

May 2020

The Use of Diverse and Varied Cultural Inspiration in Visual Development

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Abstract

This thesis aims to show different cultures in children's literary works, to help them to understand different cultures and backgrounds. Our world is quickly developing, people can observe various kinds of cultures through the internet. We are becoming more and more aware of education, which also casts a vigorous development on the children's education industry. How to show different cultures in children's literary works to let them understand each other from different cultural backgrounds?

My thesis is based on oriental culture and adapted from Andersen's story *The Snow Queen* from Western culture. Through the combination of different elements, this visual adaptation will make the Oriental culture more receptive to the Western market.

This project will study different possibilities of visual development, scenes design, story art, and character design. I hope this can provide a good direction for visual development in the future.

The Use of Diverse and Varied Cultural Inspiration in Visual Development

By

Minna Zhang

B.E. South China University of Technology, 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Illustration.

Syracuse University

May 2020

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I. Introduction

Since I was a child, I have been fascinated by different styles of illustration. I was mainly interested in American cartoons, traditional Chinese illustration or, Japanese manga. Before primary school, I began to draw like every other child. I started by imitating other people's paintings. I used anything I could find at home to draw with, like watercolors and toothpaste. Most of my paintings depicted my daily life. I tried to describe my daily life with my pencil. When I got older, I started to buy magazines and comic books to read. This is where I first came into contact with comics and animation and I was deeply attracted to their art and their stories. It was the year 2000, and Mickey Mouse magazine, Cartoon Network, and Japanese animations were quite popular in China. I used to try to imitate what I saw in my sketchbooks, textbooks, even on my desk during class. Though I didn't create anything original, I started falling in love with the process of drawing, and becoming a painter became my childhood dream.

During these three years of graduate study, I tried to explore the possibilities of drawing. I tried children's books, comics, animation concept design, editorial, and finally I decided to create concept design for animation. I also like to get inspired by nature, because there are many non-human characters to design. The color palettes I used were always bright, and most of them came from children's things, which attracted their attention. I drew many versions to sort out which is best. Since I was affected by various animations, I really like different kinds of monster designs. I prefer exaggerated cartoon designs to realistic paintings. My undergraduate major was industry

design, so I was more interested in product design, which also helped me design the surroundings in animation, and create as many versions as possible of the same design. I also conducted various studies on the use of lines and the use of color shapes. I tried to find my own style, and I am still trying. In the future, I will choose the professional direction of concept designers, focusing on a cartoon style. As a Chinese who was raised up on Eastern culture and trained in the East, I also want to mash up the Chinese style and Western design. Mixing these different cultural elements together can create a wonderful fantasy design. Combining these different philosophical thoughts and aesthetic images is the challenge of my project but it's also the creative highlight.

I chose to create a children's story as my MFA thesis project, this story is my personal adaptation of Andersen's tale *The Snow Queen*, I use diverse and varied cultures in the visual development and costume design. In this set of pictures, I drew 7 scenes and story art design, 6 character designs, and a large number of peripheral product designs. The whole story is built on a mythical world. I drew a lot of inspiration from photos and various film and television works and extracted many interesting elements from composition, color, and atmospheric renderings. This story is like a variety of adventure stories, with several specific elements: a heroic heroine and a tortuous journey full of adventures and hardships. My thesis project was inspired by the Disney animated film *Big Hero 6* which mashes up Japanese culture and United States culture.

II. Inspiration

The original story *the Snow Queen* was formed in seven parts.

About the Mirror and Its Pieces: A demon created a mirror can reflect any envied thing. The demon broke the mirror into pieces and spread them all over the world. When the small piece cut into people's hearts, they will make people's hearts cold.

There are no magic mirror pieces in my story. I think the mirror pieces represent the malevolence deep in people's hearts.

Childhood Sweethearts: A little boy, Kai, and a little girl, Gerda, live next door to each other, One summer, a piece of the magic mirror gets into Kai's heart and eyes. Kai becomes cruel and aggressive. Next winter, Kai went with the Snow Queen, who makes him forget about Gerda and his family. She takes Kai to her palace. Gerda gets heart broken and goes to find Kai.

