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Abstract

Skylarks tells a story about revenge and the meaning of life. The main characters are a group of young kids who find their village has been attacked by the Emperor. Disguised as performers, they set out to the Emperor's Palace looking for their Master who was taken by the Emperor. But there are more cruel secrets to be revealed. The aim of this thesis is to describe the making of *Skylarks* from the initial concept to the finished project. The body of my written thesis is composed of four parts: Introduction, Preparatory work for the Thesis, Major body of the Thesis and Synthesis. The Introduction will examine the background of the artist, including the influences of Chinese culture and of comics, both American and Japanese manga. The Preparatory Work of the Thesis examine the ideas before designing the background and characters of the comic. The main part of thesis contains the details of my final project. This section includes the theme of the comic, the Story, Introduction of the Characters, and the design of how I wanted this project to be exhibited. In conclusion, through the thesis project I attempted to create in comic book form an alternate reality that combined traditional Chinese and fantastical elements.

SKYLARKS: THE MAKING OF AN ALTERNATE REALITY IN COMIC FORM

by
Tingxuan Wang

B.F.A, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, 2017

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration.

Syracuse University
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I. Introduction

a. Self introduction

i. Background

My name is Tingxuan Wang. I draw comics and illustrations. Kenneth Rocafort and Takeshi Obata are some of the amazing artists who influenced me. I mostly do my work on computer and tablet, because it has an easy way to play around with the sketch. I am a huge fan of line drawing so I always put most attention on sketches and inking. Storytelling is the most important part of my comics and illustrations. And telling interesting and touching stories are my goals.

Interest always generates the most powerful motivation, just like comics for me. Rather than the exciting words in novels, I preferred magical pictures in comic books, which could demonstrate stories and characters vividly. Immersed in pictures, I was roaming in the magical world full of fictional figures and enjoying exquisite skills in character shaping. Attracted by charming comics, I am ambitious to explore further and make a certain achievement in the field.

ii. Experience

When I was in college, I chose animation as my major because very few public universities in China had a comics major. Some of the things I learned in animation also applied to drawing comics like camera angles and how things move. Majoring in Animation during my undergraduate study, I have acquired systematic knowledge concerning artistic creation ideas, modes of composition and color matching through

some specialized curriculums. *Comic Techniques* introduced basic approaches to expressing authors' creativities by using lenses. *Illustration* taught me principles and theories about creating illustrations. In *Roles Design in Animation*, I learned how to make appropriate color palettes reflecting characters' personalities accurately. Passionate and concentrated, I have tried my best to complete study tasks and, fortunately, I was awarded Special Scholarship of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology in 2016, which was the best recognition for my effort and encouragement to research further in this field.

b. Reason to be artist

i. First introduction to art (manga)

I was first introduced to Japanese manga when I was in primary school. At that time. The Internet was not as popular as nowadays. The only way for me to read manga was went to the bookstore near my school every afternoon after school. The most popular manga among kids at that time were *Naruto*, *One Piece*, *Bleach*, *Dragon Ball*, and some other manga that were also popular in Japan. Among them, the work of Dragon Ball has the greatest impact on me.



Fig.1 Manga: *Dragon Ball Z*, Akira Toriyama, 1984

Dragon Ball Z, issue 35

Because purchasing manga books by series is too expensive for kids, so I only have a few single copies of the entire series. So I read those manga books over and over again to learn how the story and images complemented each other. From copying the drawings in the manga to trying to draw original comics myself, I learned step by step how to tell a story using the picture, and even create a world of my own.

ii. Exploring other field of comic (American comic and Japanese manga)

After going to college, I learned about American superhero comics. The shaping of the superheroes in comics are different with those I knew in movies and cartoons when I was a kid. The comics also show the diversity of a character and the richness of the back story. Unlike Japanese manga, most American comics pay attention to the quality and details of the images.



