



鬼话 *GHOST TALK*:

A creative consideration of Zhiguai ghost narratives to
discuss Chinese parental expectations.

This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Design.

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7 May 2024
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ABSTRACT

Ghost Talk is an illustrated picture book inspired by my personal experiences of disquiet with Chinese parental expectations. Adopting the narrative style of ghost stories from Chinese Zhiguai literature, the narrative uses metaphorical telling to depict the journey of a Chinese girl and ghosts, that revolves around her realisation of self-worth. The story considers how Confucian perspectives of filial piety and emphasis on education may influence Chinese parents to have high expectations and strict control over their children's academic achievement. This project explores the potential of the Zhiguai ghost to create a social critique through self-experience. Methodologically, the project utilises autoethnography and heuristic enquiry to assess personal experience through a series of methods of scriptwriting, sketching, storyboarding, character development and prototyping.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have supported and assisted me.

Firstly, thanks to my parents. I appreciate their open communication with me, as well as their consolation and understanding throughout my Master's journey.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Tatiana Tavares and Dr. Cecelia Faumuina, for their constructive suggestions and guidance in various aspects of my research, writing, story, and illustration creation.

I am also grateful to my friends, Chrys Zhang, Deirdre Hu and Wenjie Mao, who have assisted me and provided valuable feedback on my work.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, It contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly stated) nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Yiran Liu, 07, May 2024

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ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENTS

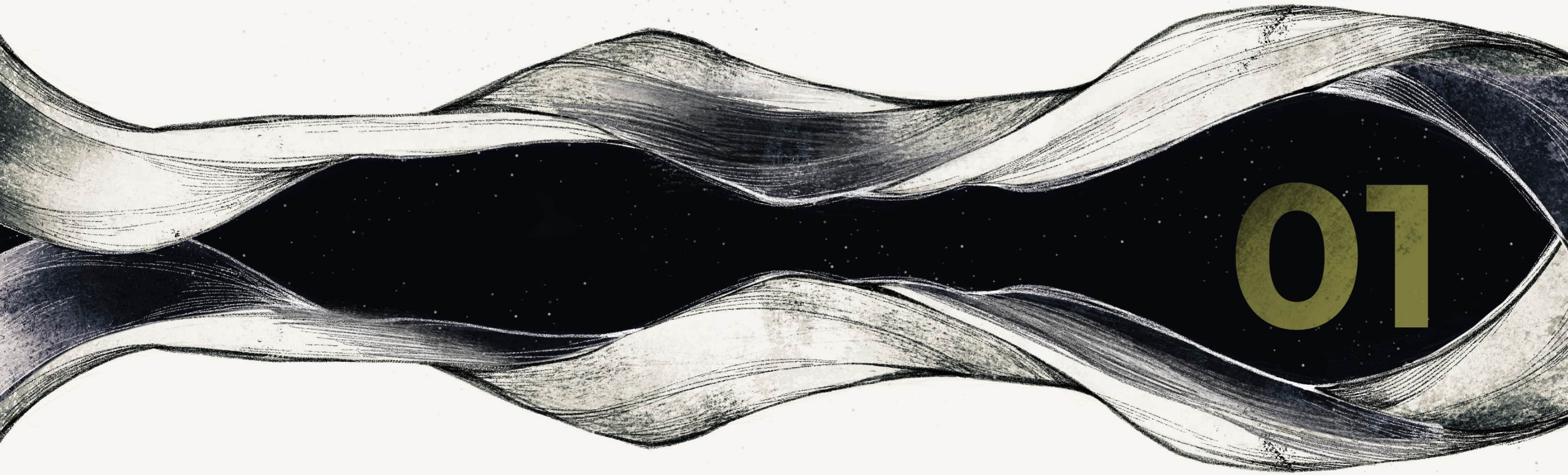
Given that this project emerged from personal experiences in the creation of a fictional work, it does not require ethical approval. The study does not involve the use of any information that is not licensed to be used or made public.

INTRODUCTION

This research asks: “How an illustrated picture book can explore the concept of Zhiguai storytelling to discuss parental expectations using an autoethnographic and heuristic methodological framework?”

Ghost Talk is a picture book that utilises a Chinese Zhiguai style of narration as means to discuss Chinese parental expectations. The story tells of a fantastical journey of reminiscence between a young girl and ghosts in a spiritually connected dream world, prompting her to reconsider the reasons behind her fading pursuit of self-wishes. Employing autoethnography and heuristics enquiry as methodological frameworks, the story reflects on personal experiences with emphasis on Chinese parents' expectations on their children's academic achievements and their influence over their children's dreams. This project contributes to knowledge by addressing Chinese cultural and social Confucian perspectives in Chinese family relationships and education systems. Secondly, it provides a creative consideration of a traditional Chinese Zhiguai genre of storytelling that blends the fantastic and the real. The constructed *Ghost Talk* story demonstrates the potential of using metaphors to discuss complex cultural and social perspectives and to evoke resonance among individuals with similar experiences.

This exegesis documents and interprets my development journey, divided into five chapters. Chapter one positions my role as a researcher and explores the reasons behind the research. It outlines my personal experiences and the difficulties I faced during my childhood with Chinese academic performance. Chapter two critically reflects on the contextual knowledge surrounding the historical background and development of Zhiguai storytelling and Chinese parental expectations, drawing on examples from ancient to contemporary Chinese literature and art. Chapter three presents the research design, showcasing autoethnography and heuristics methodologies that contributed to the development of strategies for narrating personal experiences through scriptwriting, storyboards, sketches, and prototypes. Finally, Chapter four offers critical commentary and explains the final design decisions, including how the Zhiguai has been implemented in the storyline and character development, as well as the strategies employed in the illustration style.



POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

I was born and grew up in Hebei, China. This place is known for having schools with strict teaching methods. In these schools, students usually follow a heavy workload and harsh punishments, graduating with outstanding exam results. Parents pay great attention to their children's grades to prevent them from falling behind in the intense academic competition. The high expectations on young people to succeed academically were not something I was aware of for a long time when growing up. This expectation was deeply rooted in my life (and my peers' lives) since childhood. In my perception, I trusted that my parents loved me and that their strictness benefited my future. They expected me to fully immerse myself in studying subjects that would lead me to lucrative job opportunities. However, drawing was one of the few things that brought me joy at the time. If I had some time to rest after studying, my parents encouraged me not to spend time drawing but in sports since it would help me to develop a healthy body to withstand the high pressure.

After graduating from elementary school, I enrolled in a prestigious private middle school acknowledged for its high teaching quality. To ensure excellent grades from students, the school had stern rules and teachers resorted to violence and public humiliation to punish students. Sometimes, the reasons for punishment seemed trivial, such as answering a random question incorrectly, when not handing something to a teacher with both hands and accidentally blocking their way. These experiences made me constantly fearful as I did not know when I would suddenly be blamed for something. I began habitually blurting out "sorry" whenever I went. Punishments were always public, and the feeling of having them in front of many people made me afraid of attention. I dreaded having eyes on me, so I started hiding in the crowd, staying quiet, hoping not to be noticed by anyone. Even praise made me uneasy because I believed they would realise how much of a fool I was.

During my school years, I became accustomed to punishments, believing that the reasons for them lay within me. The silent consent and indulgence of my parents seemed to indirectly confirm that these methods were acceptable to improve academic performance at the cost of abuse. As my mental health deteriorated, my parents would sometimes comfort me and sometimes question why other students at the school with better grades were not so fragile. I feared failing under the pressure and I would feel guilty about the love and time my parents had invested in me.

Fortunately, drawing became my way of healing. I no longer cared whether I was good at it or needed to showcase it to anyone; I quietly enjoyed the act of drawing. As a result, I would quickly become engrossed in it, entering a new world where fear no longer held sway.

During those days, feelings of confusion and self-doubt moved back and forth like ghosts that my grandparents used to tell me as a child. I started to use moments of imagination and storytelling to escape reality. I would recall the feelings of wonder shared with my siblings as we listened to our grandparents telling us intriguing and bizarre Zhiguai tales¹. We often listened quietly to those tales with a mixture of fear and curiosity, hoping that the main character would overcome danger amidst ghostly encounters. Despite their perceived enigmatic abilities, these ghosts were not inherently evil, or indiscriminate killers. Some could potentially become good friends. I used to ask my grandmother "do ghosts exist in the real world?", she would tell me that ghosts did not exist, but they only emerged from the human heart².

While I was educated to be obedient and respectful to my parents, I also wished my feelings could be expressed and understood, and as ghosts, my frustrations appeared quietly in my dreams. Regardless of whether ghosts were real, dreams or just imagination, I believed that the chaos caused by these

supernatural creatures could creatively be used to depict my feelings and add a touch of fantasy and wonder to my creative work.

During my move to New Zealand in 2018 to pursue my undergraduate studies, I sought ways to establish a healthier relationship with my family and myself. Studying Communication Design at AUT University in New Zealand made me realise that enjoying drawing was normal, and I could build a "successful future." I wanted to convey to my parents and those in similar situations to me that what I/we could enjoy doing was not useless. At the same time, I was curious about the reasons behind the differences in mindsets between Chinese and New Zealand culture because I knew that the notion of parental expectations could not be born out of their stubbornness.

Moving to postgraduate studies, the memories of ghost stories sparked my interest in using such an approach to narrate a personal journey of inner conflicts related to my family experiences and myself. This thesis emerged because of those questions and by recognising the potential of Zhiguai tales to portray and visualise my emotional processes in dealing with my own parental expectations. Using metaphors and the deliberate blending of fantasy with reality, I explored the inner turmoil stemming from my attempts to fulfill my parents' expectations while simultaneously presenting my suppressing feelings of frustration and indecision. During the creation of my practical work, these conflicting emotions manifested in my thoughts, creating a narrative that reflects my struggle to navigate between obedience and personal authenticity. Just as my grandmother would tell me, I trusted that ghosts could only be real if my heart was open enough. Thus, in the creation of my ghost stories, I gained a deeper understanding of myself, learned to empathise with my parents, while I longed for my feelings to be known in the face of a challenging Chinese cultural perspective.

FOOTNOTE

1. Zhiguai tales is a Chinese literary genre that emerged in the early Middle Ages. The stories refer to supernatural phenomena, narrating anecdotes of strange and unusual events of ghosts and people (Chang, 2017).

2. The Chinese idiom 心里有鬼 (translated as "there is a ghost in one's heart") is used to describe someone who has a guilty conscience or has secret motives. This idiom encapsulates the notion of ghosts manifesting from humans' emotions to teach or reviewing something about the beholder.



02

REVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

REVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

In this chapter, I focus on discussions that include the historical context of Zhiguai storytelling, the contextual perspectives around Chinese parental expectations, and works by artists using narration and illustration as frameworks that assisted me in the construction of *Ghost Talk*.

2.1. Zhiguai

Zhiguai means “records of anomalies”³, and it is a form of classical Chinese literature that uses a realistic tone to describe unreal and bizarre occurrences (Yang, 2015). Zhiguai adds an element of fantasy and romantic tone to classical Chinese literature, and its narratives often blur the line between reality and imagination. Liu (2015) defines Zhiguai as the second world invading the first world and blending a supernatural fictional world into the real world. Some Zhiguai writers and storytellers insist that the stories are based on actual events experienced by themselves or acquaintances to lend greater credibility to disseminating these stories (Chan, 1997).

Liu (2023) suggests that Zhiguai novels possess an inherent advantage in conveying ideologies to people. They achieve this by employing a blend of metaphorical storytelling and a fusion of supernatural folklore to portray certain ideas. Throughout the history of Zhiguai literature, these stories have been used to describe magical encounters between people and mystical creatures, describe regions or phenomena, critique social perspectives, such as famous works by Zhuangzi's *The Happy Excursion*⁴ (from Warring States Period) and Tao Yuanming's *The Peach Blossom Spring*⁵ (from the Eastern Jin Dynasty). This thematic is also evident in some modern Chinese literary works that incorporate magical realist elements, such as Zhongshi Chen's novel *White Deer Plain* [白鹿原] (1993)⁶ and Chinese Mo Yan's hallucinatory short story

FOOTNOTE

3. The character ‘志 Zhi’ means “record” and ‘怪 guai’ in Chinese refers to strange things. When combined, it means “recording strange things.” The translation 志怪 Zhiguai considers an ancient Chinese into modern Chinese.

4. In Zhuangzi's (369 BCE - 286 BCE) *The Happy Excursion* features Kun [鯀], a gigantic fish is transformed into a massive bird named Peng [鹏], spanning thousands of miles in the ocean. Zhuang Zhou depicts gigantic creatures roaming between heaven and earth, urging them not to be satisfied with their narrow perception of the world (Van Norden, 1996).

5. Tao Yuanming's (365–427) *The Peach Blossom Spring* tells of a fisherman discovering a secluded village of peace and equality, and after he shares its location, the village vanishes, giving rise to the idiom *Peach Blossom Spring outside the world* [世外桃源], symbolising an ideal place for refuge. This story embodies the author's desire to escape from war and worldly troubles, so he imagined a beautiful, unknown village.

6. In *White Deer Plain*, a father dreams of a white deer that runs away from him, symbolising auspiciousness. Upon waking, he learns that his daughter, who dared to defy feudal ideologies, has passed away. The author conveys a profound familial love, suggesting that regardless of the distance between them, the bond remains unbreakable.

Five Steamed Buns [五个饽饽] (2022)⁷. Both use the plot device of *precognitive dreams*⁸ to metaphorically represent possible realities.