In my script the Snow Queen is replaced by a ringmaster, and the sweethearts, Gerda and Kai, are cast as siblings. The ringmaster wants the best story in the world, which attracts Gerda's younger brother, Kai. He decides to follow the ringmaster to travel around the world and write the best story in the world for her. After Kai goes with the ringmaster, Gerda starts her journey to find Kai.

Magic Garden: On the way to find Kai, Gerda came to a garden that was like summer all year round. The owner of this garden was a witch who was very friendly to Gerda and made the garden full of flowers in order to keep her there. The witch wants Gerda to stay with her forever, so she causes Gerda to forget Kai. However, the next day, Gerda still remembers Kai. She took the opportunity to escape and found that it was autumn outside the garden.

The plot in this part does not change a lot. The owner of the garden is a Chinese style old witch. She also tries to keep Gerda in her garden by adding some herb into Gerda's teacup which can make her forget Kai.

The Prince and the Princess:

Gerda continued her journey to find Kai. On the way she met some crows who gave her the clue to a palace which lead her to the Prince and Princess. They gave Gerda a coach to help her continue her journey.

In my script, this part was merged into the witch's garden. Gerda took a coach from the witch and followed the crow's guidance to the circus.

Robber's daughter: On the way, Gerda was kidnapped by robbers and become a friend with a robber's daughter. They saw Kai when he was carried away by the Snow Queen and taken to Lapland. They help Gerda to go there.

In my version, Gerda met a bandit gang of Youkai in the forest. The bandit's daughter, a moth girl, became friends with Gerda. The moth girl was touched by Gerda's story and provided a big beetle to Gerda. Gerda rode the big beetle and flew to the circus.

Snow Queen's Palace:

When Gerda reached the Snow Queen's palace, Kai was on a frozen lake, the Snow Queen request him to use pieces of ice like a Chinese puzzle to create characters and words. He can only be released after he spells the word the Snow Queen asks him. Finally, Gerda saves him by her kiss and the power of love.

At the ending of my version, Gerda met her brother and ringmaster at the circus. The ringmaster told Gerda her childhood story about a demon, as she wanted the best story in the world, the demon gave her eternal life. Gerda told her the best story was her splendid experience. The ringmaster got what she wanted, so she released all the puppets.

III. Script

Story of chasing circus

Part 1

Gerda and her younger brother, Kai, lived in a wagon. One day they met a beautiful tall woman with a big bag. As they had the same destination, Gerda invited her to go with them. Kai was really curious about her bag; he asked the woman what was in there. "The whole circus," she said. When they passed a lake, the woman shook her bag and threw all the things into the lake. Different kinds of puppets dropped out of the bag and turned into monsters as soon as they hit the water. Handkerchiefs turned into gorgeous big tents. The woman introduced herself as the ringmaster and showed Gerda and Kai her incredible circus. "Tell me the best story you have ever heard, then you can watch the show for free."

Kai told her a story. The ringmaster brought a blank book and text appeared on the book immediately. The circus appealed to many people; they all came to tell their stories for a free performance. The ringmaster said, "I'll stay here for three days."

Part 2

After watching the show, Kai lost interest in everything but the ringmaster. He got so curious about the secrets of the ringmaster: was she a witch? Why did she want to collect stories? He begged Gerda to take him to the circus again. The ringmaster was getting ready to leave when they met her. All the tents and monsters turned back to puppets. Kai said "Please let me travel with you. I'll create the best story for you!" The ringmaster laughed and opened the bag and Kai

jumped into it. Gerda was shocked and shouted Kai's name, but it was too late. Both the ringmaster and Kai disappeared with the wind.

People couldn't find Kai anywhere. Everyone thought Kai died from drowning. Only Gerda knew Kai was still alive. The next day, swallows guided her to start a journey of finding Kai.

