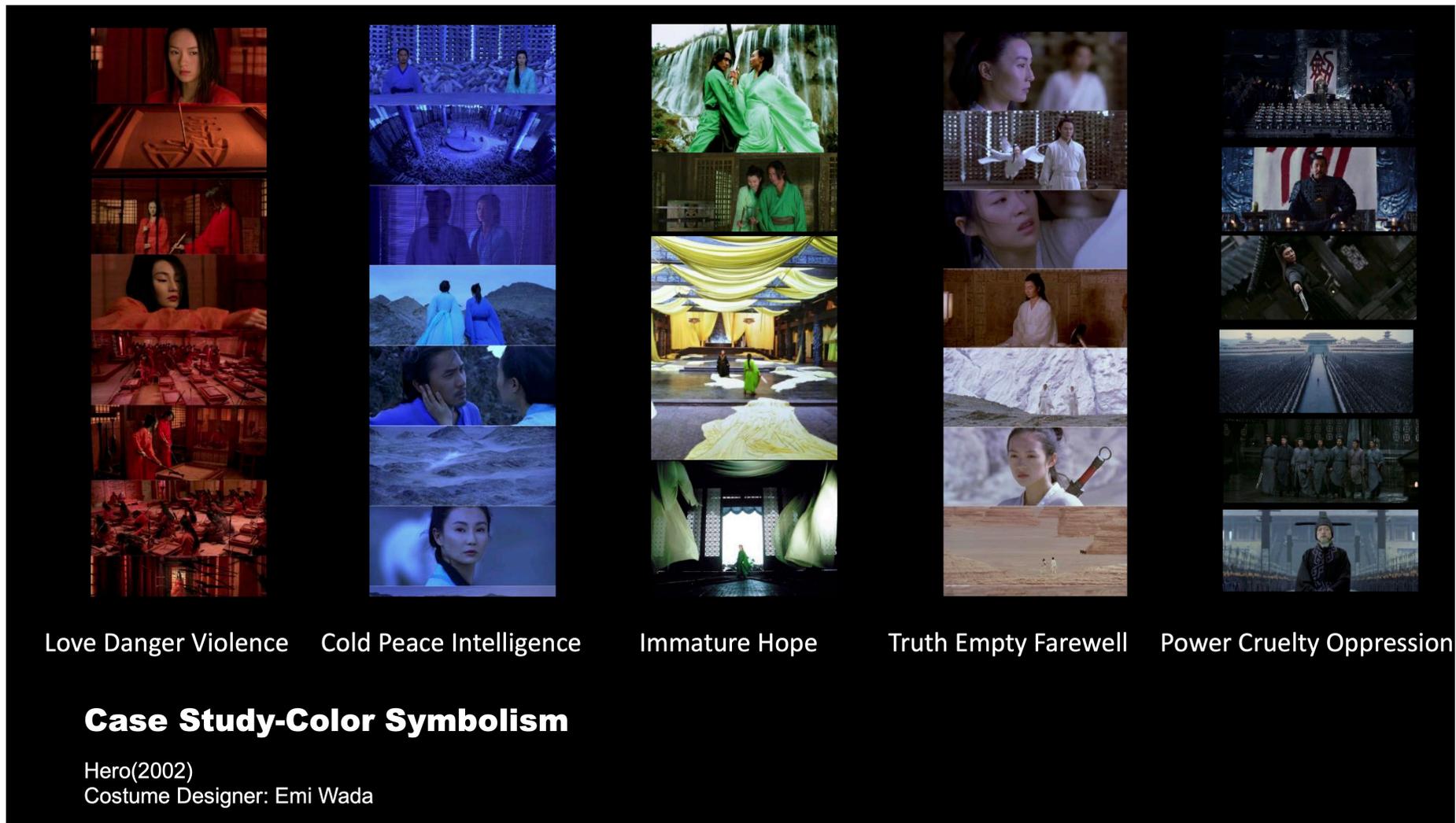


Figure 37. Case study of colour in *Hero* (2002).

is a lively history of human development” (Chen, 2019). Due to the cultural tolerance and fantasy characteristics of the background of the story, my clothing research will involve an exploration into different kingdoms, periods, and nationalities. At the beginning of the story, the heroine Shan’s clothing will be biased towards the traditional style of the Tang Dynasty. With the increase of plot fantasy components, there will be a rich change in appearance

for her character. Subsequent additions of other artistic languages, such as the art of the Chu Kingdom in ancient China, China’s ethnic minorities, and the neighbouring world of Ancient Japan, Ancient Korea, will add more clothing considerations to factor into my project. Although it is grounded in a fantasy world, I will try to avoid using too many obvious features of Chinese art within 500 years of modern times, so as not to confuse the audience.

VISUAL LANGUAGE CONTRAST

The Queen

Shan

High Saturation
 Artificial Shape Decorative Style
 Straight Line, Circle ●
 Regular, Concretezation.
 Art Deco, Japanese Art.

Low Saturation
 Natural/Organic Shape.
 Irregular, Curve
 Art Nouveau, Chinese Art.



Demon, Dangerous
 Shape: Spine, Triangle, ▲
 Colour: Black.

The Witch Kingdom

Immortal World



Figure 38. Visual language contrast between the Queen and Shan in my project. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Design Journey and Methodology

1. About Adaptation - Project Synopsis

According to a legend, the Moon Goddess left some broken pieces of a magic mirror in the human world. Every piece can bring unknown power or disaster, depending on the morality of the holder. The new queen of the Witch Kingdom inherits a magic mirror fragment. Her nephew-the persecuted prince sends his subordinates to find another holder to fight against the evil Queen.

The reincarnation of the Flower Goddess – an orphan girl, named Shan raised by a huntress in a remote mountain. When 17 years old, she and her cousin follow a merchant ship to the sea and embark on a journey to find her missing father and the secret of their family. Then they are involved in the Witch Kingdom struggle. Shan and the Prince and other partners defeat the Queen, then Shan recovers slight memory of her previous life, but also knows that there are still more difficulties and challenges ahead in her life (she needs to seek out all mirror holders who might be her old friends in the divine world and her entire memory and power).

I use a screenwriting type - The Hero's Journey - to organise this story synopsis, there are several key stages, which characters would experience during the growth journey. At the beginning of the project, I tried to cut one or two stages because of the workload issue, but soon I found they are the essential processes, which make the girl's developments not unexpected or incomprehensible.