In Chinese Culture, ghosts [鬼] also broadly refer to the souls of people after death (Poo, 2004). While Zhiguai ghosts often depict the deceased, the emphasis frequently lies on genuine emotions that transcend life and death and the curiosity about the afterlife. The fan painting *Skeleton Fantasy Show* [骷髅幻戏图] (Figure 2.1.) and the king water ghost Wang Liulang by Pu Songling's in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (1679)⁹ both embody this concept.

FOOTNOTE

7. The story of *Five Steamed Buns* tells of a New Year's Eve event during a time of food scarcity when the steamed buns offered to the gods at young Mo Yan's home were stolen, yet returned after he had a dream. The story suggests the beggar portraying the god of wealth might be the thief, but Mo's prophetic dream adds a touch of mystery. The beggar, ultimately refrains from stealing food, and the prophetic dream adds a layer of divine approval to the beggar's virtuous character. The story expressed the author's admiration for people who live in difficult environments yet are still able to strive and maintain their kindness.

8. Precognitive dreaming refers to the phenomenon of foreseeing future events in dreams (Ong, 1981).

9. In Chinese culture, a water ghost represents the opportunity for reincarnation (Mark, 2016). However, Wang Liulang is a different water ghost, who sees a mother with a child fall into the water and gives up his chance of reincarnation to save them. Despite being a ghost who should have preserved himself by harming others, Wang always had a kind heart. In the end, Wang's kindness catches the attention of the heavens, and he is elevated to the status of a deity. The story praises noble virtues and suggests that performing good deeds will bring positive rewards.

Figure 2.1. Li, S. (Southern Song Dynasty 1127–1279). *Skeleton Fantasy Show* [骷髅幻戏图].

In this fan painting, we see a family with a child who joyfully tries to reach out to a skeleton who is manipulating a puppet. The mother behind him attempts to stop his actions, adding an eerie touch to what should have been a joyous scene. By showing the different perspectives towards the ghost, the three living individuals exhibit entirely different emotions between themselves when facing the occasion: calmness, curiosity, and panic. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Song_\(painter\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Song_(painter)). Note. This work is in public domain.



While ghosts may appear different from humans and can cause hesitation in acceptance, they may also hold different thoughts due to the era and environment in which they lived. Hui (2009) commented that such stories present us with the potential for a better understanding of ourselves when overcoming the fear associated with our existence. He adds that, these stories show us that through honest communication, it is revealed that ghosts are, or were once, ordinary humans.

Huang (2016) notes that when readers discover that literary ghosts are depicted as more kind-hearted and righteous than humans, the borderline between humans and ghosts is dramatically twisted. Huang (2016) also suggests that this perception might lead readers to reflect on what it truly means to be a human. Poo (1997) observes that these narratives may present different facets of the world of the living while suggesting how the world could be. Writers use ghosts to mirror reality or place their ideal world in another world. Imbach (2017, p. 1) argues that ghosts have the potent ability to critique the status quo as "they (ghosts) can reveal what is hidden, repressed, and marginalised by hegemonic paradigms and discourses". Hajdu (2018) found that the particularity of Zhiguai stories lies in the writers' refusal to provide excessive explanations for the bizarre elements within the narrative or to rationalise unnatural plots. Because of this narrative strategy of blurring the boundaries of explanation about the supernatural, Zhiguai can serve various purposes, offering possibilities for multiple interpretation (morals, strange real events, or natural phenomena) by the audience (Aiqing & Whyke, 2024). Ancuta (2017, p. 268) also argues that Chinese ghost stories rarely provide reasons to explain the character's encounters with ghosts but they rather "focus on detailed descriptions of events."

2.1.1. A historical perspective

Chinese attitudes toward ghosts are deeply influenced by Confucian¹⁰ culture (6th to 5th centuries BCE). At that time, Confucius — the founder of Confucianism — argued that we should respect gods and demons/ghosts but keep them at a distance [敬鬼神而远之] (Confucius, circa 551–479 BCE). He advocated for proper burial and rituals for the deceased but cautioned against excessive worship of spirits, emphasising the importance of treating the living well. Confucius was not fixated on whether ghosts existed; instead, he focused on educating people to be kind to the living and respectful to the departed, especially family members. This philosophy influenced the depiction of ghosts in Zhiguai stories, where many ghost characters reflect human emotions, virtues, and desires. During this era, the prevalence of Taoism [道教] superstitions fueled the development of Zhiguai and descriptions of strange phenomena, divine chaos, and extraordinary events were extensively documented in various literary works of that time (Xu, 2014). During the Tang Dynasty (618 AD), the inclusion of the Zhiguai narrative in historical records began facing increasing criticism for obstructing the accuracy of historical documents (Liu, 2015). Therefore, authorities began to eliminate absurdity from significant records, yet Zhiguai did not vanish; instead, it was considered as a form of entertainment with some writers striving to make Zhiguai more realistic. Chinese philosopher Yangming Wang (the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644) discussed his views on ghosts in his philosophical work *Chuanxilu* [传习录]. In this text, Wang explains his misbelief in the existence of ghosts and attributed people's fear of ghosts to their failure to actively engage in moral behaviour. He suggests that if the mind is not upright, various ghosts (which he considered as disobedient thoughts) will bewilder the heart¹¹. Idioms such as *Bewitched by Ghosts* [鬼迷心窍]¹² and *Breeding Ghosts in the Heart* [心怀鬼胎]¹³ were metaphors to describe intricate thoughts and emotions rather than mysticism and ghost's influence over humans.

FOOTNOTE

10. Confucianism is China's oldest and most revered philosophy (Goldin, 2014). Confucius philosophy encompassed a way of thinking and living that entailed ancestor reverence and a profound human-centred religiousness (Weiming, 2024).

11. The original Chuan Xi Lu text 岂有邪鬼能迷正人乎！只此一怕即是心邪。故有迷之者，非鬼迷也，心自迷耳 translates as: "How can evil ghosts deceive upright individuals? It is only fear in the heart that leads to wickedness. Therefore, there are those who become lost. It is not that ghosts deceive them; it is their own hearts that become misguided" (1368-1644).

12. *Bewitched by the Ghost* is a metaphor that refers to a situation where a person, due to a momentary lapse of judgment, makes a mistake as if being misled by a ghost, leading to an erroneous decision.

13. *Breeding Ghosts in the Heart* metaphorically refers to people's hidden thoughts or matters unsuitable for disclosure.

Another historical perspective is the long tradition of Shuoshu oral storytelling¹⁴ and their influence over Zhiguai tales. Shuoshu storytelling typically blends factual elements from personal testimonies with imaginative embellishments to enhance entertainment and credibility (Chan, 1997). Chan also observed that the popular storytelling style of Shuoshu has influenced many Zhiguai writers by leading them to adopt its oral narrative techniques, such as detailed description and imaginative elaboration, to enrich their own storytelling.

In 1927, during the Chinese resistance against the Qing Governments, regulations in the Chinese film censorship system prohibited the promotion of superstition (Li, 2021). During the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), government officials utilised superstition, including the notion of divine mandates from the heavens, to enforce laws and manipulate the populace. Hence, this censorship served as a protective measure to prevent contemporary individuals from being manipulated due to historical precedents. Today, some filmmakers and illustrators are beginning to redefine the concept of ghosts in their works. Many storytellers use ghost stories to create ambiguity and provoke the reader (Figure 2.2), others explore original interpretations of the Zhiguai stories in character design (Figure 2.4) and others use unique artistic styles to elicit mood and atmosphere (Figure 2.5). In Chinese mainland horror movies, the director, Chien (2018), explains that due to China's prohibition of superstition and the supernatural in films, his stories always conclude with explanations involving dreams, nightmares, and schizophrenia to account for its unscientific phenomena.

FOOTNOTE

14. Shuoshu are "oral fictions [stories] narrated by professional storytellers in traditional China" (Chan, 1997, p. 34).

Figure 2.2. Gou, Z. (2023). *Dream Banquet* [梦宴].

The illustrations portray a surreal feast of supernatural creatures. The only human painter at the feast (right) sleeps at the table suggesting that either the ghosts truly exist, or they are merely the artist's dreams. The two contrasting explanations offer diverse meanings and ambiguities, blurring the line between reality and fantasy and engaging the audience in their interpretation. Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://m.weibo.cn/1773483597/4920588093620799>

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copyright reasons.

Figure 2.3 and 2.4. Xiannv, V. (2023). *Character design for Jie Yi Ji [解异集]*.

V-V shares her adaptation of Lao Nv Snake character [烙女蛇] (at the right) from the original *Zhao Ye Qian Zai* tale [朝野金载]. The story tells of woman who transforms into a vengeful snake after her eyes are seared and dies from a fatal wound. V-V's approach to costume design suggests the importance of dressing in depicting character personalities and evoking in-depth emotions and ideas. The character's dress choice is based on Hanfu [汉服] (the traditional clothing of the Han ethnic group in China) with a Qixiong runqun [齐胸襦裙] (a high waistband reaching up to the armpits, giving it a relaxed and lightweight appearance). V-V also plays with the folds of the fabric to evoke the smoothness of a snake's movements and a sense of danger and mystery. Retrieved November 18, 2023, from <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-zhang-xuan-preparing-silk.php>

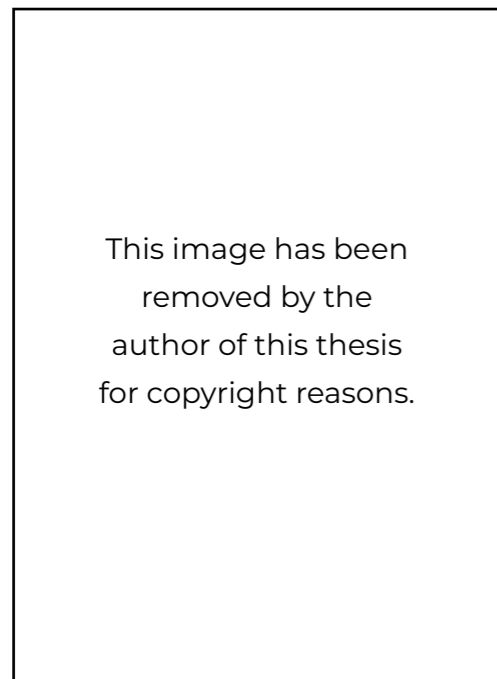
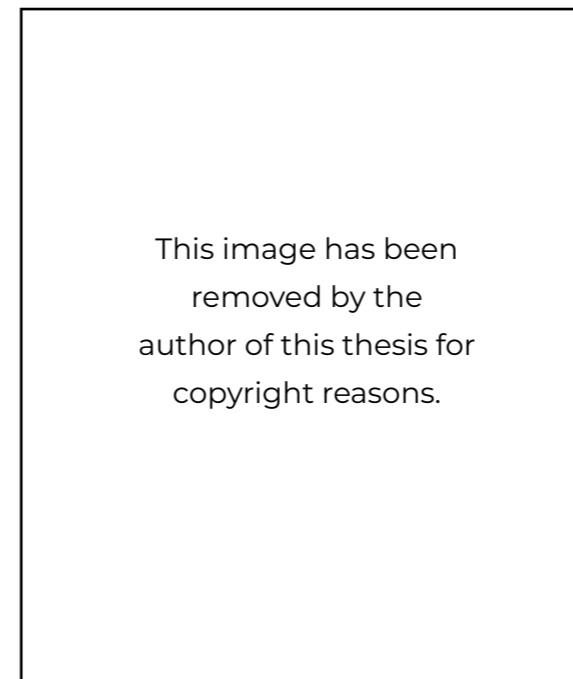


Figure 2.5. Hu, R. (2023). *Untitled*.

A series of paintings combining ink and pencil, featured in Hu's Zhiguai art collection *Entering the Wonderland [奇境入画]*. These paintings depict a character who is surprised upon discovering some floating objects on a desk, prompting him to look back to investigate the situation. The painting focuses on mood rather than realism, presenting the blank spaces and layered ink as a lyrical language on the canvas. Many of his works feature a simple, dark tone and cartoon-style depictions, evoking a subtle sense of fear and wonder towards the unknown, leaving room for the reader's imagination. Retrieved November 20, 2023, from https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_21756690



2.2. Chinese parents' expectations for their children's education

Confucianism has significantly influenced Chinese parents' emphasis on their children's education and the value of education (Huang & Gove, 2015). Confucius introduced the concept of learning for self-cultivation, advocating that everyone, regardless of status or wealth, should have access to education. Confucius established an imperial examination system, a method of selecting officials through exams, that was considered a significant success for the empire. It provided opportunities for boys from even the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds to attain power and status, allowing individuals to achieve social mobility through education (O'Sullivan & Cheng, 2022). However, Liu (2006, p. 309) suggests that "in that period of time, women [...] did not have rights for politics no matter what kind of measures would be taken for the selection of the talents."

These days, the tradition of selecting talents through examinations persists in the current Chinese education system due to people's trust in its fairness (O'Sullivan & Cheng, 2022). The Chinese reverence for knowledge and scholar status has endured until this day. Many parents in China expect their children to become highly educated individuals, hoping for elevated social status, which contributes to intense competition and significant academic pressure on students. Kai (2012) argues that the contemporary Chinese education system excessively accentuates students' academic performance, neglecting their strengths in other areas.

In addition to emphasising academic achievements, the expectations of Chinese parents are usually closely tied to another Confucian cultural value of filial piety [孝道]. This concept embodies the profound reverence of young people to their parents and ancestors in society (Spielman, 2012). Yuan (2011, p. 105) suggests that "Chinese culture and thought [...]"

think about much of the relatives and the love to the parents, rather than individual's right or need". Chinese students are frequently accustomed to conforming to life plans made by their parents. As a result, children tend to avoid disappointing others, leading to increased concerns about their lives, resulting in less satisfaction and more psychological distress (Wu & Chen, 2020). Although Confucian perspectives have contributed to the development of education in China, they have simultaneously produced constraints. Li and Wegerif (2014) believe that Confucian education depends on extrinsic motivation. They suggest that striving for good grades and high academic qualifications has become the norm in the Chinese education system, with parents placing high hopes on their children's academic success.