Part 3

Gerda went down by the river and met a witch who lived in a cabin in the woods. She asked the witch where to find her brother. The witch said they went somewhere where Gerda could not find him and persuaded her to take a rest. She provided Gerda food and a place to sleep. As the witch hoped Gerda could be happy again, she added some herbs into Gerda's food which could help Gerda to forget her brother. Gerda forgot Kai until one day she saw a rose blossom in the garden. The rose reminded her of the time she grew roses with Kai. She immediately remembered everything and resumed her journey again. A crow came and provided Gerda clues of where to find the circus. Gerda stole a Wagon from the witch to hasten her travels.

Part 4

Gerda drove the wagon into a dark forest. The leader of the Youkai family dragged little Gerda out of the wagon and tried to eat her. Her wild little daughter stopped her. The Youkai girl said, "She shall play with me." After a few days, the Youkai girl was touched by Gerda's experience. She led Gerda back to her journey and told Gerda where the mystery circus went. The Youkai daughter provided her with a giant beetle and food enough to catch up with Kai.

Part 5

Gerda flew over forests and lakes, over many a lands and seas, and found the circus on the edge of the ice kingdom. She went into a tent and found Kai was writing stories. It seemed like he had no spirit; he did everything like a machine. He just kept writing endless stories, but the stories he had written were becoming more and more boring.

Gerda wanted to bring Kai back home, but Kai was too stiff. Gerda asked the ringmaster why she needed the best story. The ringmaster told her a story.

Part 6

(Flash back)

Lisa (the ringmaster) opened a bottle and released a devil. The devil said he had been trapped for 1,000 years. He would give Lisa a wish. Lisa said, "Tell me the best story in the world." The devil told her all the stories he knew from all over the world. He kept telling stories for three days, but no matter what the devil told her Lisa only said, "There must be something better than this story." On the fourth day, the devil felt himself being teased, and he said angrily: "I will give you an endless life until you find the story you think is the best."

Part 7

(Back to the present)

"This is my story. I've lived for over 300 hundred years" the ringmaster said. "Unless you have the best story that can free me from this curse, Kai will write a story until his inspiration is exhausted."

The ringmaster had collected thousands of stories. She looked at people's hearts in order to find the most interesting stories. Many people were attracted by her and became her slaves. Those who lost their hearts became her puppets.

The ringmaster said, "Are you ready to tell me a story?" Gerda hugged her stiff brother and said to the ringmaster: "Looking back on your life, isn't that the best story?"

The ringmaster suddenly laughed. All the puppets were freed from the shackles and restored to adult form. The band became little paper men. The instruments became a variety of small tools and everything fell apart. All the books flew away. The ringmaster disappeared in smoke.

The next day, Kai woke up in Gerda's arms. He began to tell his sister about his strange dream. Gerda told him "You have just experienced one of the best stories." Gerda flew Kai on the beetle back home in the morning light.

IV. Research



Figure 1. Jeff Turley-Big hero 6-digital. 2014.¹



Figure 2. Silsila Ye Chaahat Ka • I will not let our love extinguish- Alex Cho.2018²

¹ Julius, Jessica. The Art of Big Hero 6. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014.

² <https://www.instagram.com/p/BexkBeSg5Ms/>



Figure 3. Scott Watanabe, Big hero 6, 2014³

I have been influenced by many artists. Among them Disney's animators Jeff Turley, Alex Cho, and Scott Watanabe. They all use flat design and shapes to give a sense of space and light to the picture. Adding texture improves the quality of the picture. It also refers to many principles of graphic design, such as size comparison and light-dark contrast.

All these cartoonists do many visual developments, especially scene designs. All of them are familiar with the connection between light and perspective. They have a strong sense of space.

³ Julius, Jessica. The Art of Big Hero 6. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014.



Figure 4. Armand Serrano-p48-Big hero 6, 2014⁴

The feature that inspired me the most is the Disney animation *Big Hero 6*. Care went into every single aspect of the design. At the heart of it is a brothers' story. Set in this modern mythical combination of Tokyo and San Francisco, it's a good sample of western and eastern cultural mixture. Getting the film on-screen took several years of development.

