

Thesis Support Paper

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Abstract

This thesis support paper is about the journey of my development in art and illustration during the MFA program. The paper includes an introduction of my identity and background that is influential to my artistic practice. The focus of my practice centers around my experience as a Chinese immigrant in the west and the idea of the co-existence of eastern and western culture, identity, and ideology.

I will introduce my artworks from the year 2016 to the most recent ones in chronological order to show how my works evolved over time. There will be an in-depth explanation about the techniques, creative intentions, and the concepts behind works, as well as a list of artists who inspired me visually and conceptually, and an analysis of their practice.

Introduction

In Emily Carr University's MFA program, illustration is my main tool of self-expression and story telling. Although I have a diverse practice that includes portraiture, zines, collages and illustration, my most recent interest has been making short comics that combine the subjects of science fiction, Chinese martial art genre, and folk tales. The stories that I have created include a re-make of a traditional Chinese folk tale, a science fiction story I developed, and a story inspired by my own life experience that takes place in a contemporary setting. They may seem fictional and unrelated, yet the themes of love, faith, and life's difficulties and dilemmas are all related to my own experience and identity.

In my works, I am interested in mixing components from both eastern and western culture. I draw inspiration from Chinese historical fictions and present the ideas in western contemporary (in terms of stylistic choice and language) form such as illustrations and comics. I am in constant engagement with experimentations in storytelling and creative mark-making, which helps me produce works, and find my voice in the field of fine art and illustration.

I would like to start with two research questions: How do I position myself, a Chinese immigrant artist whose works are perceived by audiences in a western world? Am I expected to produce any specific kind of works?

From the perspective of western audiences, the use of Chinese historical and fictional references in my work can raise questions such as orientalism, while from my own perspective as a native Chinese person and immigrant in North America, every cultural and historical component in my works has personal meanings to me. For example, the Chinese martial arts portion of the short comic I made in the fall semester of 2021 is not just a superficial parade of cool exotic visuals and Kungfu fight scenes. The story is adapted from a traditional Chinese folk tale. The theme of the story centers around the protagonist's problem, which involves love and

the constraint of Confucian ethics. The swordswoman character embodies the concept of “Xia”, the nomadic hero in Chinese martial arts media, that symbolizes courage, free spirit, and loyalty to promises. She offers poetic possibilities for him to conquer his emotional problems.

These subject matters and concepts exist specifically in relation to Chinese culture and literature and are unfamiliar to western audiences without in-depth explanation. In some situations, my creative intention is translated well, while other times it is easily misunderstood. Therefore, an uneasy coexistence of the East and West is formed in my work. There are also certain concepts that do not exist in the English language, and the literal translation does not justify the meaning of the original concept. Take the swordswoman from my comic book as an example again: I included her in the comic because her personality is exactly the opposite of the main character Gu. While Gu keeps failing at becoming a government official, being troubled by an unhealthy relationship, and avoiding confrontation with the fox spirit, the swordswoman is a nomadic hero who works hard on practicing martial art, planning revenge, and being loyal to the family who helped her. In the story, she received a bag of rice from Gu’s mother when she ran away from the clan massacre and moved to Jinling. The bag of rice is not worth much, but she is still grateful for the family’s help. In return, she offers to kill the fox spirit for Gu, which is a much bigger task than giving out a bag of rice. The original folk tale focuses on the notion of “yi”, the idea of returning a huge favor for somebody who helped you a little in desperate situations. This character trait is what makes her admirable and different from the main character Gu. Since the idea of “yi” does not exist in English, there might be some misunderstanding about the symbolism of this part of the story. The lack of familiarity of western audiences with Chinese vocabulary can result in ambiguity that parallels my own existence between the two cultures.

Positionality and Background

Growing up in China and moving to Canada in 2016, the conflict of the two different living experiences has impacted me culturally, politically, and artistically. I was not only questioning my culture, but also my ideology- the entire system of knowledge that is already established within me. In terms of culture, the East and the West diverge greatly in the understanding of art. In terms of politics, moving from a third-world totalitarian country to a first-world democratic country also had me question my past education. Since I moved to North America, I have been observing, adapting, learning, and unlearning. From being introduced to western stereotypes of Asian representations to questioning my pre-established system of knowledge shaped by the education informed by Chinese political propaganda, my artworks and illustrations have slowly become an expression of the complex and conflicted body.

During my undergraduate studies, most of my works are inspired by the conflict of the two different living experiences. They are reflections of my internal and external changes, such as the way I think and behave. There are both positive and negative impacts of adapting to western society and challenging my ideology. The negative impact is that I constantly questioned my identity and realized that I got stuck between the East and West and was not able to fit in either world. The positive impact is that I was able to free myself from the Chinese education system. In 2017, I stumbled upon Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower (2017). The documentary is about Joshua Wong, a teenage human rights activist from Hong Kong who participated in the Umbrella Movement in 2014. When I was watching the first part of the documentary, I automatically rejected it because I was sure the documentary was made by someone who is considered a “Gang-du”, Hong Kong Independence supporter, which is considered a crime of treason from my past education. As I proceeded to finish the documentary, I was impressed and moved by how much the protesters are willing to fight and sacrifice to defend their democratic

system. I then started to question myself, and to consider that what teachers taught me in school may be wrong. Questioning my own ideology was a long and difficult process.

I started to make works that challenged Chinese political authorities in a subtle way. In the short comic (Figure 3) I made in 2017, there are bizarre depictions of Chinese peasants in communist workers; “uniforms” and military jackets. These “uniforms” were the only garments available in communist China from the 1960s to the 1970s. The popularization of these types of garments symbolizes the fall of capitalism and the rise of the working class. I wanted to challenge this norm within a communist totalitarian society. I used the imagery I created to rebel against the Chinese media depictions of the people who wear these clothes. Growing up watching these representations on Chinese television, the workers and the militaries are often romanticized and glamorized to function as political propaganda for the government. In my graphic novel, the people are violent and bizarre while the clothing creates a sense of familiarity to the Chinese audience.