Pei (2023) argues that the traditional virtue of filial obedience has been distorted today, simplifying it to blind obedience to parental authority. Elders often criticise young people who oppose this expectation of obedience as "unfilial," making discussions about filial piety more challenging. Cartoonist Huang Yidao, through his comic *The Reason You Argue with Your Parents*, discusses communication issues in contemporary Chinese families (Figure 2.6). In this cartoon, he humorously presents a fictional evil translator to portray the contrasts in perspectives between parents and their children.

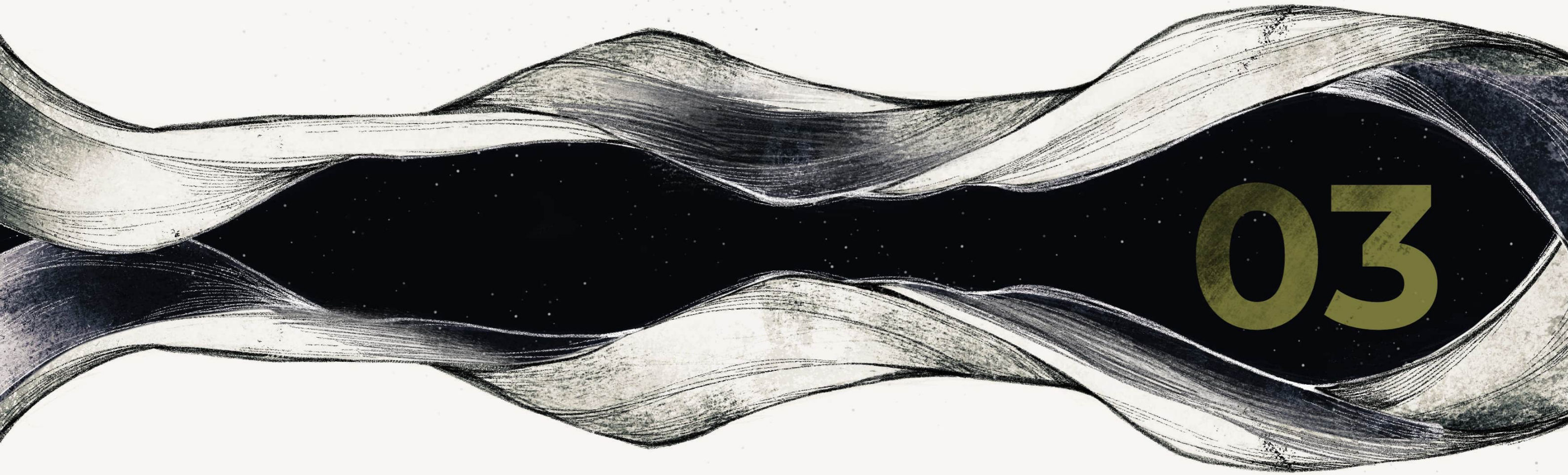
Figure 2.6. Huang, Y. (2020). *The Reason You Argue with Your Parents*.

In Huang's comic, we see children telling parents that they are going out to play with friends, but they interpret their children's friends as dangerous delinquents. Huang metaphorically describes this communication difficulty as an evil translator that distorts the meaning of the youth's voice. Through this malicious device's interpretation of speech, the conveyed message to parents becomes an act of rebellion by the children who misinterpret some remarks as challenging their authority as guardian. Retrieved November 20, 2023, from <https://m.weibo.cn/2342848315/4582140136666110>

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Conclusion

Chinese historical beliefs are present in ancient and contemporary Zhiguai stories, and the boundaries between fiction and realism, with a particular focus on the characterisation of ghostly figures. Delving into the ancient Chinese perspectives on life and death and the humanisation of ghosts, Zhiguai narratives transcend notions of fear and present opportunities to discuss the bizarre, the unusual and the human, serving as a rich vehicle to discuss emotion and human experience. In *Ghost Talk*, Zhiguai is a platform to dissect the prevailing expectations of Chinese parenthood and offer a critique on the academic expectations in Chinese culture.



03

RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Methodology

Ghost Talk stems from self-search through autoethnography and heuristic inquiry as methodological frameworks. Autoethnography and heuristics aid in the process of self-reflection and provide strategies for narrating a personal story in the creation of an illustrated book. These approaches involve assessing aspects personally experienced by the researcher as means to discuss a broader cultural context.

3.1.1 Self-search: Autoethnography and Heuristics

Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on, analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author” (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Emerald and Carpenter (2017, p. 35) suggest that “autoethnography is usually written retrospectively as a way of reflecting on a moment of significance”. Emmerich (2018) states that autoethnography can be divided into two main categories: evocative autoethnography, which emphasises the self, and analytic autoethnography, which emphasises culture. Allen-Collinson (2013, p. 287) suggests, “autoethnographic researchers whose focus shifts toward the culture end of the auto-ethno spectrum usually subject to in-depth analysis their lived experiences [and as a] member of a cultural or subcultural group, [... their] the aim is portraying vividly, and illuminating perceptively, wider cultural experiences, practices, and processes.”

To access personal experiences, memories became my initial point of entry in writing the script and designing *Ghost Talks*. During the initial stages of the research, the familiarity with my culture through my upbringing and filial piety has influenced me, making the research process rich yet challenging. The invisible cultural and ideological aspects I experienced were

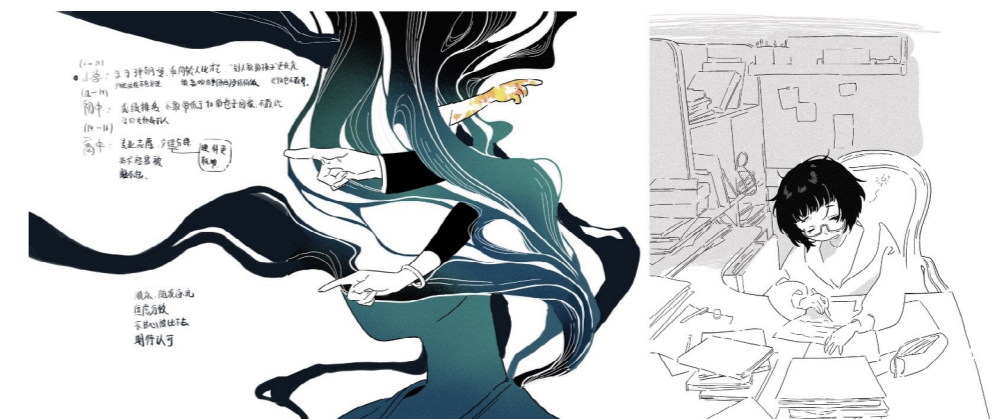
used to analyse similarities and differences between cultural backgrounds. Ngunjiri (2010) believes that the self in autoethnography needs to be constantly situated within diverse *others*, including those with similar, different, or irreconcilably different values and experiences. In this manner, I engaged in conversations with other Chinese and New Zealand students to gain a better perspective of my experience. In autoethnography this is a process of gathering self-information into an exploration of how the surrounding environment shapes the self (Ngunjiri, 2010). In addition to my parents' emphasis on academics inspiring the creation of the character Agui, my cousin, who shares similar experiences with me, also helped me develop Aren. My cousin has a dream of becoming a novelist. Although she ultimately did not pursue it as a career, she never abandoned it and continues to write in her spare time. This made me realise that some choices do not determine our entire future; what matters is staying true to our self-will.

Another self-searching method is heuristic enquiry which aims to uncover the essence of human experience through subjective reflection, exploration, and elucidation of the studied phenomena; its goal is to shed light on a specific problem, question, or theme through discovery and flexibility (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Bach (2002) suggests that focus is a crucial aspect at the onset of heuristic inquiry, enabling researchers to delve deeply into a topic or question. In *Ghost Talk*, the process of accessing personal experience included clearing my internal space, maintaining continuous attention, and being able to listen to the call of one's inner self. Using a process of self-dialogue, I was able to bring to attention the most memorable experiences from past events and changes in perspectives and translate this into the process of making. Custer suggests (2014, p. 2) that "the subjective nature of memory allows [the researcher] to hold [the memories in the] mind, move it around, and see it from many different angles." By recording the changes in perspectives through note-taking

and drawing, I was able to let the work emerge from this experience. I annotated memories and documented them as notes with illustrated feelings, personal experiences with my parents and friends (Figure 3.1). Through ongoing reflection on past memories, I continually reassessed whether the distinct characteristics of various characters had been portrayed effectively. I deliberately avoided excessive similarities between my own experiences and those of the characters, ensuring each had unique attributes in both personality and attire within the story. I crafted their dialogues to clearly highlight the differences in their perspectives.

During the design and writing of the story, scepticism around ghosts followed me due to my perception of absence of scientific evidence substantiating the existence of supernatural things. Still, during the design of *Ghost Talk*, I immersed myself in the mysterious atmosphere of the story, allowing the world of Zhiguai to transcend mere narration and establish a connection with my emotions. During this process of story design, I required a unique observational perspective to discover the magic within the story, that navigates between a dream state and perceptions of an inner world.

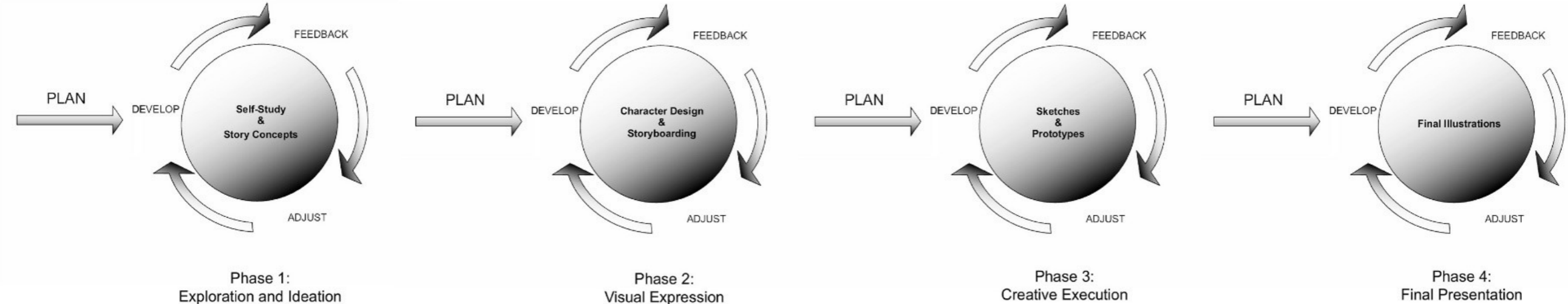
Figure 3.1. Liu, Y (2023). *Notation of memories.*
In this image, notation and drawing describe (in Chinese), what I experienced between 6 and 16 years. Here I record some experiences in elementary school (ages 6-11), middle school (ages 12-14), and high school (ages 15-16), along with my feelings about some of the requirements my parents had for me, such as achieving scores and the restrictions I had on certain hobbies.



3.2. Methods

During the process of designing the narrative and illustrated works for *Ghost Talk*, I engaged in methods that progressed cyclically through four progressive phases (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Liu, Y. (2024). *Diagram of methods process.* Phase one starts with exploration and ideation through self-study and story concepts. In this phase I documented inspirations drawn from personal experiences and cultural research and conceptualised plotlines. In phase two, I explored visual expressions through character design and storyboarding. In phase three, I engaged in the process of creative execution by drawing sketches and testing prototypes. In phase four, I worked on the final composition of the illustrations and refinements on the overall flow.



3.2.1. Phase One: Exploration and ideation

Scriptwriting operated as a method of self-reflection and cultural analysis that enriched the depth of the storyline in *Ghost Talk*. During this process, I went through several written iterations of the story world and plot creation with many versions and approaches exploring the overall ambience, setting, and character design of the story (Figure 3.3). The iteration also reflected in the ghosts' depictions, whether they existed in the story world, if

they were merely illusions, or their role changed throughout the narrative (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). In a trial-and-error process, I added and subtracted pieces of the plot from longer to shorter versions trying to understand aspects of past and present, boundaries between fiction and real (Figure 3.6).

