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# *Shanghaiing*

An Exploration of how Game Characters Design can present the  
heritage story for contemporary audiences

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master in Design at Massey  
University, Wellington, New Zealand

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2024

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**Keywords:** *Shanhaijing*, Chinese Heritage, Fantastic Creatures, Game Narrative, Illustration, Game Character Design

## **Abstract**

The *Shanhaijing*, an ancient book of wonders from the pre-Qin era (before 221 B.C.), features a rich collection of monsters, ghosts, and gods constituting an entire world. This project aims to explore the fantastic creatures depicted in the *Shanhaijing* and present them to audiences through a video game character design. By examining their appearance, habitat, and role in other traditional Chinese mythologies, this project seeks to introduce these creatures to a contemporary audience by depicting them in a contemporary mystery RPG game platform. Through this research, I aim to demonstrate how illustration for contemporary game characters can engage a contemporary Chinese audience with their ancient cultural heritage.

## **Section I: Introduction**

Cultural heritage signifies pride in belonging to a nation that has been formed through tradition, and there are times when we need to look to the past to inform future innovation. In *Cultural Heritage and the Future*, Holtorf argues for the importance of intangible cultural heritage for the development and future of Chinese society (2021). Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is the cultures that lead people to understand one nation's core, and they must not be rigid or unchanging. Rather, they evolve and adapt to become more suitable for the modern period. Therefore, before creating a new future, we must remember those sources that belong to us.

Traditional Chinese stories, myths, and legends always refer to real-life locations, as including the names of places in a story provides them with a sense of recognisability and intimacy. In ancient times, the sole mediums for the dissemination of stories were oral language and books. During the Qing Dynasty, however, only 30% of people could read books, newspapers or letters (Rawski, 1979). Most stories were conveyed through storytellers and the gossip of the people themselves (Gu, 2019). Also, due to a lack of scientific understanding, many natural phenomena at that time were inexplicable, such as thunder and phosphorus fire. People would therefore transform these strange occurrences into stories,

providing answers with their imagination (Wu, 2008). A historical text which includes such stories is the influential, ancient book *Shanhaijing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas). The monsters and fantastic creatures in this book of the pre-Qin era are depicted as though they live in the real world, as the mountains and rivers they inhabit are considered geographically accurate. This discovery technically made *Shanhaijing* one of the oldest geography books in Chinese history (Global Times, 2022). Moreover, because *Shanhaijing* was written so long ago, it is impossible to identify its author. The unearthed version was edited by Liu Xiang and Liu Xin, two literary figures of the Han Dynasty (424-230 B.C.E.), and thus passed down from the past to now.

The purpose of this project is to allow the audience to experience the richness of Chinese cultural heritage through game character design. In contrast to static education, my goal is for players to develop an impression of Chinese heritage organically through a gaming experience. This project aims to use game character design to engage the Chinese audiences with their cultural heritage.

I intend to use a popular, contemporary mode of delivery – a mystery role playing game (RPG) – to attract audiences to delve deeper into the origins and information about these fantastic creatures, invite them to experience the richness of Chinese culture through my designs of a selection of mythical figures as game characters. As *Shanhaijing* does not contain a story about these fantastic creatures, *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* (Han, 1980) is a very good example that used the Phoenix as the blueprint for a mythical story celebrating the Yellow Emperor's virtue and power. The story talks about Phoenix as a symbol of benevolence and virtue. When the Yellow Emperor was crowned king, a phoenix appeared in his palace and remained there, serving as proof that he was a wise ruler who possessed the qualities of benevolence and virtue. It demonstrates how people can use their imagination to expand a symbol to a story. In the mystery genre video games, symbolic elements are often used as clues to prompt players to make inferences, or as convenient tools to advance the plot. In comparison, contemporary storytelling methods are to give the audience a feeling inside the characters that they read, especially in the role-playing video game. The visual language and the environment are all used for narrative, allowing players to put their role into the protagonist's point of view, letting them experience the world by themselves (Thomas & Brown, 2007). In China, the table murder mystery game called "*Jubensha*" is very popular

among young people's groups now. In 2021, this type of game has 9.41 million players (Mao, 2021).

I identify the target audience as young Chinese people from the ages of 18 to 34, because they are the generation who have grown up entirely in the digital era. That means, most of them are familiar with video games, and play them. By the end of June 2013, the number of video game players in China had grown to 345 million, an increase of 9.64 million compared to the end of 2012 (CNNIC, 2013).

To better integrate cultural heritage into the design of the video game's art style, Chinese ink painting elements will be fused with the technology of modern digital painting to create a refreshing style of old and new. As the story develops, players will experience the visual impact of artistic style changes within the game.

## **Section II: Review of relevant literature and precedents**

### **2.1 *Guanshanhai*- A New Version of the *Shanhaijing***

*Shanhaijing* is rich in content and symbolism. It represents a culmination of the wisdom and imagination of the people of the pre-Qin era. Even today, scholars engage in vibrant discussions about its contents. Classical literature, as a fundamental part of the country's traditional culture, plays a crucial role in cultural dissemination. Discovering new methods of promoting and sharing this content is important for helping the public become more familiar with these works. Yuan explains that adaptation can enhance the popularity of literary masterpieces among the general public (2010). For instance, the original text of the *Shanhaijing* may be challenging to understand, and its illustrations may not align with contemporary aesthetics. Therefore, individuals may choose to modify and reprint it to enhance its appeal and accessibility, and as *Shanhaijing* has a lot of versions and reprints which allows for the observation in evolving illustration aesthetics over time. Through the *Shanhaijing* reproductions, we can observe variations in illustration styles. When discussing the creatures from *Shanhaijing*, we can find old editions from the Ming and Qing dynasties that visually supplement the text, but a notable contemporary example is the reprint of *Shanhaijing* called *Guanshanhai* (Ze & Liang, 2017). It contains many beautiful illustrations combining ancient Chinese painting phenomenon and modern art styles. This book focuses

on the creatures of *Shanhaijing*, offering accessible commentary text and beautiful illustrations that combine ink pen drawing, traditional Chinese techniques, and watercolour painting. The updated illustrations bring to life the fantastical world these creatures inhabit, modernising the visuals from older versions for today's audience. However, for people to understand the cultural significance of a text, there needs to be a focal point to evoke their emotional empathy. *Guanshanhai*, as a reprinting of *Shanhaijing*, presents the original text as a simple encyclopaedic introduction. While this allows people to appreciate the beauty of the illustrations, it may not necessarily ignite a desire to learn more about these creatures. Therefore, there is an opportunity to make *Shanhaijing* and its encyclopaedic heritage accessible to a broader and more diverse group of people.

## **2.2 Challenges and Opportunities for Traditional Chinese Heritage**

Cultural heritage can also refer to the spiritual production of human beings and the crystallisation of its results, including knowledge, beliefs, art, religion, philosophy, law, morality and so on (Liu, 2018). In current media, digital entertainment has started developing. For example, animation moves from hand-drawn to digital, video games through 2D to 3D. Traditional literature is not less popular than it used to be but has more ways and directions to present them.

The one thing is people now are seeking more engaging forms of entertainment. For example, Baldur's Gate 3 is a role-playing video game based on the tabletop RPG Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). But as a video game, Baldur's Gate 3's interactions go through with the gameplay mechanics.

“Generally speaking, an RPG is any game in which players perform as characters in a narrative... Every choice the player of a digital RPG can make arises in response to the ruleset of the game as programmed by the developers.” (Rollinger & Roger, 2020).

When players progress through the story in single-player mode, all non-player characters (NPCs) will have some interaction with the player. The choices made during these conversations will influence upcoming events, the NPC's favourability toward the player, or even the game's ending. Additionally, since this is a video game, it offers players a heightened sense of immersion through the visual environments displayed on the screen. In

traditional D&D, the interactive experience relies on multiple people playing together at a table, and the level of immersion depends largely on the storytelling ability of the Game Master. In contrast, a video game can provide a fully realised world with visuals, music, and interactive elements that draw the player in, allowing for a more direct connection to the story. (Qin, et al., 2010) Also, a single-player video game doesn't require multiple players, allowing people to play whenever they want. This means the player doesn't need to coordinate schedules with others, making it more convenient for solo players who have different schedules or the people who do not prefer real-life social interactions.

It is imperative, then, that designers assess opportunities generated by technological developments and harness new mediums to share traditional stories.

### **2.3 Video Games: a new way to experience classic stories**

Chinese young people live with increasing study tasks, workplace pressures and require the time for mental relaxation that digital entertainment often provides. The data about duration of exposure to various types of media for adult Chinese nationals in 2021 and 2022 shows that mobile phones and the Internet exhibit the longest contact times, with a significant increase in phone usage observed in 2022 (NPPA, 2023).

Animation, games, short videos, and other visual entertainment that can provide greater immersion are prevalent among young people and have led to a decline in reading (Thompson & McInay, 2019), but start to get information and learning new knowledge through other devices.

Howard's statistical charts data in 2023 demonstrate a survey of the global population of video game users between 2015 and 2022 and a forecast of the number that will arrive in 2024. From these two charts, it is evident that the number of gamers is consistently growing each year. This represents that video games have become a formidable commercial and cultural industry.

Video games are now a very effective tool for cultural communication (Cerezo-Pizarro, et al., 2023). The immersive experience that video games can achieve allows the general public to embrace a new world comfortably and, traditional cultural elements are no exception. For

example, *Never Alone* is a game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, the Alaska Native people, based on their traditional stories passed down through generations. The game has been downloaded 4 million times on Steam and introduces players worldwide to the lives of native people in the Arctic, showcasing their survival strategies in the harsh, frozen environment (Gershenfeld & Angst, 2021). Through this game, players not only experience the narrative of the story, but also can feel a different cultural phenomenon from another region.

