

A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF THE AESTHETIC LIFESTYLE OF THE SHARED COMMUNITY IN CHINA

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Abstract

The aim of this research project is to explore alternative visual narrative strategies for the conceptual manifestation of a contemporary Chinese aesthetic lifestyle of a popular shared community in China. Referring to the ideological content of the traditional Chinese story, *The Land of Peach Blossom* (Tao Yuanming, 421) [桃花源记], it is the vehicle in which to inquire into China's traditional aesthetic lifestyle. Illustration is the medium of the practice, primarily referring to both traditional and contemporary Chinese aesthetics in exploring the visual narrative strategies. The methodology centres on me, reflecting on the on-going development of my practice and its inter-connection with the data collected, the contextual review and the visual strategies that I have developed. They foster a systematic structure to progressively generate a contemporary view of how to define 'home' and its aesthetic lifestyle in the era of a shared economy of today's younger generations. An aesthetic lifestyle is defined in this project as an appreciation of the environment in our daily life. It is a spiritual pursuit to balance or ease the tension of the material life. Lin Yutang (1937) called it "the art of living". The main research output consists of a series of illustrations which feature 13 story themes and 15 works. They have been composed to become an animated work to representing the creative resolution of the project.

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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 any other person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), 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.

signed 

17 May, 2018

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Introduction

Research aims

The aim of this research project explores alternative visual narrative strategies for the conceptual manifestation of a contemporary Chinese aesthetic lifestyle of a popular shared community in China. It refers to the ideological content of the Chinese traditional story *The Land of Peach Blossom* [桃花源记] (Tao Yuanming, 421) as the vehicle to inquire into China's traditional aesthetic lifestyle. This inquiry aims to provide a contemporary view on how to define home and an aesthetic lifestyle as they are found in an era of a shared economy by today's younger generations. An aesthetic lifestyle in this project is defined as the appreciation of the environment in our daily life. It is a spiritual pursuit to balance or ease off the tension of the material life. Lin Yutang (1937) called it the art of living.

Contemporary ideological content: The shared community

With the changes in today's family structure, lifestyle has also changed accordingly. In the past, all family members lived together in the same home. They could exchange information with each other and help each other in their daily life. With the beginning of the industrial revolution, the family structure has gradually transited from a big families to becoming smaller. Today, in the era of digital online communication, living an independent life has become common. The shared community is a phenomenon that has appeared in more recent years; in this community a group of people share a common residential space while keeping a limited individual private space. Japanese architect Shuhei Aoyama [青山周平] claims: "In a modern society, the common system of families, regions, and clubs are gradually weakening and tend to disintegrate. People prefer to live an independent life. However, in recent years, the 'shared community' has started to attract people's attention around the world as a new type of residential model. A certain number of strangers share the same space and live together. Everyone can get a variety of shared space. Thus, naturally people with common interests gather to become members of the community. Shared communities as a new living group contain enormous possibilities" (2017).

The traditional ideological context: The Land of Peach Blossom

Tao Yuanming's (421) story *The Land of Peach Blossom* is about a utopian world. In his story, there is no monarch, no war and no poverty. People are honest, kind, and harmonious and live a pleasant lifestyle. They live a self-reliant, happy, and healthy life. It cheers up the readers through providing an imaginative, dreamful and seemingly attainable life. Below is a plot summary to provide an overview of the ideological context of the story. However, it was not used as the content of my practice. Instead, I have developed 13 stories or scenarios to portray a range of various activities. Together they have become the narrative content for me to explore a range of visual strategies to narrate my view of today's Chinese aesthetic lifestyle of the popular shared community in China. The plot summary: The plot summary is extracted from *Wikipedia* (2017).

"The Peach Blossom Spring [The Land of Peach Blossom] was written during a time of political instability and national disunity. The story describes how a fisherman haphazardly sailed into a river in a forest made up entirely of blossoming peach trees, where even the ground was covered by peach petals. When he reached the end of the river (or spring in some translations), the source turned out to be a grotto. Though narrow at first, he was able to

squeeze through and the passage eventually reached a village with animals and people of all ages.

The villagers were surprised to see him, but were kind and friendly. They explained that their ancestors escaped to this place during the civil unrest of the Qin dynasty and they themselves had not left since or had contact with anyone from the outside. As a result, they had heard nothing of subsequent changes in political regimes.

The fisherman was warmly received by the hospitable villagers and stayed for over a week. Upon leaving, he was informed that it was worthless to reveal this experience to the world. However, he marked his route on his way out with signs and later divulged the existence of this idyllic haven to others. They tried to find it repeatedly but in vain."

Research statement

The creative resolution of the practice is the primary output; it adapts a research statement instead of posing research rationales or questions. The practice explores how to maintain sufficient social and material needs while seeking a harmonious relationship between man and nature. Therefore, it strives to advance the visual manifestation of the aesthetic lifestyle of the utopian world of *The Land of Peach Blossom* with illustrations and an

animation to advocate a contemporary ideological view of today's lifestyle of a shared community.

The following are key components of a shared community:

- The shared community is a home; not just a physical dwelling.
- Lifestyle is an extension of the home.
- Lifestyle within a shared community can be extended to influence the aesthetic lifestyle of the nation.
- Home is where humans may relate to nature.

Structure of the report

This report includes the following main components:

1. An introduction that contextualises the primary contexts.
2. A contextual review of related knowledge.
3. The methodological structure of the research and design processes
4. Findings and conclusion.

Contextual review: Background to the study

Appreciation of the daily life

In *the importance of living* [生活的艺术] by Lin (1937) it gives the readers a broad view of how Chinese people escalate the material life to achieve spiritual pleasure and to be cultivated: for example, how to taste wine, how to view the mountains, how to play with water and so on. Simply put, how to appreciate things in nature and in our daily life. A classical document *Tao Te Ching* [道德经] (Laozi, around 533 B. C.) posits a core value of “doing nothing”[无为]. Laozi’s “doing nothing” is not the kind of negative attitude of ‘inaction’, but an attitude of deliberately pursuing everything without intentional change (6th-century B. C.). This is the key attitude about life I want to depict in *The Land of Peach Blossom* and in my practice about the shared community. *Breeze-ruffled Lotus at Quyu Garden* [曲院风荷] (Zhu, 2006) analyses poetry, painting, calligraphy, music, stonework, architecture and other artistic aspects from a philosophical point of view to review the appreciation and pursuit of aesthetics in cultural activities. Chinese philosophy and their art practice are interrelated. While *Breeze-ruffled Lotus at Quyu Garden* is a book on Chinese philosophy, it also discusses the philosophical implications of the aesthetics of art practice. They inspire a detailed and picturesque way to comprehend the Chinese aesthetic lifestyle as well as theoretical knowledge about the

value behind the lifestyle. This is to pursue a life with the attitude of ‘a long flowing stream’ [细水长流] (literally it means sustainable). As an academic research theory, the aesthetic lifestyle involves the philosophical view of how we see, enjoy and live a life that is embodied in the various daily contexts of life such as political, religious and environmental agendas and so on. So, it is imperative to investigate the ideological essence of its contents. The above three books have inspired me by the philosophical aspects of the Chinese aesthetic that are based upon the daily ordinariness in life. Whether it is the event of a spring tour, a snow feast or a moonlit night get-together, this philosophy is about appreciating nature wholeheartedly. In my opinion, life should not be dominated by social values, but exists to enjoy a harmonious relationship with others and with nature.