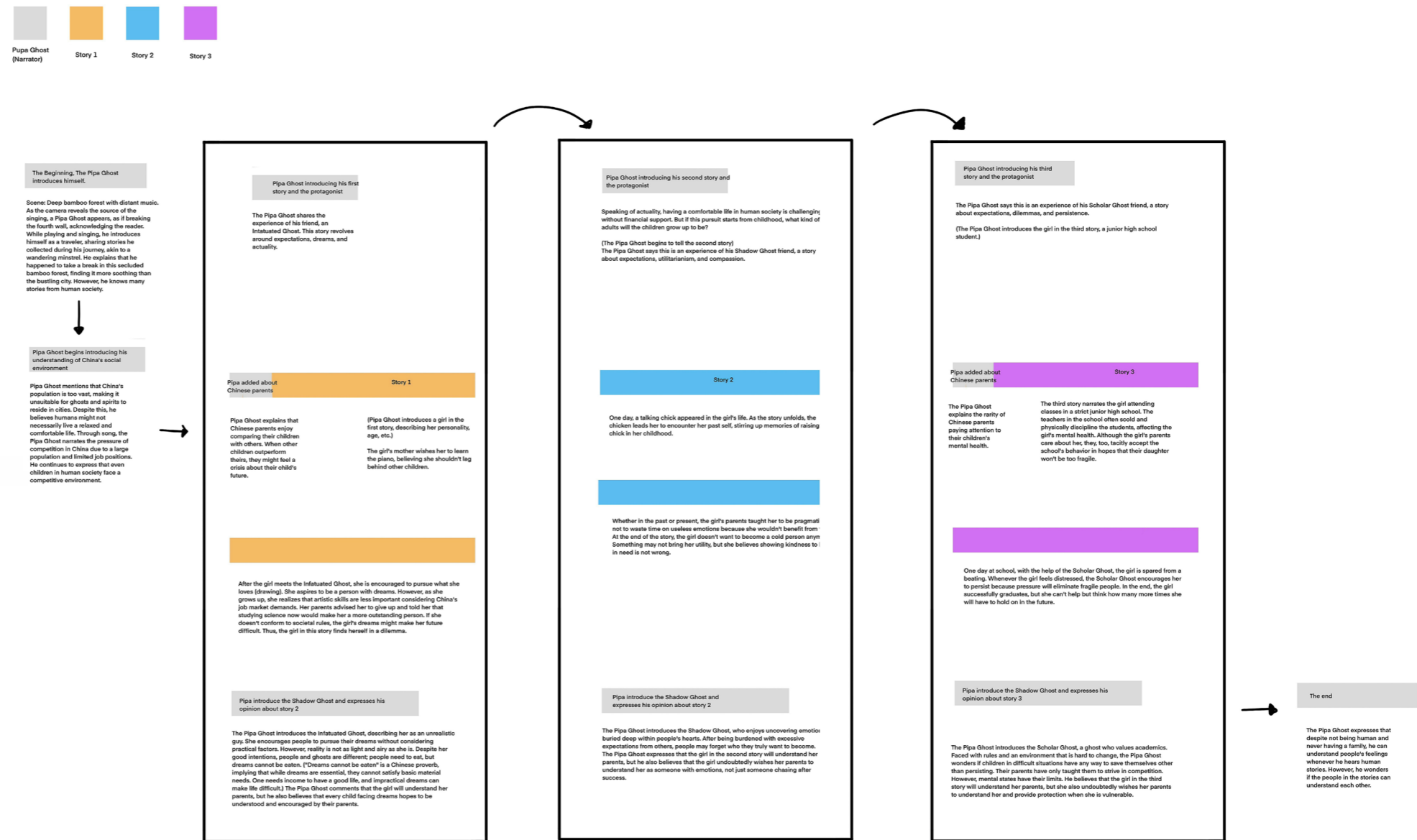


Figure 3.4. Liu, Y. (2023). *The Adventure of the Girl and the Ghosts*. In the initial version, a girl who sees ghosts decides to go on an adventure with one of them. In this version, the ghost was a creation from the girl's mind.

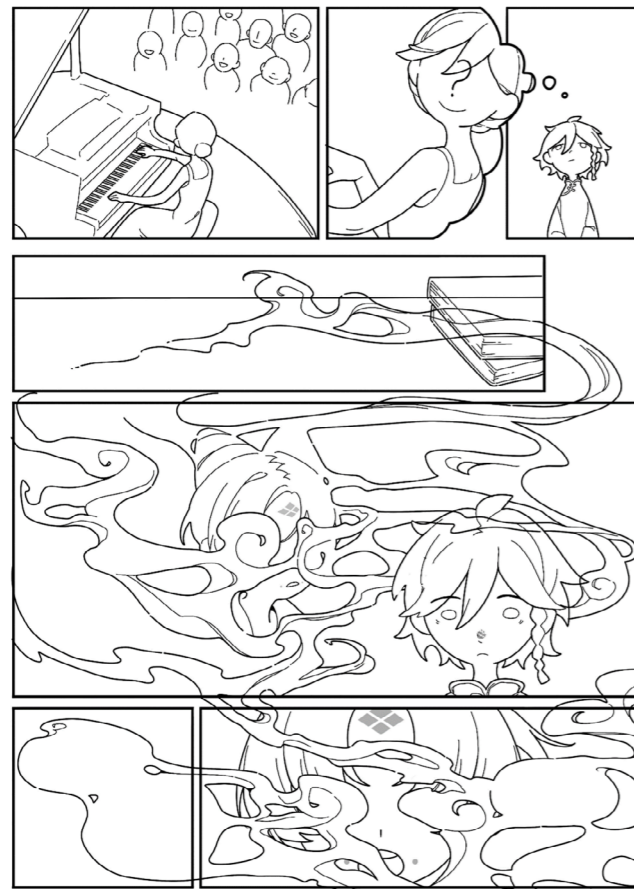


Figure 3.5. Liu, Y. (2023). *Three protagonists and three stories*.

This version narrative presents three separate ghost stories, all addressing challenges posed by parental expectations and the protagonists' psychological turmoil. Due to the length of the story, I opted to focus on one of the stories.

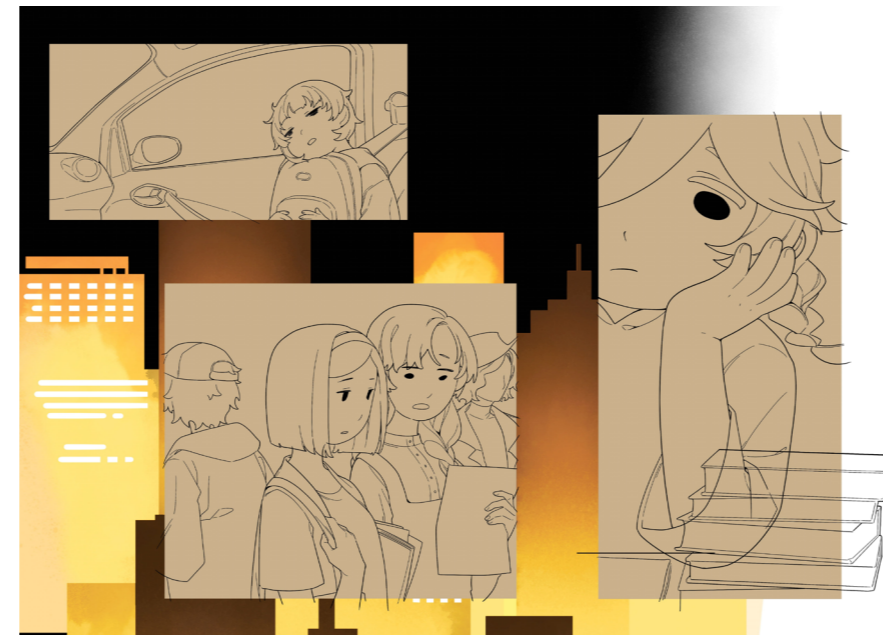
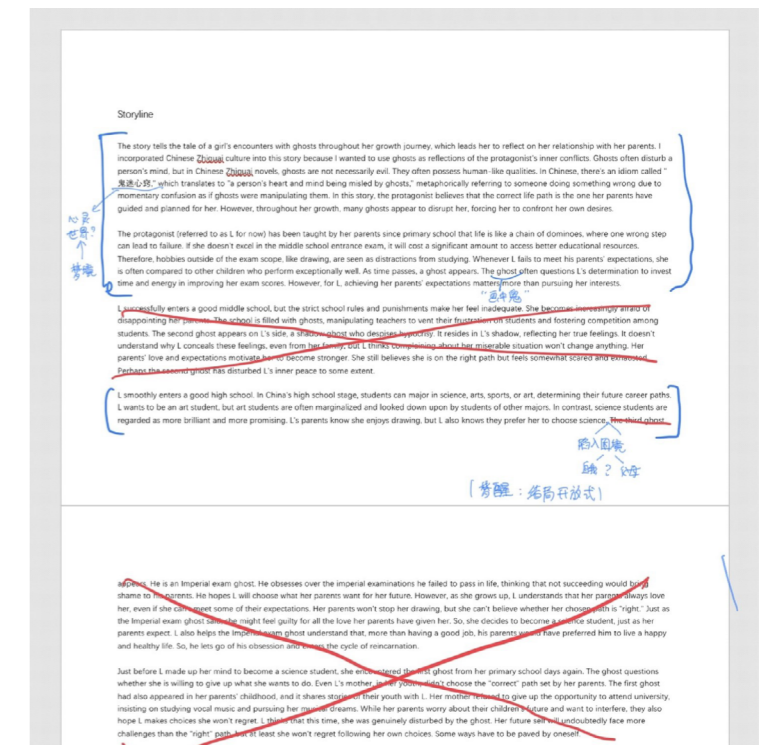


Figure 3.6. Liu, Y. (2023). *Cut down on the storyline*.

In this version of the story, I revised the synopsis, condensing three events into one to make the story shorter and more focused.



3.2.2. Phase two: Designing Characters and Storyboards

This phase refers to the process of character design and storyboards, from scripts to rough sketches (Figure 3.7) and finally digital painting. During this process, I worked between refining the narrative and defining the main characteristics of character and storyline.

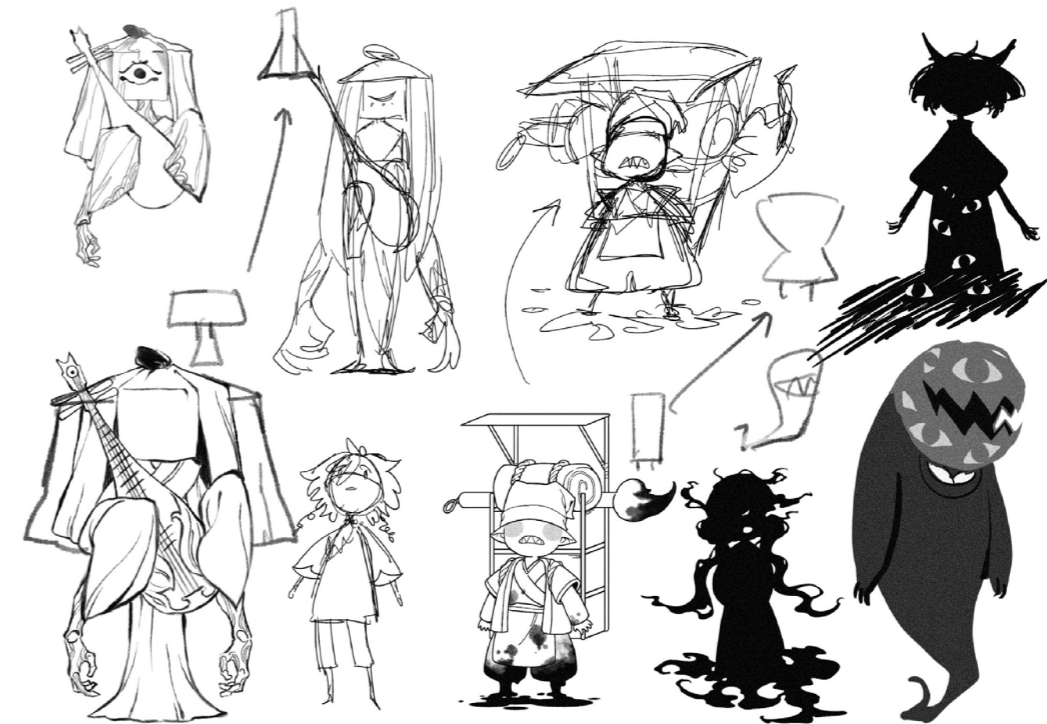
(1) Character design

During character design development, I created detailed *three-view sheets*, that included character costumes and actions (Figure 3.8). Although these sheets worked as initial references during the illustrating process, these character outlines were expanded during the development of the narrative.

In the earliest character designs, the protagonist was envisioned as a young girl who loved painting, embodying a lively and unconstrained spirit (Figures 3.9 and 3.10). Her unruly short hair and school uniform splattered with coloured paint. These traits gradually faded as she matured, evolving under parental expectations into a *composed and behaved* adult (Figure 3.11). Colour was essential to the earlier version of character design, as I experimented with watercolour and digital painting (Figures 3.12 and 3.13) as means to explore visual emotions. However, the abundance of flowing colours didn't complement the story as it made the scene appear cluttered. Influenced by Hu's artwork (Figure 2.5 – page 13), I later used black and white to express the emotional fluctuations in the tranquil atmosphere in some of the scenes.

Although the protagonist's clothing closely resembled my personal daily wear style, the lack of its ethnic features made it difficult to recognise the main character as Chinese. Therefore, I adjusted her attire (Figure 3.14) by incorporating traditional Chinese styles like the Qipao and Hanfu¹⁵ elements.

Figure 3.7. Liu, Y. (2023). *Ghost characters developmental sketches*. In these sketches, I explored shape and form focusing on the silhouettes of the characters.



FOOTNOTE

15. Qipao[旗袍] is a traditional Chinese dress characterised by its high-necked collar, and close-fitting silhouette, sometimes adorned with intricate patterns or embroidery. Hanfu[汉服] is a term for traditional Chinese clothing worn by the Han ethnic group. Hanfu has various styles, most featuring loose, flowing silhouettes and long, wide sleeves.

Figure 3.8. Liu, Y. (2023). *Three view sheets showing character designs for three ghosts Li Xiu, Zhizhi and Pipa.* In these boards, I draw character perspectives with annotations referring to the choice of clothes and behaviour for each character.