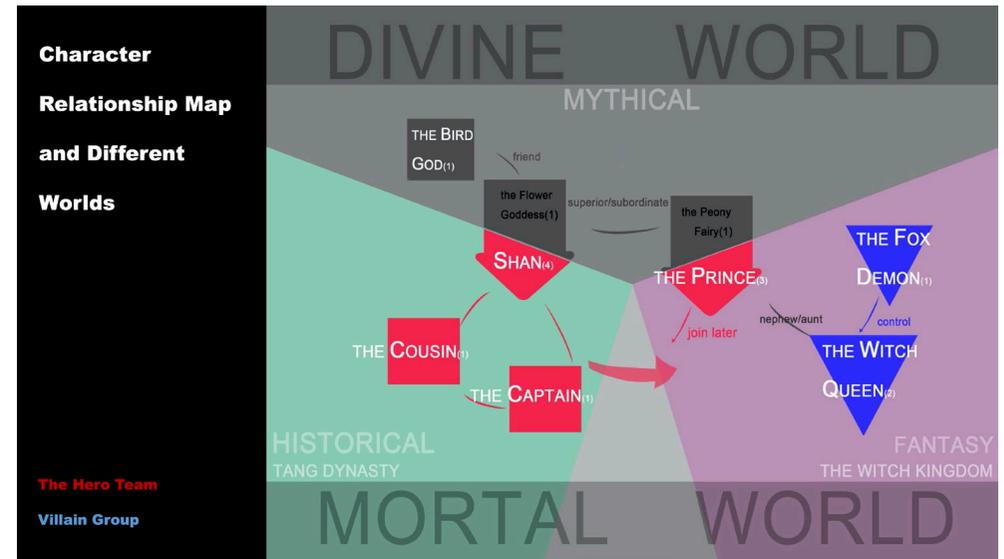


Figure 39. Character relationship map in different worlds. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

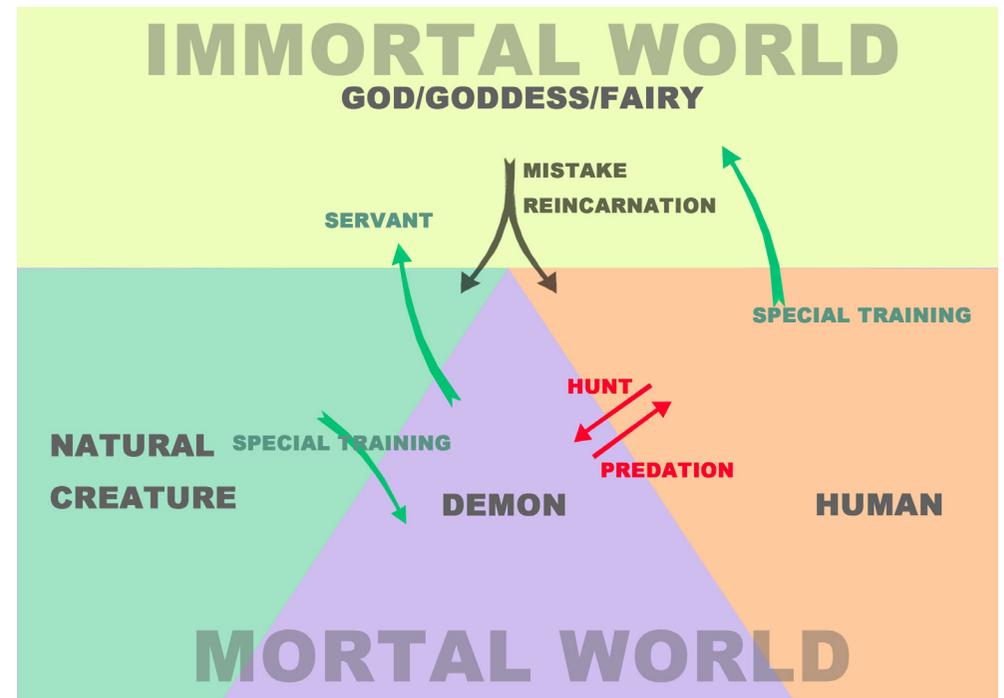


Figure 40. System of different worlds in my story. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

As a result, this writing method has also turned into a design method for two protagonists, every single stage has a different appearance with apparent and underlying links between each other, and all of them constitute the character evolution. This is the principal design methodology in my project. Shan was a reincarnation of a goddess, but in her current life, she was a human with a little mythical magic.