In the image that depicts a portrait of Mao Zedong (Figure 4), the first president of communist China, I wanted to challenge the authoritative figure in a subtle way while trying to avoid the censorship of Chinese media. The leaves and flowers that grow on the statue’s face decentralize the power by obstructing the authoritative figure, while the presence of the construction worker who tries to remove the plants adds another layer of complexity to the visual metaphor that is open to interpretation.

I also started to explore and create imagery from an orientation that views my culture from the position of an outsider, such as my illustration of the Orientalism¹ in depictions of a woman with

¹ The idea of Orientalism is introduced in the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said published in 1978. The term “Orientalism” is the imitation and depiction of the Eastern world including the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa, done by western writers and artists.

vases (Figure 5). The experimentation of embodying Orientalist aesthetics is interesting to me because I did it with a full understanding of my own culture to avoid cultural appropriation.



Figure 3

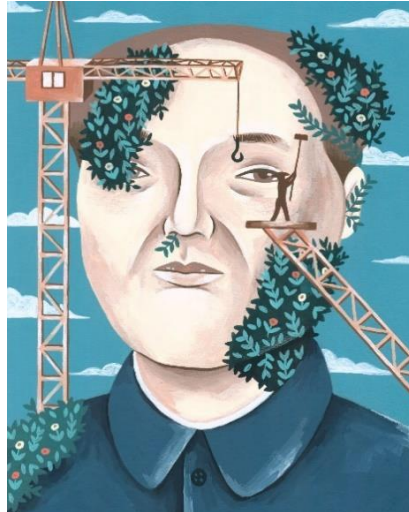


Figure 4

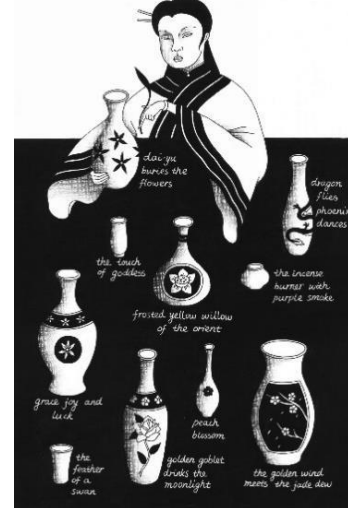


Figure 5

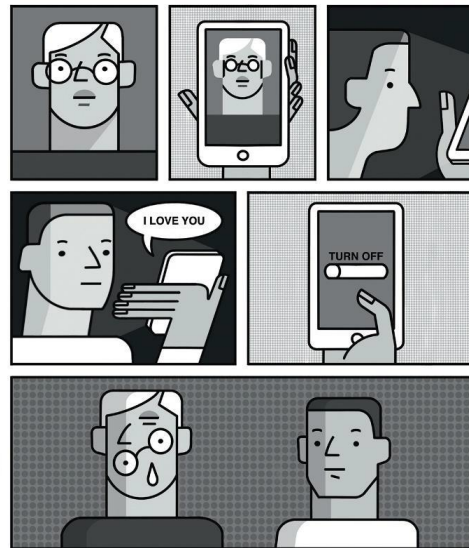
Looking at these illustrations now, all of these works are exploratory processes for me to figure out my own voice and identity in the field of illustrations in terms of style, techniques, and subject matter. They are also a reflection of learning and unlearning I experienced when I moved to a democratic country and gained access to more diverse news, history, and political opinions.

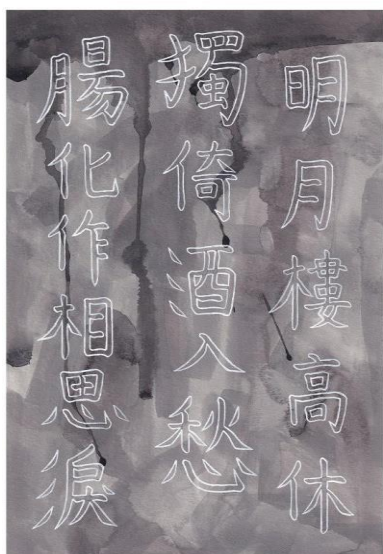
Today, my practice as an artist and illustrator is still highly influenced by my understanding of my culture from both the eastern and western perspectives, while I continue to make illustrations that explore my lived experience and identity within the Chinese diaspora for a universal audience. I also focus more on recording my personal lived experience and exploring my identity as a queer, bilingual, and relocated body. I am interested in these topics because I believe self-expression and self-discovery is important for an artist.

Zine project: My Senseless Grief

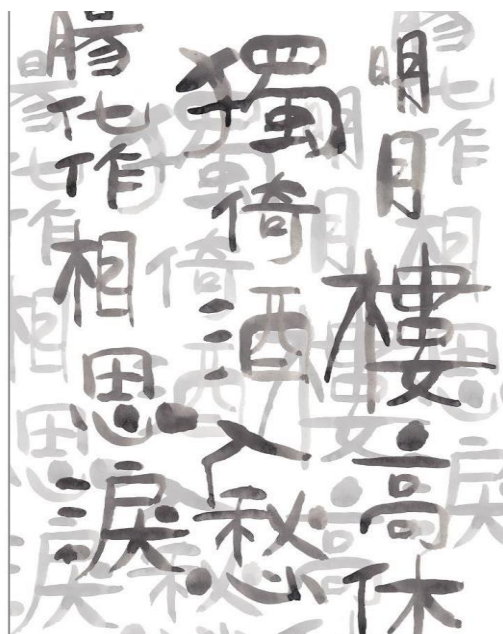
I would like to start off with a zine I made during the summer of 2021, titled My Senseless Grief (Figure 1). Zines are independent publications made by artists and designers. They became popular in the west in the 60s, 70s, and 80s as counterculture emerged among young rebellious people. Zines also became the platforms for the oppressed people to express their political opinions, because the nature of self-publishing allows more creative liberty. Artists put all kinds of works in them, including photography, illustrations, collages, comics, short stories, or poetry etc, which gives them the opportunity to experiment freely with texts and images and their poetic possibilities.