The shared community

The recent growth in China’s economy has pushed house prices extremely high so the majority of the younger generation cannot afford a property of their own. To buy an apartment of around 60 square metres to 80 square metres-even with their parents’ support-they will have to spend decades of

time to repay the loans. A fully self-contained apartment of 30 to 40 square metres is very cramped. Nowadays, one can only afford to live in a small space but they would have to spend a large proportion of their income to repay the loan. As a result, the sharing community's living model emerges as affordable"

Lu Hui & Zhou Junqing gave an overview of the emergence of the shared community, that: "The joint living model that Denmark began to raise in the 1960s was the earliest proven origin of modern shared communities. At that time, a group of Danish families thought that the housing and community system could not meet the needs of childcare. So in 1967, the first modern common housing plan, Saettedammen, formed from about 50 families and became a community of ideas. In addition, there has also emerged a communal living model developed to assist working mothers or single parents to share childcare work. With the advent of senior citizens, common care has also become a way of life. In the past two decades, the concept of shared community has gradually expanded to many other countries including Europe, North America, and Australia. In California, United States has 35 shared communities. The Spring Hill community in Stroud, United Kingdom, leads the trend and has become the first community in the UK to conduct regular public gatherings. In China, the surrounding houses of the courtyard houses and Hakkas all have characteristics similar to those of the shared community, and were

even developed earlier. The architect from Japan, Aoyama, learned a lot from the hutong cottage [四合院] in Beijing in exploring the concept of a shared community. The people who live in the hutongs often see restaurants, food courts, roads, etc. around the residence as part of their living space" (2009).

Young people's ecologically shared community extends the concept of home to become a larger living community and is usually located within five minutes' walking distance of recreational centres. Members of the shared community have their own private space such as bedroom and bathrooms, and they share the communal public space of living room, bathroom, kitchen, tea-room, and so on. The proximity of recreational centres has virtually expanded the territory of the shared community. This idea is not new. Nowadays, within a residential site there is usually a clubhouse providing various shared functions, including bars, gyms, living rooms, etc. for the residents. The major difference is the relative size between them. The public space of a shared community is relatively much larger than the private space used by individual members. For the clubhouse, it is the opposite.

The inspiration of the shared community comes from the traditional Chinese communal family structure of a half-open space inside the courtyard that is shared by a group of families. An individual family's private space is very small, but the public

living space is very large. In the half-open space, one can have easy contact with neighbours; life is rather open or public while maintaining a certain level of privacy. When I was a child, I lived in a courtyard house. Children could always go to the neighbour's home to play. Subconsciously, the private space of others' was an extension of our own. The living room was very small, but we would meet in the public yard to play cards, skipping games, etc., and the yard became an extension of the living room. A few hundred metres away from the house, there was a vegetable market. Most of the daily dishes could be purchased freshly at the market. The food field was virtually an extension of the refrigerator at home.

The courtyard style house has a large family-style living space that allows several families to live together. It is a very traditional style and has been popular with past generations. The concept of a shared community can be found in many Chinese traditional living spaces. In ancient China, there appeared a great number of public spaces similar to the "shared communities". According to Zhu Yuhui, the emergence of public space is closely related to the opening up of the social environment. "The development of public physical space can reflect the development of public thinking space and discourse space. The open social environment in the Song Dynasty was the birth of a public living space providing these conditions" (2008). Many public spaces are born out of places with a specific purposes such as ancestral halls. "There are a lot of

public living spaces in the northern Jiangxi and especially the Yongjia Nanxi River basins in Wenzhou. Among them, there are the public settlements of Li's settlement in Cangpo Village, Yantou Town, formed in the Southern Song Dynasty, and the Yantou Formation in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. The villages of Jin Village in Tau Village are the most typical of public spaces. They are free from divinity and become more conscious and pure, multi-functional and hierarchical 'community' public spaces for people to exchange, rest and travel. And hold public gatherings" (Qian, 2017). These public spaces or pavilions, or theatres, have become a vehicle for people's public life.

After the implementation of the one-child policy in 1979, the family model gradually has evolved from a 'fourth-generation family' structure to becoming a 'family of three' — parents and the only child. Nowadays, as the only child generation becomes mature, it is not uncommon for the grown-up child to move and live alone in another city – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou etc., especially Shenzhen. Contemporary society has slowly turned into an individualistic era. But even in this era, it needs a platform to provide people with opportunities to communicate with each other. With the development of the social media, the younger generation unwittingly forms a new type of social network; but they are still afraid of being lonely and often feel isolated. As such there is a gradual change to swing away from material consumption and toward more

spiritual pursuits in their daily lives.

Case Study of the shared community

I searched the Internet for the current status of shared communities in China and worldwide. It can be seen that in the early years, a shared community was mainly a living space centred on entrepreneurship. The members were young people who started a business or people who associated with entrepreneurs, such as those engaged in legal, financial and technological work. The shared living model, *Superlofts*, a Dutch architectural project developed by Marc Koehler Architects (Figures 1 & 2), allows occupants to inhabit in “urban villages.” In traditional buildings, it is difficult to integrate offices, studios, music studios or

commercial kitchens into the living spaces. However, all these become possible in the space provided by *Superlofts* (Marc Koehler Architects, 2018). In recent years, shared communities for young people have begun to appear in large cities in China. They are located in the Yanjingli New Street Community in Yanjingli Street, Chaoyang District, in Beijing. Apart from an apartment building, there is also a related building within the office building. The two buildings are not high; there are usually only three to five floors with a large courtyard in between. It is a structure built close to the courtyard. Outside the courtyard is an



Figure 01. The Superlofts structure¹. Retrieved from <https://www.archdaily.com/892160/super-lofts-marc-koehler-architects/5aca787df197cc84980000a5-superlofts-marc-koehler-architects->. by MKA, 2017.

old Beijing recreational community with a breakfast shop, a night market stall and a vegetable market, a tailor's booth and so on. You don't need to live in a hutong cottage [四合院], but you can still have a "Grand Courtyard" lifestyle that interacts with neighbours. Recently, the international youth community brand YOU+ has opened a community in Shenzhen Qianhaimen Factory, and YOU+ plans to enter the Hong Kong market (Nan, 2018). It carries out unified planning and the development of living space, with a special emphasis on the development of public spaces, such as the provision of bar tables, meeting rooms, gyms, etc. This explores the value of shared space in addition to living, to create a

community culture, and to create a "living office", inhabitable gym and cinema.

This kind of shared community, providing social and living facilities is becoming popular. The difference between shared homes and traditional renting is that the housing space is made into a youth community. Young members have their own independent space and they can also carry out lightweight socialisation in the shared space (Nan, 2018).