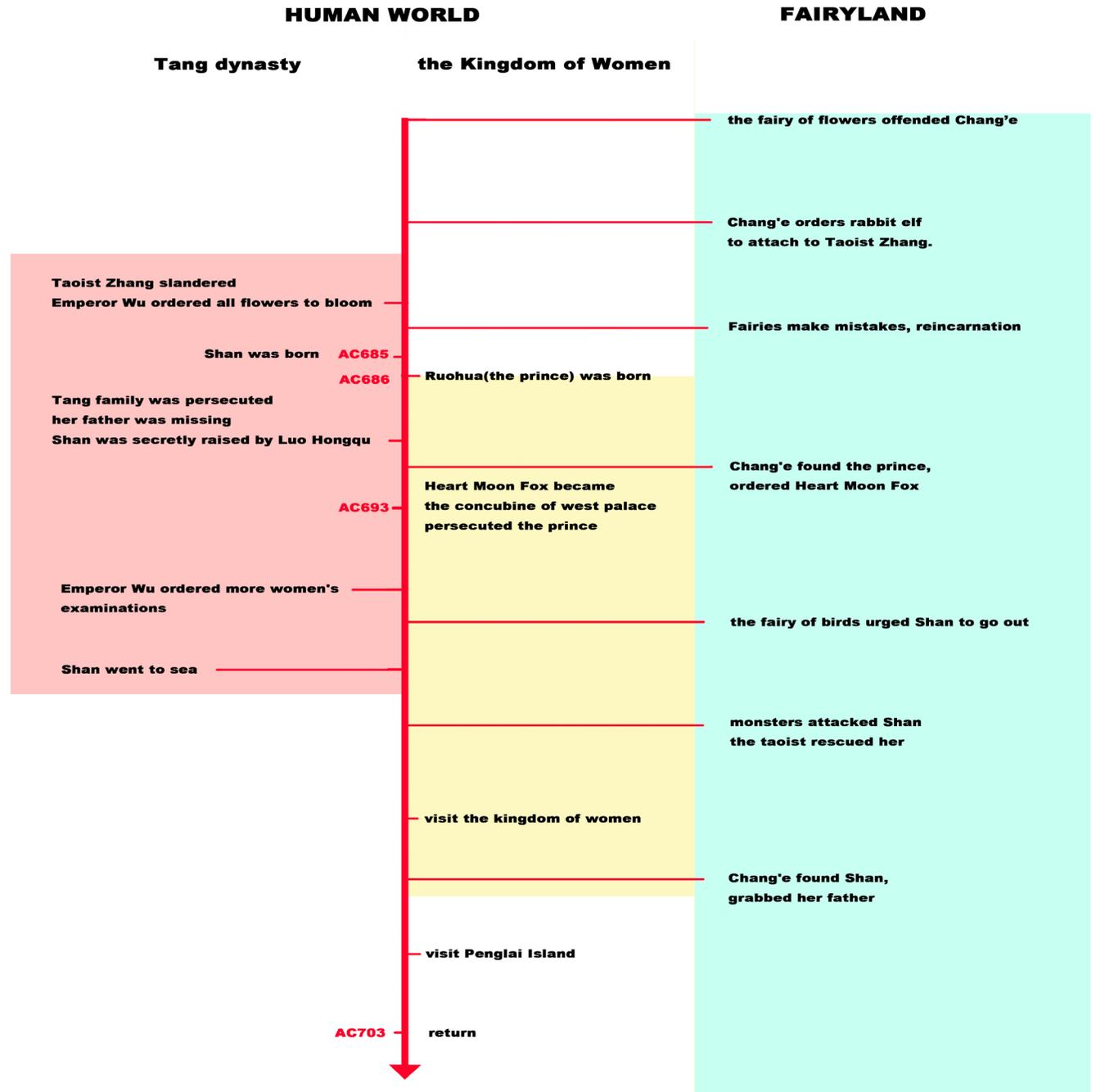


Figure 41. Timeline of story in different worlds. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

2. Character Evolution

This story synopsis has several key stages, which characters would experience during the growth journey. At the beginning of the project, I tried to cut one or two stages because of the workload issue, but soon I found they are the essential processes, which make the girl's developments not unexpected or incomprehensible.

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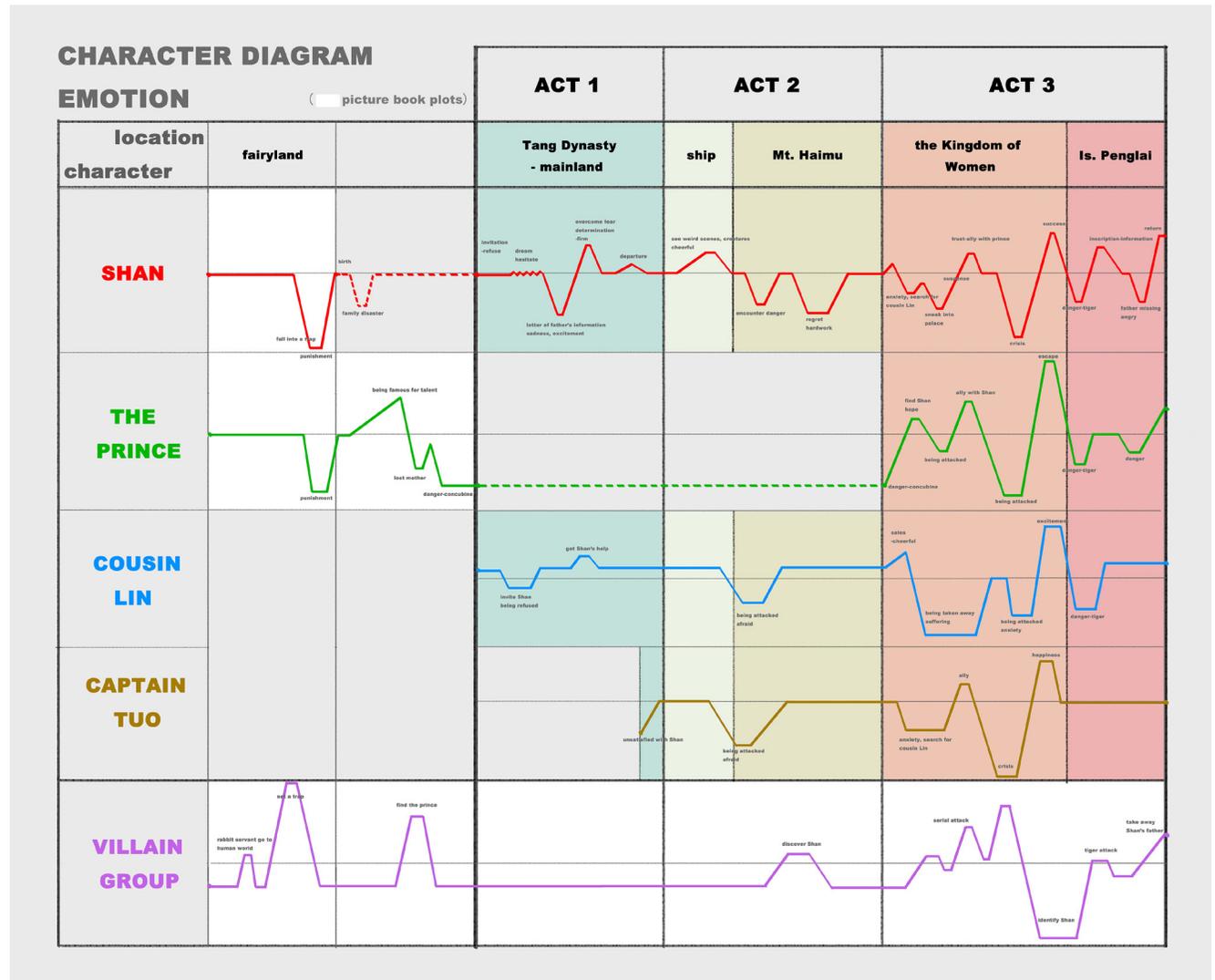


Figure 42. My character emotion diagram. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



Sansa and Arya in *Game of Thrones* are my main case study. For Sansa, I tend to analyze her mental activity and underlying meanings that reflected on the costume, and as for Arya, I research the masculine factors infected on her looks, which give me inspirations of Shan in stages 2 and 3.

Figure 43. Sansa Stark's evolution Analysis.



Figure 44. Arya Stark's evolution Analysis.