illustrated by Tommy Li





"Don't lean alone on rails
when the bright moon appears,
wine in the poet's heart turns to nostalgic tears"



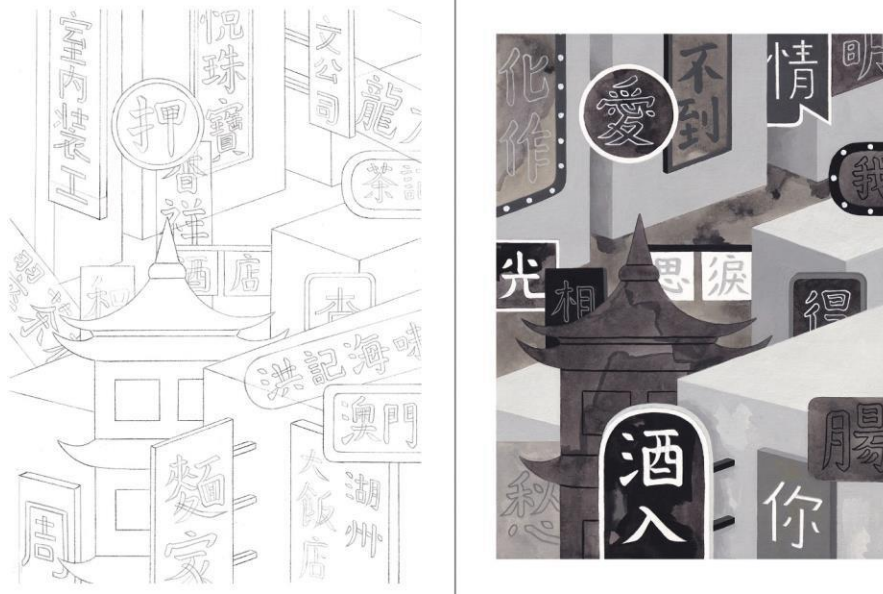


Figure 1: Images from the zine, *My Senseless Grief*, 2021

In a contemporary setting, zines can also be about purely artistic and visual expressions, which is what I am doing here. This zine is the product of an experimental process of recording my personal lived experience. It is a project I started in the summer of 2021. The zine is a collection of my latest illustrations, designs, visual explorations, and other experimental mark-making. The types of illustrations I used include comics, portraits, calligraphy, editorial illustration, etc. The topics and subject matters include street signs, quotes from classical Chinese poetry, love, relationships, identity, and sexuality. During the making of the zine, I used a method that liberated myself from my usual ways of mark-making and made the images as chaotic as possible for the purpose of breaking the conventional rules of drawing and painting I established for myself.

I played with different materials and incorporated digital and traditional ways of drawing, collage, calligraphy, and design. I did not have a certain concept in my head before the making of the zine. I wanted to keep the creative process intuitive, and let meanings be made both intentionally and unintentionally from the experimentation of the images.

In the creation of my zine, I started by playing with the images from my culture that are visually interesting to me, such as neon street signs of Hongkong, and Chinese advertisements from the 1930s and 1940s, and Chinese ink calligraphy. These images are interesting to me because they symbolize the aesthetic of the integration of the East and West and commercial culture. According to Brian Sze-Hang Kwok's article "Vernacular Design: A History of Hong Kong Neon Signs", neon signs were introduced to China in the 1920s and became popular in urban cities such as Shanghai. From the year 1937 to 1949, due to the instability caused by Japanese invasion and the Chinese civil war, many neon-makers relocated their businesses to Hong Kong, which was a British colony at the time. In the 1940s and 1950s, neon signs were more popular and gradually became one of the most iconic symbols of Hong Kong. Kwok states in the article that these neon signs are "mixtures of western and Chinese symbols", which is compelling to me. "In the 1940s and 1950s, Hong Kong's neon lights symbolised fashion and imported western technology," Kwok mentioned in the article, "This reflects the nature of Hong Kong culture, which is neither entirely Chinese nor entirely western and can be seen as a negotiation between western styles and Chinese traditions, new technologies and handmade solutions, and global branding and local solutions" (Kwok). Even though I am not from Hong Kong, the idea of the negotiation of the East and West is still present in my identity and personal lived experience, which is why I am interested in exploring these visuals.

After playing with the visual elements that are inspired by historical or traditional references, I then moved on to illustrating more contemporary subjects, such as a story that is inspired by my own experience of online dating. One of the pages also showcases a manga/comic book style illustration, suggestive of youth and popular culture references that add some playfulness to the narrative.

During the making of the zine, I was inspired by a short story titled Spring Fever written by Yon Fan. The story takes place in the early 1970s Hongkong. Taiwan was in its "white terror" period,

while in Communist China, the Cultural Revolution was taking place where Communist ideology and nationalism motivated the youth of Hong Kong to fight against the British colonizers. Single mother Mrs. Yu and her daughter immigrated from Taiwan to Hong Kong. Mrs. Yu and her daughter both fall in love with Ziming, a local university student whom they hired as the daughter's English tutor. In the short story, Mrs. Yu and Ziming discussed the novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber* by Qing Dynasty author Cao Xueqin, and *In Search of Lost Time* by French author Marcel Proust, and how they are similar. Mrs. Yu also talked about her interpretation of the character Miaoyu, a Buddhist nun from the novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber* and the possibilities of the sexual intimacy between her and the robber in the novel. The short story also explored the sexuality of the male tutor's body, and Mrs. Yu's desire and fantasy about the masculine body.