Another factor is the development of technology which has matured the effectiveness of storytelling in the game industry. Contemporary games now incorporate visualizable stories, music soundtracks, and special effects that appeal to the senses. As gamers progress through the game, these elements are used to evoke emotions and allow them to resonate with scenes or events in the game (Hodent, 2018). Storytelling plays a vital role in player immersion. Since *Shanhaijing* is more like an encyclopaedia and lacking in a traditional narrative, a key focus of this project is developing a story around the characters and creatures, offering players a meaningful way to engage with this cultural heritage.

The mode of gameplay and player mechanics are important. As my game concept needs to present the involvement of these fantastic creatures from traditional folklore, the narrative is essential. An ideal concept to design this game should be as an RPG, a Role-Playing Game.

As discussed in section 2.2, an RPG is the game in which players will perform a character in the narrative. So, what makes a good RPG? Throughout the history of the game industry, there are particularly successful examples of pop culture icons including *Pokémon* (1997–present), *the legend of Zelda* (1986-present), or the *Final Fantasy* series (1987-present). These games all have memorable characters associated with them, like Pikachu in *Pokémon*, Link in *Zelda*, or Sephiroth in *Final Fantasy VII*. RPGs stand apart from other genres like First-Person Shooting Games (FPS) or Racing Games as they don't rely on manufacturing competition to provide a quick sensory rush. Instead, they use character and narrative progression to immerse players and to form a lasting impression.

The rationale for reimagining *Shanhaijing* as an RPG game is that RPGs place greater attention on characters and stories rather than valuing a player's ability in the game. The great part that an RPG game with a collecting mechanic provides is that players not only create characters themselves but collect characters within the game to build a team (Bycer, 2024).

The players also will meet a lot of non-player characters and have interactions with them. These interactions may occur between main characters central to the narrative or with characters outside of the narrative, allowing players further opportunities for cultural learning and emotional empathy. This relationship between player and non-player characters, based on the emotional fluctuations brought about by characterization and interaction, will give the player in the game the satisfaction that comes from the process of playing (Erbet al., 2021). And create a cast of memorable characters to endear the audience to the classical roots of the story.

## **2.4 Mystery Genre Games.**

The mystery genre traverses multiple media forms, including novels, movies, comics and games, but has an identifiable essential key feature. The mystery genre has one thing in common: it piques the audience's curiosity and desire to explore, leaving them wanting to know what happens next in the story or with the characters that appear in it. Video games excel as a medium for this subject matter, enabling players to deduce their own conclusions through exploration and investigation. While there may be only one pathway, individuals perceive things differently, offering unique perspectives on fantastical creatures and cases. By involving players in the investigation of various cases involving these creatures, games allow them to uncover the creatures' habits and legends independently.

As mentioned in the introduction, a tabletop mystery genre role-playing game called *Jubensha* has become very popular in China. In 2021, due to COVID-19, people had to stay at home, making offline tabletop games less feasible. This situation led to the rise of online *Jubensha* play. Several apps have become platforms for playing *Jubensha*, and one app called *Bai Bian Da Zhen Tan* has a substantial database. According to data from 2022, 47.3% of *Jubensha* players use this app (CY402, 2023). When playing *Jubensha*, players need to read the script, assume the roles they choose, and investigate clues provided at different locations in the script. Through group chat and role-playing, players ultimately identify the suspect they believe is the murderer and use voting to determine.

Additionally, given that many elements of the mystery genre can defy the laws of reality, stories involving these fantastic creatures often showcase bold innovations (like magic

powers they have, and the case based on those powers). This allows players to imagine more vivid depictions of the character and NPCs, ultimately, breathing new life into those old texts.

Another style of these games is text-based RPGs, such as *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, a mystery genre role-playing adventure game developed by Capcom (2001). The game utilises a visual novel style, where the protagonist, a lawyer, must investigate evidence to prove the innocence of their client and defend them in court.

In this style of text-based play, characters don't move around; instead, changes in location are represented by background picture updates. Players can interact with NPCs present in their current location. When a case occurs, players can also examine evidence and ask witnesses to gather testimonies.

The reason I chose this style is because a text-based game provides players with a narrative focus while allowing them ample imaginative space to think about the story, characters, and what actions to take next. Unlike real-time combat games, text adventures immerse players more deeply into the narrative's world, enhancing their engagement with the experience of playing the game (McDonald, n.d.).

Simultaneously, the fusion of mystery themes and narratives can lead to even more surprising experiences for players. Incorporating suspense and puzzles into the game enhances satisfaction, particularly as players gather clues through exploration and deductive reasoning to unveil the truth (Brice, 2016).

Given that the mystery genre is popular in China, I decided to develop my project's character design with the mystery genre video game in mind and delve deeper to explore how to present a contextual style, story, and characters.

## **Section III: Case Studies**

### **3.1 Classic Stories; New Audiences**

In the past, there have been many games that incorporated elements of myths, legends, or folktales. The game production teams have blended those elements with some new settings and stories, resulting in numerous excellent works. There have been some successful attempts

at revitalising characters from other ancient stories in innovative design forms. Monkey King is a character from the Ming Dynasty (around the 16th century) era, in author Wu Chengen's book *Journey to the West*. This story is popular in contemporary entertainment media and *Journey to the West* has been adapted into animation, live action film, live action television series and games.

The 1965 animated film titled *Havoc in Heaven* about the Monkey King, produced by the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio is one of the classic and most famous spin-offs of the story. *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024), a game leveraging sophisticated 3D technology, offers audiences a completely different experience. It is an action RPG game that is based on *Journey to the West*. This game project utilises Unreal Engine 5 to present a world crafted from the new story they make. All the enemies in the game are originally from *Journey to the West*, and the developers have created a Journal Portrait collection to showcase what they look like in traditional Chinese art style. This is a very interesting way to present them to the player. While the game itself is 3D and feels quite realistic, the addition of this collection system allows players to see how the characters would appear in a traditional context.

*Journey to the West* has been adapted many times beyond animations and games, including the TV series, movies, comics, etc. Depending on the changing period and social circumstances, the figure appeared very differently in the various works. A work like *Journey to the West*, which embodies classic Chinese culture, often holds significance beyond the narrative itself.

The *American Born Chinese* TV series produced by Disney, released on 24 May 2023, is a notable reference that demonstrates how adaptations can have simultaneous positive and negative effects depending on their cultural location and intended audience. It incorporates many elements from *Journey to the West*. However, these Chinese elements are not the primary focus of the production. Instead, the main perspective of the story comes from an American born Chinese high school teenager, Wang Jin. The Chinese American family and the dynamics of the Chinese community life become central themes in this drama with the series borrowing elements of Chinese fantasy. In this adaptation, the connection between the work and *Journey to the West* is minimal. This situation has resulted in people in mainland China not resonating with the series and viewing it negatively due to its inaccurate interpretation of the content of *Journey to the West*. On Douban, one of the largest online rating platforms in China, *American Born Chinese* has received a rating of only 5.9 out of 10

(Douban, 2023). This shows that when adapting classical works, audiences tend to focus more on the faithful depiction and performance of iconic characters. While adaptations are not inherently undesirable, they must respect the core traits and spirit of the original work.

### 3.2 Visual Styles Outside China

A game that uses both techniques of classic brush painting and modern digital art is *Paranormasight: The Seven Mysteries of Honjo* (2023). *Paranormasight* is a haunting supernatural mystery adventure game by the publisher Square Enix. It is based on Honjo's (the area name) urban tale in Edo period and devises a new story to tell the tragedy of mutual curses that revolve around the secret art of resurrection. *The Seven Mysteries of Honjo* uses the traditional brush line on the character's outline, but also digital painting colours on them. The production team shifts the timeframe of the story to the later Showa era to combine old and new.

“We decided that the late Showa period, when cultural development was progressing remarkably, and when people were thinking about the future and the unknown, was just the right time.” (Costa, 2023).

There are also outstanding works within contemporary gaming which connect ancient and modern cultures, throughout the world. In 2006, Capcom Japan released *Okami*, an action game based on Japanese myths and legends, folk tales, and nursery rhymes. The art style of *Okami* draws inspiration from traditional Japanese painting styles, particularly Ukiyo-e. Ukiyo-e is an art style based on traditional Chinese painting during the 18th and 19th century of Japan, the technique they used was the woodblock print and hand painting. Ukiyo-e generally displays vivid and varied hues of colours, obtained from pure colourants or mixtures of pigments (Biron et al., 2020). In the article 'The Floating World of Video Games,' (2018), a comparison is drawn between Toyohara's traditional Ukiyo-e art and a screenshot from *Okami*. The colouring style and the presentation of the cherry blossom tree in *Okami* bears resemblance to traditional Ukiyo-e. Additionally, the brush stroke technique used in *Okami* reflects another classical art style, Japanese Sumi-e. In the figures below, it's evident that *Okami* shares the same brush stroke style with traditional Sumi-e art, featuring thick, strong outlines and light, vague inner lines. This combination of traditional and 3D styles allows players to experience the gaming brought by new technology while effectively

interpreting the story of *Okami*, which is adapted from traditional Japanese myths. This enables viewers to better understand and immerse themselves in the atmosphere and art style of ancient Japan.

This unique artistic approach presents the video game in a new light, bringing the rich stories of Japanese mythology to audiences in a visually captivating way. According to sales statistics on CAPCOM's official website, *Okami* has surpassed 4 million sales globally as of December 31, 2023. This achievement demonstrates its success as a truly popular game (CAPCOM, 2024).

### **3.3 The importance of Character and Creature design in Digital Game Design**

The *Okami* is based on Japanese myth, and many of the gods and monsters that have appeared in these tales are also featured. In *Okami*'s character design, we can see that the main character, Amaterasu, has a mirror on her back called 'Yata no Kagami.' This mirror is one of the Three Sacred Treasures from Japanese mythology, symbolising 'wisdom' and 'honesty' and representing truth and reflection. In the original myth, this bronze mirror also has a deep connection with Amaterasu. According to Kojiki, one of the oldest Japanese books, Amaterasu is the god who represents the sun in Japanese mythology (Taniguchi, 2018).