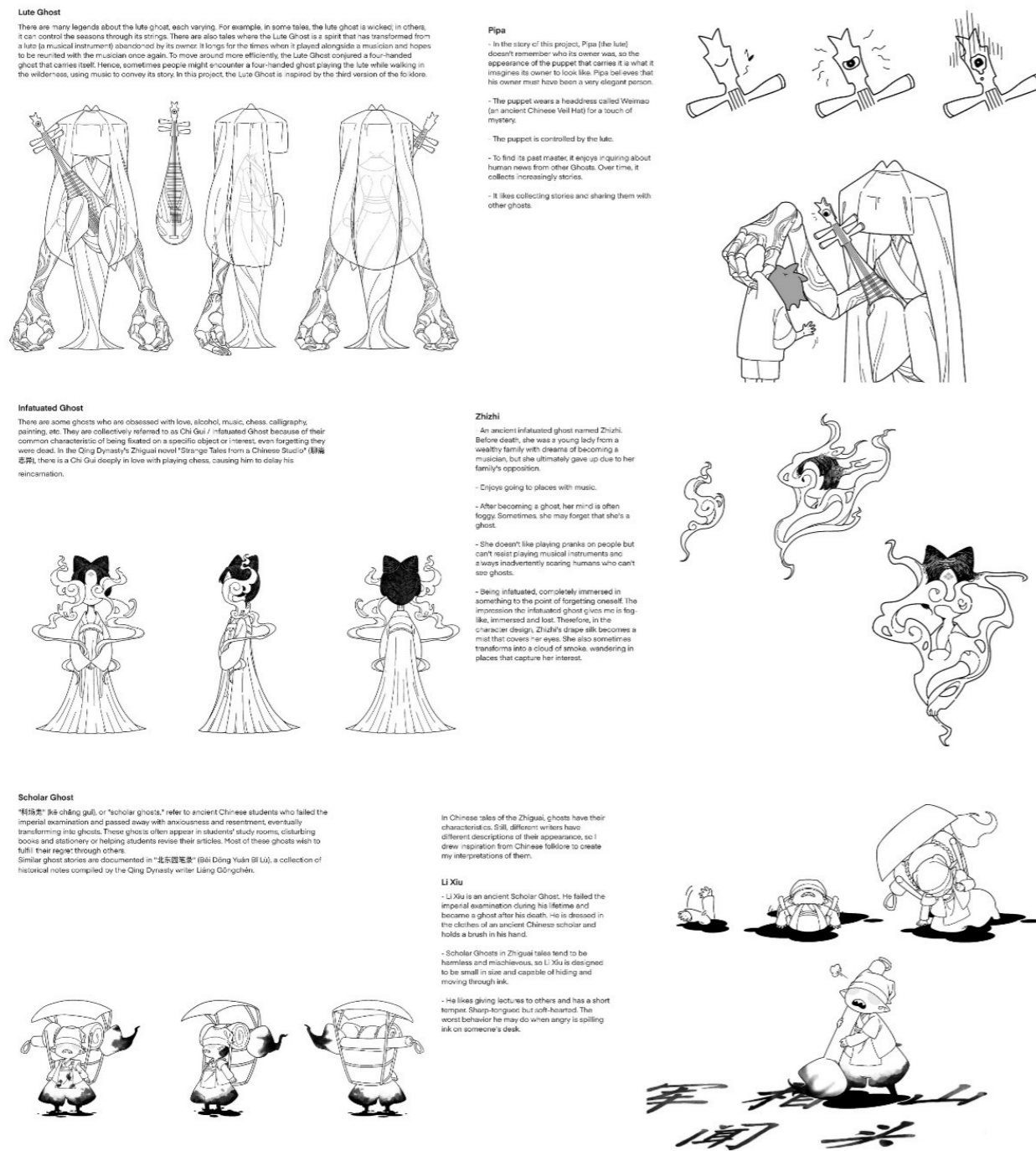


Figure 3.9 and 3.10. Liu, Y. (2023). *Character design for the protagonist Aren using colour to emphasise emotions and action.*



Figure 3.11. Liu, Y. (2023). *The protagonist at different stages of her life.*



Figure 3.12. Liu, Y. (2023). *Exploring visual emotions through digital drawing.*
The images illustrate my exploration of anxiety and turmoil in the face of parental expectations through a blend of colours and abstract textures. I opted for highly saturated colours to convey that parental expectations are also a part of love, expressing constraints woven from bright love.

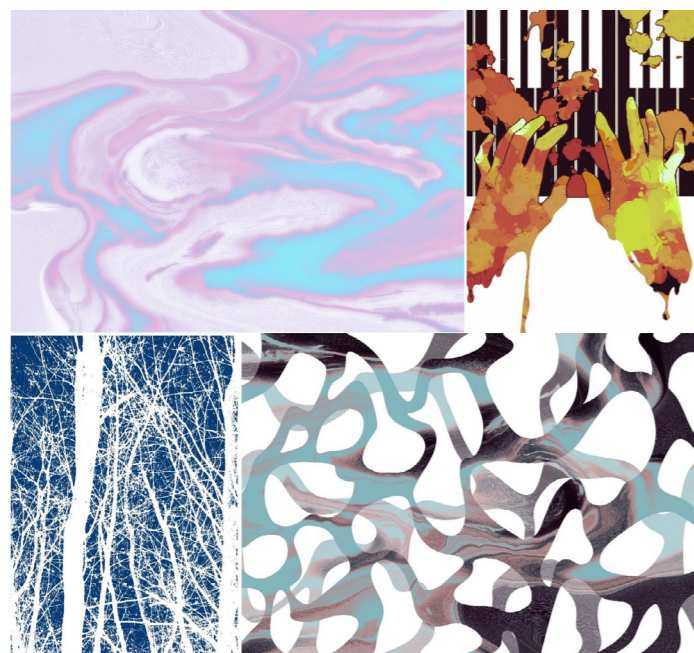


Figure 3.13. Liu, Y. (2023). *Exploring visual emotions through watercolour.*
I create a sense of flowing emotion through watercolours. In these experiments, the characters were left uncoloured, with coloured elements portrayed as emotions.



Figure 3.14. Liu, Y. (2023). *The Character design of Aren during her elementary, middle, and high school years.*

Although she appears more like a Chinese character compared to the character design shown in Figure 3.11, I found the curly hairstyle somewhat misleading; I realised that straight hair would better convey the impression of her suppressing herself under parental expectations of brushing her hair.



(1) Storyboarding

Storyboarding is a method of sketching that defined the main actions and emotional beats of a story, showcasing critical visual elements to each step (Wood, 2022). Chen et al. (2019, p. 2236) suggest that storyboarding “[does] not only simplify the understanding of textual stories with visual aids, but also makes the following steps in story production go more smoothly via planning key images in advance.” During this phase, storyboards allowed me to pre-plan the visual narrative of the story and prevent time spent making large-scale revisions to the content during the drawing process. Furthermore, the storyboard enabled me to concisely present the concept and seek feedback from peers to optimise the understanding. Its communication benefits quickly manifested in my practice by eliminating excessive dialogues and exploring the power of visual storytelling (Figure 3.15). Therefore, to empower the visuals, I decided to use the characters' expressions and actions to convey their feelings and behaviours instead of relying on written storytelling (Figures 3.16 and 3.17).

Figure 3.15. Liu, Y. (2023). *Early drafts of panels in the storyboards depicting Aren (the protagonist).*

In this part of the story, Aren discovers a ghost in her home, but her mother doesn't believe what she says. During this process of designing the panels, I realised that despite adding more pages to the book, most of the plot was propelled by the characters' dialogues, and the illustrations conveyed minimal information. This approach resulted in a lack of visual impact, leading to a hectic and exhausting reading experience.



Figure 3.16. Liu, Y. (2023). *Some sketches of the second storyboard.*

These panels depict the mother discovering Aren distracted while studying and criticising her. I realised that this scene lacked detailed characters' expressions and actions, making it difficult to understand the overall context of the narrative.



Figure 3.17. Liu, Y. (2024). *Some sketches of the third storyboard.*

These panels depict the mother criticising Aren, then leaving her to answer the phone. While reducing the dialogue necessitated more panels to tell the story, I realised that they also contributed to the emotional impact of certain point of the narrative and provided more rhythm to the story.



When adjusting the continuity of the storyboard's panels, I employed two main strategies. One was to ensure consistency in the positions and directions of characters by keeping their positions and camera angles on the story (Figures 3.18 and 3.19). The other referred to the continuity of panels that relied on attention and cropping. I continuously shift the focus of the camera to highlight elements in the scene that I want to emphasise and bring attention to (Figure 3.20). Cohn, Weiner and Grossman (2012) argue that "readers track only the most important aspects of a sequence to establish the continuity of the narrative". However, I quickly realised that this strategy was challenging (Figure 3.21), since the frequent manipulation of camera positions could disrupt continuity and interpretation of the narrative (Figure 3.22).

Figure 3.18. Liu, Y. (2024). *One of the continuity tests for the storyboard.*

Initial sketches showed the character continuously changing the direction she is facing within the four panels. The draft illustrates a conversation between a girl and her father in the study. The changes in the characters' orientations seemed to be detrimental to the continuity of the graphic narrative.

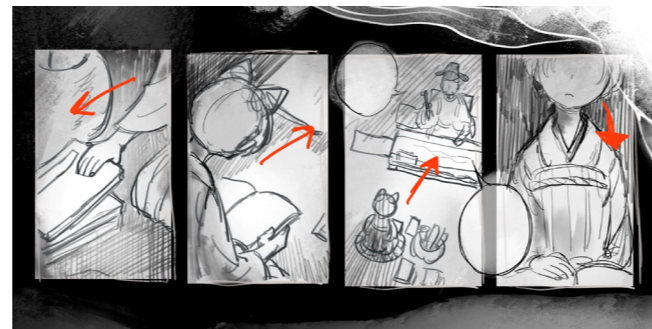


Figure 3.19. Liu, Y. (2024). *Continuity in panels.*

To maintain visual continuity, I changed the character's positions by altering the orientation of characters in the panels and adjusting the camera angles so the reader could perceive the movement of the scenes.

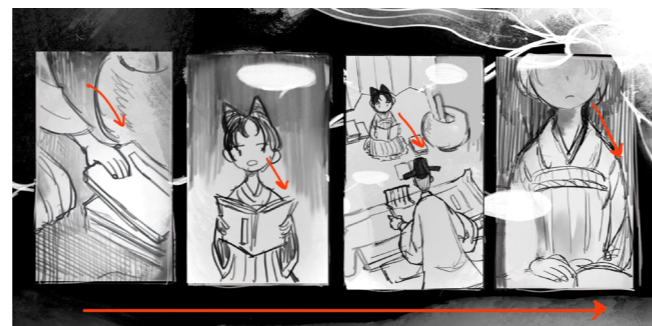


Figure 3.20. Liu, Y. (2024). *Maintaining continuity through the movement of forces on the panels.*

These panels show Aren secretly taking out a sketchbook and drawing a painting through four consecutive panels: (1) from the sketchbook to (2) the girl's face, then (3) to her side body, and finally (4) directing back towards the movement of her hand.

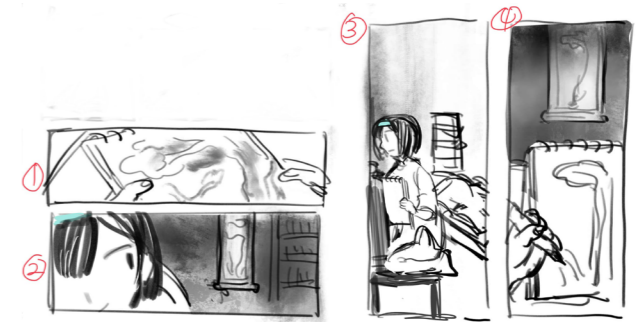


Figure 3.21. Liu, Y. (2024). *Maintaining continuity Test 1.*

The three panels in this storyboard depict a girl listening intently to the sounds outside, then, realising no one is coming, she retrieves a sketchbook from a drawer.



Figure 3.22. Liu, Y. (2024). *Maintaining continuity Test 2.*

Similar to Figure 3.21, this storyboard provides a more detailed depiction of the girl's consecutive actions from looking around to taking out her sketchbook.



3.2.3. Phase three: Creative Execution

As the final painting process, sketching was the phase in which I determined the overall composition of the panels through three stages.

In the first stage, I freely wield my pen on paper, simultaneously engaging in uncertain thoughts and drawings (Figure 3.23). Practising and expanding ideas on the go was advantageous for capturing emerging and chaotic thoughts in my mind that were gradually refined into more precise forms.

The second stage involved a selection of sketches and transferring them to the computer for further development (Figure 3.24). Digital drawing (on iPad using Procreate software) allowed me to easily edit and scale the image to further observe the composition layout. During this development, I added more details and

filled in colour blocks to generate a rough sense of atmosphere, predicting the final colouring effects and providing explicit references for the next digital painting process.

In the third stage, I focused on the line art (with minimal colour) to render a tranquil atmosphere with subtle emotions. I envisioned the lines to be the leading force in enriching the content of the illustration and utilised this stage to emphasise the basic structure and composition of the digital painting. This led the shading and colouring of the panels to explore ambience and atmosphere (Figure 3.25).

Figure 3.23. Liu, Y. (2024). *The early stage of exploring storyboards. Sketching on paper.*

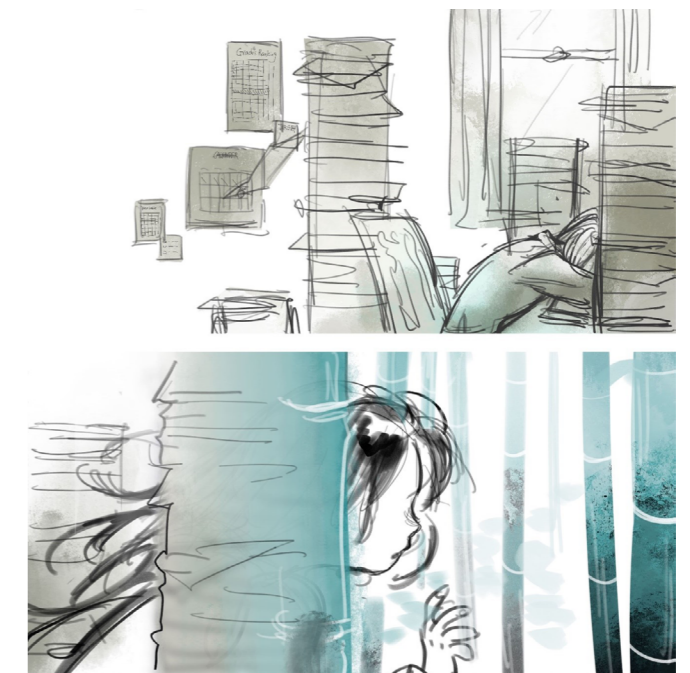


Figure 3.24. Liu, Y. (2024). *Line arts.*

This phase emphasised the overall composition and details before the digital colouring of the panels.