The short story resonated with me because the author and I shared very similar experiences. As a Chinese queer artist, I relate to how Yon used the female gaze and female experience in his writing, while addressing political issues and references to Chinese literature and merging these components together. The 18th century novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber* also has significant influence in understanding Chinese queer culture in the imperial era. The short story inspired me to investigate the topics of immigration, sexuality, queer experience, and cultural and historical identity from the perspective of personal lived experience.

This exploration has clarified the themes of sexuality and identity in relation to the personal experience of migrant populations, particularly of Chinese heritage that are central to my investigations.

One of the examples would be the juxtaposition of the two sequences of comics (Figure 1). One appeared on the first page of the zine, and another appeared later in the zine. They are two different iterations of the same composition. One is rendered digitally while the other one is

rendered traditionally. The depictions of the same scenario with two different lines said by the character, “I love you” and “I hate you”, are ways to play with different conceptual possibilities of the story. It also explores the idea of the love-hate relationships between people.

Another thing I learned from my graphic and aesthetic explorations is particularly from that one-page comic that appeared twice. There is a shift between grey scale and the pink colors in the background. This exploration shows how colors convey messages. The use of limited color palette is a common method for illustrators to maintain the consistency of the imagery. It also helps to build the mood, atmosphere, and other conceptual conventions. For example, in this page, I used color limitations to build a convention to differentiate real and virtual space. Grey scale represents the physical space and pink represents the online virtual space where the communication between the two characters takes place. This convention is blurred in the final panel where I used pink to present the two characters in a shared space, which makes the viewer question the pre-established convention. The contradiction and ambiguity in the two images also speaks to the complex nature of contemporary relationships.



Figure 2: figure in cheongsam dress

Another observation I would like to mention is how the graphic explorations demonstrated exciting poetic and conceptual possibilities. The image I would like to point out is the grey scale digital illustration of an ambiguously gendered figure in a traditional Chinese cheongsam dress². In the image on the right (Figure 2), the ambiguously gendered figure is clothed with the photo collages that combines various inconsistent or even conflicting echoes of Chinese and universal cultural and historical identities. There are images of 18th and 19th century Chinese men with braided hair, female models from the 1930s and 1940s Chinese advertisements, nude male bodies, communist propagandist posters from the 1960s and 1970s, and the pixelated patterns suggestive of the digital age and censorship. This image raises various questions for me. Is this a reflection of my own conflicted identity and lived experience of immigration and relocation, and

² Cheongsam, also known as qipao, is a form-fitting dress originated from traditional Manchu garment. It emerged in the 1910s and 1920s and is still worn today as a traditional Chinese garment. Its most iconic features include slanted button closure at the chest and the Mandarin collar.

how western education and life experience might differ and conflict with received knowledge?

Does this image help to capture the complexities, incongruities, and nuances of Chinese identity?

In conclusion, the zine *My Senseless Grief* is the product of a highly intuitive and experimental creative process. Through a series of visual experiments, I came up with a poetic visual representation of my identity and lived experience.

Drawing Exercises

I see my drawing exercises as an important part of my research. When I am working on my personal projects, I focus on making images that are natural and familiar to me, while still being conscious about my identity as a Chinese artist and illustrator whose work is perceived by western viewers. Therefore, there is a combination of authentic and Orientalist representation in my subject matters that form a complex and conflicted body of work.

I choose my subject matter intuitively. Some of it is embodied within a certain cultural reference, while the others may appear as more neutral and universal, such as the life drawing exercises (Figure 6). In Chinese art institutions, drawing still-lives, European plaster statues, and clothed or nude models is considered the fundamental training for all kinds of art practices, as it is also part of the “college entrance exams” for art students. To me, this drawing exercise is like going back to the basics while still trying to make the outcome look unconventional and experimental.

At first, I think of these life drawings as exercises to loosen up and to overcome my artist block. Unexpectedly, I was always happy in the end about the outcomes, because of the contrasty pastel colors, geometric shapes, and the harmony between the watercolor texture and the simplified plain background.

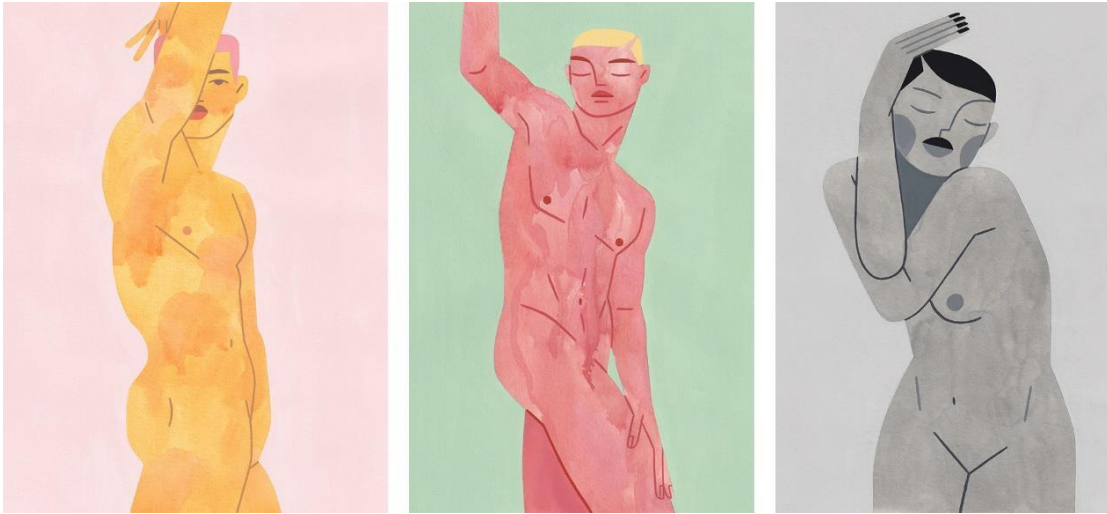


Figure 6: Examples from my life drawing exercises (2020-2021), gouache on watercolor paper

After many experiments and exercises with the rendering of these drawings, I eventually came up with the most comfortable way of executing these images: a transparent, watercolor paint for the body to capture the looseness of the paint brush, with thicker paint to frame the body.