One game that masterfully combines ancient and modern elements is Atlus' *Persona 5*. It features monsters and enemies from the myths and legends of various countries, such as Cuchulain and Skaha from Celtic mythology, the Biblical angels Michael and Gabriel, as well as the Japanese myths of Yamata No Orochi and Kushinada Hime. A meticulously designed worldview is essential to blend contemporary, mythological, and psychological worlds seamlessly. While previous works have often featured elements like the 'inner world' or 'Phantom Thief,' the fusion presents an entirely new design to the audience. The 'inner world' is the way that Atlus blended these classical elements into the modern setting. A world based on a fantasy setting of this kind is inherently open to abnormal, fantastic events.

*Persona 5*, based on Jungian psychology, references the masks of personalities held by individuals, which morph into superpowers. These "personality masks" often resemble famous figures from myth or history. *Persona 5* boasts a substantial global player base,

thanks partly to its innovative user interface, stylish artwork, and captivating soundtrack, and a successful character design.

For example, one of the protagonists Kitakawa Yusuke's powers is derived from a famous traditional Japanese Kabuki symbol, Goemon. An outlaw hero from popular folklore during the Edo Period (1603-1867) As Goemon is a traditional Japanese character, Kitakawa Yusuke's Phantom Thief uniform incorporates many Japanese elements, such as a fox mask and a shimenawa on his waist. Additionally, his power, which has a human form called Goemon, is designed with the appearance of Ukiyo-e art and features traditional patterns on its clothing. This design ensures that players immediately recognize the traditional Japanese elements in the character, from his outfit to his role in the plot. This is an example of successful character design, as it effectively conveys the intended cultural influences and themes to the players through the character's appearance. And this is also one of the aims from my project.

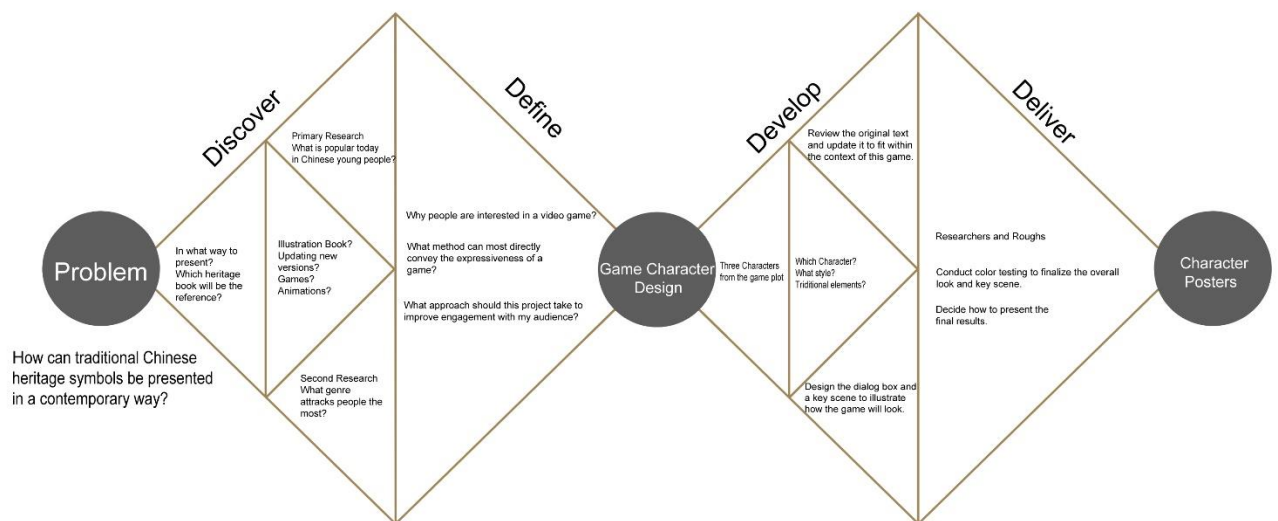
## **Section IV: Research Methods and Process**

*Shanhaijing*, the ancient book of wonders, encapsulates an entire world with numerous monsters, ghosts, and gods. Based on this book, I will explain the approach of my design works, which broadly describes the parts of my project that are in progress.

Through this project, I aim to use digital technology to visualise and re-design the fantastic creatures including digital painting software Clip Studio Paint and Photoshop, to create three characters from my story. One Protagonist, one creature in guide position, and one Level Boss.

According to Dan Nessler's revamped Double Diamond model (2016), my project starts with the research from my initial research question: how can traditional Chinese heritage symbols be presented in a contemporary way? These symbols could be expressed through various forms, such as illustrations, comics, animation, or even children's picture books. However, after conducting my research (see Section II), I realised that video games could be an effective medium for this purpose. Since the medium of video games is expansive, comprising numerous modes and styles, I needed to determine the style of project I wanted to create and how well that genre would align with the Chinese heritage I aimed to express. In

the case studies presented in Section III, I found several examples that helped me identify the style and genre I wanted to pursue in my design work. Ultimately, I decided to create a mystery genre role-playing game character design because characters are the first aspect that leaves an impression on players. They set the tone of the game, giving players a sense of what to expect from the experience. These steps form the first part of my methodology, transitioning from discovery to definition. I explored my initial question through research and then progressed to the next phase. Figure 1 illustrates my design method and process using Dan Nessler’s revamped double diamond diagram.



**Figure 1. Double Diamond for this project based on Dan Nessler’s (2016) Double Diamond revamped model**

The next step was to refine the more detailed aspects of the project. Since my goal is to convey traditional heritage to the audience through character design, I needed to gather references that would guide me in determining how to present these elements in my work. This process followed the second part of the Double Diamond model, helping to deliver my final designs.

## 4.1 Research based on original text

Most of the creatures that appear in *Shanhaijing* possess strange abilities. In our ancestors' depictions, they either resemble birds, insects, or fish but have some different features, or they have faces or limbs similar to those of humans. Although these creatures do not exist in reality, their appearances and habits are described in this book, sparking the reader's imagination.

For this project, I chose one human character to be my protagonist, and two creatures from *Shanhaijing* to create: Chenghuang from Chapter 2 - Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas - West; Qiong Qi from Chapter 7 - Classic of Regions Within the Seas - North. They will serve as a protagonist, and a level boss in my story.

Also, one object Celestial Mirror, which is originally called *Tianji* Mirror, is one of the magic items from *Shanhaijing*. It has the power that can reveal the past and future and can even travel through time. In the story, the Celestial Mirror was protected by the creature protagonist Chenghuang, and will become a key prop for the protagonists to uncover the truth.

## 4.2: Narrative development and adaptation

In *Shanhaijing*, everything is introduced like an encyclopaedia, but the creatures described are not real animals that exist in our world, making it difficult for people to understand how they would live in the world like others. Therefore, storytelling becomes the best medium for people to experience these fantastic creatures. As mentioned previously in section 2.4, narrative plays a crucial role in games, encompassing the player's interactions with non-player characters from the protagonist's perspective, interactions with the in-game environment, and the dynamics between characters as the player progresses through the events. These interactions have the potential to evoke emotions in players and immerse them in the game world as intended by the developers. Therefore, the mystery genre is a good way to spark the curiosity of the players, and a well-crafted script is a fundamental aspect of any RPG. Thus, I have created a brand-new script based on *Shanhaijing*, and here is its brief introduction.

The year of 2124, Shen Jun, the head of the Criminal Division at the Hangzhou Police Department, purchased a holographic game during their holiday intending to relax. However, he never expected to discover that he couldn't exit the game through the operating panel once inside. Through an email that appeared in their email inbox, it appears that the only way to escape the game is to uncover the murderer in each triggered scenario and solve the associated puzzles to discover the mastermind. The cries of babies appearing in the night and pedestrians disappearing one after another, victims who pass away in their sleep with a contented smile, expressionist artists killed one after another after their exhibitions... In this so-called holographic detective game, what should have been a virtual death becomes real. When they try to use the emergency route to contact the police office, they encounter a strange creature Moon Fog, who calls itself the Guardian of the Electronic Sea, guiding them toward the truth of these cases, and helping them uncover the person behind it all.

This game's name is called *Shanhaijing*, looks the same as the book *Shanhaijing* in English, but in Chinese it has a different meaning. 山海经(the book), the last character 经(Jing) means the experience, but 山海镜(the game), the last character 镜(Jing), is means mirror, and it relate to the key item Celestial Mirror in the game.

### **4.3 The paper texture and brush strokes**

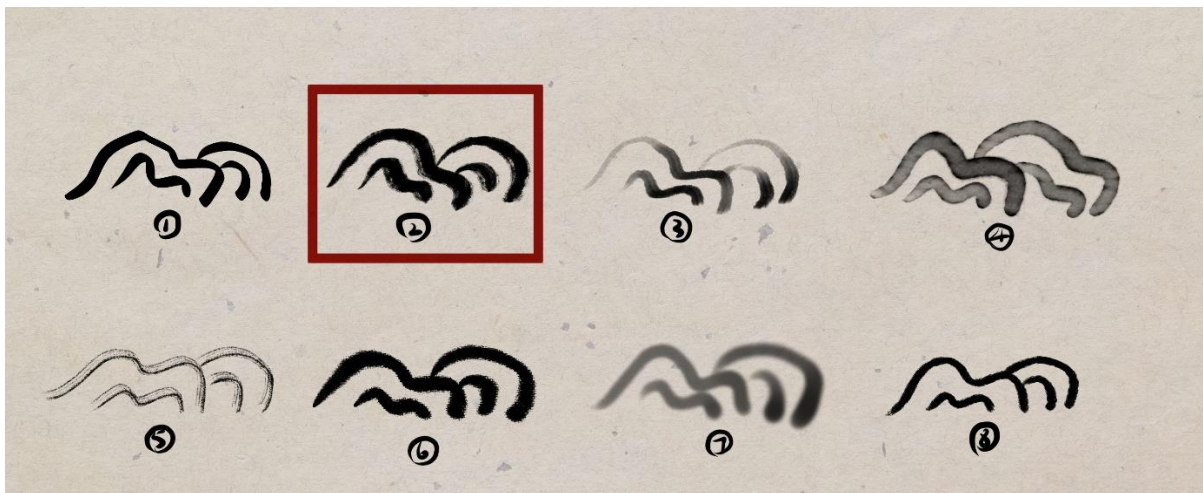
Integral to my character designs are paper texture and brush strokes. The material used in traditional Chinese painting is silk or rice paper (called Xuan Zhi), which is not white but yellowish in colour and has a distinct texture.