2.1 Shan's Evolution

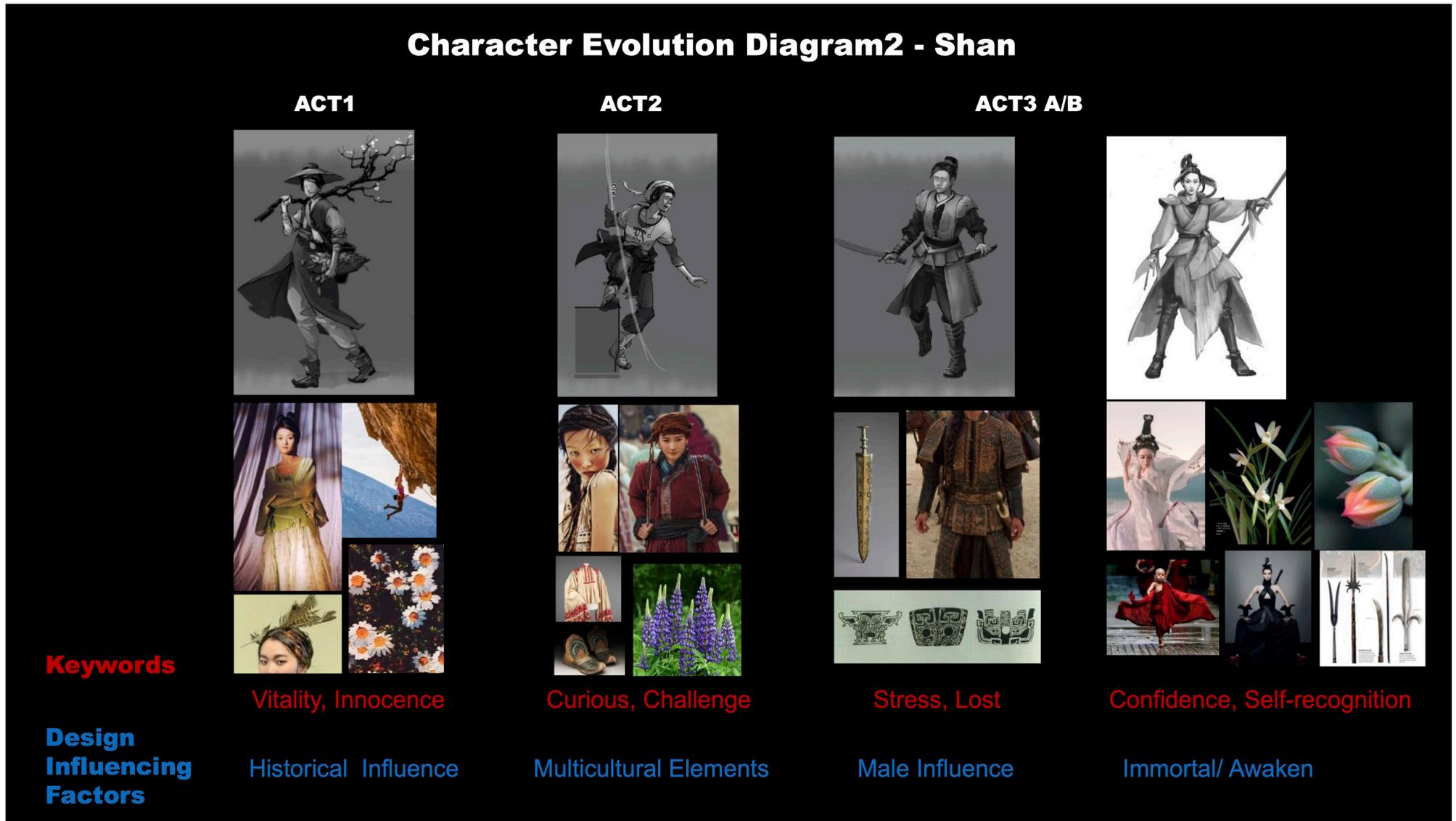


Figure 45. Character evolution diagram 2 of Shan. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

There are four human periods in this project:



Figure 46. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Peasant Costume

Orphan Girl

First look, Shan is an orphan girl who likes to study herbs, raised by her teacher - a demon huntress with her cousin in a remote mountain. She is innocent because of the undisturbed life. On the other side, this kind of strange innocence and independence implies that she has less human emotion compared with the normal - she is uncommon.



Figure 47. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Sailing Costume

Sailor/Medical
Apprentice

Moving into the next stage, is a traveler and a medical apprentice on a Chinese junk, this time Shan's clothing style will be impacted by diverse things as they travel through different places and the team members have complicated backgrounds. Shan attempts to absorb kinds of new things. Like Arya, Shan longs for the adventure life of men, like her cousin. Casual and oversize clothes wrap the body, which is multi-functional, provides protection, and also hides her some feminine characteristics. She actively participates in the sailor team and quickly adapts to the new environment. You can feel the girl is full of vitality.



Figure 48. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Sailing Costume Warrior

Stage three, a protagonist should meet a frustration so he or she looks like a clumsy soldier. She idolizes the captain, the closest father-like figure to her. Her obligation becomes heavier and she wants to become powerful to help others, but the urgent mind may lead her to ignore her self-recognition and to get lost. These changes will be reflected in the clothing, a very masculine outfit.



Figure 49. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Sailing Costume Warrior/Fairy

Eventually, Shan has a feminine appearance (a flower-type skirt, slenderer boots, narrower sleeves) that reveals her real identity and the lost memory and magic have been recollected. I create a figure of a fairy-like warrior for her in the final fight, which shows some similar points with the Flower Goddess and hint they are the same person.

2.2 The Prince's Evolution

The character evolution is a cycle and all of these changes would be affected by interior and exterior influence. It means as the story develops, Shan's mental activities and other characters sway her dressing and prop. In turn, the appearance of Shan shows the developing plots, that is my design aim - using character design to help tell the story and to design.

Compared with Shan, the Prince also has a character evolution, situation is different, they look like the control group, which reflect inversely mental activities. Shan would have more duty but the prince would free and release his depressing emotion, therefore, we can see Shan's outfits would become tighter, slenderer in silhouette, and darker in colour, these of the Prince would change from heavy to light.



Royal Costume

Depressed Prince

A half-blood prince who was taken away from the throne, I want to show his plight, depression, and weakness, through a series of costumes and decorations: a high and heavy crown, multi-layered decoration, tightly bound body, and a large cloak covering the whole body with dark color.

Figure 50. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



Daily Costume

Prisoner

The imprisoned prince may have shackles on his feet, with a subtle bird pattern on the back of his robe, and the cut or knotted sleeves mean the lost freedom. He was casually dressed in loose pajamas, with loose hair, looking very frustrated. The suicide poison is placed in the necklace around his neck. On the one hand, it shows his pride (preferring suicide rather than being killed by the queen). On the other hand, he has not yet committed suicide, meaning his tenacity and hope in mind.

Figure 51. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



Armor

Armed Avenger

The final battle between the Prince and the Queen, I think, for this country, is more like some historical rebellion to seize power by force. So I want his image to be an armed fighter. Compared with Shan (fairy + warrior), the armor of the Prince (a human without magic) is man-made, and luxury, looks more formal, masculine, and functional, but it will not be too heavy as before (he is no longer depressed). White color in Chinese culture shows death and sacrifice, because of the determination of killing the current evil Queen and the homage for his mother-the former Queen.

Figure 52. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

3. Connections in Character Design

3.1 Connections within Shan



Figure 53. Connections between various stages of Shan. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

During the design process, there is also a hard time. After first thumbnails in my intern time in Weta Workshop, I got some basic ideas of Shan with different looks. Nonetheless, I noticed that there is no connection between each other. Shan is an individual, she is affected by exterior elements but she is still one person with a stable personality. As a result, even though I have affluent reasons to specify why she changed a lot, I also have to prove her inner reality. I remembered someone suggested that maybe there is an item Shan still keeps in the journey to show her identity, then I realised that it is essential to find a way to link the four stages. (Maybe the easiest idea is that Shan's missing father left a small decoration for her, like a necklet as a keepsake, but too boring and common).