Fig.2 *Batman: Court of Owls*, Greg Capullo, 2011

New 52 Batman: Court of Owls, issue 1

Some of the Japanese manga artists I admire are very good at creating atmosphere with white space. This using of negative space is very smart but hard to use it well. Taito Kubo is a manga artist who is excellent at using white space for emphasis. For example, in the drawing below from manga *Bleach* episode 675: This panel the character gets a new ability and form. Taito Kubo used great amount of white spaces in order to heighten the character's expression and his horn which leaves a deep impression on readers.



Fig.3 Manga: *Bleach*, Taito Kubo, 2001

Bleach, episode 675

Another major difference is that Japanese manga are mostly black and white, while most American comics are full-color. This gives these two different forms of art their own unique quality. I love both American comics and Japanese manga equally. And I am still learning from both forms of art. I admire how American comic artists use

panels to push the story forward and how Japanese manga artists developing their art style and the ability to tell interesting stories.

When I was at my senior year of college, I began to have a strong interest in ancient Chinese culture. This interest made me want to create comics of ancient Chinese backgrounds with my own opinions and re-creation. At this time, I was introduced to some comics from Hong Kong.



Fig.4 Comic: *Wind and Cloud*, Rongcheng Ma, 1989

Cover of Wind and Cloud, episode 242

I read some Hong Kong comics with traditional Chinese cultural background as the theme and learned from each artists' understanding and interpretation of 'Chinese style'. These comics remind me of that the 'Chinese elements' can be shown not only by story but also by images.



Fig.5 Comic: *Wind and Cloud II*, Rongcheng Ma, 2000

Wind and Cloud II, episode 16

I also used a sumi brush with Chinese characteristics in my final project in order to make the comic have a traditional hand-drawn quality.

iii. Discovering my own visual voice

Due to my personal reasons, I was unable to devote myself to reading novels, and I was only attracted to the cover and the illustrations in graphic novels. It is because I prefer to know the stories conveyed through images. So the only books I enjoy are comics and manga. I like to choose my favorite panels to copy while I read them. At first, I just learned how to draw the characters' expressions and modeling. Then I started to draw my own comics. The stories could be all kinds of things I encountered in my life. When I have several pages done I show them to my friends and family, and then ask them if there is anything unclear in the comic. After summing up their opinions and suggestions I redo those panels in order to help anyone who reads my comics understand the story of it. At that time my art style was still simple and goofy with exaggerated actions and expressions. After growing up gradually I have read more and more comics and manga, and I have seen many different art styles and amazing stories. So I began to learn from these artists and then practice to combine and absorb these features that attracted me into my own art style, not only the artworks but also the ability to tell interesting stories.



Fig.6 Manga: *One Piece*, Eiichiro Oda, 1997

One Piece, episode 601

During the preparation of my final project. I read the famous Japanese manga *One Piece* as a reference. *One Piece*'s slightly exaggerated but detailed style and touching and fascinating stories deeply attracted me. So I began to add slightly exaggerated shapes and expressions when I designed the characters of my final project, which I had been unwilling to add to my art style, but I am very happy that I finally chose to do so.

II. Preparatory work for the Thesis

a. Building the world

I started thinking the whole setting of the final project before I began. First, I intended to design an alternate reality that combined traditional Chinese elements with science fiction elements; this combination is relatively rare and interesting. The whole concept of adding Sci-Fi elements to the background of ancient China is quite eye catching. I learned about the setting of an ideal township from a story I loved very much called ***the Tale of the Fountain of the Peach Blossom Spring*** and added my own understanding and conception. This is the origin of the story background of my comic ***Skylarks***.

The Tale of the Fountain of the Peach Blossom Spring is the story of a fisherman who lost his way while fishing and accidentally walked into a peach blossom forest. He was shocked by the beauty of the peach blossom forest and wanted to explore to the end of the forest. At the end of the forest there was a mountain, and an entrance under the mountain that can only be passed by one person. He walked into the cave and saw a small village. The houses in the village were neatly arranged. The villagers who lived in the village were from young to old, and their clothes were same as people wore outside. Everyone living in this village was peaceful and satisfied. The villagers were surprised when they saw the fisherman and asked about the outside world where the fisherman came from. The fisherman learned that the ancestors of the villagers came here to keep them away from war and had lived a self-sufficient life

ever since. The villagers welcomed the fisherman for a few more days. Before the fisherman left, the villagers told him it was important not to tell outsiders anything about the village. But after leaving, the fisherman still told others about the village hidden at the end of a peach blossom forest. But they couldn't find the place although they tried to search for it.