Most of the brushstrokes in traditional Chinese paintings tend to halo, a unique quality created by the interaction between silk and ink. In Guo Xi's *Ping Yuan Tu* (1078), the brushstrokes on the silk create beautifully balanced lines. Due to the inherent water resistance of silk, the halos from the ink are well-controlled, resulting in both thick and delicate strokes.

I will use this effect on my character's outline to give them the traditional tonality. The emergence of digital tablets and painting software has introduced a new trend in art. Although the craft differs from hand-drawing, it offers its own unique style. My goal is to combine these two approaches to painting, allowing people to feel the influence of classical Chinese painting in the images created with digital tools. An artist who was influenced by the

aesthetics of traditional Chinese ink painting and the vibrant colours of Western oil painting is Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010). In his work, you can see the combination of traditional Chinese brushstrokes and the vividness of oil painting. His approach inspired me to explore the combination of traditional ink strokes with modern digital painting techniques.

Based on traditional Chinese ink brush strokes and Wu Guanzhong’s work, in the image below, I tested eight of the strokes in Clip Studio, and chose the second for the character's outline. In contrast, the second one is the brush stroke most closely resembling the traditional Chinese ink painting.



*Figure 2. Digital Brush Stroke Test in Clip Studio*

The reason that I do not reference traditional Chinese figures art is because in traditional Chinese paintings, figures are often very small scale, the artists integrated into the composition, inviting the viewer to adopt their perspective, journeying through the mountains and rivers, immersed in the landscape (Christie, 2018). Additionally, compared with landscape drawing, traditional artworks that focus on figures do not have distinctive brushstrokes, as traditional figure drawing is more of a stylized art form. My goal is to combine traditional brushstrokes with modern digital art techniques, so I chose not to use the traditional figure-focused works as references.

#### 4.4 Colour Style Study

After completing the brush stroke study, I began the colour style study. Colours in classical Chinese painting are quite distinctive. For example, the classic masterpiece *Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (Wang, 1113). The Song Dynasty had a deep appreciation for the colour cyan, which is reflected in their paintings (Cheng, 2021). They used cyan pigments made from minerals to create landscapes, as seen in *the Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* painting. The vivid blue blends seamlessly with green gradients on the silk canvas. The artists of the Song Dynasty were particularly skilled at using green tones, which is why landscape paintings from that era are often referred to as blue-green shan shui (Zhao, 2017). In my project, this ancient gradient colouring technique is valuable for learning and gaining inspiration.

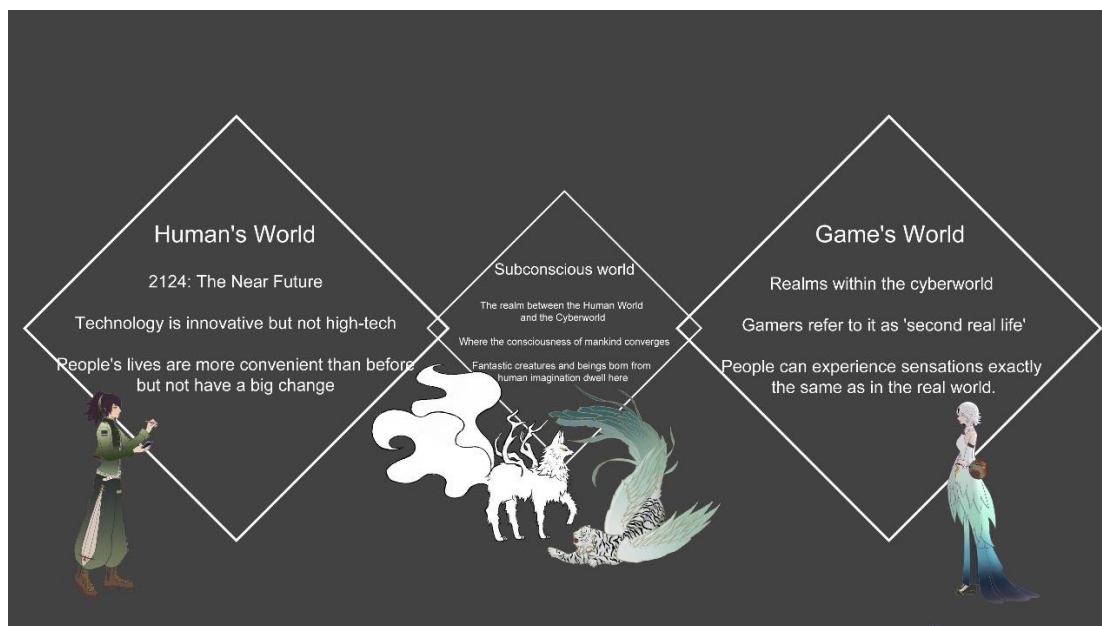
Modern Chinese artists often favour flat and gradient colour techniques. One notable example is Feifei Ruan, who designed *Doctor Who* posters for the Chinese market, cleverly integrating the TARDIS into iconic Chinese cityscapes and landscapes. Her posters often feature blue, green, or yellow-toned backgrounds, with flat-coloured landscapes that stand out, creating a striking contrast with the backdrop. The incorporation of traditional Chinese elements adds a strong sense of China's historical atmosphere to a modern setting (Ruan, 2018). In my project, I will reference both the traditional Chinese painting gradient technique and the modern flat colouring technique in my character designs.

#### 4.5 The world setting

I set the story in the year 2124, which isn't far from the world we know today. In this version of the future, the world is moderately advanced in technology, but it hasn't reached the level of a distant, high-tech society. People's lives are faster and more convenient than now, though not drastically different. Holographic technology has matured and been integrated into various industries, including gaming. The gaming helmets developed from this technology can connect directly to the human brain, allowing players to experience the same sensations they would in the real world. It's like creating a second world where people can deeply immerse themselves. However, since this technology connects directly to the brain, it also has the power to control human senses. This is how Shen Jun and other players end up trapped in the game's virtual world, unable to leave.

The game Shen Jun plays differ from the real world. Although it has the large common spaces that allow people live just like in the real world, in the gaming area consists of different dungeons, there are no connections between those dungeons, much like a "Jubensha" (script murder game), where each dungeon has its own distinct era and setting. After the mastermind behind the game announces that death in the game leads to real-world death, these dungeons begin to forcefully draw players in at regular intervals, leading to continuous fatalities. The only way to break this cycle is to enter the dungeon, investigate the clues, and identify the murderer to stop the sequence of deaths permanently.

According to the Chinese fantasy elements in the script, in the space between the human world and the game world—more accurately, the electronic cyber world—there exists another realm. This is the collective consciousness of humanity, a vast ocean where the magical creatures from myths and legends can live and grow. This ocean represents the world of fantasy creatures, born from the spiritual realm of human imagination, residing in the unseen depths of the subconscious with their own unique social structures. Moon Fog, another one of our protagonists, originates from this world and serves as its guardian. In pursuit of the shattered pieces of the Celestial Mirror, she crosses from her realm into the game world where Shen Jun resides.



**Figure 3. Three Worlds from the Story**

## Section V: Characters Concept development

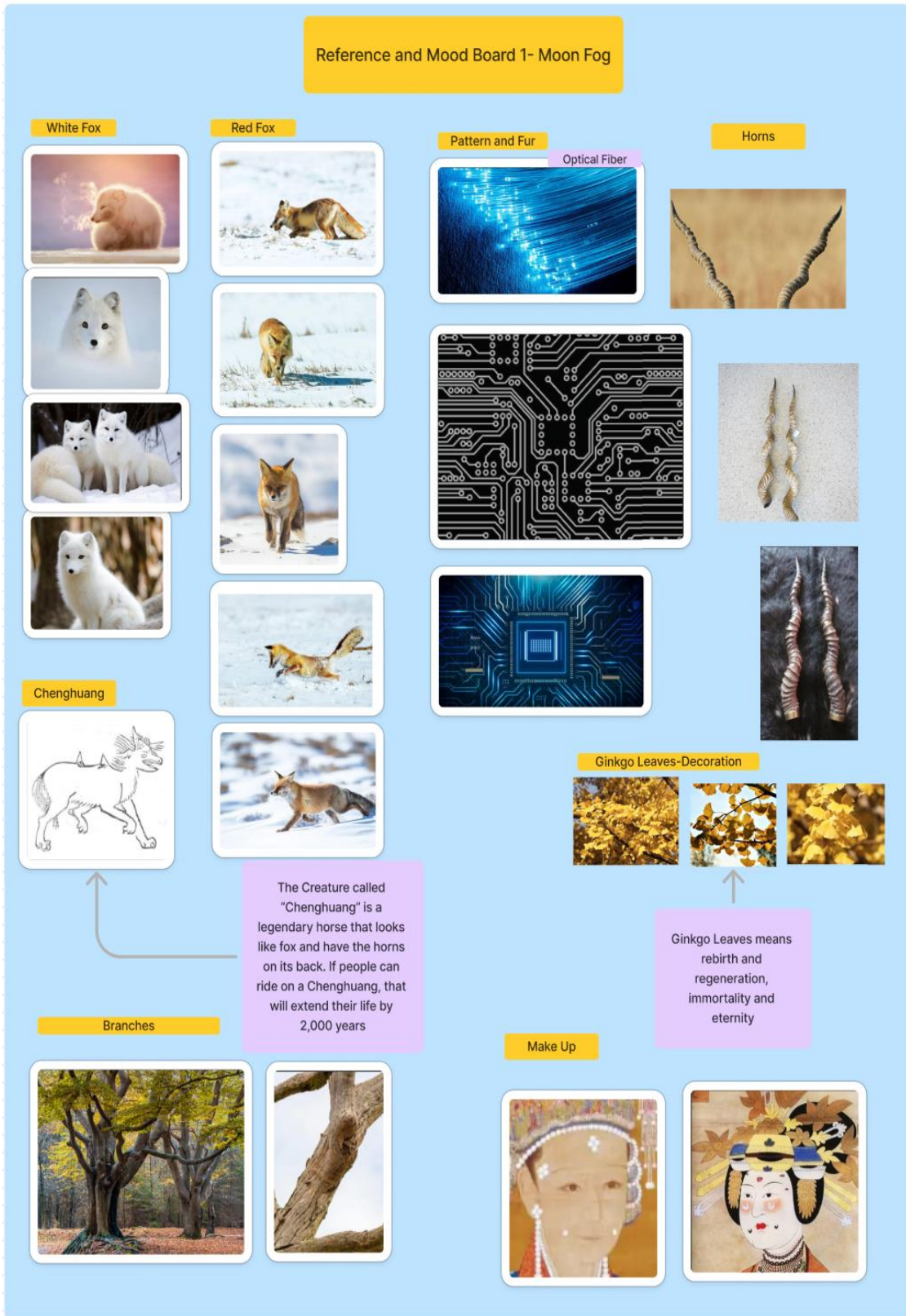
### 5.1 The Guide, Chenghuang — Moon Fog