To save time, I decided to start other characters and looking for the symbols of Shan simultaneously, hoping other roles would bring me a little inspiration.

It proved to be a wise approach later, studying less important roles is effective access to help me to understand Shan clearly. Thinking of them as the significant exterior influence of Shan. For example, the cousin and the captain are not very important roles, but their character design work is necessary because they affect my female protagonist in the third stage – Shan is eager to be mighty, so she definitely will imitate some powerful models around her - her masculine clothing mainly comes from her close male companions, who help and protect Shan a lot and respected by her.

On the other hand, after some sketches of the Flower Goddess(the last life of Shan) were done, I was glad to capture some vague idea of the connection between Shan and the Flower Goddess- they may both have a flower-shaped item (transformable, an ornament, a scarf or a part of clothing). over shoulders, which suggests the real identity of Shan - the human reincarnation of the Flower.

3.2 Connections within the Prince

As for the Prince, I would like to give him some kind of connection by using the pattern on the back. If you observe the first look, there are lots of bird embroidery patterns on the back of the cloak, and the vertical golden lines make the Prince's figure look like a birdcage. Then when he is imprisoned, the eye motifs on the pajamas tell us he is monitoring. In the last stage, he gets back the cloak but using lighter material with a combination pattern of wing and peony, hints his mixed identity(the reincarnation of peony fairy).



Figure 54. Connections between various stages of The Prince. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

3.3 Connections between Shan and Other male characters

Some other less important roles, such as the Cousin and the Captain, due to the limited time, their design work stays at the sketching stage, without too much detail. These are displayed as supplementary for the main role design description, as they can give me clear direction for the design of Shan, they affect in stage 2 and 3.



Figure 55. Designs of the Cousin. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



Figure 56. Designs of the Captain. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

4. Fantasy Factors in Design

The other difficult task is the Witch Queen, who is a Queen of oriental style the villain in the Western story setting. Her country – the Witch Kingdom is also a fantasy place, not really existing in life. The question of how to create a fictitious character who has a reasonable culture background gives me a challenge.

I began with the exploration of some existing early civilizations with similarities

on the earth. They may believe in certain creatures and natural things that appear around them. Then considering the island setting of the kingdom in the original novel, I allocate some symbols to the queen's family. They might worship birds, fire, and sun. This method broadened my design ideas and I got the preliminary content of visual language for the Queen.

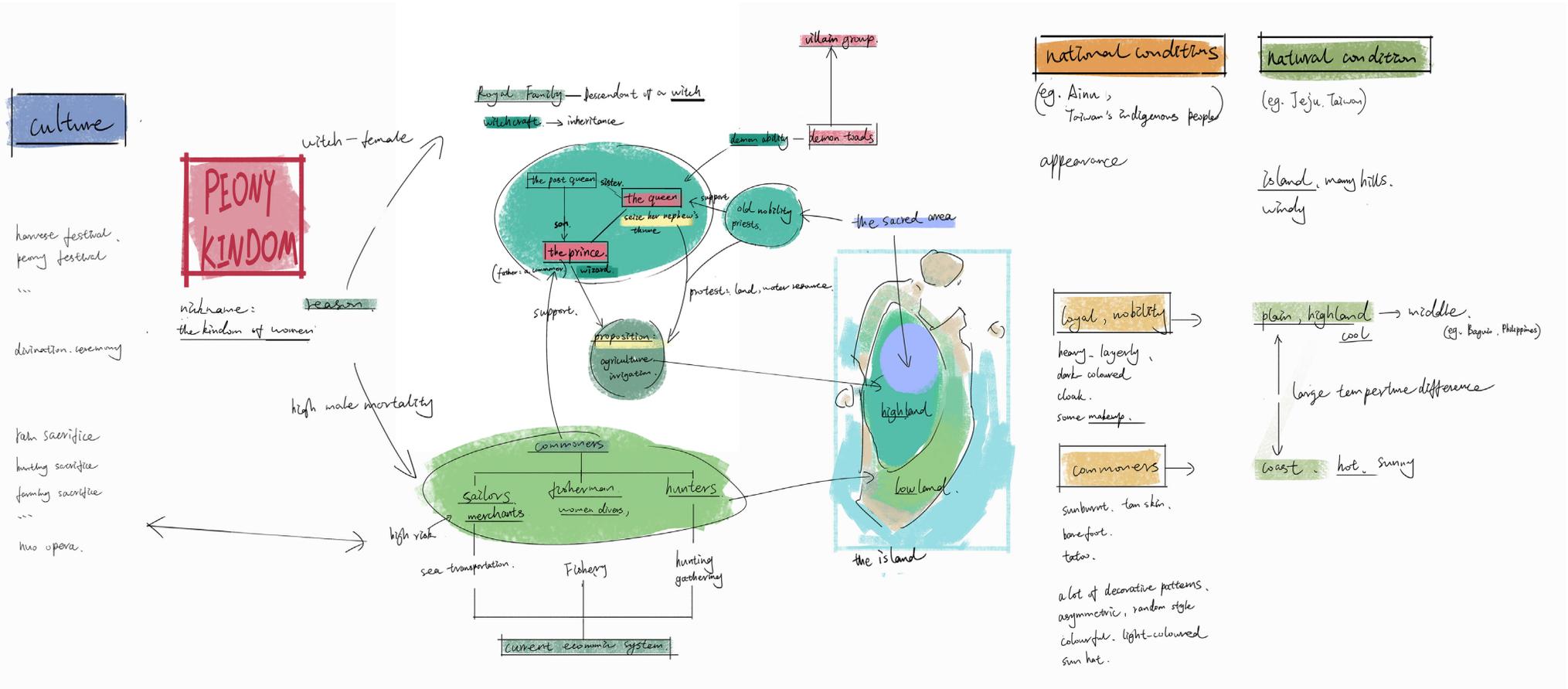


Figure 57. Environment setting of the Witch Kingdom. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Culture, Signs and Symbols

The Culture in the Witch Kingdom

The imperators in the kingdom are always witches and the royal family believe their ancestor was a great witch who mounted a magic bird and landed here then she established the country. Witches can master fire and they worship the sun, especially the eclipses.



Figure 58. The introduction and culture of the Witch Kingdom.