The content of my illustration is based on the traditional Chinese story *The Land of Peach Blossom*. This story lures the reader

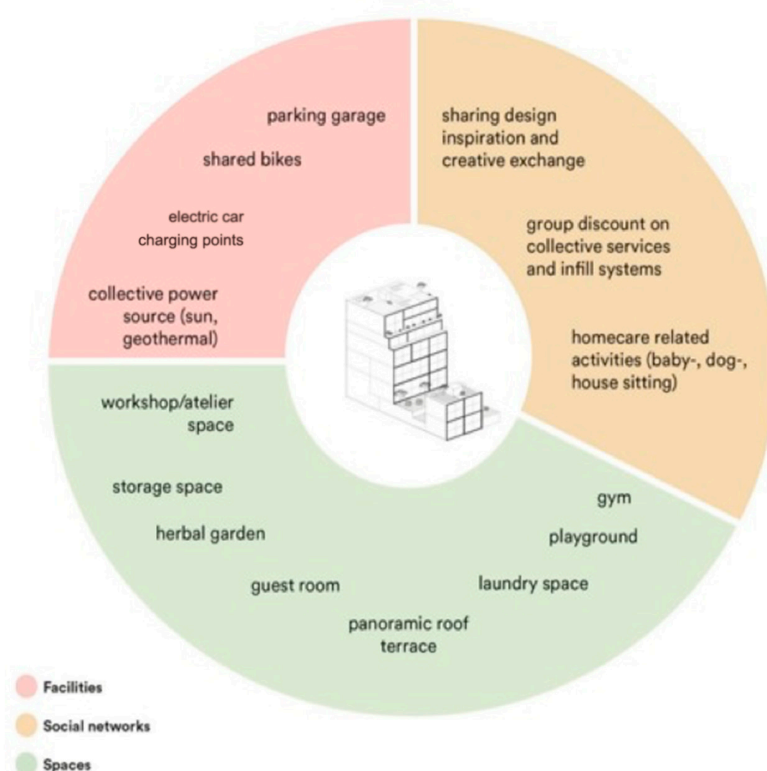


Figure 02. The Superlofts structure2. Retrieved from <https://www.archdaily.com/892160/superlofts-marc-koehler-architects/5a-ca787df197cc84980000a5-superlofts-marc-koehler-architects-> by MKA, 2017.

into escaping from daily life and fantasises a dreamed world. It tells of the adventures of a secular fisherman who has strayed into an isolated world. I intend to visually translate the story by way of illustration, to explore and further the spiritual pursuit extended by this story in an interactive manner with the viewers. The outcome is to discuss the meaning of the return to simplicity and to seek a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Visual narrative strategies in illustration

Below, I have reviewed several illustrators' works that are relevant to my research context. In Figure 1, designer Freja Bao's (2018) work *Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendour* is inspired by *Dongjing Menghua Lu* [东京梦华录] (Meng, 1147) [孟元老] to conceive a city named *Splendour*. The work portrays people's activities in accordance with the change of the four seasons to promote each season's individual splendour. (Figure 1) The work is intended to reshape China's profile brand and to market the concept of Beijing as the cultural capital of China. His choice of viewing angle, colour and design language encourages the audience to become immersed in the Eastern world. The work is based on a story about an imagined city; Bao portrays the vividness and charm of the city through the atmosphere of people's lives, to reflect on A

Dream of Splendour, the character's life. Her meticulous and fastidious painting style engages the viewers to cross over into the fantasy city created in her work. Both her painting style and the visual elements are in line with the traditional Chinese aesthetic that is familiar to Chinese viewers. For example, in the work of *Chunlan* [春兰] (the first one of Fig. 3), the sunset view and the hovering birds perfectly recall the feeling of the Song's poem *Preface to King* (Teng Wang Ge Xu) [滕王阁序]: "The autumn river shares a scenic hue with the vast sky; The evening glow parallels with a lonely duck to fly" [落霞与孤鹜齐飞，秋水共长天一色] (Wang, 649-676) [王勃]. The visual strategies and techniques are significantly influenced by the 'flowers and birds' classic painting [宋元花鸟] of the Song and Yuan dynasties.

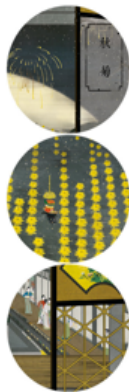
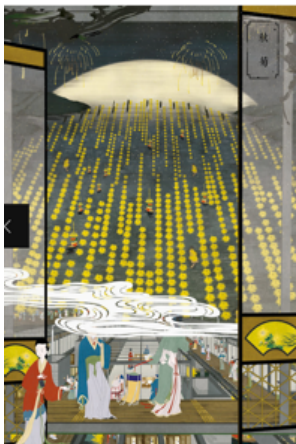


Figure 03. *Splendour: the Eastern Capital*. Retrieved from <https://baohouse.co/splendour-the-eastern-capital/> by Bao, F. 2017.

Another example is the work of young artist TSUKI that is based on *The Peony Pavilion* [牡丹亭] by Tang Xianzu [汤显祖] (1598). This work is enriched by the movie-like motion of the lens and the dynamic effects of post-production (Figure 4). This micro-animated style makes the picture more vivid, but still retains the static beauty of the illustration, leaving viewers with more imaginative space. This is different from animation in which the sequential narrative is important. TSUKI's illustration is filled with Chinese elements and uses the linear art techniques

[白描手法] commonly found in traditional painting. It is influenced by *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*, sometimes known as *Jieziyuan Huapu* [芥子园画谱]. It is a printed manual of Chinese painting compiled by a group of artists during the early Qing Dynasty (1679), which provides a comprehensive overview of Chinese painting techniques and aesthetic. Many renowned late Chinese painters, like Qi Baishi (1864-1957) [齐白石], began their drawing lessons with the manual *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*.



Figure 04. *The Peony Pavilion*. Retrieved from http://www.sohu.com/a/110959911_463811 by TSUKI, 2017.

The Art of Shadow (Figure 3) inspires in me the charm of silhouette that I can use in my illustration to accentuate the poetic characteristic of my illustration. The author of “Understanding Comics” argues that when you see realistic portraits, you consider you are looking at the face of another person, but you see yourself as you when entering the world of cartoons (McCloud, 1994). My point of view is, that irrespective of the media, silhouette art style or comic style, it is important to simplify the appearance of people as much as possible when creating an immersive experience for the audience.



Figure 05. Reprinted from *Silhouette The Art of The Shadow* by Rutherford, E. & Guinness, L. 2009.

Sound effects are a key component of animation. Sounds are vibrations travelling through the air as sound waves. Sounds affect our physical, mental, and cognitive behaviour continually even though we are not aware of their existence. Industrial designer Jinsop Lee has made a presentation at TED about the importance of the 5 senses-including auditory perception in design (Lee, 2013). South Korean illustrator Jihye Lee’s idea (2015) is to offer sound with his illustration to enhance the feeling of time and space (Figure 4). He has created a jungle theme with a background of the song of cicadas that sustains a quiet atmosphere. In my point of view, sound can stimulate an audience’s emotions to immerse them in the space created by the designer, while subconsciously deepening the memory of the design work.



Figure 06. The manga. Retrived from https://www.instagram.com/p/4YzZ6jLF_j/?hl=en&taken-by=e_heo00, by Lee, J. 2015.

Methodology: Structure and visual strategies

Overview

The design of the methodology aims to accommodate two main goals. Firstly, it explores how the traditional lifestyle aesthetic can be adapted in today's shared community. Secondly, it explores a range of visual strategies of digital illustration to enrich the interaction between the viewers and the works by increasing the visual dynamics of the imagery when communicating the Chinese aesthetic lifestyle. The two components are interrelated and as such the content and concept of the illustration are developed for the purpose of manifesting my view on the aesthetic lifestyle of the contemporary shared living space. This means to regularly engage oneself in a dreamed-life to attain a spiritual state of mind of ultimate freedom [逍遙] (Zhuangzi, 369 - 286 B. C.) (Refer to the section 'Conceptual and creative development').