I enjoy this story very much. The author used only words to describe a beautiful and self-sufficient ideal township. The story is very romantic and mysterious. In China, there are more interpretations of this story. Some say that this expresses the author's longing for a better and more peaceful life in turbulent times. Some boldly speculated that the village of Taoyuan was actually a cemetery, and those neatly arranged houses were tombstones. All the scenery is nothing but the fisherman's fantasy. I like both interpretations and both of them bring mystery and romance to the story.

One theory I add in my story is the Chinese legend about immortality and how Chinese emperors are obsessed with it. This is another cultural story that I think is very interesting. It blurs the boundary between reality and myth. It also shapes the emperor's obsession with power and enriches the emperors' character. Much Chinese literature has such descriptions in them. The emperor who ruled all of China was not satisfied with the way things were. In order to make his wish of immortality come true, he sent out troops to find the secret of immortality. In some tales, the secret of immortality is either a kind of panacea, or a sacrificial ceremony. I started designing with the secret of immortality as the starting point. Under the influence of cyberpunk and science fiction, I decided to define the secret of immortality as transplanting the brain and heart into the mechanical body to attain eternal life. When I came to my own

understanding of this secret of immortality, I had the idea of combining science fiction and ancient Chinese culture. I decided to continue this combination in the background setting of the entire project.

After deciding the setting of the entire alternate reality I developed the idea of the story. With ***The Tale of the Fountain of the Peach Blossom Spring*** as reference I wanted to design a small village hidden in the mountains and forests away from the society outside. The master in the village was familiar with a mysterious technique. He used mechanical organs to replace various parts of the human body. At first he just using this skill to replace the organs or limbs of the orphans of war. Then one day he used this skill to save a dead child by replacing his injured heart with a mechanical heart. That person is the protagonist of the story, the leader of the children - Zho. I set him as one of the princes of the emperor who was killed by him. Because the emperor did not believe that anyone but him could be qualified as king, he ruthlessly killed all his descendants and tried to achieve eternal domination by realizing immortality.

I want to use Taoyuan as an hidden village to contrast with the cruelty of the war era to highlight this yearning for a beautiful and ideal utopia. In the early design of the story I intended to have some plots to show the life in Taoyuan, including how the children's master getting along with them. This contrast with the tragic development in the later part of the story. In the plot before the tragedy happened in Taoyuan. The children were training with the master. Those children worked together with each other and using a special trick to beat the master in the training. At the end of the story when the master's consciousness temporarily stalled the emperor's movements. The kids used the same trick to restrict the emperor and attack him the last time. There will be

foreshadowing in this story, but in the end I had to delete these plots because of space limitations.

b. Forming the story

After conceiving the general framework of the story. I thought of including a story within a story as a metaphor for what the emperor did. The tale is about a lion who is the ruler of the earth. The lion wanted to also rule the sky so it brutally killed those skylarks who lived on the branches. Even if the skylarks could not threaten his rule. The surviving fledglings sought revenge. They burned their bodies and turned into a phoenix to finish the lion's life. The ending of this tale also refers to the ending of the comic.



Fig.7 Concept design of the full color illustration, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

At first I thought about using dragon as a metaphor for the emperor because dragons have more Chinese characteristics. But dragons has always been a symbol of emperors in ancient China. So using dragons as a metaphor here is too obvious. Finally I chose the lion as the metaphorical animal for the emperor in the story. As for the children, after research I decided to use skylarks as their metaphorical animal because the skylark is small and seems to be insignificant to be a threat to most

animals. Chinese words for skylarks means those birds can fly above the clouds and their sounds are very clear. One fun fact is that the Chinese word for skylarks can be also read as 'telling the prince'. Both descriptions fit perfectly to the story. So eventually I chose Skylarks to be the title of my comic.