Shape/Silhouette

ART DECO

JAPANESE ART

CIRCLE

STRAIGHT LINE

ARTIFICIAL CURVE

TRIANGLE

RADICAL PATTERN

MULTILATER

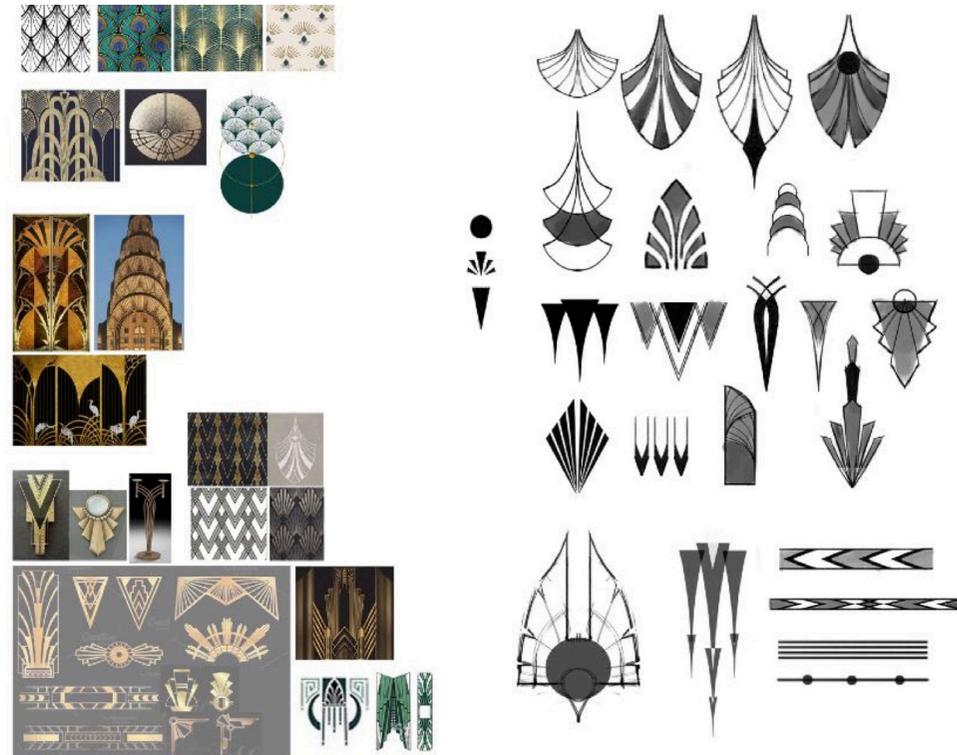


Figure 59. The Witch Queen's visual language. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



Figure 60. The Queen's early sketches.



Figure 61. Colour schemes of the Queen. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

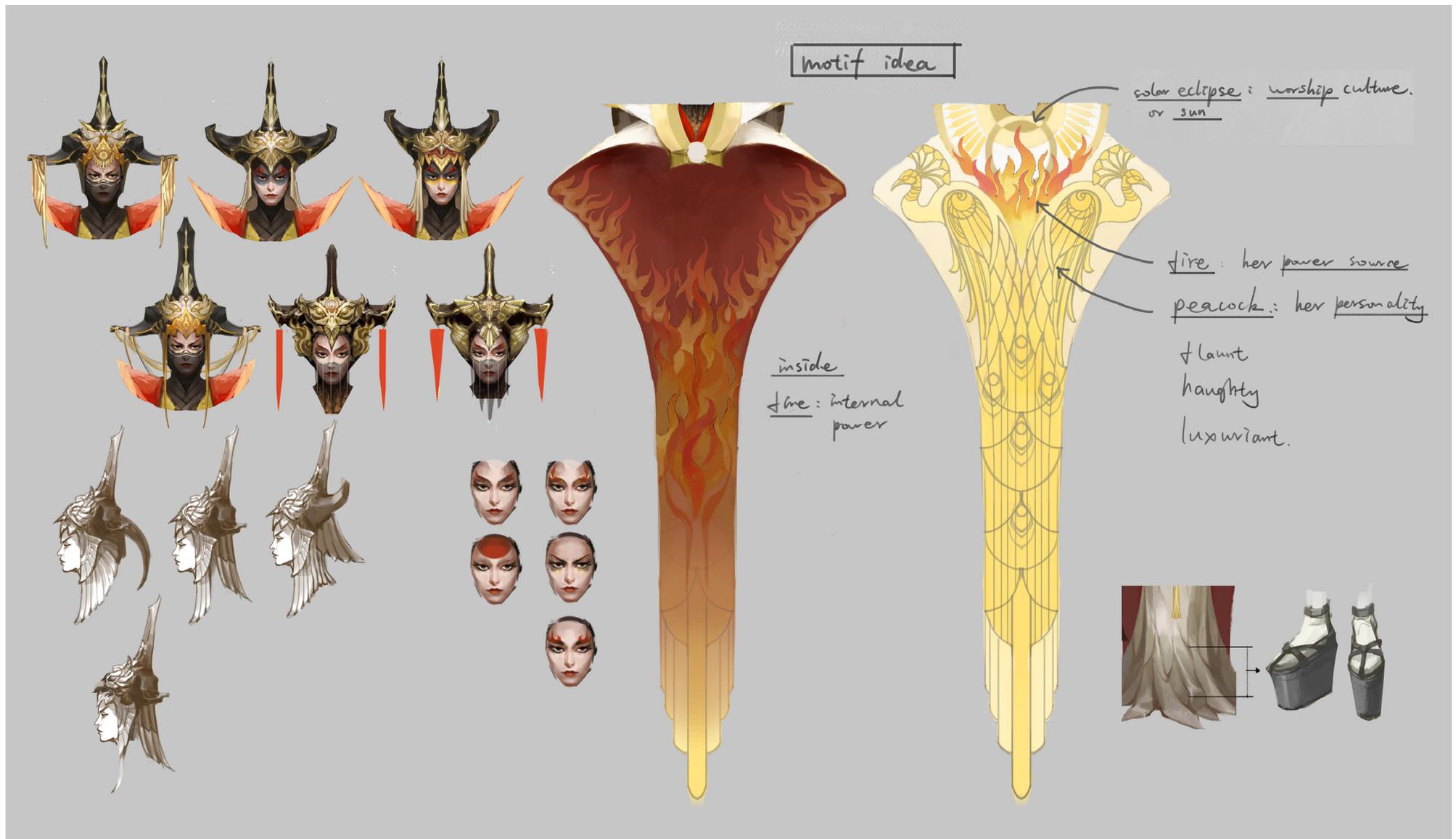


Figure 62. Attachments of the Queen. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



5. Prop Design

Shan and the Prince are equipped with some weapons, a spear and a sword.