Methodological structure

The exploration started from performing a contextual review of the related fields to obtain background and theoretical knowledge. The data collected was analysed to develop a personal view on Chinese aesthetic lifestyle to inform the visual creation of my practice. In my work, the utopian lifestyle of the story content of *The Land of Peach Blossom* does not mean to provide a mental 'get-away' space to the members of the shared community but to advocate a state of balance in the contradiction between the material and spiritual life of the shared community.

In the second stage of the study, based on the understanding and review of the textual and visual data collected, I built the structure of my methodology (Figure 7). It provided an overarching relationship of the key components of the project. It was used

to identify, organise, review and connect the suitable style and visual structure in order to generate creative ideas and strategies for my practice. Initial experiments of my practice started with the trial and error process of different drawing styles to generate different effects. It is another method to improve the pathway of communication.

During the experiments, I adeptly covered a variety of issues when using the data I had

collected to inform, review and improve further experiments. It is a cyclic process. My goal is to highlight how visual methods are not a separate entity, but are “embedded in the narrative at its inception, reception, interpretation and impact” (Mannay, 2016). This approach to visual methodology asks scholars and practitioners to consider how their research can complement and even expand narrative and creative resolutions.

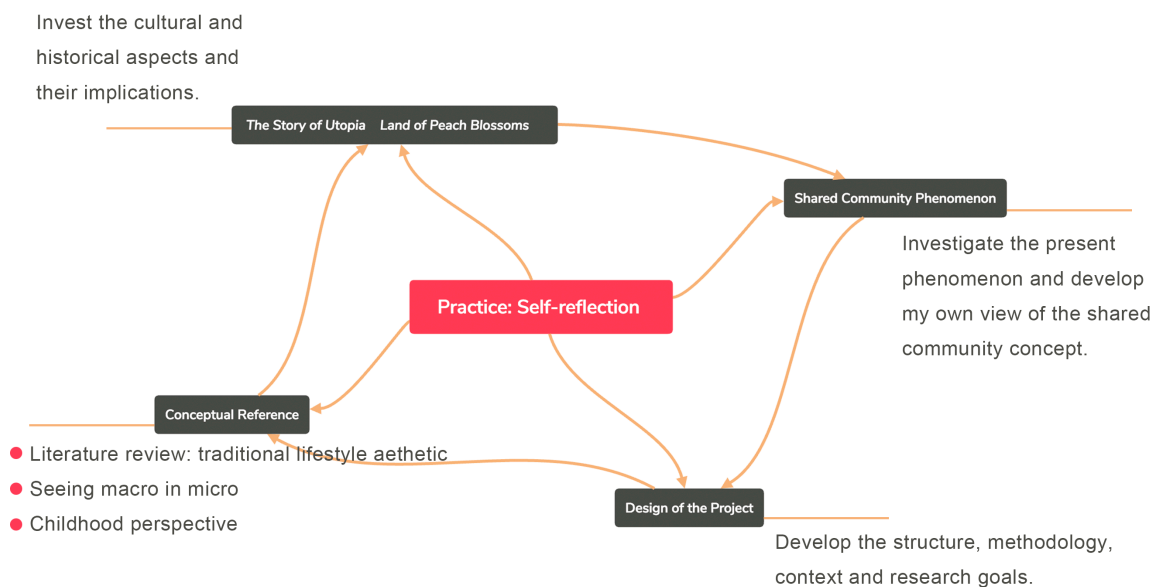


Figure 07. Jiang, Y. (2018). Methodology structure.

Conceptual strategies

I have adapted two key conceptual strategies from Chinese art theories to inform my practice, 'Seeing Macro in Micro' and 'Childhood Perspective' respectively.

Seeing macro in micro [见微知著]

In artistic creation, the image is emphasised, selected, and condensed, and a single point of view is enlarged and expanded to heighten the expression of the theme or narrative. Seeing macro in micro is a kind of artistic treatment that provides great flexibility and allows unlimited expressiveness by the creators. As an example, the 'pools and rockeries' aesthetic in Chinese traditional gardens is heavily influenced by the theories of 'small near and big in the distance' (Zhu, 2006). In the Chinese art aesthetic, the ancient Chinese cleverly used nature to achieve certain physical needs through an understanding of the environment and they often strove to find out how things in nature related to the body. A Chinese garden normally has limited space, so architecture often uses the windows and walls to extend the outside view into the inside. This is also common in other Asian countries such as Japan.

Seeing macro in micro has parallel meaning with seeing distance in closeness. For example: the sea is vast, but it could be seen at a glance; the mountains stretch and we know it from a little stone; we know autumn is coming when there are falling

leaves. My illustration is a miniature of the ideal world of my own. It is a small universe that is full of vitality. Without this vitality, there is no conversion mechanism from small to large. This kind of vitality stimulates the viewers to think beyond the visual context of the illustration itself.

Childhood perspective [童年视角]

Childhood perspective (Geng, 2010) refers to the form of creating art through children's perspectives without a cognitive process. It often brings about natural vividness, unique and fresh, innocent language and aesthetic effects. Informed by this, the visual narrative meanwhile is cognitively designed and structured, and is seemingly presented from the viewpoint of a child. For example, the protagonists of my work are relatively tiny people. This provides an exaggerated sense of feeling of the surrounding environment.

Figure 8 gives a structural view of the relationship between the childhood perspective, me as the artist, my work and the viewers who have an individual life experience and different ways of seeing nature.

The work on the tea tasting theme is a typical example of the childhood perspective in my visual strategy. When we were children, the things around us were very large to our eyes. We would imagine

ourselves growing smaller. We felt that the turtle was very big; its hard shell floated in the water like a boat and I imagined myself riding on it. It floats on water. The drifting teacup is also relatively huge. In this situation, the tiny people can't pick it up to drink. They use a long hook to hook them to the shore. In our childhood memories, everything in the world was mysterious and interesting, and they could all become the subject of our daily games. They brought us a lot of inspiration to enrich our imagination. I wanted to reconstruct and

exaggerate these feelings in my illustrations.

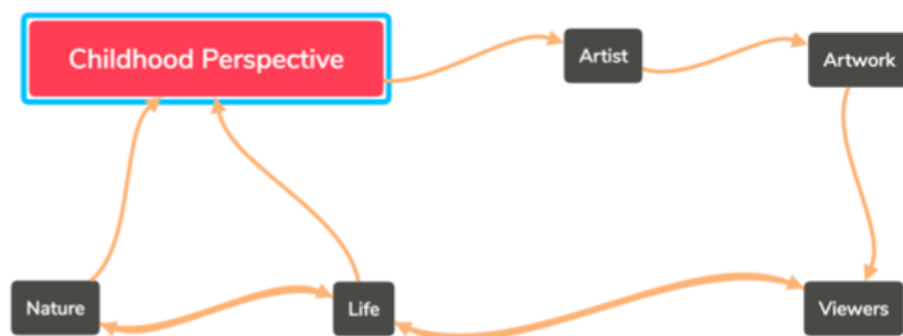


Figure 08. Jiang, Y. (2018). Childhood perspective structure.

Visual strategies

I designed and implemented a range of visual strategies. They are interrelated and are guided by the conceptual strategies. Together, they form the creative infrastructure for the visual narrative of the practice. There are five major strategies: the use of pastel colour, the empty space, repetition and symmetry, body without an identity, and line and form. I discuss them separately in the following sections.