III. Thesis

a. Composition of Thesis

i. Character Design



Fig.8 Character design of Zho, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

Zho: Leader of the children. Slightly older than the other children. He has excellent leadership and ability of coordination. His true identity is the prince who was killed by the emperor but got saved by the master of Taoyuan. He has a heart-shaped

birthmark on the left arm. Both his left arm and the right leg are powered by gears. Because the master of Taoyuan saved him from death his heart has been replaced with a mechanical organ powered by gears. In his left arm he hides a crossbow which he uses as weapon.

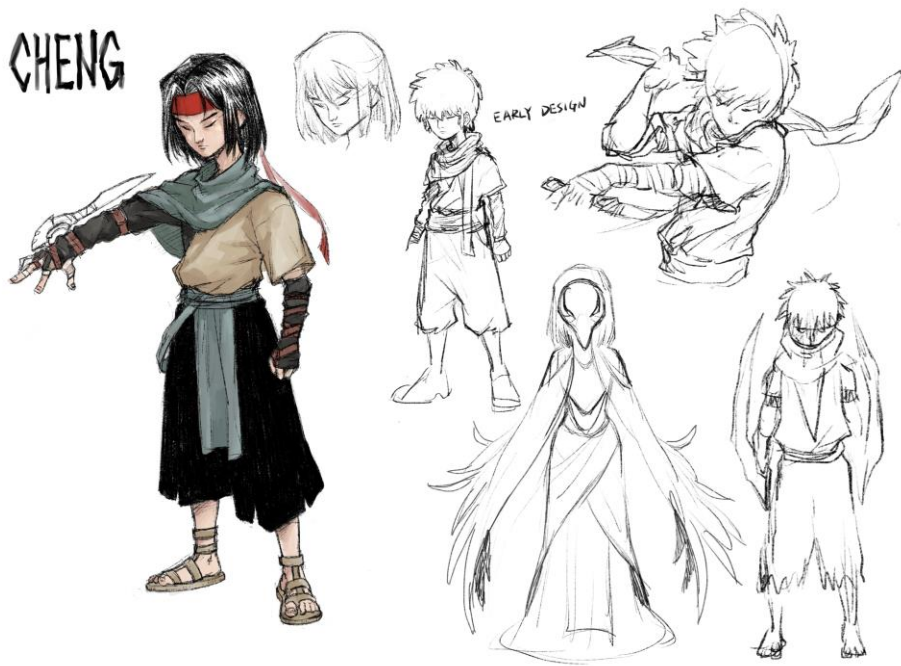


Fig.9 Character design of Cheng, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

Cheng: He has a calm and dispassionate personality. There are no replacement body parts on him but both his eyes are blind. Due to his blindness his other senses have been strengthened. He has got a small figure but with agile movement. His weapon is a pair of daggers.

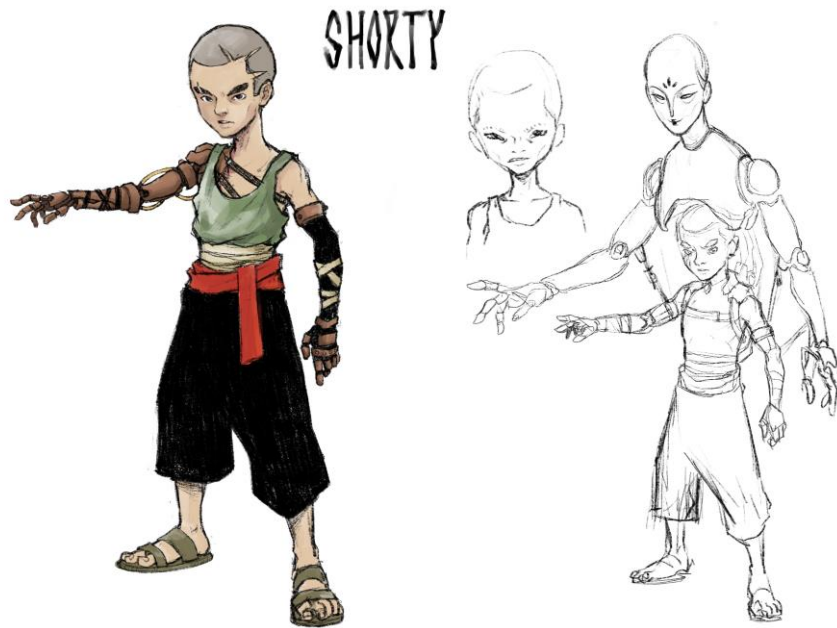


Fig.10 Character design of Shorty, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