#### 5.1.1- Character design

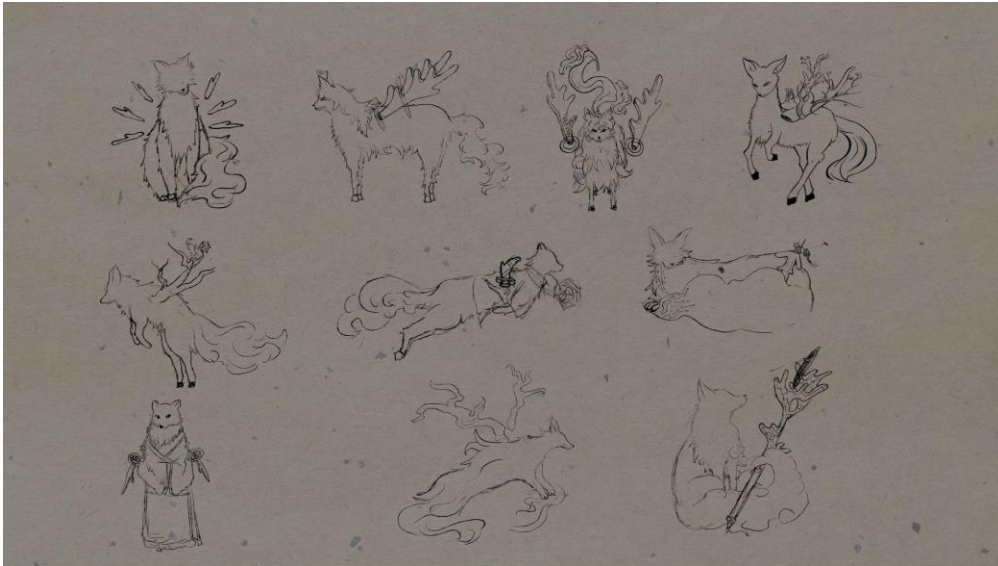
In *Shanhaijing*, Chenghuang looks like a fox but has horns on its back, and if someone can ride the Chenghuang, it will be able to increase its life expectancy by a thousand years. Chenghuang, who is named Moon Fog in the game narrative, will be one of the protagonists in the story.

In ancient Chinese culture, people thought white foxes exhibited good spirits. Chapter 28 of the old book *Songshu* (Shen,492–493) reveals, “The white fox would arrive if the king is both benevolent and wise.”

Conversely, China does not have white foxes found in the country's range. The most common fox in China is the red fox, therefore I used it as my main reference with the polar fox to give the white fur. Moon Fog's face is inspired by the popular makeup of women during the Tang Dynasty, with a moon symbol on her forehead representing her name, and auspicious cloud patterns beside her eyes symbolising good luck. The horns on Chenghuang's back and its life-extending abilities reminded me of ginkgo trees, and in China, the ginkgo tree symbolises longevity, good fortune, and eternity. Therefore, I designed Moon Fog's horns as branches with ginkgo leaves. Her tails are shaped like clouds, reflecting the cloud patterns on her face. I also incorporated an electric circuit pattern on her tails to give Moon Fog a futuristic feel and to emphasise her connection to the Celestial Mirror.



*Figure 4. Reference Board for Moon Fog's Character Design*



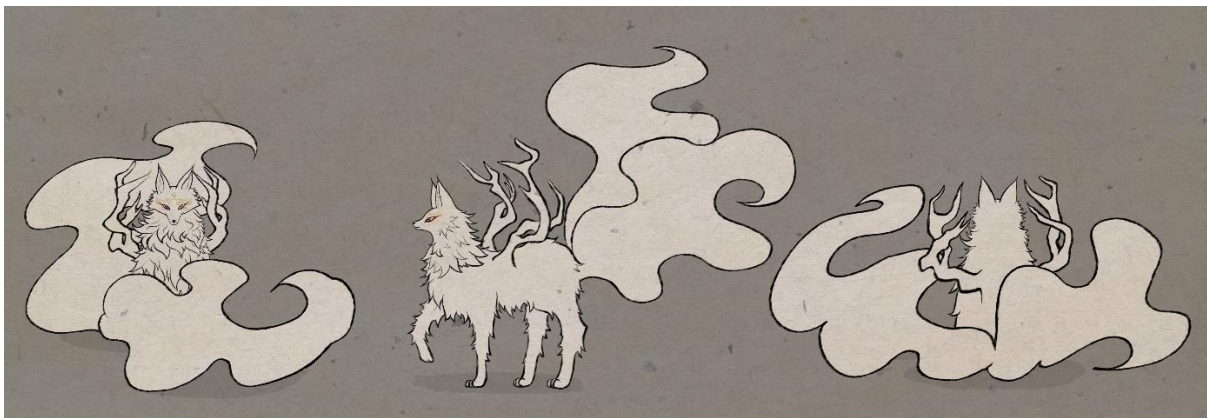
Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Moon Fog Roughs



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Moon Fog Face Shot



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Moon Fog Body Shot



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Moon Fog - Final Design

*Figures 5-8. Character Design Progress for Moon Fog*

### 5.1.2 The Celestial Mirror

One important item, called the Celestial Mirror, serves as the central connection throughout the story. In the narrative, the Celestial Mirror is shattered, with most of its fragments falling into the hands of the enemy before the other protagonist, Shen Jun, enters this world. Since it's a holographic game setting, although the mirror has a visible form, its true essence is a data chip located at its centre. This means the part that shatters is actually a part of the code. After the protagonists deduce the truth behind the incident and defeat the murderers in their mental worlds, they retrieve the code fragments in the murderers' possession, allowing them to restore the power of the Celestial Mirror.



*Figure 9. Reference Board for Celestial Mirror*



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Celestial Mirror Shape Testing



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Celestial Mirror

*Figures 10-11. Design Progress for Celestial Mirror*

## 5.2 The Protagonist Player — Shen Jun

### 5.2.1- Character design

In the story, Shen Jun is the head of the Criminal Division at the Hangzhou City Police Department. In this world, the symbol of the criminal investigation department is bamboo,

one of the 'Four Gentlemen' in Chinese culture. Historically, bamboo was regarded as unbreakable, yet modest. I chose it as the department's symbol to convey that the criminal investigators will be persistent in solving cases while remaining humble before the people.

Since Shen Jun is in the holographic game world, he doesn't wear his usual uniform. However, after the first murder occurs in the game, he realises he needs to prove his identity to avoid obstacles during evidence collection. So, he asks Moon Fog to provide him with a detective jacket that clearly marks his role. This outfit, created by Moon Fog's magic, combines a traditional Chinese style with a touch of modernity. The jacket was requested by Shen Jun himself, featuring "HPD" (Hangzhou Police Department) printed on the back to signal his role as a police officer to those involved in investigations. Beneath the jacket, he wears a traditional Chinese Tang suit, with colours also inspired by bamboo, blending different shades of green and brown. His trousers include a small, attached bag for functionality, allowing him to store case notes and pens. Traditional Chinese buttons, styled in matching colours, serve as accents on the trousers, adding a light touch to the green ensemble.

Shen Jun's hairstyle and hair tie are inspired by Chinese martial arts dramas, where many male heroes tie their hair into a high ponytail. In martial arts novels, these chivalrous figures are often portrayed as fair, courageous, resourceful, and willing to uphold justice for others. If a comparison is needed, they share some similarities with Western knights.