Pastel colour

Pastels or pastel colours are the family of colours which, when described technically in the HSV colour space, have high value and low-to-intermediate saturation (Gilbert, 2010). The name comes from pastels, an art media characteristic of this colour family (Clark). The colours of this family are usually described as 'soothing', 'soft', 'near neutral', 'milky', 'washed out', 'desaturated', and lacking strong chromatic content (2003). Pastel color sustains a style that suits to reflect the gentleness and beauty of an imaginary harmonious society of the utopian world. I am also inspired by the colour and tone of Song and Yuan's 'flowers and birds' painting aesthetic. The colours are relatively light and the tones are simple.

The empty space

'Empty space' [留白] is one of the important visual strategies of traditional Chinese art. It is widely applied in the study and practice of Chinese painting, ceramics, poetry and

other fields. Leaving an empty blank space leaves a corresponding blank concept in the work. In traditional Chinese painting blank space is often used to represent the physical appearance in a scene such as water, clouds, wind, etc., which are more reserved and introverted than the physical revelation of the scene. Empty space (blank and usually called white space in Chinese) can harmonise the composition of the scene and reduces the oppressive feeling of the composition. It naturally guides the viewer to focus on the subject while contemplating beyond through what



Figure 09. *The Light of the Puddle of the Cow* by Li, K. (2013). Retrieved from <http://auction.artron.net/pai-mai-art0026670140/>

is missing in the empty space. In *Painting Microcosm* [绘事发微] (Tang, 1675-1752) [唐岱], there is an exposition: "The paintings of the ancients also used ink and brush to depict yin (black) and yang (white or empty space)." For example, Li Ke-ran's (1907-1989) landscape painting is significant in the use of empty space. In *The Light of the Puddle of the Cow* [浅塘渡牛图] (Figure 9), Li creates the artistic effect of endless imagery with the 'empty space' behind the wicker. It can also be seen that the black and white also reflects a dialectical philosophical relationship between yin and yang. Thus, it is a mental space that sustains the dynamic of imaginative construction.

Repetition and symmetry: The balanced composition

Human vision is easily attracted to consistent and repetitive elements of a scene, resulting in 'orderly' or even 'beautiful' feelings (Maizi Education, 2018). Woods posits that "Repetition constitutes rhythm and movement that have a high degree of tacit understanding of the group dance performance, or at the parade ceremony. The collective and uniform movement of the soldiers attracts the attention of the audience"... Symmetry in everyday language refers to a sense of harmonious and beautiful proportion and balance. In mathematics, 'symmetry' has a more precise definition that an object is invariant to any of various transformations, including reflection, rotation, or scaling.

Although these two meanings of the word 'symmetry' in different contexts can sometimes be told apart in different contexts, they are however related. For example, the common dried persimmons and rice noodles in the rural areas of Taiwan, or the oysters and salt-pans at the seaside are all impressive and intriguing scenes" (2008). Mathematical symmetry (Mainzer) may be observed with respect to the passage of time: as a spatial relationship; through geometric transformations; through other kinds of functional transformations; and as an aspect of abstract objects, theoretical models, language, music and even knowledge itself (2008). Repetition and symmetry are inter-related to provide a balanced composition to the work.

Body without an identity

The characters in the work are naked and have no gender identity. Nudity is a strategy to remove the costumes to signify people's identities; as such there is only a collective identity. Removing the identity of the characters (or the collective identity) breaks the emotional boundary between the characters and the environment or the scene and also between the viewers and the work. Without the shackles of identity, viewers are invited to become a character and immerse themselves in the scene. This strategy complements the use of empty space to engage the viewers to 'see' the

scene as if they are a character in the work to think about and self-construct what is beyond the scene.

Line and form

In traditional Chinese painting, line drawing is not only for sketching static outlines but to also express dynamic rhythm. The movement of lines instills the painting with different feelings. In my work the forms created by the simple line drawing style are very influenced by the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* [芥子园画谱] (Wu, 2002). In a way, the line is the performer of form through the density, direction, and arrangement of the lines. Through their relationships, the characteristics and aesthetic taste are presented.

Conceptual and creative development

In the initial experimental stage of the practice, I did some sketches around different subjects of the Chinese aesthetic. They included the tea and wine tasting culture, travelling culture, and so on. I learnt that the context of the experiments was very broad. The Chinese art aesthetic includes every aspect of life (poetry, painting, drama, music, calligraphy, architecture, etc.). Not only do they have their own unique system, but often there is crossover between them. These initial experiments had prompted me to narrow down the contents of the practice.

As a consequence, I selected the story *The Land of Peach Blossom* to provide the ideological context of the dreamed and fantasised world of the practice. However, the practice did not follow the story plot of it (refer to the section 'The traditional ideological context: The Land of Peach Blossom'). This section discusses the individual conceptual and creative development of the 13 stories. They are informed by the visual narrative strategies specifically designed (refer to the section 'Conceptual strategies' and 'Visual strategies') to manifest my view of the aesthetic lifestyle of today's shared community which strives for a spiritual pursuit to balance or ease the tension of material life. There are two key ideas underpinning a spiritual pursuit; ultimate freedom [逍遥], and a real and

dreamed-life. Ultimate freedom is a philosophical concept of life by the Taoist Zhuangzi (369 - 286 B. C.). I adapted it to advocate: freeing oneself from the Chinese traditional cultural values of life; freeing oneself from the traditional structure of a family; and freeing oneself from the very limited space in the shared community. Real and dreamed-life maintains a balanced state of mind between the daily hardship of material life and the fantasised utopian life. This constitutes a harmonious relationship with the others.

Tea tasting

It was said in the old story that a turtle represents auspiciousness and longevity. It has the ability to absorb the mountain aura. Its slow movement parallels to the mentality of tea tasting. The work (Figure 10) is inspired by Wang Xizhi's *Lanting Collection Preface* [兰亭集序]. It describes a game Quliushui [曲水流觞] that soaked cups of tea are floated along a stream in a water circulation system that turns the cups around. Participants, who are usually are scholars, can choose to pick up a cup of tea. However, he or she would have to improvise intuitively to create a poem. "Bai Juyi [白居易] (846 A. D.) and Su Dongpo [苏东坡] (1101) had the same literary games as this until today, the spread of this game worldwide has become a common means of

revitalizing the tea party” (Mo, 2018).

Today, tea tasting is a leisure activity that occupies a relatively tiny private space. The tea custom is precise in both the making and drinking processes of tea. It is the slow movement of making and drinking that engages the drinker in a tranquil state of mind and keeps it away from the mundaneness of daily life. In the work, the people cruise around on top of the turtles. I left massive empty space to represent the sea to signify the vast public space. I only sketched some circulated water movement around the cups to suggest the free state of cruising.



Figure 10. Jiang, Y. (2018). Tea tasting.

The maze

The maze (Figure 11) was inspired by an app game, *Monument Valley* (Ustwo Games, 2013), which is an indie puzzle game developed and published by Ustwo Games. *Monument Valley* is a surreal exploration through fantastical architecture, optimal illusion and non-logical geometry. A Chinese garden is undoubtedly the master of garden illusion, a place of quiet reflection with minimum disturbance for contemplation. Therefore, I transformed a Chinese garden into a maze. The long, twisted winding corridor and windows of the Chinese garden provide the visitors the same illusive feeling of a maze. In modern cities the walls are getting higher and higher, separating the inside world from the outside. In ancient times the walls were not so high. Everyone could imagine what could



Figure 11. Jiang, Y. (2018). The maze.

happen inside the walls through views that can be seen from outside and above the short wall. This fantasised maze with people wandering about in it represents the relationship of a shared community. In this community people share similar values of a harmonious coexistence between individuals, and between humans and nature.