Figure 64. Designs of the spear of Shan. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

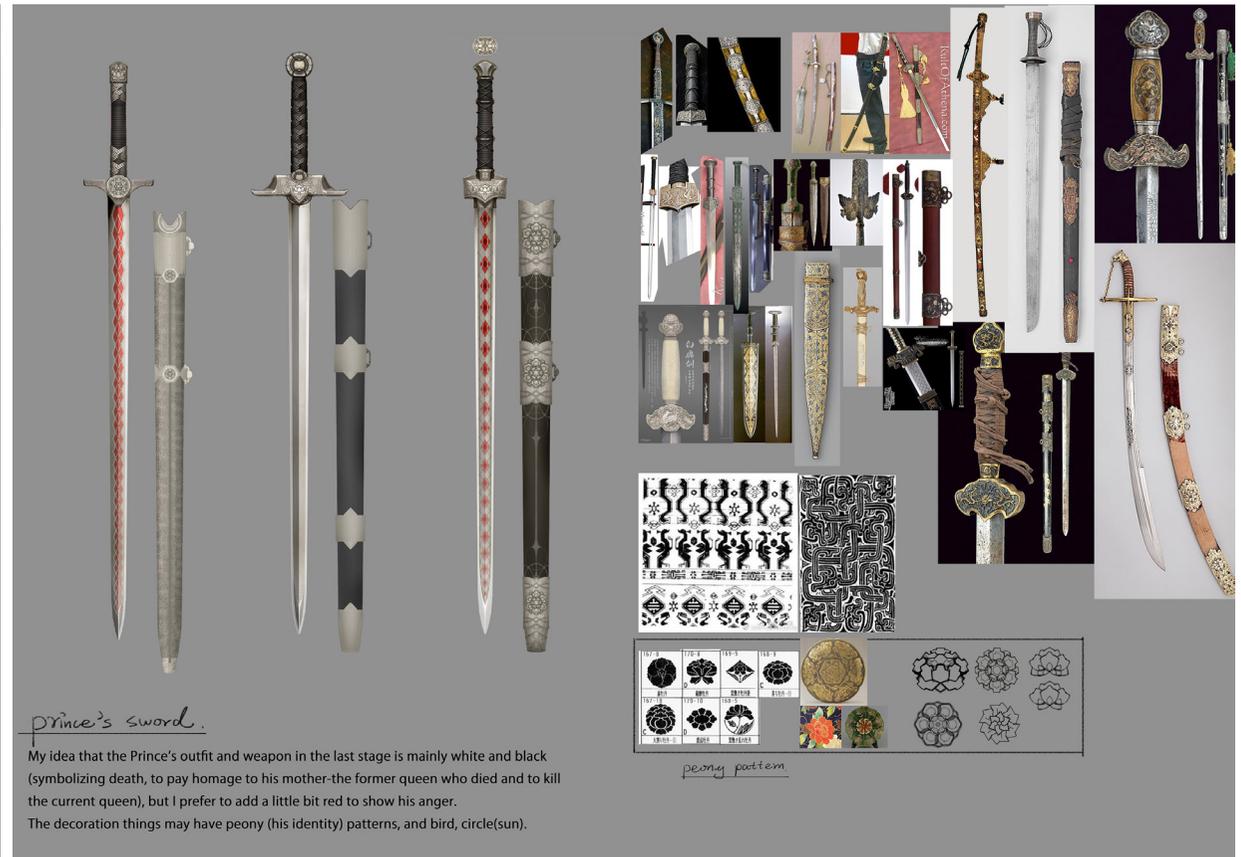
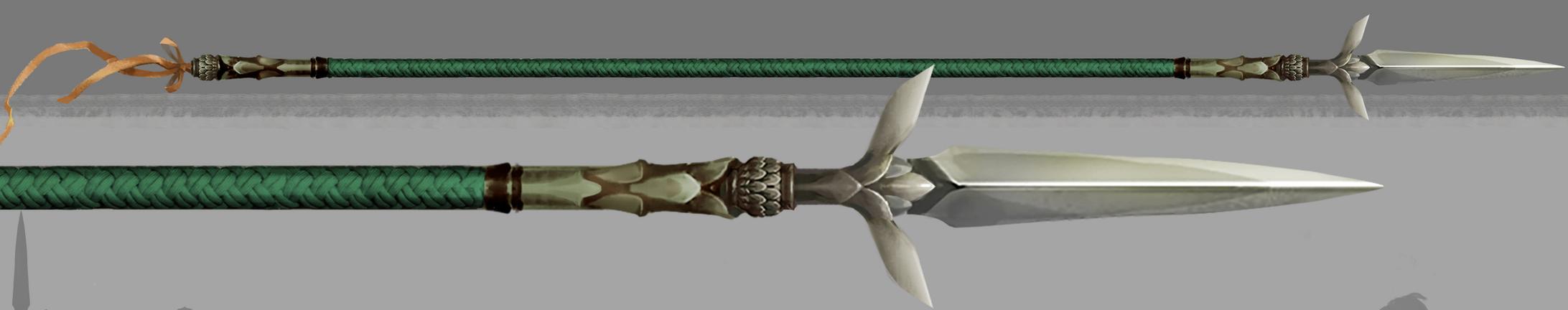


Figure 65. Ideas of the sword of the Prince. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

Figure 63 (opposite). Final result of the Queen. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.



PROP DESIGN

Shan's Spear

The blade is shaped like petals or leaves, and the spear has flower patterns (like lotus, orchid...).

The main color is green, coming from the user - Shan.

The Prince's Sword

the Prince's outfit and weapon in the last stage are mainly white and black, symbolizing death and sacrifice, but a little bit red shows his anger.

More decoration things have peony (his identity symbol) patterns, and bird, circle(sun).