Instead of using linework to define the edges, I use minimal lines within the figures, leaving the edge of the body free from linework to let it become more harmonized and sink into the background. In addition to that, an absence of light and shadow also allows me to flatten and simplify the image to make it more stylized.

I choose to simplify the forms by using geometric shapes to compose the body, studying and exploring whimsical and performative postures, fluent movements of the human body, and odd gestures of the arms, hands, and fingers. I find the process meditative and liberating. The finished product comes together naturally as the curved and straight lines cross and complement each other.

Since the making of my illustration is an intuitive process, observing and analyzing the outcomes is essential to understanding the creative intention behind my works. In some cases, I also push my research process further by observing and analyzing the subject matter, themes, and techniques of my work, as well as my practice as an illustrator in a larger context. I also ask

myself questions such as how do illustrators formalize their style? In what ways can an illustrator tap into their cultural background and lived experience to stylistically influence their work? I became more conscious about the source material of my drawing exercises. I am interested in re-creating 1920s-1940s Chinese advertisements, which often appear on calendars, or as posters and packaging, featuring Chinese female models in traditional and modern (at the time) fashion (Figure 7). According to the book *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-century Shanghai* (2004) by Ellen Johnston Laing, “advertisement calendar posters were the most important of the many forms of visual advertisement in China. They were introduced from the West and printed in glowing color lithography. These calendar posters, known in China as “yuefenpai” (月份牌), and the most popular subject matters of “yuefenpai” were of women. “Beauties dressed in the flowing garments of ancient times and in settings of elaborate traditional architecture appeared as illustrations to Chinese stories and legends. Their modern sisters were portrayed as fashionable women in contemporary domestic interiors, stylish beauties in gardens, or as homemakers with their children. Pictures of the product advertised appeared at the bottom or along the edges of the poster” (Laing).

In my own work of re-interpreting these old Chinese advertisement calendar posters, I continued to build geometric shapes while putting together the composition of the images. With a similar illustration style I developed from the life drawing exercises, I realized that the images are also effective when I apply the same techniques to these paintings. The geometric shapes, thick pigments, and the fashionable women from old Chinese advertisements creates a sense of familiarity and nostalgia. Laing also states in her book that “the Chinese advertisement calendar poster was an adaptation of Western advertising practices refashioned for Chinese tastes”. The crossover of Chinese and Western aesthetics is the reason why I am interested in these images.



Figure 7: Comparison between my illustration (on the right) and its source material, a 1940s Chinese advertisement painting (on the left)

I am interested in the mixing of the East and West in these posters, which is not only present in my works but also in my personal lived experience. This experience changed my understanding of culture, language, lifestyle, and political views. Both the early 20th century advertisement art, and the neon street signs of Hong Kong are the product of both Eastern and Western influences that mark the trend moving into globalism and modernity in China's colonial era in late 19th and early 20th century. I feel connected to these ideas because I am also a conflicted body that consists of both Eastern and Western influences.

Aside from developing concepts for my own works, sometimes I also like to take a step back and look at the bigger context. I will think about questions such as: How do I develop and formalize a unique visual vocabulary? And in what ways can I as an illustrator tap into my cultural and lived experience to stylistically influence my work?

I am curious about these questions because most artists and illustrators I look up to are European and American artists whose works are inspired by their traditional and popular culture. For example, illustrator Helena Perez Garcia's style is heavily influenced by 18-19th century

British painters William Blake and Edward Burne-Jones, and Monica Garwood is inspired by American cartoonist Mary Blair and the collages of Henry Matisse. Transforming these materials and visual languages into something that reflects my identity and experience is something I am constantly exploring.

Artistic Influences

Helena Perez Garcia, illustration series, Beautiful Women in Odd Situations, 2016-2017

Helena Perez Garcia is a Spanish artist and illustrator who specializes in conceptual, editorial, and children's book illustrations. In the beginning of Garcia's career, she started to establish her own methods of artistic expression by creating whimsical, conceptual illustrations. She then moved on to making more commercialised and children-friendly illustrations later in her career, as her illustration style continues to progress to fit the needs of the industry.

One of my favorite illustration series of hers, Beautiful Women in Odd Situations is made during the early period. I believe these early works are the best representations of the artist's identity and practice. They are bizarre, surreal, and hold more artistic personal values, because they are not made for the purpose of advertising, but pure artistic expression.

Garcia received her Fine Arts degree in Spain and moved to London, United Kingdom in 2012. While she was living and working there, her art style was influenced by the culture and art history of the country. She was inspired by the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones, William Blake, Hieronymus Bosch and many other European historical paintings from the medieval period to the Renaissance era. Her conceptual works are embedded in European art history. From the composition of the image and the portrayal of human activities to the rendering of the lights and shadows, and the certain choices of subject matters in the background of the paintings, Garcia does an amazing job of bringing historical influences and traditional European painting style into a contemporary setting.

In Garcia's painting, the exaggerated postures of the characters are influenced by British artist Edward Burne-Jones³. The characters in her paintings are staged, performative, and almost as if they are posing for the viewers. The delicate and detailed ways of rendering trees and plants also have a lot of similarities with Burne-Jones's painting, which Garcia converted into a more

contemporary visual language by adopting pastel colors and simplifying and flattening the space.