Shorty: He is cheerful and impulsive. His right arm is powered by gears. He uses a mechanical puppet that can be manipulated as weapon. Each body part of the puppet can be disassembled and then controlled by strings as a weapon. His body is hidden under the puppet when he is disguised as a dancer.

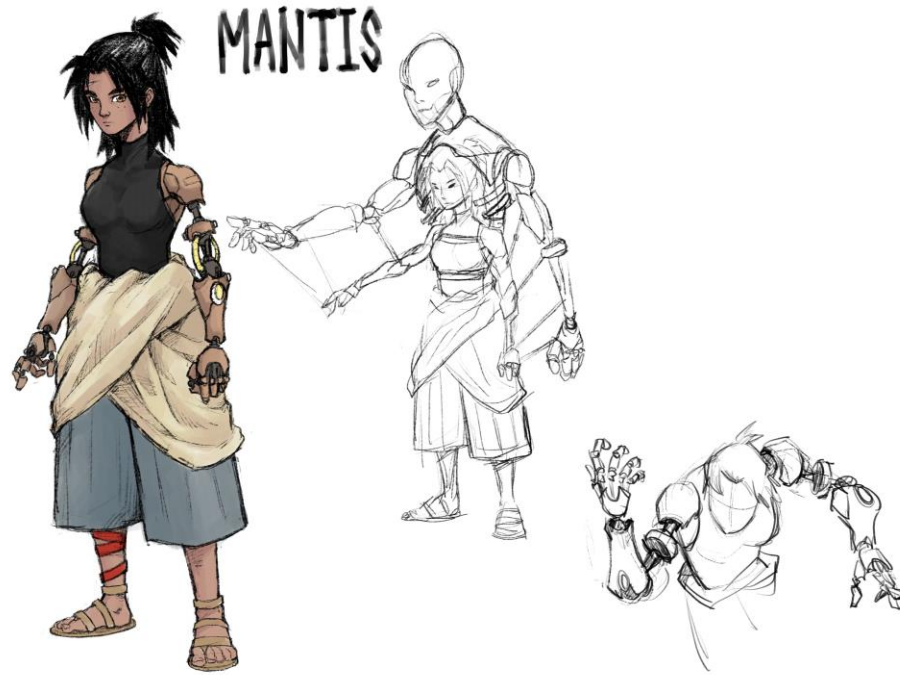


Fig.11 Character design of Mantis, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

Mantis: She is the only girl in the group. She has a mild and mature character. Both of her arms are powered by gears. Her weapon is also a mechanical puppet which can be disassembled and controlled by strings.



Fig.12 Character design of Sou, Tingxuan Wang, 2019, Digital

Sou: He is a quiet kid. Both of his legs are powered by gears. He is proficient with the knowledge of mechanism and he remodeled his legs into animal foot structures, which improves his mobility to a great degree.

ii. Story

Tonight is the night of the emperor's birthday banquet. The emperor is enjoying the food and wine with the ministers in his huge palace. They are enjoying the singing and dancing performances while having the feast in front of them. Today is the emperor's birthday. The lights illuminate the palace but there are five children planning something in the shadows outside the palace where the light cannot reach.