Reference and Mood Board- Shen Jun

Clothes- Old Photos and museum stuffs



Jackets



Bamboo

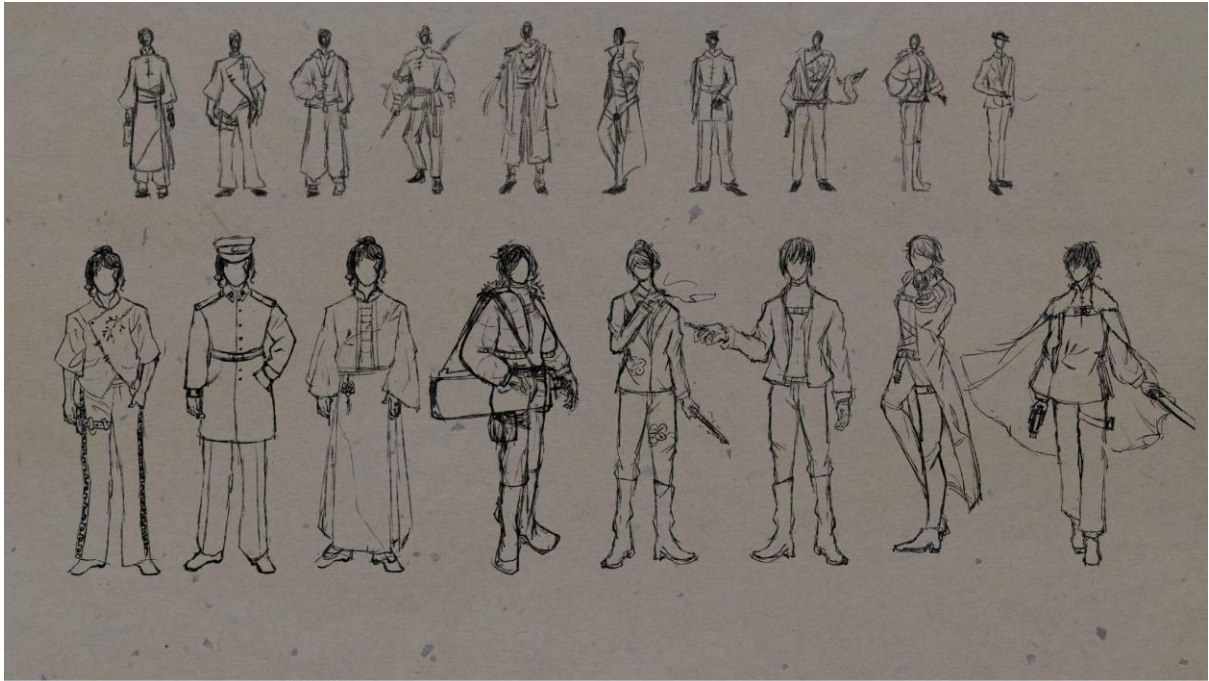
Hair Style



Buttons



Figure 12. Reference Board for Shen Jun's Character Design



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Shen Jun Roughs



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Shen Jun Face Shot



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Shen Jun Face Shot



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Shen Jun Body Shot

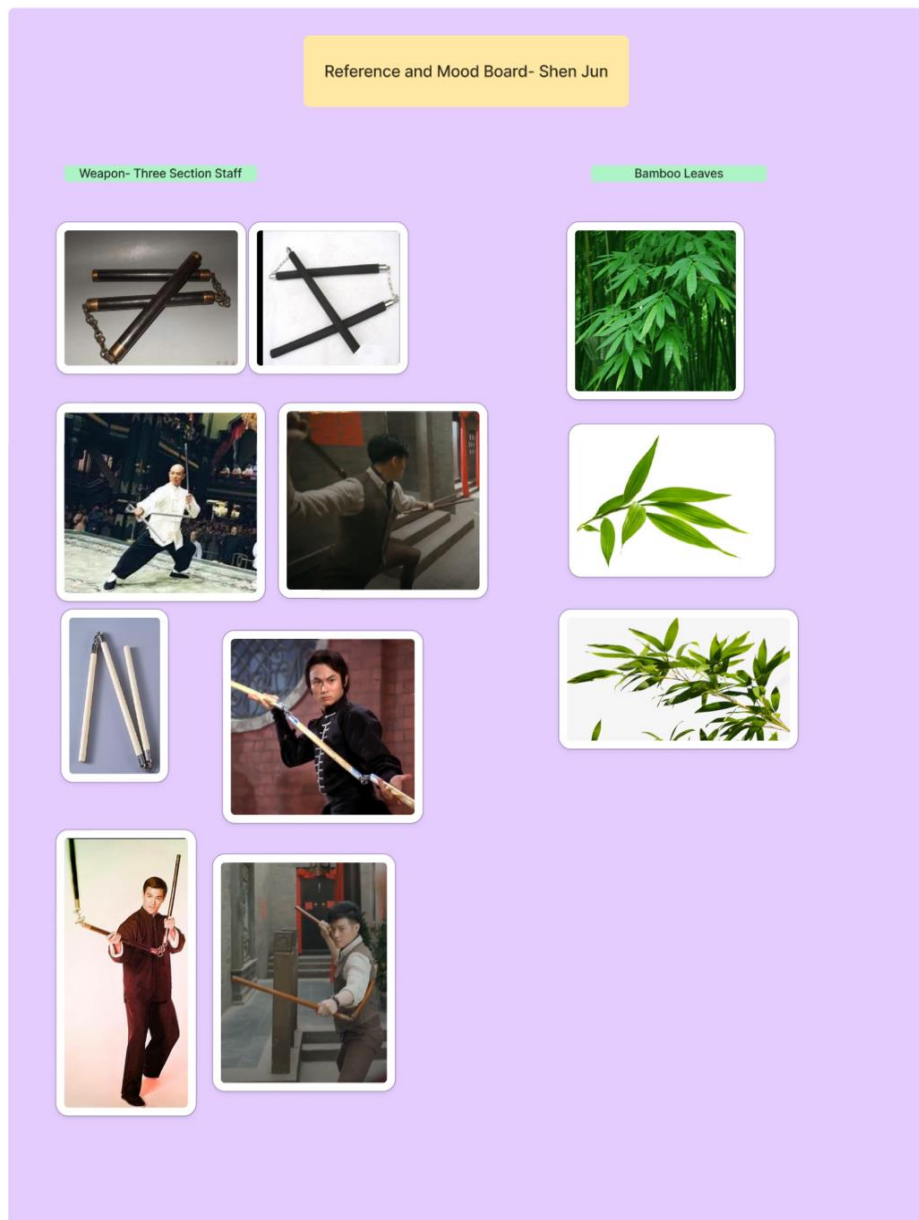
*Figures 13-16. Character Design Progress for Shen Jun*

### 5.2.2 Weapon: Three-Sectioned Staff.

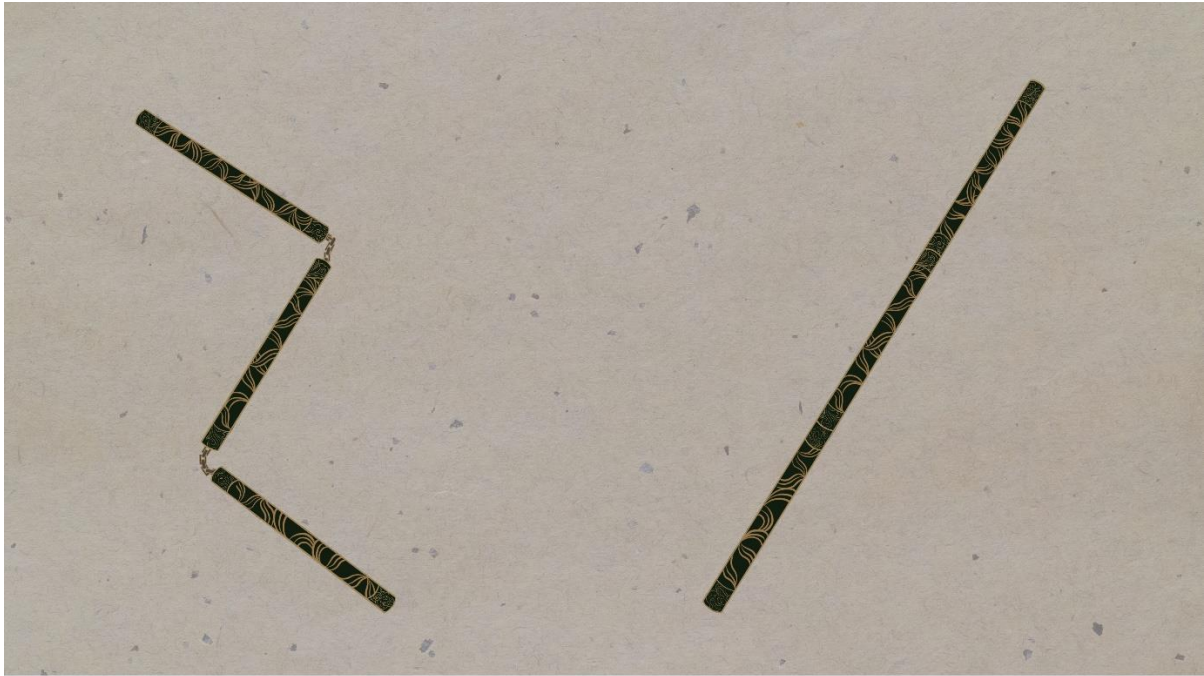
As a police officer, Shen Jun needs a weapon that offers both striking and suppressing capabilities. I chose the traditional Chinese weapon, the three-sectioned staff, for him to use

as a tool for subduing criminals. This weapon not only can function as a three-sectioned baton, but also can be assembled into a long baton when necessary, making it an effective tool for both short- and medium-range combat.

In the holographic game world setting, Shen Jun's three-section staff will float behind him without the need for clips or straps to attach it to his jacket. It can function as a single long staff, but when Shen Jun requires more flexibility, he twists the joint on the staff, causing it to split into three sections connected by metal chains. This allows for greater flexibility and a wider striking range.