In *Big Hero 6*, the team combines Tokyo culture with San Francisco's landforms and incorporates a variety of Japanese cultural elements. For example, in a scene in which they design a coffee shop. The artists went to a local Japanese coffee shop to do research. In the scene, there is a modern university research institute. In the early concept design, the designer drew a draft that incorporated Japanese culture into modern technology. It has a Japanese old school style and uses stone and wood to make the shape of the building. In my own design, I also use the shape of western buildings and Chinese elements.

⁴ Julius, Jessica. *The Art of Big Hero 6*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014.

There are many such elements in the *Big Hero 6* setting set. In the illustrations I refer to, their scenes have very good perspective, light and shadow. Any design will involve a lot of field investigations.



Figure 5. Chasing Circus characters design, Mixed medium, 2019

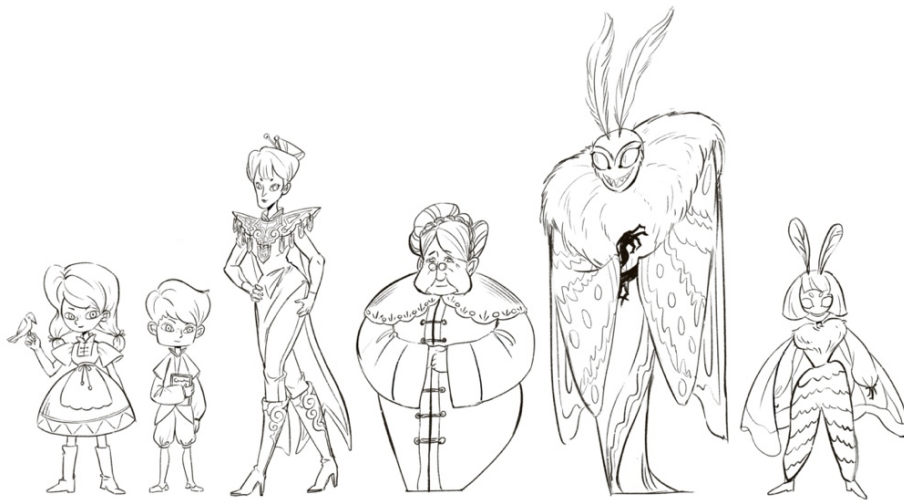


Figure 6. Chasing Circus characters design, Mixed medium, 2019

For the character design, I drew many color palettes first, and then decided color shapes and exaggerated the outfit of the characters. I did a lot of research before designing the characters' costumes, which were filled with oriental carriages, houses, western-style Gerda and Kai, oriental-style ice queens, and oriental-style witches. For the ringmaster's costume, I used the ancient Chinese cloud shoulder pattern design. This decoration come from ancient China, Ming and Qing Dynasty. Most cloud shoulders are beautiful cloud patterns. Other designs include bat, lotus and various kinds of vases. For the witch, I drew some auspicious clouds pattern on her robe, inspired by Qing dynasty female costumes. Gerda and Kai were dressed in Nordic traditional costume. Moth monsters' wings were decorated by Japanese patterns.



Figure 7. Chinese traditional costume cloud shoulder.2017⁵

⁵ Chinese traditional costume. Accessed May 9, 2020. <https://m.91ddcc.com/t/148453>.



Figure 8. National Costume from Aust Agder County, 2015⁶

The clothes of the siblings are designed by National Costume from Aust Agder County. Gerda's clothes are the most obvious. Both practical and beautiful.

V. Thesis show



Figure 9. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

The scene in the first picture is the night view of the circus. People came to the circus for the first time. The shape of the tent here comes from the design of the typical Western circus tent and the Mongolian yurt. The patterns on the tent come from some traditional Chinese patterns. The atmosphere design is based on China's New Year's Day, which is taken from the shape of a fish. This scene design expresses a warm and delightful emotion. The whole picture is made up by two main colors, purple and yellow.



Figure 10. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2020

The second picture is about the brother Kai deciding to follow the ringmaster to travel around the world. Kai jumps into her bag while the ringmaster was putting all her puppets in the bag. This is a powerful perspective, seen from above. The younger brother and various puppets are absorbed into the bag. Kai is at the top of the picture, and the ringmaster is at the visual center of the picture. Everything points to the bag. The whole picture forms a vortex. The scene is created with violet and orange which are contrasting colors.