For the more imaginative subject matter and surrealist atmosphere in her work, it is also hard to ignore the influence of British artist William Blake and Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch, whose works are both filled with religious and fantastical elements. The flattening of the spatial relationship and the use of bold yet harmonious colors in Bosch's paintings are also present in Garcia's work. However, the touch of fantasy and surrealism is also more subtle in Garcia's illustration series *Beautiful Women in Odd Situations*, as the settings of her paintings are usually depictions of everyday life, and the "oddness" is often revealed in the actions of the characters. Also, by adopting the method of realist painters, yet reducing the layers of over-renderings and leaving the rawness of the paint brush mark, it allows more looseness and simplicity in her works, which gives them a contemporary and illustrative twist from the historical inspirations.

While Garcia's illustrations are highly decorative and visually striking, the concept behind these works are simple, "Sometimes I wish I had a bunch of heads with different hairstyles. It would make getting ready much easier", says Garcia as she explains the creative intentions behind the first painting of the series. The artist's intuitive creative process is very similar to my art practice, and it is a very relatable experience for me that the surrealist atmosphere created in these images sometimes can be unintentional.

What initially draws me to the artist's work is its formal quality. The fact that Garcia's unique art style is developed under the influence of Western culture and European historical art makes me realize how culture and history can inform contemporary and commercial works. As someone who comes a different cultural background, rather than blindly mimicking Garcia's style of illustration, I am more interested in developing my own skills and representations and thinking about how my practice can benefit from my own culture, history, and lived experience.

Yon Fan, animated movie, *Number Seven Cherry Lane*, 2019

Yon Fan is a Hong Kong-based filmmaker, writer, and photographer. He is born in Wuhan China in 1947 and immigrated to Taiwan at the age of 5. He then moved to Hongkong at the age of 17 and studied and immigrated to the United States in 1960s-1970s. As a queer artist who has also experienced immigration and cultural exchange, I found his works very relatable.

No.7 Cherry Lane is an art house animated film directed by Yon in 2019. The story of the film combined three short stories written by the director himself, Nights of Spring Fever, Youthful Dreams, and Room at the Top. The story takes place in Hong Kong in the late 1960s.

Taiwanese single mother Mrs. Yu and her teenage daughter Mei-ling immigrated to Hong Kong, which was under British colonization at the time. In order to make her daughter fit in better, Mrs. Yu hired a local University student, Zi-ming, as her daughter's English tutor, who became emotionally involved with both Mrs. Yu and her daughter, and thus a love triangle was formed between the three main characters. As someone who shares similar identity, culture, and experience with Yon, this film resonated with me in many ways.

Yon is extremely good at telling stories within stories. For example, when Mrs. Yu and the English tutor first met, the English tutor introduced the French novel, Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time) to Mrs. Yu. To help her get a better understanding of the book, he compared it to the 18th century Chinese novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin, stating that they are similar stories taking place in two different cultures. The conversation then moved on to Miao-yu, a character from *Dreams of the Red Chamber* who is Buddhist nun that was not able to repress her secular desire for love. That night, Mrs. Yu had a dream, in which she fantasized about the male tutor's body. In the dream, she became Miao-yu, the Buddhist nun who suppressed her desire for years and finally decided to release it.

As a queer male artist, Yon's depiction of the female gaze and female experience in this story arc is interesting for my research, this is due to the fact many queer artists are not able to tell stories within a patriarchal perspective. Yon also received a lot of criticism due to the history of the male gaze, and for how his depiction of female experience is fantasized and romanticized. I often use female protagonist in my stories, or as the main subject matter of my works and receive similar criticism. However, I see the value of occupying this perspective as a gesture of moving away from and critiquing patriarchal perspectives.

Another example of telling stories within stories is that when Mrs. Yu and the English tutor went to the theatre together, Yon chose to depict the movies they were watching in great details as a metaphor for what's happening in the main story. Since I am also experimenting with this method of storytelling in my latest graphic novel, I find this part of No.7 Cherry Lane to be a very helpful model for how stories can overlap and contain other stories.

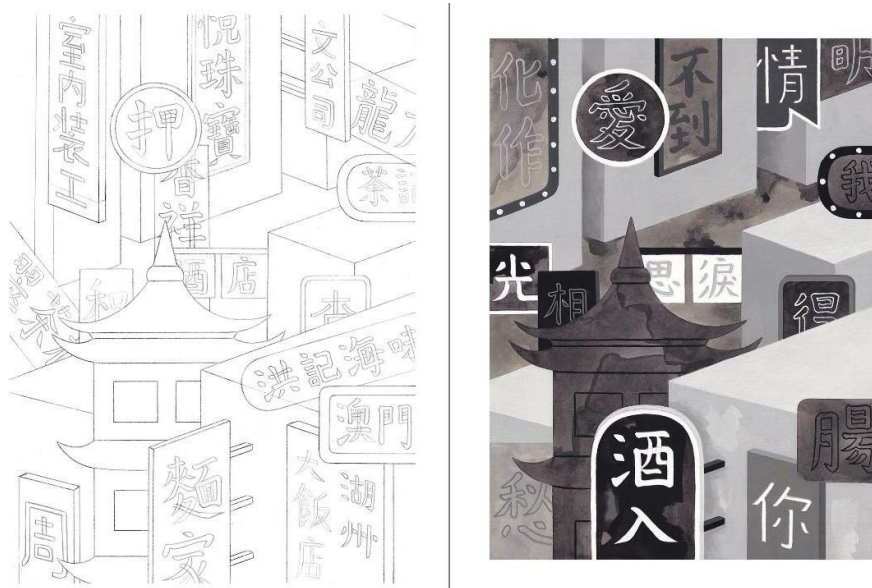


Figure 9



Figure 10

What interests me is not just the plot and the storytelling method. The zine I made during the summer of 2021 is also heavily inspired by the visual art of this film. It is also due to the fact that in my work, there are depictions of same subject matter such as street signs, old banners, posters (Figure 9), and Maoist propagandas (Figure 10) that establish a complex and conflicted body of history and politics and create a space where East meets West, capitalism meets socialism, history meets the contemporary.