The flying whale

The flying whale (Figure 12) is based on the story *Getaway* [逍遥游] by Zhuangzi (369 - 286 B. C.) [庄子]. It was said in the Northern

Ocean there is a fish, the name of which is Kun [鯤]. Nobody knows how big in size Kun is. Kun morphed into a gigantic bird with the name of Peng [鹏], of which nobody knows how long the body is. When Peng rouses itself and flies, its wings are like clouds in the sky. My work represents ultimate freedom; incorporating the spirit of the space. In the scene with the people flying on top of Peng it metaphorically resonates with the scenario when the fisherman enters the utopian village of the story, *The Land of Peach Blossom*.

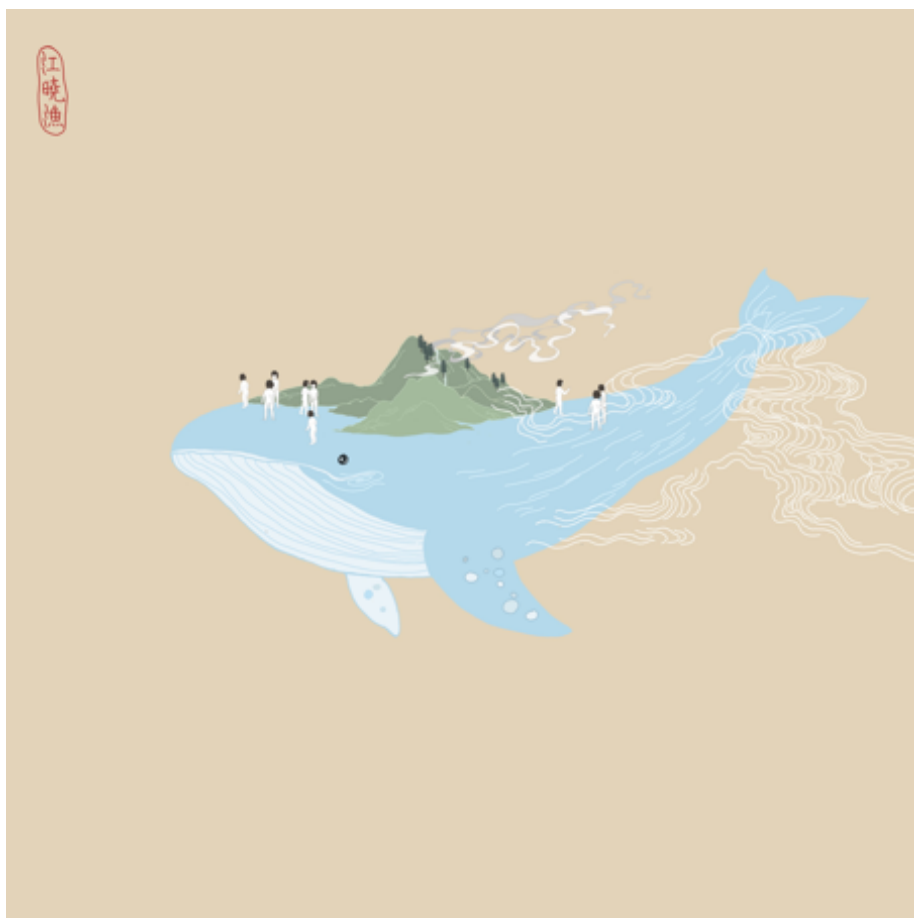


Figure 12. Jiang, Y. (2018). The flying whale.

Wine drinking

Traditionally, wine drinking and the sword dance are blended cultural activities. Social rules are abandoned after a while when in a tipsy state after drinking. The drinker enters a relaxed state of mind and this is the best time to perform the sword dance. Today, sword dancing is impractical and as such wine drinking has become a standalone social activity to foster a closer relationship with others. In the work (Figure 13), the pavilion (a common place for the activity), gigantic wine bottles and sword dancing are utopian signifiers of the freely relaxed state of mind in wine drinking.



Figure 13. Jiang, Y. (2018). Wine drinking.

Urban farming

This work (Figure 14) represents my vision of urban agriculture, or the sharing of community farming. The theme in this work of planting watermelons is based on the Chinese farming culture and strives to manifest an imaginary concept of organic farming in the city. The concept and visual content were inspired by an idiom that when translated into English means 'you reap what you sow' [种瓜得瓜，种豆得豆]. I used repetitive calligraphic characters 'melon' [瓜] (what you sow) to resonate with the melons (what you reap). In the shared community, nearby planting areas



Figure 14. Jiang, Y. (2018). Urban farming.

are like home refrigerators and food storage rooms that supply fresh food. What if the shared community grows the kind of fruits and vegetables nearby (or in a shared space within the community) that have a short-growing period and lengthy storage life? It might sustain an eco-community.

Legendary crane

In ancient Chinese legends, a crane often accompanies Taoists. It is a creature that works as the immortal's mount and it has been deeply loved by people. It is a symbol

of longevity, auspiciousness and elegance.

In my work, the crane is the sole creature depicted in this space. It represents the pursuit of the aesthetic spirit in this space.

The wandering cranes, the non-proportional scale of the subjects and objects, and the silhouetted mountain are meant to portray a dreamlike spiritual experience (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Jiang, Y. (2018). Legendary crane.

The wedding

In the wedding theme (Figure 16), the bride and groom are sitting on the carps celebrating their marriage. The carp is a fortune fish that symbolises prosperity, good fortune and an abundant harvest in Chinese culture. It is said that when you dream of carps, good things will happen to you. In addition, the carp is a fish that has phonetic similarity with leftovers. Traditionally, fish thus also signify leftovers, which is an auspicious blessing to live an affluent life. After all what is more important than always having food left over in our daily lives. Symmetry and repetitive motifs are the main visual strategies to

connote harmonious newly-weds and the affluence of their future life. A large area of intense red colour instills the work with a joyful and formal atmosphere. Although the red curtain covers up a major part of the scene, the school of fish is meant to depict the vastness of the space and also creates a sense of movement.



Figure 16. Jiang, Y. (2018). The wedding.

The moon

This work is based on the Chinese mid-autumn festival. The round full moon connotates family reunion. On the festival day, all junior family members gather at the parents' home for a reunion and enjoy moon cakes under the full moon. The work (Figure 17) depicts a person sitting on a mountain waiting at home; the other person arrives home by water lily. The person in the

moon playing the flute represents a vibe of 'homesickness' from afar, which would be greatly felt by many who study abroad, like me. The far-away moon is 'brought home,' again through an exaggerated proportion. Members of the shared community who do not return home for the family reunion, they might have mixed feelings about the work. Are they home? Do they miss home? Is the shared community their home?



Figure 17. Jiang, Y. (2018). The moon.

Entering the utopian village

The first episode of *The Land of Peach Blossom* narrates that the fishermen got lost and accidentally found the entrance of the peach blossom village. However, some people believe that they were drowned in the water and died instead so I changed the plot to: The entrance of the utopian village is under the water, the fishermen swam past the underwater tunnel and entered into a wonderland through the hot water spring (Figure 18).

In this space, creatures, plants and water are an optical illusion. The positional composition of the position of the objects in the picture is not logical as it would be in the real world. The exaggerated size of the aquatic plants and the school of fish that swim from above are all subconsciously signals assigned to build this utopian world.



Figure 18. Jiang, Y. (2018). Entering the utopian village.