Figure 3.25. Liu, Y. (2024). *Explorations of using digital drawing for sketching.*



3.2.4. Phase four: Final Presentation

After completing the storyboards and digitalisation of panels, I printed and bound them into a prototype book to test the layout and the readability of the textual and visual sequencing (Figures 3.26 and 3.27), while using them in feedback sessions. Blackwell and Manar (2015, para. 1) suggest that “a prototype is an initial model of an object built to test a design.” Mackay and Beaudouin-Lafon (2023) believe that prototypes provide a common foundation for communication among designers, audiences, and other stakeholders.

During prototype testing, I realised there were of issues legibility, size and use of materials in the overall design. At feedback sessions with other designers, I usually provided them with these prototypes with no specific explanation. This method allowed a pair of *fresh eyes* to view the storyline and identify holes and incoherences in the narrative. During feedback sessions, I documented conversations and ideas received on these prototypes, that led to subsequent modifications.

Figure 3.26. Liu, Y. (2023). A4 size prototype.

During the prototype creation process, I initially attempted to design it as an A4 book (210×297mm). I found that while the aspect ratio suited vertical comic panels, the pages felt cramped and the panels became small, losing their impact.

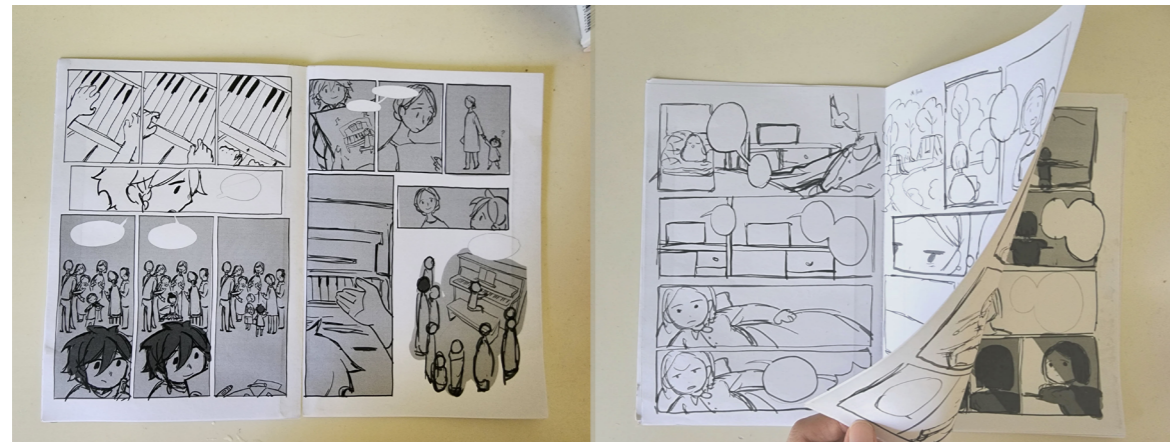


Figure 3.27. Liu, Y. (2024). Prototype with notes.

In a new large size version, the format was changed to landscape. Post-it notes were placed in pages to annotate collected suggestions and changes on continuity and readability of the story.



Conclusion

Utilising autoethnography and heuristic inquiry, *Ghost Talk* was created using a four-phase cyclic method of production. I formulated narratives and scripts and visual representation of illustrations, progressing through character design, storyboarding, sketching and digital painting. Although this project is based on personal experiences, the communicative power of the story is tested in the use of prototypes to garner feedback for the refinement of the work.



04

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This chapter connects theoretical concepts with the strategies implemented in the narrative construction, character, environmental design, and the illustrative expression of the created world. It outlines how *Ghost Talk* incorporated Chinese cultural elements in reference to a Zhiguai style of narration alongside the use of metaphors to address the societal issues of Chinese parental expectations and filial piety and processes."

4.1. The Synopsis

Ghost talk tells the story of 16-year-old Chinese girl named Aren who lives in contemporary China. At the outset of the narrative, Aren succumbs to drowsiness amidst her heavy workload of high school coursework and faintly hears a voice calling out to her. Subsequently, she follows the voice and enters a dream, arriving at a place called the Tranquil Place, akin to a serene environment. Walking into a bamboo forest, Aren discovers that the voice's origin is a hermit playing a pipa¹⁶ with her face obscured. The hermit seeks Aren's assistance in safeguarding the Tranquil Place which is on the brink of disappearance, where the solution lies in Aren reassessing her forgotten childhood experiences. Thus, the hermit initiates a story, attempting to awaken Aren's memories. Because of the naturalisation of ghosts' encounters in Zhiguai narratives (Hajdu, 2018; Aiqing & Whyke, 2023; Ancuta, 2017), in the story, the protagonist momentarily expresses surprise when encountering ghosts, but she does not pursue the reasons. Speculations about ghosts' meanings and hidden metaphors are left to the audience to decipher.

In the hermit's narration, Aren, as a child who enjoyed drawing, sees another ghost named Agui, who lives in a different era to Aren in the past. Agui shares her life experiences in the Tang Dynasty (618 CE) and explains to young Aren why she had to forsake her hobbies and adhere to her parents' educational goals. Agui, who has an old-fashioned perception of the world, tells Aren to give up her dreams of drawing and strive to fulfill her parents' expectations. From this suggestion, Aren then decides to bury her love for drawing in her inner world, transforming these feelings into an imagined Tranquil Place, where she escapes in moments of struggle. In this moment in the narrative, the true is revealed. Over the years, Aren's hidden dreams became the hermit herself, who diligently safeguards this Tranquil Place upon her return before this place becomes forgotten and disappears completely.

FOOTNOTE

16. Pipa [琵琶] has a history spanning over two thousand years. It is a Chinese lute prominent with short-necked solo instrument in Chinese opera orchestras (Britannica, 2018). Its aesthetics are deeply intertwined with the essence of Chinese culture, including painting and poetry, making the pipa akin to a brush that transports the audience into Chinese landscapes crafted by its music (Li, 2023). I embody the pipa's aesthetics in my story, where a hermit creates beautiful scenery that touching the Aren's soul through the melodies of the pipa.

4.2. Concepts around *Ghost Talk*

The name *Ghost Talk* draws from the Chinese idiom “a string of ghostly talk” [鬼话连篇]¹⁷ which means being full of deceitful and nonsensical words. Using the idea that ghosts do not exist (Yangming Wang, 1368-1644), the idiom suggests that the words spoken by ghosts are also unreal. Therefore, this idiom can be used to describe the lack of truthfulness and credibility spoken by someone. On the one hand, the ghosts in the narrative serve as narrators of certain events, challenging the literal meaning of a ghost talking. *Ghost Talk* takes the Chinese proverb “finding a pure land in the earthly realm” as its starting point, narrating the adventures of a girl seeking tranquility in the realm of her mind. Another layer of meaning in the title implies that ghost talk is nonsense.

As the story unfolds within Aren’s dreamscape, the ghosts she sees may not be real individuals, or just bizarre occurrences. The narrative structure employs an embedded narrative known as “story within the story” (Nelles, 1992), where past and present, real and dreams coexist.¹⁸ Aren’s memories and recollections are crucial for the decoding of the narrative that starts with the enigma initiated by the hermit. Aren’s pursuit of answers is done through introspection while we progress the story layer by layer. It provides a narrative that depicts a deeper transformation of the character from past to present.

Unlike Confucianist views on Zhiguai, the ghosts in *Ghost Talk* stem not from supernatural entities but from Aren’s mental actions. While Agui’s tale recounted by the hermit may not be real, the “parental expectations” and the emotions embodied by Agui are real; and similarly, the hermit may not exist, but the self-expectations she represents are genuine. Both the storyline and the ghostly characters are considered fabrications of her

dreams and hidden emotions. Yet, the ghosts originate from Aren’s experiences, forming a narrative where the truth and falsehood coexist.

Building upon the humanisation of ghosts in Zhiguai (Huang, 2016), in *Ghost Talk*, they represent the inner world or realities some refuse to accept. In the story, the connection between the character and ghosts becomes apparent when one attempts to understand herself through them. This perspective is presented in the relationship between Agui and the hermit.

Concepts of dreams in the Zhiguai story, draw inspiration from the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (the Warring States period). In the story, Zhuangzi — once transformed into a butterfly in his dream — was unaware of his original identity. Upon waking, he doubted whether he truly existed in an objective reality or was merely an illusion in the dream of a butterfly. In *Ghost Talk*, by placing Aren in a fantastical dream, the ghost characters become more loyal to her feelings. This combination of dreams and ghosts intends to create more interpretive depth to the story.

Ghost Talk used personal perspectives while acknowledging the cultural subtleties and influences of parental expectations¹⁹ within the historical and social context of contemporary China. Parental expectations are implicitly present in the characters’ dynamics. For instance, throughout the story, there is no direct portrayal of Aren’s parents, but there is a metaphorical connection through Agui’s character. As a mature character Agui indirectly imposes her own views onto the immature ‘dreamer’ Aren, shaping her future. The interaction between characters (who despite their age, appear capable of equal communication) replaces the concept of ‘authoritative elders’, fostering a narrative tone of mutual understanding rather than criticism.

FOOTNOTE

17. 鬼话连篇 is a Chinese idiom. Its literal translation is “the ghost spoke at length.” Metaphorically, it means that some words are not credible, just like things spoken by non-existent ghosts are false.

18. When 16-year-old Aren encounters a hermit in her dream, the plot changes time to 9-year-old Aren. Before commencing her narration, the hermit avoids revealing her identity and the true nature of the Tranquil Place, creating suspense that entices readers to anticipate the story’s progression. As the hermit’s narrative approaches its conclusion, mysteries are unveiled.

FOOTNOTE

19. Lin (2010) suggests that emphasis on education and filial piety in Confucian thought have always influenced interpersonal relationships and life in contemporary Chinese society.

4.3. The Characters and the environment

The background and character design in the story incorporate elements of Chinese traditional clothing and poetry, enriching *Ghost Talk* both in terms of depth and visual appeal. Characters serve as expressions and affirmations of Chinese cultural identity, showcasing diversity and sharing my personal approach to storytelling.

4.3.1. Aren (阿荇)

The protagonist, Aren (Figure 4.1), is a Chinese girl born in 2000. In her name, the pronunciation of “ren” is the same as the pronunciation of “人” (people) in Chinese, which adds a dramatic and symbolic layer to her experiences with ghosts. Aren embodies two personas: her vibrant 9-year-old self, passionate about drawing despite parental disapproval, and her weary, pressured 16-year-old self, sacrificing hobbies for academic success to meet parental expectations.

In the early design phase, distinguishing the two Arens from different periods as the same person was challenging due to variations in hairstyle and clothing. Consequently, to mitigate the disparity in their appearances, both characters sported identical green headbands. Her clothing blends modern with traditional elements to convey Aren’s youthful Chinese identity. Her attire incorporates traditional Chinese clothing like Qipao (footnote 15 – page 22) collars (Figure 4.2), wide sleeves, and knot buttons. Compared to the Hanfu worn by Agui, the qipao gained popularity during a period closer to contemporary China. Thus, incorporating elements of the qipao serves to differentiate Aren, a modern character, from the historical one.

Additionally, Aren’s hairstyle makes her appear more compliant, as the story doesn’t focus much on her “rebellious” side but on how she conforms to her parents’ expectations. Aren’s growth reflects her transition from being true to her desire, to relinquishing it, with her parents’ expectations becoming a part of her life and playing a role in this transformation.

Figure 4.1. Liu, Y. (2024). Character designs for Aaron at ages 9 and 16.



Figure 4.2. Unidentified artist. (1930). A 1930s advertisement for the new dye of the era. Depicting a woman in a qipao. Retrieved April 27, 2024, from <https://www.thepankou.com/history-of-the-qipaos-golden-era-1930s/>

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4.3.2. Yin (隱)

Yin is a hermit that appears in the Tranquil Place of Aren's dream. She is a mysterious character with a covered face and embodies Aren's discarded self-wish. She can be seen as Aren's 'inner-self'. Yin resides in Aren's inner world, hoping to create peace to soothe Aren's anxious emotions. Hence, she refers to herself as a hermit.

Yin wears a white Hanfu and a Mili [幂篱] (Figures 4.3 and 4.4), a Chinese veil. Her dress is long and narrow to accentuate her calm and unhurried personality as a hermit; the oversized sleeves and the long veil on her hat envelop her figure, adding a sense of mystery to the character. When the wind blows or she moves, the sleeves and veils easily flutter, reflecting the hermit's free-spirited nature.

The name "Yin" [隱] means "hidden from sight" in Chinese, which aligns with her concealed identity within Aren's inner world. The hidden Yin also symbolises Aren hiding her true self.

Figure 4.3. Unidentified artist. (early 15th century). *A partial excerpt of the painting "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute- The Story of Lady Wenji" showing a lady with Hanfu and Mili veil.* Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimao>. Note. This work is in public domain.