Short Comics Project

“Liaozhai”



In the fall semester of 2021, I started another experimental zine project that involved narrative. After two months of editing and experimentation, this project eventually became the beginning of a graphic novel by the end of the semester.

The story includes the Chinese folk tale “Swordswoman” (侠女) from an 18th century Chinese romance and fantasy novel Strange Tales of Liaozhai (聊斋志异) by Pu Songling and a contemporary storyline that is inspired by my own experience with family. The story centers around the theme of “love” and “conflict”. I wanted to tell a story about the “love” that comes with the frustration and anxiety that is caused by both societal and personal reasons.

Strange Tales of Liaozhai is a collection of short stories about Chinese demons, ghosts, and humans with strange supernatural abilities. The book belongs to the genre “zhi-guai”, which is

translated by its literal meaning: tales that are strange and absurd, or tales about monsters and spirits (The term “guai” has multiple meanings). “Zhi-guai” stories often deal with supernatural existence such as gods, ghosts, and spirits. Fox spirits are the most common characters in these tales. In the short stories of *Strange Tales of Liao-zhai*, fox spirits are the shape-shifting demons that transform into beautiful men or women. They trick humans into falling in love with them and consume their life energy when they are off guard. In the essay “Foxes and Sex in Late Imperial Chinese Narrative”, the writer Rania Huntington looked into the history of fox spirit in Chinese literature from the Ming and Qing Dynasty, of which *Liao-zhai*, the source material of my short comics, is undoubtedly the most well-known. “The shape-changing fox is the embodiment of lust” (Huntington). The mythical creature is sexual, seductive, and deadly, which is perfect for telling stories in a metaphoric manner.

According to Huntington, although most stories from *Liao-zhai* are narratives of heterosexual relationships between the protagonist and the vixen, Pu Songling also created characters such as Huang Jiulang, a male fox spirit who would engage in a homosexual relationship with the human protagonist. Such variation in gender offers me opportunity to explore the narratives about fox spirit in relationship to queerness, which is more relatable to my own experience.

Huntington also mentioned in a footnote, a catamite³ in *Liao-zhai* who appeared in the story “Swordswoman” (侠女), which happens to be the story I adapted to my comics. The fox spirit did not play an important role in the original folk tale, since he is “a minor character quickly eliminated by the woman warrior of the title” (Huntington); however, I found it to be a great opportunity for me to develop this character with full imagination in my own adaptation.

³ Catamite: 娈童 *luantong*, under aged and sometimes adult male prostitutes who are sexual companions of older males, a common occupation in imperial China.

Since there are many kinds of fox spirit in Chinese literature, I decided to mix these different concepts in my story. For example, “foxes also play important roles as popular deities, aspiring immortals, household poltergeists, romantic heroines, and scholarly friends”. While some foxes are considered deities, the concept of “fox spirit” is interpreted differently in a contemporary setting: “the idea of the fox, especially the vixen, as the embodiment of dangerous sexuality is a familiar one: the modern vernacular retains “hu-li-jing” (fox spirit) as a derogatory term for a seductive, loose, and cunning woman” (Huntington). For example, a home wrecker who seduces married man is called a “hu-li-jing” and it is a common thing in Chinese soap dramas. In my short comics, the fox spirit character is present in both stories. It is a fantastical individual that exists outside of the societal norm and the physical limitations of the fictional and real world. He is both a deity and a demon that manipulates other characters behind the scenes and reflects the inner struggles of the main characters of each story. To some extent, the appearance of the fox spirit may seem like a solution to the dilemma of the protagonist, but that solution usually comes with consequence or karma.

I started the project due to my obsession with Chinese martial art genre and tragic love stories. When I came across the folk tale of “Swordswoman”, I thought it is the perfect story for me to adapt to my graphic novel as a parallel to the contemporary storyline that is inspired by my experience of romance and relationship, since both stories deal with the topic of queerness within in context of Chinese and Confucian culture.

In the contemporary storyline, the main character fell in love with the man he was supposed to have a one-night stand with, while facing the pressure of his father’s expectations is in a similar situation as Gu from the folk tale.

Both characters suffer from their hidden identity and the shame of not being able to conform to parental expectation and societal norms established by Confucian culture leads to the state of detachment and self-denial. I also chose to use a conservative and contained language for

the narrator of the story to echo the tone of the original folk tale, as well as reflecting the idea of the character's hidden identities as queers. According to Hongwei Bao's article "Queer Comrades: toward a post-socialist queer politics", the self-identification of the LGBTQ people in China is often associated with the concealing and avoidance of their true sexual orientation within the circle of their family, friends, and co-workers. The term "tong-zhi" (comrades) serves political purposes for addressing people in a communist or socialist setting, has also been used to address queer people in the post-Mao era. In order to survive as queer people in China, a society influenced by Confucianism and Maoist ideology, Bao proposed: "what if we reject a liberal notion of individual subjectivity and private personhood, and instead embrace a political subjectivity imbued with revolutionary passion and collective affect?" (Bao 27). Bao states that while "queer" represents a disruption of, and departure from normative gender, sexuality, and social norms, the term "comrade" is more accepted socially and politically in post-socialist China. To not cause any misunderstanding from my representation of queer relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the life of queer people in China is different from the West. The hiding of one's true identity and the compromise to conservative morality are always present. Despite creating my story within a Canadian institution, and free from the restrictions, this continuous conformation to societal and political norms has already been established within my ideology. Therefore, I decided to give the queer characters in my graphic novel a tragic ending that consists of self-destruction and self-denial, which not only indicates the failed resistance to the societal and political oppression, but also reflects my real-life experience.