*Figure 17. Reference Board for Shen Jun's Weapon*



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Shen Jun's Weapon- Three Section Staff



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Three Section Staff with Shen Jun

*Figures 18-19. Weapon Design Progress for Shen Jun*

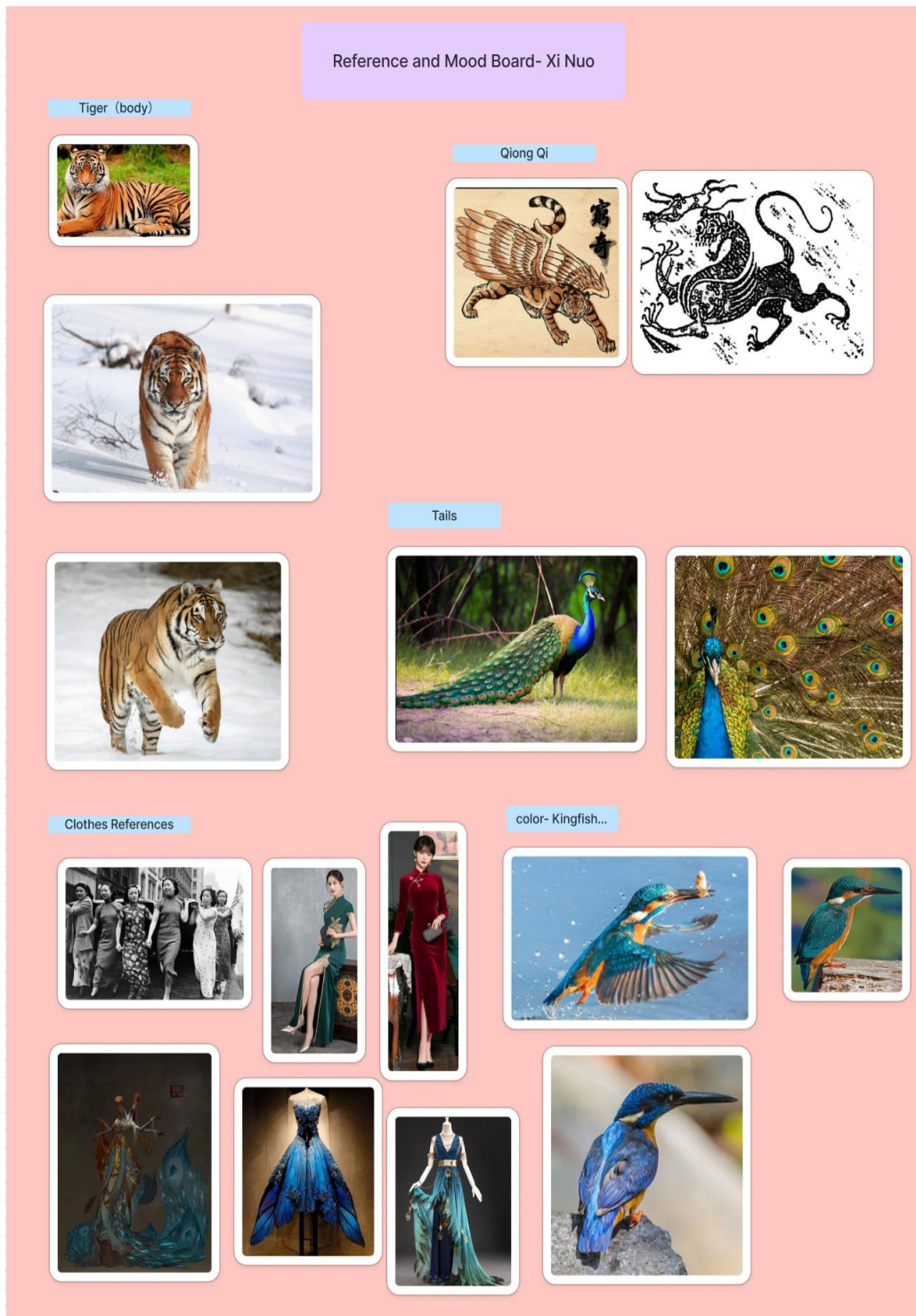
## 5.3 The Level Boss, Qiongqi - Xi Nuo

### 5.3.1- Character Design

The level boss that I choose is called Qiongqi, a creature that looks like a tiger but has wings on its back. One description of Qiongqi states that this creature harbours evil spirits; it loves evil and hates the good. If people commit evil deeds, Qiongqi will hunt and present prey as a gift. In times of conflict, Qiongqi will eat the person who is right. In another description of Qiongqi, it states that the creature has a good spirit and has the ability to repel parasites and poisons. In the *Huainanzi* annotated by Gao You (He, 2007), there is a reference to Qiong Qi being a descendant of the wind god. Drawing from this and other sources, I designed Qiong Qi as an erratic character who does as she pleases, disguising herself as human to mingle with others for fun. In the game, she is an ambiguous figure, leaving the protagonist and their party unsure whether she is a friend or foe.

Since tigers, as part of the cat family, often evoke a feminine image, I designed Xi Nuo's human form as female. Qiong Qi's body is tiger-like, with wings on her back, reminiscent of beautiful birds with brightly coloured feathers, like peacocks and kingfishers. For her costume, I blended the traditional Chinese Qipao with wide sleeves, altering the sleeves to resemble bird feathers. The back hem of the skirt is elongated to evoke the look of a bird's colourful tail feathers. The cheongsam's colours are inspired by traditional Chinese painting styles, particularly Blue-Green Shan Shui, and the vibrant hues of kingfishers. The upper part of the cheongsam is white, symbolising Xi Nuo's identity as a white tiger. I chose the white tiger because its black-and-white pattern highlights Xi Nuo's dual nature, reflecting her transition between good and evil spirits.

In Xi Nuo's human form, I incorporated black into her hair and added light scars on her body to reflect the patterns from her creature form. She is a character who does everything for her own pleasure, and in her pursuit of fun, she isn't afraid of fighting or getting hurt, as long as it brings her happiness. And the fan in her hand, is the prop she uses to change her form.



*Figure 20. Reference Board for Xi Nuo's Character Design*



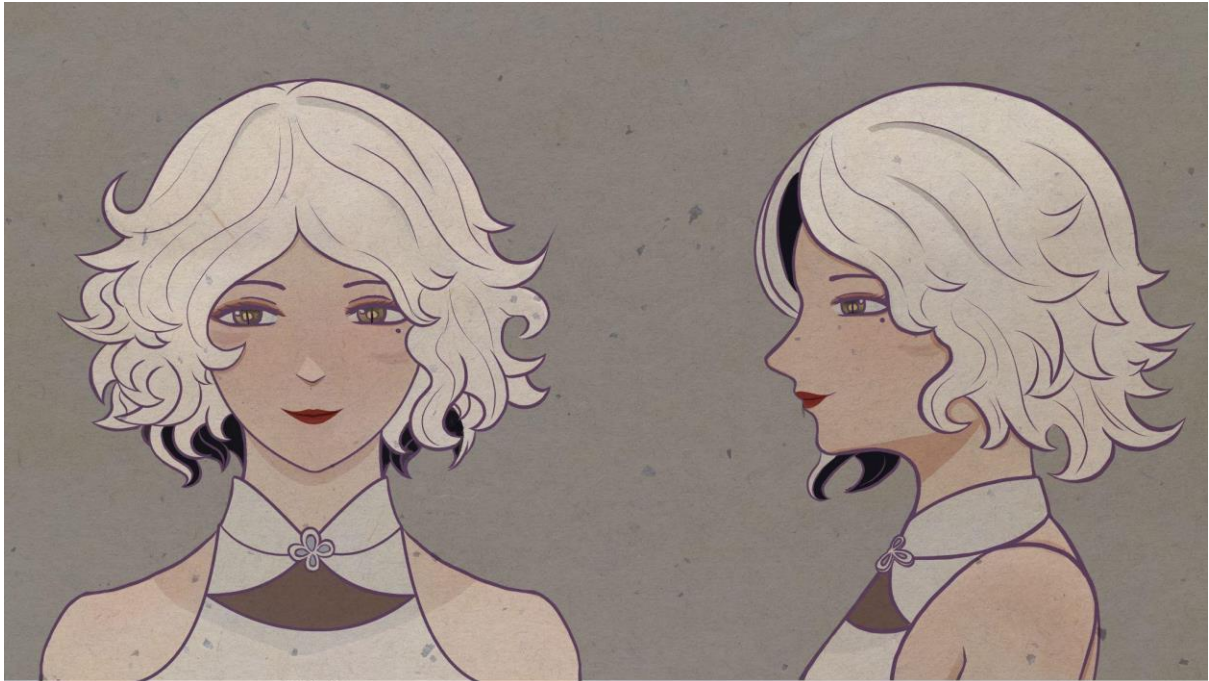
Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Xi Nuo Roughs



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Xi Nuo - Creature Form



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Xi Nuo - Human Form Face Shot



Game- Shan Hai Jing/山海镜

Xi Nuo - Human Form

*Figures 21-24. Character Design Progress for Xi Nuo*

### 5.3.2 - Weapon

One of the descriptions of Qionggi is that it is a descendant of the wind god, which is why I think a fan is a fitting weapon for Xi Nuo to control the winds. The fan she wields is called a ‘Tuan Shan,’ a traditional Chinese fan with a wooden handle and silk surface. In ancient China, Tuan Shan was often used by high-class women as a decorative accessory. Typically, the fan’s surface would feature landscape or beauty-themed artwork. For Xi Nuo's Tuan Shan, I incorporated two different artworks on each side: one side features Xi Nuo’s human form, while the other side depicts her creature form.