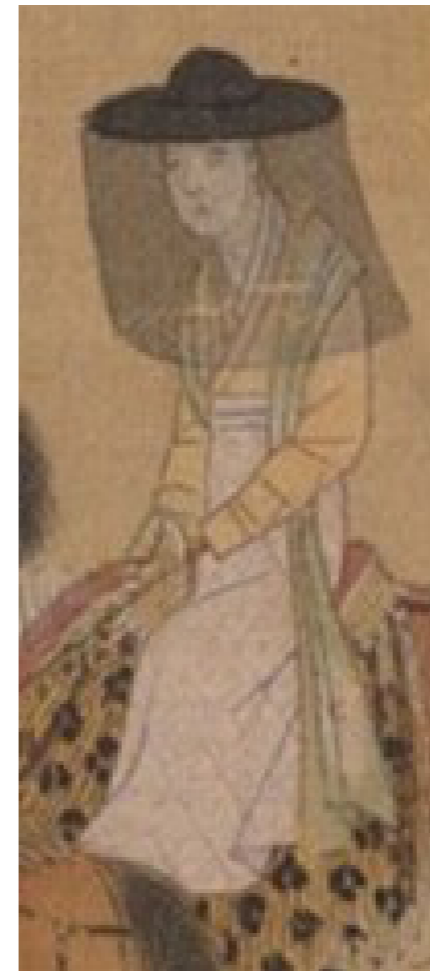


Figure 4.4. 装束复原 . (2019). *Early Tang Dynasty Lady with a Mili Hat.* The Tang Dynasty clothing style reconstructed by the 装束复原 (Costume Restoration) team based on historical Chinese artifacts. Retrieved April 20, 2024, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39569>

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4.3.3. Agui (阿桂)

The name Agui, originates from "gui" and sounds like the Chinese word for "鬼" (Ghost), forming a contrast with Aren's name. Agui (Figure 4.5) is a woman from ancient China (Tang dynasty 618 CE) who desired to have scholarly recognition and was opposed to the existent societal Confucian norms, but for women, this was not permissible at the time (O'Sullivan & Cheng, 2022; Liu, 2006). After her death, she became a ghost within Aren's paintings, envying modern women's educational opportunities. Agui's existence in Aren's childhood remains ambiguous, suggesting the possibility of being just a creation from the hermit's telling. Inspired by China's Shuoshu culture (footnote 13 – page 11), Agui is depicted as a ghostly figure crafted by the hermit's oral telling through a blend of reality and fiction.

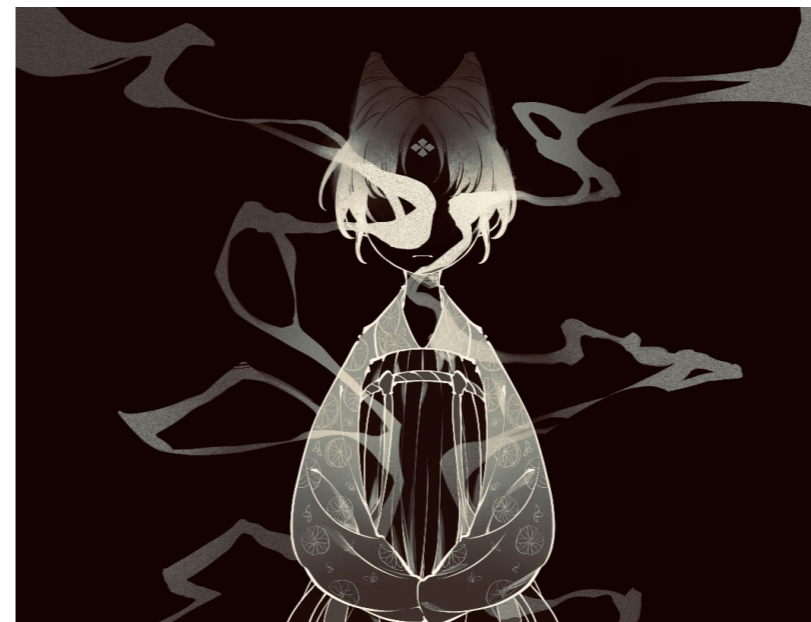
Agui's attire features the traditional Chinese garment of a Qixiong ruqun²⁰ (Figure 4.6). The long, flowing skirt and the absence of a tight belt give her a ghostly sense of freedom; the character design is also inspired by the Lao Nv Snake design by the illustrator V-V (Figure 2.4 – page 13), with the obscured visage attempting to evoke the dangerous and mysterious aura of an unseen ghost.

In the story, Agui's ideals are what Aren doesn't want to face but must. She represents the traditional expectations of Chinese parents regarding their children's studies. Her presence also symbolises Aren's dilemma. Following the filial path aligns with Confucian principles, but it contradicts Aren's desires. Therefore, Aren hesitates between fulfilling her parents' expectations and pursuing her dreams, reflected in her conversation with Agui.

In the framework of my embedded narrative, the tales featuring Aren and Yin within the contemporary timeframe are imbued with a richer palette, whereas the embedded narrative recounting the formative years of young Aren and Agui predominantly employs monochromatic renderings. Drawing inspiration from Hu Rui's monochromatic illustrations (Figure 2.5 – page 13), my objective is to cultivate a tranquil ambiance and invoke a nuanced melancholic sentiment, thus endeavouring to portray the essence of the "past" through black and white illustrative representations.

Figure 4.6. Zhang, X. (714-755). A partial excerpt of the painting "Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk". The clothing worn by the woman in this painting is Qixiong ruqun. The high waistband, narrow sleeves, and loose long skirt of the Qixiong ruqun are all reflected in Agui's design. Retrieved from https://zh.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BC%B5%E8%90%B1_%E5%94%90%E6%9C%9D%E7%95%AB%E5%AE%B6. Note. This work is in public domain.

Figure 4.5. Liu, Y. (2024). *The Character design of the ghost, Agui.* As a ghost, Agui's body is translucent, and she wears clothing from her era. Her face is veiled by a mist-like "silk", keeping her mysterious.



FOOTNOTE

20. A style of Hanfu. The belt of the skirt is tied around the chest rather than the waist (Tibberts, 2021). The Qixiong Ruqun was prevalent during China's Tang Dynasty, a period noted for its progressive social ethos and the elevation of women's intellectual and social status (Wang, 2024). Consequently, I selected Tang Dynasty attire for Agui, a character who contemplates and yearns for women's rights.

4.3.4. The Tranquil Place

Chinese building styles appear in the scenes portraying ancient settings where ghosts live (Figure 4.7), while Nature draws inspiration from ancient Chinese poetry and allusions (Figure 4.8). Poems like "逝川与流光，飘忽不相待"²¹ (Li Bai, 701-762) metaphorically link time to a river, while "草不谢荣于春风，木不怨落于秋天"²² (Li Bai, 701-762) compare human attitudes toward life to plant growth and decline. These poetic landscapes inspire my storytelling by subtly portraying Aren's mindset through the changing surroundings of her around nature, rivers and bamboo forests. In addition, the illustrations delineating the narrative unfolding within the contemporary timeline predominantly utilise cool tonalities, notably blue or cyan. Nevertheless, as the narrative approaches its denouement, warmer hues such as orange are introduced, symbolising the emotional fluctuations inherent in the protagonist Aren's psyche.

The story starts with Aren's search for inner peace amid academic pressure and parental expectations. Contemplating whether to painting another painting hanging on her wall, she delves into her introspective world through a dream. The inspiration behind the emphasis on maintaining inner calm and purity in the Tranquil Place stems from Tao's (365–427) poems *Drinking Wine No. 5* [饮酒 (其五)]²³ and *The Peach Blossom Spring* (footnote 4 – page 9). The Tranquil Place expresses Aren's desire to escape the chaos of reality and suggests that even if circumstances remain unchanged, one can alleviate troubles and unrest by altering their mindset.

FOOTNOTE

21. 逝川与流光，飘忽不相待 means that time passes like a flowing river; once gone, it never returns, waiting for no one. It is from the poem "古风五十九首·其十一" by Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty.

22. 草不谢荣于春风，木不怨落于秋天 means that grass does not thank the spring breeze for its prosperity, and trees do not blame autumn for their falling leaves. It metaphorically suggests that people should adapt to their environment and face changes calmly. It is from the poem "相和歌辞·日出行" by Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty.

23. The original lines of the poem are "结庐在人境，而无车马喧。问君何能尔？心远地自偏 translates as "living amidst the hustle and bustle of people, yet I couldn't hear the noise of carriages and horses; if you ask me why, it's because my soul has avoided the clamor" (Tao, 365-427).

Figure 4.7. Liu, Y. (2023). *An alley with Chinese ethnic style in initial depictions of environments in the story.* The ancient environment in which the ghost (Agui) lived in her past life.

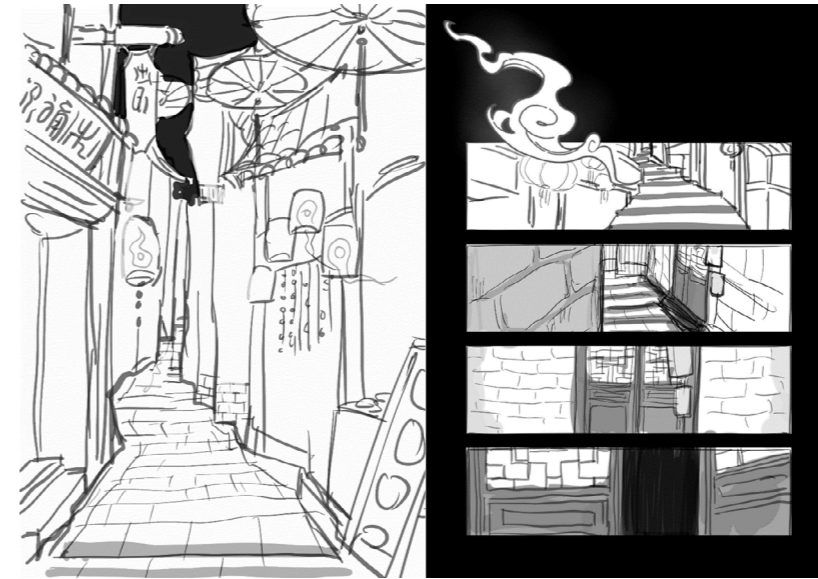
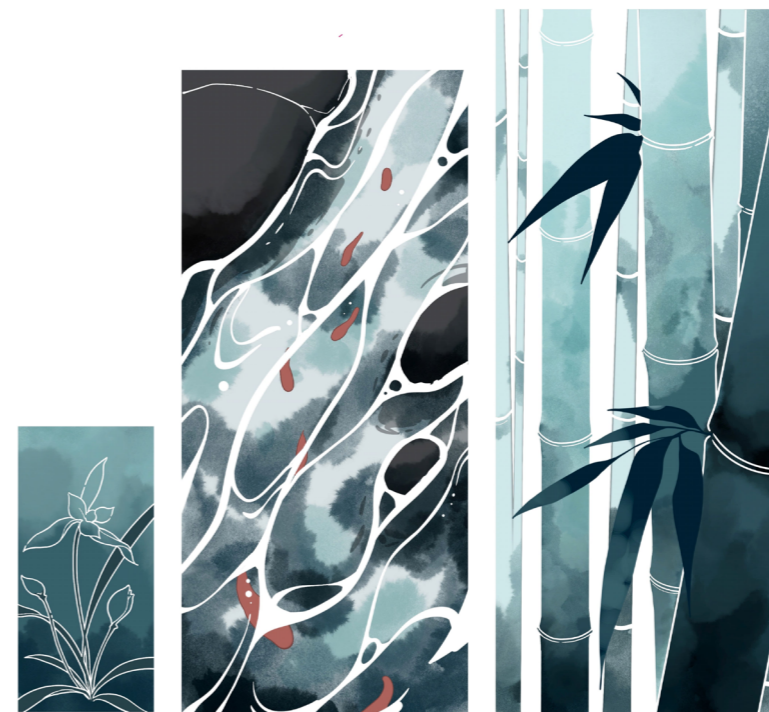


Figure 4.8. Liu, Y. (2023). *Poetic illustrations depicting nature.* The unassuming little plants quietly grow, never giving up despite their smallness; the river water flows endlessly towards the future and distant place; the tall and straight bamboo remains unbowed despite its towering stature. In the Tranquil Place, all things adhere to the laws of nature, revealing their spirits.



4.4. Visualising parental expectations

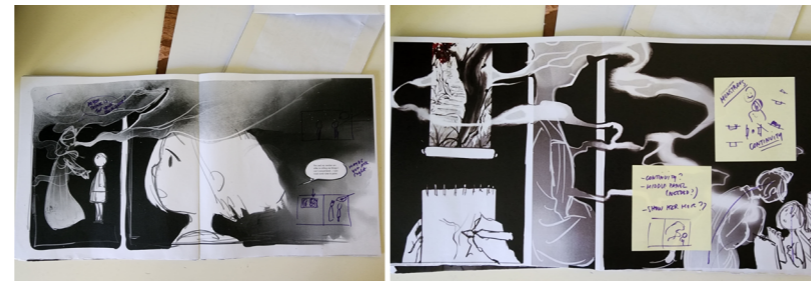
In *Ghost Talk*, elements resembling smoke and sheer veils often swirl around or cover characters, representing the expectations of others. In the story, these manifestations stem from Agui and Aren's care for elders; hence, they seem to have a gentle texture, yet they desire to envelop others, thus embodying a sense of constraint.