Hotpot dining

This work (Figure 19) was inspired by the typical Chinese hotpot dining culture. It is a special way of dining where people gather around a table with a copper hotpot in the centre and surrounded by a variety of raw foods. The raw foods are dipped into the hotpot to cook while eating. The hot pot is representative of the cuisine of Chinese food culture, that the activity of dining is a pleasurable 'mix and mingle' social activity. In the hotpot dining culture, the diners sit around the table and choose their own food to cook and eat. During the cooking everyone helps each other and also shares the food. The social practice of the dining setup thus creates a relaxed, equal social status, close-range, small-scale, close-to-intimate interpersonal atmosphere. The work narrates the pleasant climate and rich resources of The Land of Peach Blossom. It also connotes the ecological concept and practice, that all things come from and return to the land, have no beginning or end, like the impermanence [无常] of life.

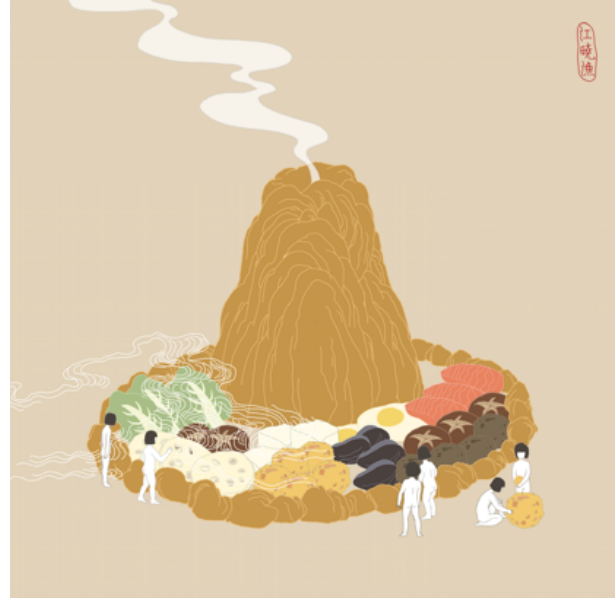


Figure 19. Jiang, Y. (2018). Hotpot dining.

Bird riding

This work (Figure 20) depicts two people riding birds. In this land without industrial pollution, living creatures replace cars, planes and other transportation. There are many immortals and natural gods. Their mounts are different creatures. I adopted a typical traditional Chinese painting approach in constructing this work. The composition isn't visually (or physically) symmetrical but conceptually symmetrical. The plants are bled to the edge of the work to suggest the infinite vastness of nature. The empty background accentuates the vastness. The postures of the two birds and the people echo with each other, implying both a compact and yet free environment.



Figure 20. Jiang, Y. (2018). Bird riding.

Deer and chess playing

Deer are the symbol of wisdom in the Taoist culture. Deer worship is very popular during Spring and Autumn and the Warring States period [春秋战国] in China. The idiom Zhuolu Central Plain [涿鹿中原] that has spread to today reflects the significant role of the deer. In the work with a 'chess playing' theme, the deer signifies wisdom. This fallen tree, where people play chess and swing, becomes a piece of furniture in the tiny shared community. Together with the over-sized flower vase, they portray a vast dreamed environment under the tiny sheltered (the branch extends widely over the top of the people) private space of the shared community. The tree branch also extends across the horizon of the work linking the rock, swinging people, deer, chess players and flower vase to portray a relaxing atmosphere that connotes the freely available entertainment activities of the shared community (Figure 21).



Figure 21. Jiang, Y. (2018). Deer and chess playing.

Qilinbus

The qilinbus is the large creature qilin [麒麟] that serves as a bus complete with windows and seats and a long tail. The qilin is a mythical chimerical creature known in Chinese and other East Asian cultures, said to appear with the imminent arrival or passing of a sage or illustrious ruler. It is a good omen thought to occasion prosperity or serenity. The work *qilinbus* (Figure 22) is inspired by Catbus, a character in the Studio Ghibli film *My Neighbor Totoro*, directed by

Hayao Miyazaki (2002). The qilinbus is the bus that I used to travel on and the name of the bus stop is where I lived when I created this work. Because the Auckland bus system is not very convenient, sometimes I check the bus timetable and wait there for a long time, but it disappears, so my impression of the bus in Auckland is like a mythical creature that comes and goes like a spirit.



Figure 22. Jiang, Y. (2018). Qilinbus.

Signature of my work

In my work, I have followed the Chinese traditional painting practice to add a seal as my signature. Instead of using my given name, I have used a staged name, Jiang Xiaoyu [江晓渔] (Figure 23).

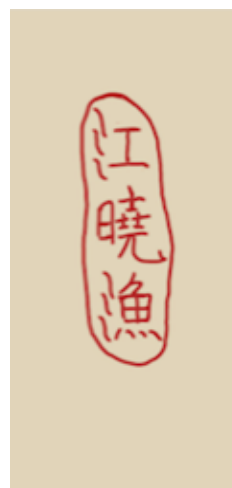


Figure 23. Jiang, Y. (2018). My staged name.

Exhibition

When I was a little girl, I had to constantly change my living place, I seldom living with my parents. I lived in different relatives' places when I was in primary school, and boarded at middle school, and after that entered the university and studied abroad where I finished my studies. I subsequently found work in another city. My whole life has been unstable with an always changing lifestyle.

For years I wanted to find a place that could provide me the feeling of home. When I studied in the US, I lived with a friend. We've

faced a lot of difficulties together, and sometimes I feel like she is a kind of family to me. Now I live with some friends here in a house in Auckland. We buy groceries together and take turns to cook food. Recently we planted some vegetables and now we eat the food we grow, it turns out very well. After the meal we make some tea and play tea games, in the evening when everyone is home, we play cards or mahjong and drink wine. When the weather is fine, we enjoy short trips. I have come to realise that under the definition of the new era, home is no longer a fixed residence with

fixed family members. It is a space where humans and nature meet in harmony to achieve a perfect balance. It is all about the aesthetic lifestyle.

Based on my experience, I have created a space for my utopian dream, which is called *The land of peach blossom*.

The long scroll is a Chinese traditional format of storytelling or painting. It can be sequential or non-sequential. For my work, it reads from right to left, which is the Chinese traditional way of reading. This form of narrative art can also be found in ancient Egypt (Figure 24).

Now, imagine yourself in a dream built up of peach blossoms, streams, mist, cranes,

where deers are friends and a whale is a flying ship. It has a tea house, chateaus, gardens and a hot spring.

The long scroll is created from a bird's-eye view which is a perception of the overview of a the space. It also provides a detailed story plot.

The animation provides a first-person experience. The experience is intriguing through the visual movement, and audio (music). Music provides the feeling, the environmental sounds such as the wind, water, birds and giggling provide different layers of immersive feelings. The experience is intimate and intricate. The slowness of movement provides a remote, calm feeling, a soft environment (Figure 25).