*Figure 25. Reference Board for Xi Nuo's Character Design*



*Figure 26. Weapon Design for Xi Nuo*

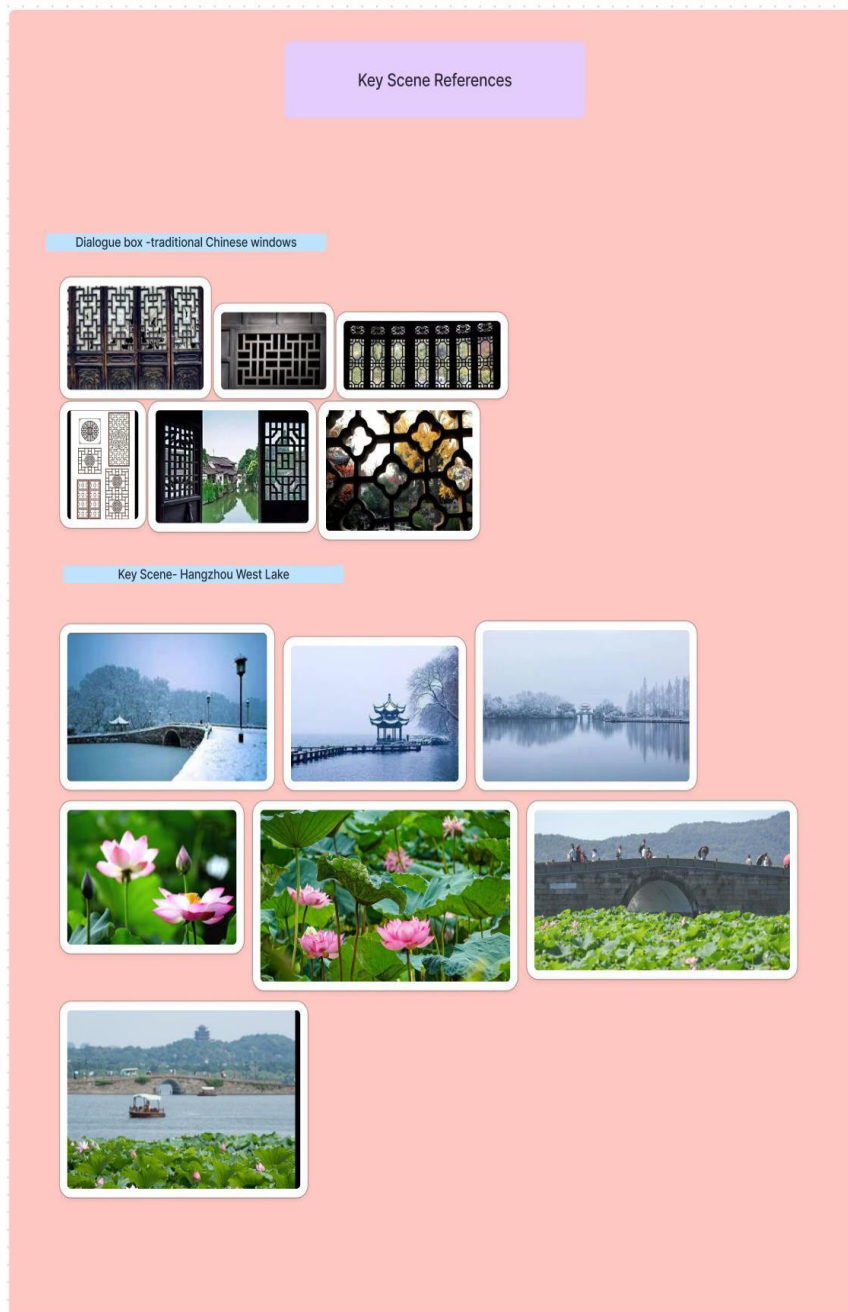
These are the design processes for all three of my characters. To show how they will appear in the game, I will present them in the key scene.

#### 5.4 Key Scene

Before presenting the key scene, I will discuss my Dialogue Box design. Since this is a text-based game, the Dialogue Box plays a significant role in conveying the game's atmosphere. I chose traditional Chinese window patterns as a reference, as looking through a window to view the landscape outside is symbolic of how players will investigate the game world.

For my key scene, I chose the location where the protagonists will battle Xi Nuo, inspired by Hangzhou's famous West Lake. This setting offers both a renowned summer and winter landscape, creating an intriguing contrast, which makes it the perfect battlefield for Xi Nuo. In winter, West Lake is known for its serene snow-covered scenery, evoking a sense of purity and tranquillity. In summer, the lake is adorned with a vast expanse of lotus flowers. While

lotus flowers are beautiful, they grow out of the mud, presenting a complex duality when compared to the peaceful winter landscape of West Lake. I've incorporated my key scene with dialogue boxes to demonstrate how the game will visually render as players progress through it.



*Figure 27. Reference Board for Dialogue Box and Key Scene*





**Figures 28-30. Dialogue Box Design, Key Scene and how characters talking in the scene**

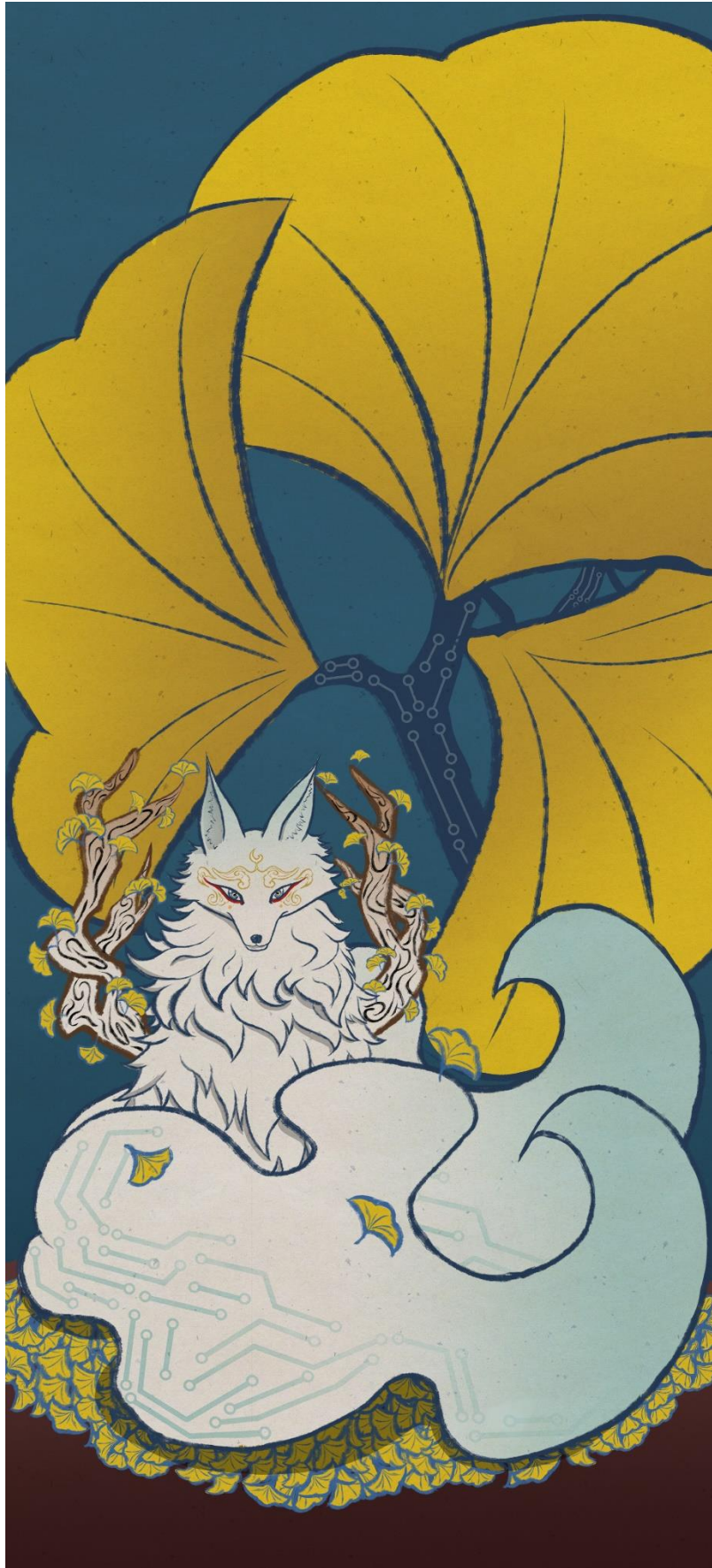
## 5.5 Poster Presentation

Lastly, I decided to present my characters through three prints out illustrations to showcase my project. Referenced by traditional Chinese art scale, I create three long posters to show my designs. First, the large size of the poster allows for detailed character depictions, giving the audience a complete visual identity for each character. Second, posters are commonly used in game marketing, such as at events like Gamescom, where companies display their posters to attract players to their new games. Since my focus is on game character design, creating three large-scale posters seemed like a fitting way to present my work.

For the first poster featuring Moon Fog, I connected her with the ginkgo tree by drawing a large ginkgo tree with an electric board pattern on the trunk. The tree's crown is made of oversized ginkgo leaves, blending the traditional symbol with futuristic elements. I also placed some ginkgo leaves beneath Moon Fog to enhance the feeling that she is a creature with the ability to bring people an eternal life.

For the second poster featuring Shen Jun, I included rocks, grass, and bamboo in the background to complement his outfit design. The bamboo also reflects his role as a police officer. He is holding his weapon to give the audience a sense of how he uses his three-section staff.

The last poster is for Xi Nuo, with lotus flowers and leaves in the background to emphasise her connection to the key scene. Her creature form appears in front of her, and its wings create a circular formation around her, resembling a shield that protects Xi Nuo. I present both the human form and the creature form together to illustrate the connection between the two forms in the story.



*Figure 31. Final Poster for Moon Fog*



*Figure 32. Final Poster for Shen Jun*



*Figure 33. Final Poster for Xi Nuo*

## Section VI: Conclusion

This project aims to find a way to present the Chinese heritage story by game character design in an innovative way.

The project first explores the key text *Shan Hai Jing* and examines its significance in Chinese history, using this book as a foundation to create a new story that showcases the creatures it contains. After researching the updated version of *Shan Hai Jing*, the worldwide video game player population, and the entertainment preferences of Chinese young people, I decided to utilise character designs from the mystery genre role-playing game to achieve my goal.

My second research focuses on how to present my designs in a way that effectively combines traditional elements with modern techniques. I examined the classic animation *Havoc in Heaven*, the highly successful game released in 2024, *Black Myth: WuKong*, and the modern TV sitcom *American Born Chinese* to compare and identify the strengths and weaknesses in the updating of traditional stories. These works underscore the importance of narrative. Additionally, *Okami*, *Paranormasight*, and *Persona 5* demonstrate how video games can integrate traditional art styles and old folklore into a modern context, as well as how character design can influence the perception of both the character and the game's overall personality.

Through this research, I developed a story outline and selected three characters to focus on, using the double diamond theory to guide my design explorations. After exploring traditional Chinese art styles and being inspired by the artist Wu Guanzhong, I decided to combine traditional Chinese ink painting techniques with modern digital painting styles to further develop my project.

After testing brush strokes and colour studies, I completed designs for three characters: two protagonists (one human and one creature) and one boss character from the story and one key scene. I chose to present my characters as posters because this format is commonly used in marketing, allowing audiences to see the full detail and identity of the characters, and get a sense of how the game will look and feel.

My two supervisors provided me with valuable advice regarding my research and design progress. While these designs do not complete the entire story, I believe that after my graduation, I can use this study experience to further develop the narrative I have created.

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