"Genre Fiction" and "Realism"

In the essay "Between Realism and Genre Fiction: American Born Chinese and Strange Fruit" by Jiahong Wang, the author mentions that there are two main categories of visual narratives in western countries. "Superhero comics" that are popular in the 1960s and 1970s are considered

“genre fiction”, and comic works such as *Maus* (1990) by Art Spiegelman, *Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi, and *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang are examples of comic works that tackle real world subjects. For example, *Maus* is about the artist’s father’s experience as a Jewish descendant in Poland during World War II, and *Persepolis* is about the artist’s own experience of growing up in Iran in the 1970s and 1980s during the Islamic revolution. These comic works tackle “serious themes” and “brought graphic narratives into the literature cannon” (Wang 221).



Figure 8

I also went through a phase where I was trying to create graphic works to respond to the political oppression I have experienced in China, such as the incomplete short comic I made in 2017 (figure 8). The problem with the short comic is that the story is set in Beijing, China in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution. I have not personally experienced the time period nor have the elders of my family talked to me about their experiences due to the lack of freedom of speech in China. Therefore, there is a lack of authenticity and emotion in this work. When I

decided to come back to making short comics, I wanted to depict my personal experience in parallel with fantasy and fictions to make it more personal and experimental.

In Yang's comic book *American Born Chinese*, the author started the book by introducing three different stories separately, a recomposed ancient Chinese folk tale about the magical monkey king adapted from the 16th century Chinese fantasy novel *Journey to the West*, a story about a child of Chinese immigrants who struggles with his race identity in an American school, and a story in the style of a 90s situation comedy about an American boy and his Chinese cousin. The three stories started separately, but the hidden clues and major characters from each story all came together in the end. This method of storytelling inspired me to create my own short comic with multiple storylines, with the fox spirit character as the key element that connects the stories together. However, unlike Yang's story about self-discovery and empowerment, I decided to go a darker route with my story, with themes such as self-denial, failed resistance, and surrender to power.

The Haunting Tale of Liaozhai Studio

For the last semester of the MFA program, I have added another piece of short story to my comic book to enhance the project. The story is a mini science-fiction comic that takes place in a dystopian future. In the year of 2046, Hongkong became a totalitarian state and is ruled by communist government. The main character of the story is a night club songstress who is also a secret member of an underground religious group. The government found out their secret organization and sent troops to wipe out the religious group, and that is when the songstress finds out that the buddha statue she has been worshipping the whole time is in fact, a shapeshifting fox spirit.

I initially came up with the idea of making a short comic that takes place in dystopian Hong Kong as an excuse to play with visual elements such as neon street signs and mid-century night clubs. I then proceed to develop a story about faith and religion. Inspired by the true events of the government's persecution of religious groups in China, and the current political tension in Hong Kong, I created a fictional story that is eccentric to fit the tone of my developing graphic novel, yet the story still reflects those real historical events.

I also chose to set the story specifically in the year 2046 to pay tribute to the movie 2046 by Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai. The movie took place in Hong Kong in the 1960s. It is about the life of a martial art novelist who attempts to write his first science fiction novel. With every person the novelist met in real life, he transformed them into the fictional characters in his novel. The story keeps shifting back and forth between the real world and the fictional world created by the novelist, and the film's surreal and dreamy atmosphere gives me a lot of inspiration for my own project.

In the final iteration of the work, there are three stories, one in the past, one in present, one in the future. As an addition to the first two stories, I added the third story titled "Tom" to the book,

which expanded on the two-page comics from the zine *My senseless Grief*. In the third story “Tom”, I chose to depict a story that is inspired by my personal life, which focuses on the relationship between the main character and his father. I introduced the fox spirit character as a superstition held by the father character, which is a familiar belief among people in contemporary China. My experimental approach of putting the three stories together leaves space for the reader to find meanings in the relationships between the stories.

The image on the front cover of *The Haunting Tale of Liaozhai Studio* is a remaking of old Chinese advertisements, another practice of mine that I have mentioned before, and it also features an image of Chairman Mao. The aesthetic qualities and the ambiguities of the cover image not only reflect the “haunting” atmosphere of the book, the combination of illustration and collage allows me to include images of book pages and photographs that echo the real-life inspirations for the fictional stories. The cover avoids direct visual representations of the content of the stories, which creates a space that allows the readers to bring understandings of their own.

Conclusion

In my short comics, there is no right or wrong, hero or villain. Each main character is confused, lost, and unable to find the hopes that keep them alive, such as love and religion. Each character is unable to conform to societal and political norms, so they are constantly punished, challenged, and oppressed. The fox spirit ties the three stories of The Haunting Tale of Liaozhai Studio together, yet its meaning is never resolved. The magical and shapeshifting nature of the fox spirit lets it exist outside of pre-established systems and break all the boundaries and limitations of sexuality, politics, and religion. It can be read as karma, angel, demon, or just a trickster who manipulates human interactions. The openness of the fox spirit character allows me to play freely, creating and re-telling these “zhi-guai” (strange and absurd) stories.

To address the research question raised at the beginning of the thesis support paper: As a Chinese artist working in North America, there are expectations for me to produce certain works that contain subject matters from my own culture on the one hand, and on the other hand, I am open to critiques such as orientalism and the objectification or marginalization of non-western culture. There will always be a gap between me and the world I am currently in. The process of creating illustrations and stories for western audiences as a Chinese immigrant artist is another form of shapeshifting, just like the fox spirit character in my short comics. As a character that feels out of place in those stories, the fox spirit becomes a reflection of myself, an artist who attempts to make an emotional and poetic connection between the ancient tales and contemporary life.

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