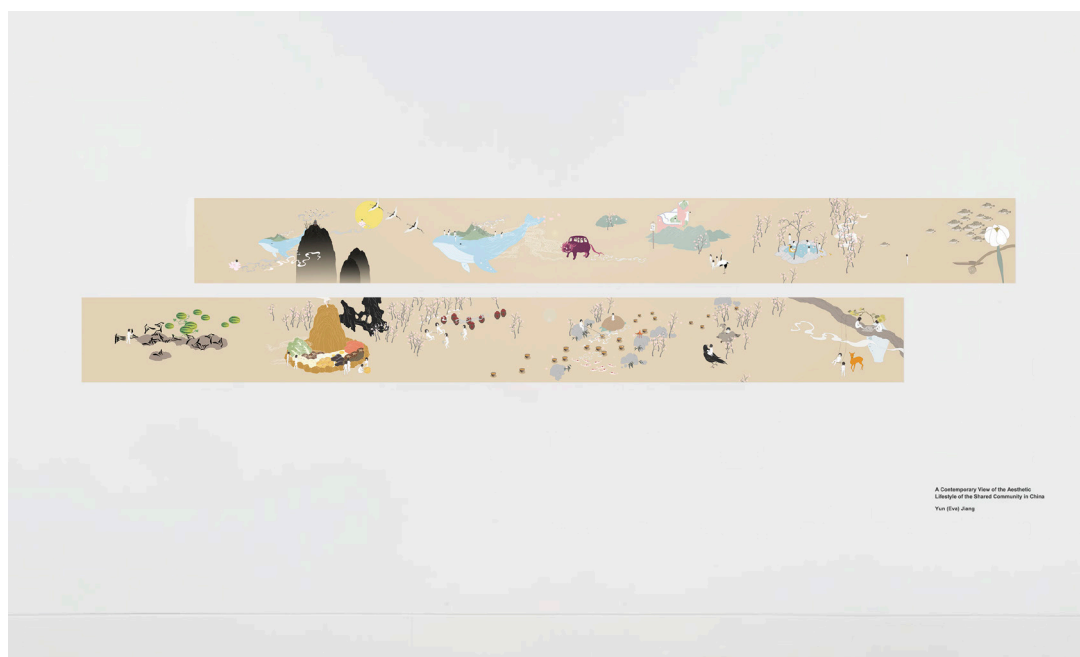


Figure 24. Jiang, Y. (2018). Long scrolls.

If you are a person who has infinite love for life, hoping to constantly improve your lifestyle at home and find the best balance of life and work, the concept that I study comes infinitely close to this balance.

I believe that human instinct is to pursue beautiful and wonderful things. I hope the research and promotion of the concept of an aesthetic lifestyle can allow more people to focus on the essence of life and build a harmonious and beautiful contemporary circle of life with people around us.



Figure 25. Jiang, Y. (2018). Animation.

Findings and Conclusion

Research context: The aesthetic lifestyle of the shared community

This project used a series of themes to visually narrate the utopian world of the Chinese story *The Land of Peach Blossom* in which material life and spiritual pursuit are well balanced. In my practice, illustration was the primary medium to explore the conceptual manifestation to express my viewpoint on the contemporary Chinese aesthetic lifestyle of the popular shared community in China. Animation was used to connect the story plots together with a dynamic and free flow. During the research journey, I had been thinking about the new definition of a home in this era. In the past, when we talked about home, we talked about a fixed number of family members living together in a house, and a sense of safety and the harmonious atmosphere and relationships within the physical space. But I believe that home is more than that; it is also where we appreciate our own way of living. It therefore represents an aesthetic attitude towards our daily life. In my practice I re-deconstructed the 'home' with no physical fixed size and defined functional areas to advocate my view that home can be extended to today's shared community through lifestyle. Home is a well-balanced space where humans are able to relate to nature and generate an aesthetic lifestyle.

Methodology

My research journey was cyclical and centred around my practical experiments to reflect on the utopian context of the story *The Land of Peach Blossom*, the conceptual reference (contextual review and conceptual strategies), my view of today's shared community and my design of the project. They are interrelated and indispensable. The story *The Land of Peach Blossom* gives the shared community a concrete and imaginative spiritual blueprint. My investigation of the concept and phenomenon of the shared space has led me to gradually understand the current status of the shared space (the reason for its emergence and the future direction of development). It guided me to develop the conceptual contents and visual narrative of my practice. Consequently, I was able to develop the methodological structure of the project and the visual strategies of the practice. Again, the visual strategies and their creative manifestation were guided by my contextual review into the Chinese traditional aesthetic lifestyle and contemporary artworks. Every piece of the 15 final works was developed through my reflection on the above aspects repetitively in cyclic processes.

In summary, my methodology was developed progressively, and it enabled me to establish a research framework and a clear goal, and also to refine the research content for the project.

The practice

In the practice I set up a range of conceptual and visual strategies to explore alternative narrative visual strategies to communicate my views on the contemporary Chinese aesthetic lifestyle of the popular shared community in China. To address the conceptual contexts of the utopian story *The Land of Peach Blossom*, there are two key aspects to guide the exploration: a real- and dreamed-life, and ultimate freedom. I decided not to follow the traditional storyline. Instead, I used 13 themes to develop 15 works that relate to the Chinese aesthetic lifestyle to depict a utopian world. Also, my view about the shared community is portrayed through specific features, such as relaxation of the activities, fantasised environments or situations, and the spiritual pursuit in daily material life. Together, they portray an interlinked and crossover narrative about connecting home (the shared community) with nature harmoniously.

I summarise below the key conceptual contexts of the 13 themes:

Ultimate freedom:

The flying whale
Wine drinking

The bird riding
The legendary crane
Tea tasting
Urban farming

Real and dreamed-life:

Entering the utopian village
Qilinbus
The maze
Wine drinking

Fantasised environments:

The maze
The legendary crane
The wedding
Deer and chess playing
The flying whale
Entering the utopian village

The spiritual pursuit in daily material life:

Wine drinking
The legendary crane
Hotpot dining
Bird riding
Tea tasting
The flying whale
Urban farming

Home (the shared community) and nature:

Hotpot dining
The maze
The moon
Urban farming
Deer and chess playing
Qilinbus

Through the 13 themes of work, the viewers are immersed in an experience of the

Chinese aesthetic lifestyle. According to McCloud in his *Understanding Comics*: “When it is necessary to create an immersive experience for the audience, it is crucial to simplify the characteristics of the task as much as possible. The more abstract and general features, the more the audience can immerse into the creator’s environment” (1994. McCloud’s view supports the effectiveness of my visual narrative strategy. Additionally, the scenes are as absurd as a dream, lacking a clear logic. They are however a fantasised world that is meticulously designed and carefully constructed. It is a world to be felt. Seeing macro in micro guided the design of the relative proportion of the subjects and objects in the practice and led to a deeper level of conceptual resolution. A childhood perspective has added to my illustration process which has been dominated by sensuality and subconsciousness. The visual strategies (pastel colour, empty space, etc.) succeeded in simplifying the visual structure. They were much influenced by the visual strategy and style of Chinese painting that basically uses simple lines, minimal colour tones, and substantial empty space to complete the work. Conceptual and visual strategies worked in parallel and have shaped the aesthetic style and narrative of the practice.

In conclusion, the Chinese aesthetic lifestyle is an extension of the home. The shared community is not just a physical dwelling but a home for people in need. Under the definition of the new era, the home is no longer a fixed residence with fixed family

members. It is a space where humans and nature meet in harmony to achieve perfect balance. Through the display of dynamic illustrations, the final work goes deep into the spiritual core of *The Land of Peach Blossom* and invites the viewers to rethink about the aesthetic lifestyle of today’s shared community. From this perspective, adhering to this spiritual context, the exhibition strips, deconstructs, and reinterprets the content of the work and the medium, and presents another *The Land of Peach Blossom*, which is the new carrier under the cultural background of the contemporary society.

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