The ministers hold up their wine pots to celebrate the emperor's birthday but the emperor just sits on his throne and does not move his chopsticks at all. At this time, the host walks to the center of the banquet. He knocks on the gong in his hand to introduce the next group of dancers loudly. A faint smoke spreads around the banquet. Two dancers jumped out from the smoke to the center of the room in a lion-dance costume. Another dancer who wears a bird mask stands on the lion's head. The smoke was from his mask. Then several birds fly out of the smoke again. When the audiences look closely they find out those are puppet birds which were manipulated by two other masked dancers. Then the singers begin to sing:

There was a lion who ruled all the living things on earth. But he was never satisfied. He also wanted the sky which he could not touch. The lion began to conquer even the smallest birds. Although a few fledglings were lucky enough to survive. Even though their wings were not all covered with feathers yet, but they still stood together to fight against the lion. Fire started to burn the fledglings' bodies. They rose together to form a mighty flaming phoenix and ended the lion's ambition.

After the song finishes the smoke fades away and all the ministers in the palace have disappeared. The dancer wearing the bird mask is standing in front of the emperor. He is grabbing a dagger towards the emperor's throat. He removes his mask. Under the bird mask is a child's face with his eyes closed. His name is Cheng. Other dancers also removed their disguises and all of them are children – Zho, Shorty, Mantis and Sou. They ask the emperor about the whereabouts of their master and threaten to avenge their villagers who were killed by the emperor. The emperor says that they are too late. Then Cheng suddenly waves his dagger cross the emperor's throat. When they think they have killed the emperor and are about to leave they find that the emperor who was supposed to be dead slowly sat up on his throne again. The emperor takes off his robe. Under his clothes is a mechanical body operated by gears. The children are shocked by what they have just seen. In the next moment, they cooperate seamlessly and pierce an arrow into the emperor's heart. Before they could catch a breath they are shocked to see the emperor's resurrection again. This time the emperor shows them the second heart and the other brain in his mechanical body. It turns out that the emperor left the children's master's brain in his transformed body in order to continue to perfect his body. The first heart which the children just pierced was the heart of their master. Then the emperor tells the true facts about the massacre which the children had not known.

Serval days earlier, in order to celebrate the birthday of a little girl in the village. Children sneaked out to saw the outside world. That day happened to be the day when the emperor was on the street. When the kids were about to return to their village they found that the red scarf which they gave to the little girl as a birthday gift was lost. The

five kids asked the little girl to wait for them to bring the scarf back at the entrance of the village. But when they found the scarf and returned to the village they found that all of the villagers were massacred and the village was burnt. They found out that the initiator of all this was the emperor who also took their master away. So they vowed to find the master and have revenge for the villagers. The reason why the emperor can find the village is that he recognized Zho in the crowd. Zho was one of the princes who was killed by the emperor because of his effort to occupy the throne forever. This is how the emperor found the secret of immortality. Then the emperor beats the kids down. When he is about finish their lives his movement suddenly stops. The reason is that the master's brain still remained a little bit conscious and it was his consciousness that restricted the emperor's actions. The children take advantage of this opportunity to launch their final attack. They make up their mind and decide to use their mechanical body parts as explosive to kill the emperor. Finally the palace is submerged in fire.

iii. How to present thesis visually

During the process of my thesis. I gradually began to design the layout of my thesis exhibition. There is a four-page spread illustration in my comic which is the only colored illustration in the whole black and white comic. Since this cross-page illustration is a story within a story It will not affect the reading experience to exhibit individually. I wanted to present this illustration as a separate project and use a unique form that fits the keynote of the story. After surveying different mounting techniques I finally chose to make a reel. (Fig. 13) Because this is a very traditional Chinese mounting technique it fits the content of the comic.



Fig.13 Photo of the scroll, Tingxuan Wang, 2020, Silk

After deciding how to display the double-page spread, I thought it was necessary to show the four-page comic-page-sized illustrations as one whole piece. So I conceived a plan to print the spread pages on a separate four-page sized paper.