Figure 11. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

The third picture is the scene which shows the first time when the owner of the garden meets Gerda. Gerda just appeared outside the garden. The lens points to Gerda from the witch's direction. The huge witch and the tiny Gerda formed a strong visual contrast, and the light hits the witch's head. The shadow is covering the witch's action of putting medicine into the teacup. There are various plant elements in the picture. I used the Chinese wisteria as a frame to form the whole image in a certain shape. This help people to find the focal point of the scene.



Figure 12. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

The fourth picture is Gerda driving away from the garden to the forest in a wagon. The perspective is fairly flat and straight forward. I tried to depict the forest's sense of space in a way that is close to reality. Because I want to emphasize the dramatic effect of the picture in most scenes, this one feels relatively calm, and it can be regarded as the transition part of this series of pictures. Different value of trees gives a spatial sense of depth.



Figure 13. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

In the fifth picture, Gerda meets the leader of the moth robbers and his daughter in the forest. In this picture, I used the method of illuminating from bottom to top to create a horrible atmosphere. The focus of this picture is not the sense of picture but the story. The use of red light as the background reflects the tension formed by a strong contrast, suggesting the dangerous situation as Gerda faces the robber.



Figure 14. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

In the sixth picture, Gerda flies away from the forest by riding a huge beetle, with the robber daughter in the forest behind them. This composition draws on the fisheye camera. The entire composition is a huge arc. The overall color is relatively flat, the grayscale is high, and the visual impact is large. I want to create a feeling of rushing out of the picture. I searched for many beetle photos. I studied the beetle's morphology and modified it slightly.



Figure 15. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

In the seventh picture, Gerda walks into the interior of the circus tent, which displays a variety of puppets. The younger brother and the ringmaster are in backlight. The whole picture is mainly composed of two tones, and the contrast between cold and warm is very strong. What I want to express is the tense atmosphere of the final battle. The light guides the screen from left to right, from Gerda to the direction of the ringmaster and the younger brother.



Figure 16. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019



Figure 17. Chasing Circus, Mixed medium, 4800x2700 px, 2019

In the final battle, the script mentioned the childhood experience of the ringmaster. I used another illustration style to describe two illustrations. The first one is the ringmaster's experience of encountering the devil in the bottle when she was a child, and the second one is an abstract scene of telling various stories to the ringmaster, showing his endless stories with different objects. The reason why I used another style for these illustrations is that it is a story in memory, and this part needs to be distinguished from the main part of the story.