Design Findings

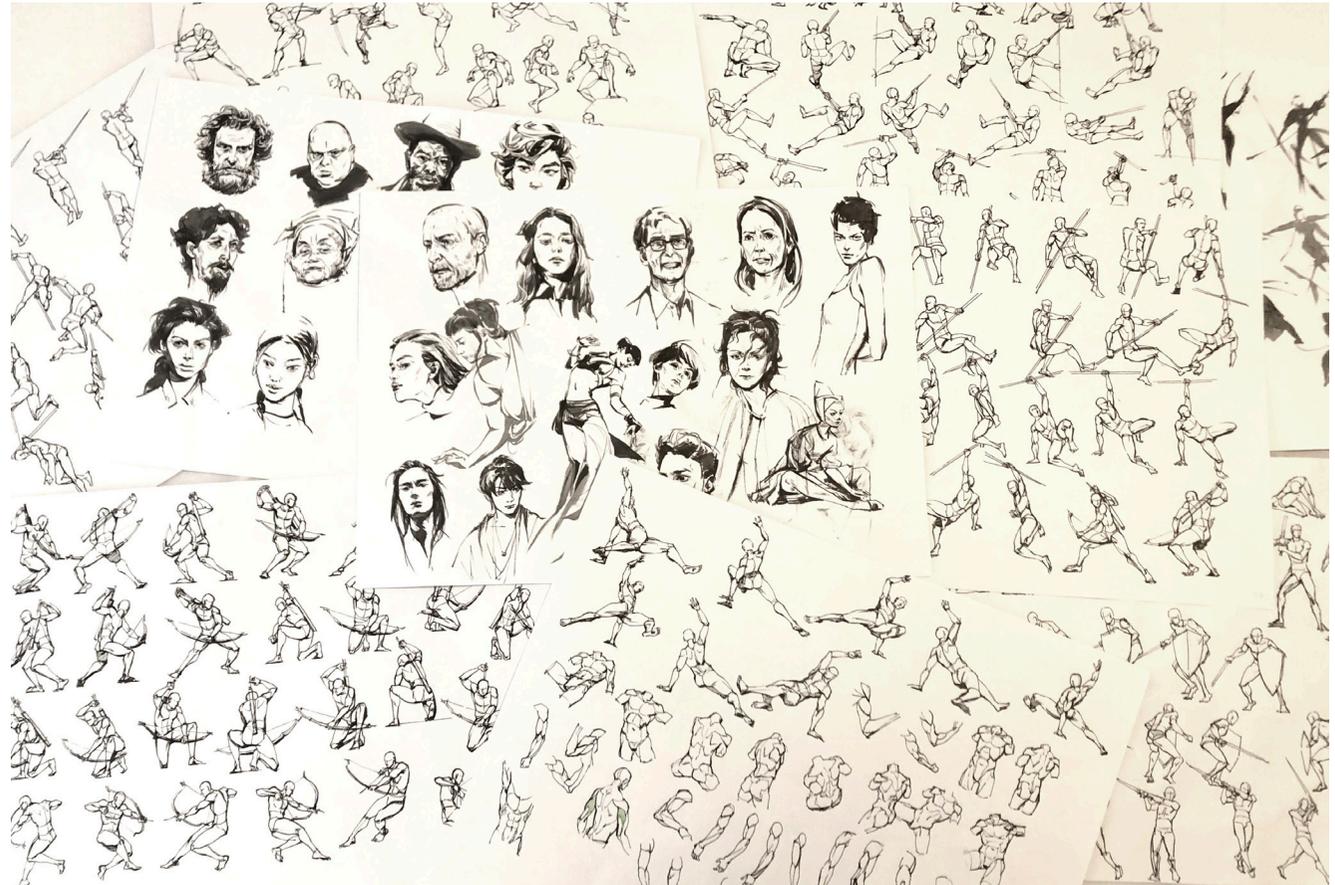


Figure 67. Daily sketch practice. Drawn by Xiaochen Wang.

Through this year of study, I realize the necessity of doing a lot of research before starting to design. Reasonable design and in-depth research can make concept design works more convincing. In past work experience before this master project, I didn't have enough time or consciousness to do enough research and case study, which caused my design works to be weak. In addition, I have a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of the design. In the past, I had no objective, practical and correct ideas about the pros and cons of a concept design. I was confused with the aesthetics of art and design and often focused on the drawing skills of the artists.

Another critical matter is daily learning and fundamentals. In some previous work, I overused images to help my design, which limited the flexibility of early brainstorming, so I was determined to draw as much as possible. For lack of continuous practice before this master project, I felt my hand drawing is rusty. Then I made sketching practice part of my routine, like doing thumbnails of heads and postures for 1 hour every day. The great improvement in my design can be seen quickly, which laid a good foundation for later work.

Figure 66 (opposite). Final result of weapon design. Designed by Xiaochen Wang.

It is worth mentioning that I think the design study in the internship in Weta Workshop has helped my entire project. Two weeks of study basically laid the planning and design rhythm for my subsequent design work. During my early years of drawing and learning, I was influenced by animations and comics, when drawing sketches, the proportions of my characters would be exaggerated, which does not suit character design in a live-action film. This problem can be clearly seen in the sketches during the internship. One of the advantages of the Weta Workshop is the rich experience in concept design. After each Arohaehae, I got very targeted and practical suggestions. For example, regarding the relationship between the perspective of a movie lens and the design point of character, the main design details are concentrated on the upper body, especially above the chest, because of the scope of shooting - the medium shot or medium close-up in movies. This suggestion prompted me to think about Shan's design point placement.

I am not a game person, but I read art collections of video games sometimes. Just after Shan's work was almost done in September, I found a good game, named *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, which has similar elements to my project, like the setting of feminine character, adventure plots, and world setting. I was glad to see some of my design processes fit this successful art team, for example, they said the look of the main role will change when she travels, depending on the external environment and culture, and the artist studied how characteristics, mental activities, exterior conflicts impact her appearance. These descriptions give me huge encouragement that I did not go the wrong way with concept design.



Figure 68. The art work of *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

Conclusion

I selected the complete design drawings of the three characters (Shan, the Prince, and the Queen) to show my design result in my final examination. Shan will be used as an example to illustrate the design method of character evolution with four stages, and the Prince is Shan's control group, containing three stages. Each character contains early thumbnails, colour schemes, final design examples, and bigger character posters on walls or my workbook. The design process of the Queen illustrates the application of some visual language in character design, such as the design ideas of signs and symbols.

From the four stages of character design, Shan experiences growth, from childish, clumsiness to maturity, and self-confidence. The combination of positive and negative things in her journey resonates with the audience and makes them believe that she is capable of being an empowered female role-model eventually. Sometimes I am also inspired by her evolution. Being a concept artist is somewhat like being an explorer (Ijzermans, 2017), Shan and I are all beginning explorers in different worlds.

This year's study time quickly passes by, and I feel it is too short. I also have

some small regrets about my works, and there are many areas I want to try. For example, for the subject of the project, I chose a relatively safe option. Ancient Chinese stories belong to my comfort zone, and I did not dare to try other areas, such as science fiction. Then the design scope was not determined and planned as soon as possible in the early stage, resulting in there being no time for some roles and biological design. Nonetheless, fortunately, two supervisors help me re-plan the work timeline and workload. The quantity of character designs is enough to explain my design ideas and process. In the research process, through the guidance of two supervisors and a large number of case studies, I felt that I had explored some basic methods of concept design, and I was partially satisfied with my design results and found a little confidence. I hope that after graduation, I can still be a concept designer and use the experience gained from this project to continue to improve my abilities. This year of study is a very good foundation for my future career development. In my view, by mastering the correct and appropriate design methods and learning methods, I have the possibility to find a breakthrough in work, even exposure to more unfamiliar subjects in the future. At last, as a concept explorer, just remind myself, keep curious, keep learning.

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Figure List

Figure 1. *Flowers in the Mirror (English version)*. Picture from Amazon

Figure 2-3. Sansa and Arya in *Game of Thrones*. Pictures from Business Insider.

Figure 4. Poster of *The Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017), Directed by Kaige Chen. Picture from Douban.

Figure 5. Poster of *The Assassin* (2015). Directed by Hsiao-Hsien Hou. Picture from Douban.

Figure 6. Poster of *The Wandering Earth* (2019). Directed by Frant Gwo. Picture from IMDb.

Figure 7. Classic storytelling model. Picture from Visme.

Figure 8. The Hero's Journey. Picture from Shift.

Figure 9. Historical background and images of Wu Zetian in different art works. Picture from internet.
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