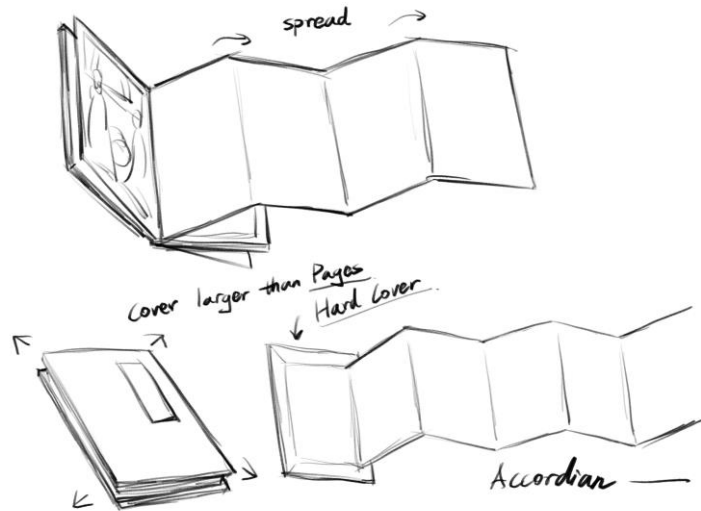


Fig.14 Sketch of the representation of the book, Tingxuan Wang, 2020, Digital

As I was sketching this idea a thought suddenly occurred. Since I am going to make this spread page illustration into a separate accordion folding page, why not make the whole comic in this form? I searched for the techniques of making an accordion book and decided to realize this amazing idea. I made a dummy book to present this idea to the professors.



Fig.15 Photo of the dummy book, Tingxuan Wang, 2020, Cardboard and Paper



Fig.16 Cover Illustration, Tingxuan Wang, 2020, Digital

Conceiving the cover of my comic at first I designed a double-page illustration as the cover. I intend to create a cover for the first time to see that the children's facial expressions are peaceful. They are looking in the distance and imagining a better future. But after finishing reading the comic the readers will find out what is really going on with this illustration. On the back cover it turns out that those kids were still standing in the palm of the emperor. The front cover and back cover combined together will be the complete illustration.



Fig.17 Poster for the exhibition, Tingxuan Wang, 2020, Digital

I also designed an illustration as a poster for my thesis exhibition. This poster embodies the main idea of the story of *Skylarks*. In this illustration there is a skeleton opening his hands and the strings attached to his hands control the puppet doll in the center of the image. The four skylarks in the picture represent the four children – Mantis, Shorty, Sou and Cheng. The puppet in the center of the illustration actually represents Zho , the protagonist of the comic. And the skeleton hidden in the background represents the emperor. The skeleton manipulates the puppet with strings also metaphorically represents that the fate of Zho has been manipulated by the emperor till the end.



Fig.18 *The skeleton's trick*, Song Li, Song Dynasty

<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/231588.html>

The inspiration for me to draw the illustration of the poster is a painting of the Chinese Song Dynasty painter Song Li. The painting is called *the skeleton's trick*. In this picture, there are one large skeleton and one small skeleton. The large skeleton is controlling the small skeleton puppet with strings which represents contained and manipulated. Opposite the skeleton is a child who was seduced by the little skeleton puppet and he was followed by a woman who tried to stop him. But she still failed to stop the kid who continued to face the temptation. This painting has a triple attraction structure. The first attraction is the large skeleton controls the small skeleton. The

second attraction is the large skeleton is controlled by the artist. And the third attraction is the viewer would be attracted by the content of this drawing. Some scholars have analyzed that this drawing reflects the illusory fate of life. Today's manipulator may become the person who will be manipulated tomorrow. I created this poster of my thesis with this drawing as a reference. I intend to represent the powerlessness of the children who want to revenge for their own home by their own power but still cannot escape the manipulation of fate in the story.

IV. Synthesis

After finished drawing *Skylarks* I decide to do more comics with the background of Chinese culture. The reason I want to do this is because there are not many comics with Chinese culture, not even in China. Japanese manga and American comics are still stand for high quality comics in China now. Lots of readers start to be attracted by the unique culture in these comics and willing to know more about the culture itself. I want to introduce Chinese culture which I am deeply interested in to all people who hasn't been introduced to Chinese culture. Just like how Chinese people are addicted with Fengshui, including divination and so on. It seems obscure at first, but there are so much fascinating knowledge and amazing stories within. It is such a pity that those interesting culture could not be known by more people outside China. *Skylarks* will be my first step to accomplish this dream I have.

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