In the autobiographical graphic novel "Lighter Than My Shadow" Green (2021) discusses the power of visual metaphors to describe emotions more vividly. In this sense, the representations of *smoke* appear as parent's expectations throughout the narrative. As Agui attempts to persuade Aren to accept her opinion, the "expectations" (emanating from her) also try to envelope and manipulate Aren (Figure 4.9 and Figure 4.10). Additionally, Aren's expectations materialise as white veils, enveloping the hermit, symbolising that the hermit inherits Aren's self, carrying her expectations and desires. Fahmi (2016) asserts, "the denotative context of the narrative text is interpreted by the connotation of the visual text; thereby, an illustration is polysemous, and the meaning-making is indefinite" (p. 46). In *Ghost Talk*, illustrations possess the potential to convey complex meanings through poetry and providing multi-level interpretations can trigger the audience's thinking.

Figure 4.9. Liu, Y. (2024). The veil. This storyboard shows layers of silk, symbolising parents' expectations when trying to cover Agui and Aren.



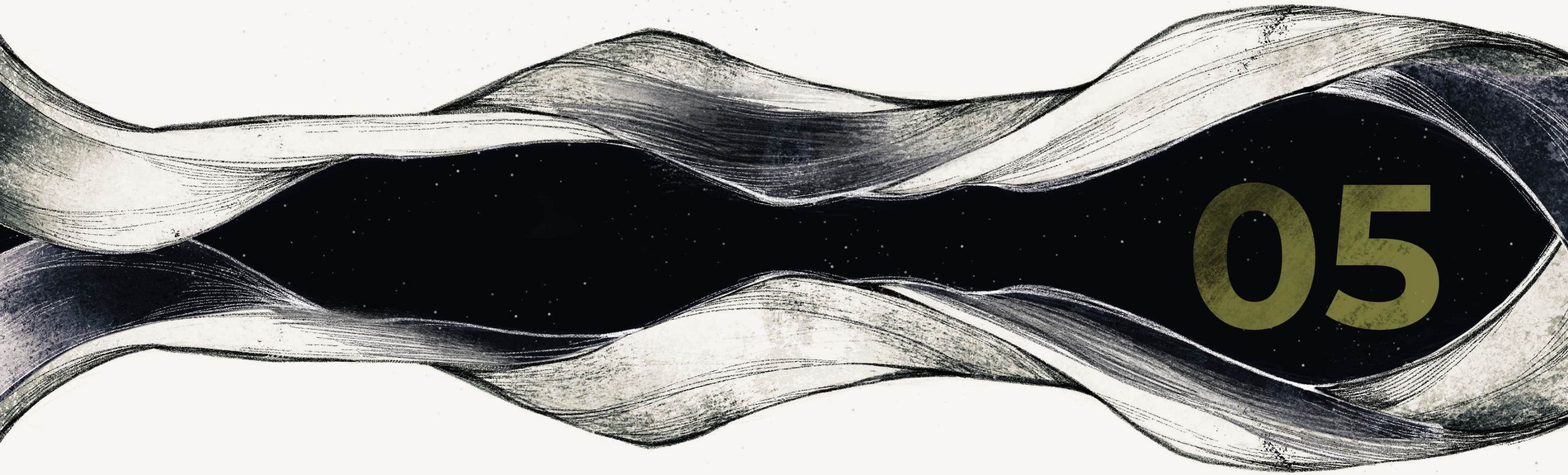
Figure 4.10. Liu, Y. (2024). The veil 2. This storyboard shows Agui trying to get Aren to accept her preconceptions and expectations.



Conclusion

In this chapter, I delineate the narrative strategies employed in *Ghost Talk* and, through the embedded metaphors, illustrate a personal experience. Additionally, I offer a detailed explanation of the environment and character designs, including the cultural connotations they embody based on Chinese traditional clothing and writing. This final section also discusses the strategies of a 'story within a story' (Nelles, 1992) that define the structure of the narrative, enriching the layers of the narrative by setting up mysteries within the main story and resolving them through past and present. By visualising parental expectations, I use visual metaphors through character design and colour to differentiate between the stages in the timeline.

In *Ghost Talk*, symbolism and metaphorical expressions abound. I endeavour to shroud past experiences in a mist of eerie ambiguity, imbuing them with a semblance of reality intertwined with the fantastical to portray the inner peace and turmoil within my psyche.



05

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

In this exegesis, I have discussed how I narrate my experiences through the metaphorical storytelling of Zhiguai tales. I engaged in self-reflection aided by autoethnography and heuristics. Throughout this study process, I discovered that, despite my significant growth over the past ten years — from a sheltered, disciplined, and arranged child to a mature adult with partial autonomy—, the sense of guilt towards my parents still persists when facing them. I have not been able to rid myself of the psychological burden imposed by parental constraints by becoming independent. Therefore, during this research, I expanded the discussion from my personal experience with Chinese parental expectations to a broader cultural perspective, within the concepts of filial piety and value of education in Confucianism.

Drawing inspiration from Zhiguai storytelling, I explored the definitions and depictions of ghosts in ancient and modern Chinese literature and art into a creative visual text. I delved into symbolic interpretations of the human psyche and emotional activities through the communication of ghosts and humans in character design. The research also explored the power of illustration and metaphors to discuss complex societal issues and to incorporate cultural elements such as ancient Chinese poetry, allusions, and traditional attire to adorn the graphic narrative stage set in China.

Through *Ghost Talk*, I reflected on my memories, fragmenting myself into characters from different periods of my life and cultural background with varying perspectives. I shifted angles between ghosts to observe my growth and my questioning under parental expectations. I used my personal story to strike a chord with those who have undergone similar situations.

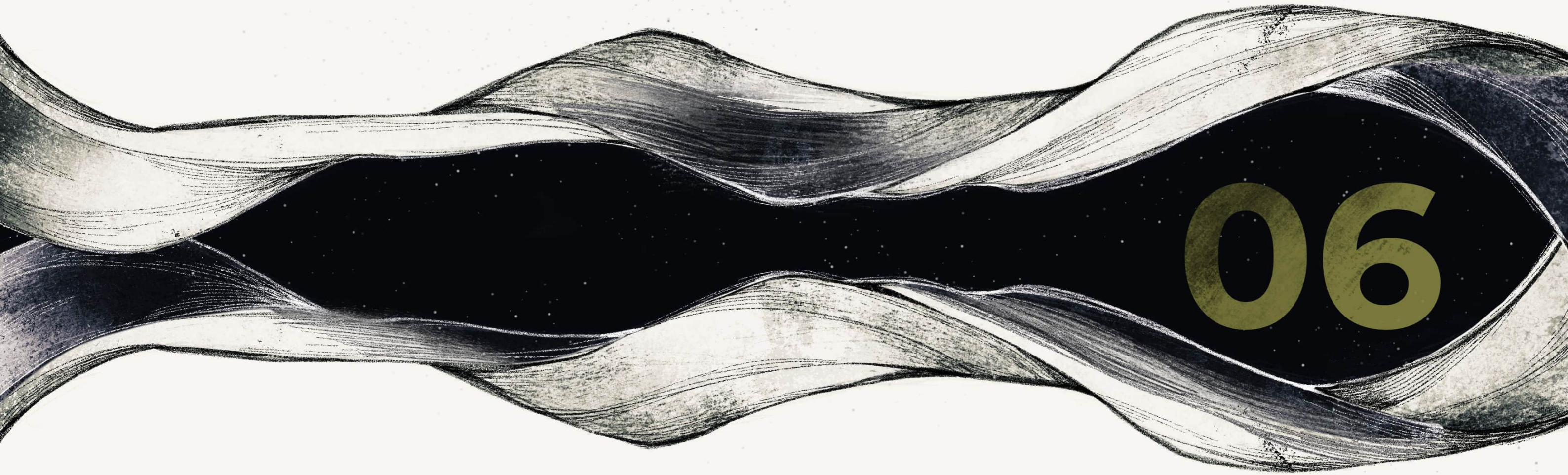
In my journey of transformation, like ghosts revealed through hardship and reflections on my inner self, I'm reminded of Qu Yuan's quote (c. 340-c. 278 BC):

“Long, long is my road, and far, far is the journey; high and low, up and down, I'll search with will”²⁴.

(Translated by David Hawkes)

FOOTNOTE

24. The original poetry text “路漫漫其修远兮，吾将上下而求索”. This is a well-known line in *Li Sao*, a poem written by Qu Yuan (c. 340-c. 278 BC) to express that in the pursuit of truth or ideals, the road ahead is both long and arduous, but I will spare no effort in seeking and exploring.



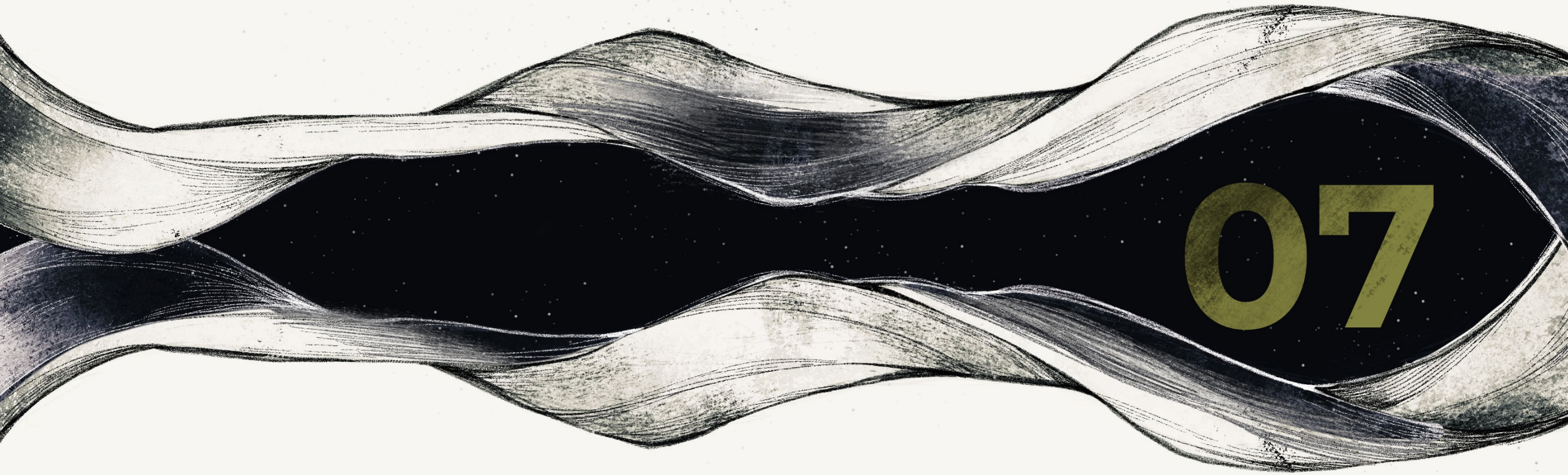
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07

APPENDIX

EXHIBITION (Dates: 18 Jun-22 Jun, 2024)

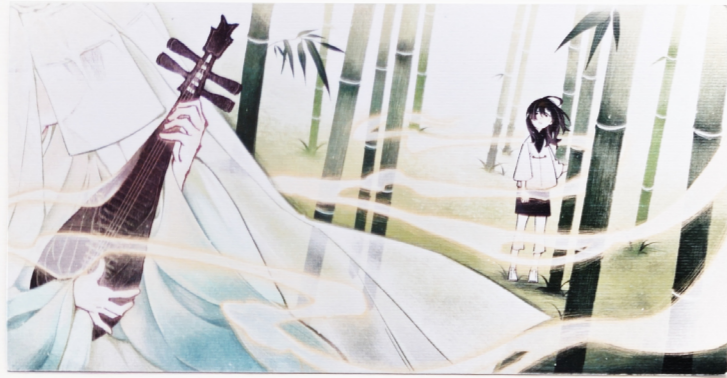
The exhibition “Ghost Talk” comprises eight paper posters of varying dimensions displayed on the walls, accompanied by double-sided postcards and two picture books on the table. On the left wall, four 400x280mm posters highlights the primary characters from the “Ghost Talk” story. The right wall features two 1186x593mm posters and two 500x250mm posters, each illustrating key scenes of the protagonist’s encounters with ghosts from the picture book. These elements are strategically arranged to engage the audience and draw them into the story’s visual.



POSTCARDS

The double-sided postcards measure 22x11mm. On the front, they feature eight selected color illustrations from the picture book, while the back contains my project's abstract and quotes from classical Chinese poetry that inspired these illustrations. These postcards are available for the audience to take, designed to help them understand the concept behind the work and to promote the beauty of Chinese poetry.





Ghost Talk

by Yiran Liu

Abstract

Ghost Talk is an illustrated picture book inspired by my personal experience of disagree with Chinese parental expectations. Adopting the narrative style of ghost stories from Chinese *Zhiguai* (志怪) literature, the narrative uses metaphorical setting to depict the journey of a Chinese girl and ghosts, that revolves around her realization of self-worth. The story considers how Confucian perspectives of filial piety and emphasis on education may influence Chinese parents to have high expectations over their children's academic achievement.

This project explores the potential of the Zhiguai ghost to create a social critique through self-experience. Methodologically, the project utilizes autoethnography and heuristic enquiry to assess personal experience through a series of methods of scripting, sketching, storyboarding, character development and prototyping.

In addition, ancient Chinese poetry has inspired the narratives and symbolism in my works, enabling me to delve even deeper into the exploration of cultural expression...

「夢」· 莊子《齊物論》

If life is but a dream,
The Dream, No. 6: The
97

「車馬喧」· 陶淵明《飲酒·其五》

Idle and bustle of people, yet I
Use of carriages and horses; if you
Use my soul has avoided the clamor
eg. "Drinking Wine No. 5" (365-427)

「長生」· 陶淵明《飲酒·其五》

If for so long,
Xin Yu Pin Zuo" (403-444)

PICTURE BOOKS

210x210mm, 60-page, full-color, hardcover books with white fabric and silver foil engravings. The picture books are the project's primary output and are available for the audience to read during the exhibition.