Figure 18. Circus puppets, Mixed medium, 2019

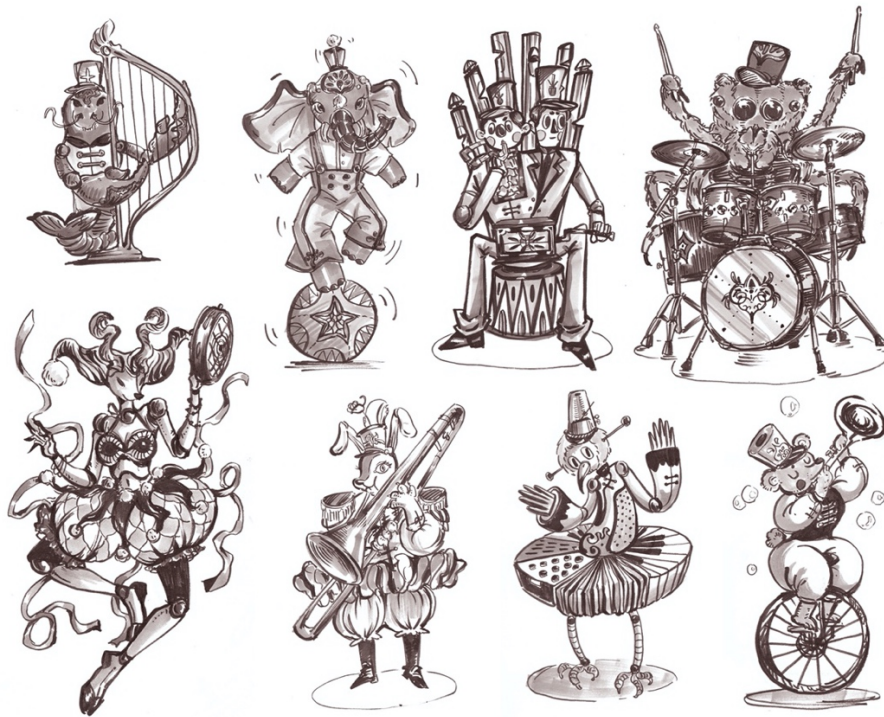


Figure 19. Circus puppets, Mixed medium, 2019

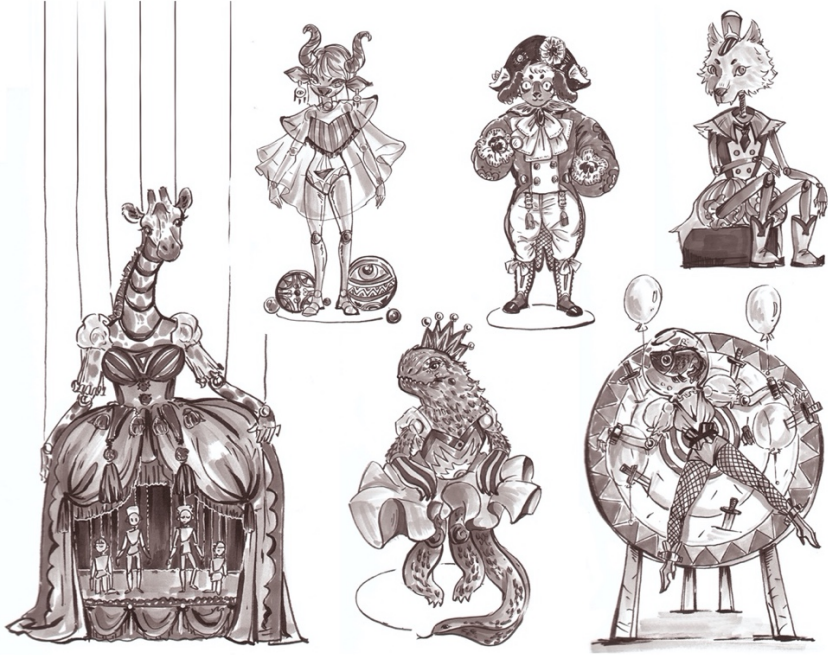


Figure 20. Circus puppets, Mixed medium, 2019



Figure 21. Circus puppets, Mixed medium, 2019

I also designed 28 puppets for the ringmaster's circus. The inspiration for the puppets comes from various animals and insects. Some of them form a band, and some of them are acrobats. They all look cute or interesting. The outlook of these puppets comes from circus animals and old toys.

VI. Future development

I decided to use this series of visual development for children's story art. In the future I am more interested in animation and all kinds of children themed work. The animation market is a developing both in China and United States. I want to work in an animation studio, to learn and grow. I am very interested in the small things in the animation scene, such as various products and architectural design. I want to focus on the design of scenes and surrounding small props. This series of animation visual development designs has comprehensively tested my ability in all aspects and also inspired me about the direction I want to pursue in the future.

Nowadays our world is becoming a big global village, we accept information from all over the world. Do we really know all this information from different culture backgrounds? Do we really understand each other's cultures? Before creating this project, I regarded mixing different cultures into one project as my theme. However, when I finished the whole project, I find that it is difficult to know the meaning of different cultures without research, and the design will become a meaningless collage of different cultures. It's also necessary to let the world know your culture, so you need to adjust something to fit a different market. The quickest way is to use some local elements which can make audience more familiar with your work. All good art work comes from culture and nature; we cannot make up an artwork from our imagination. At the same time, we should also notice cultural appropriation.

As a Chinese student studying in the United States, I saw some Chinese elements designed by American studios. There are also many Chinese characters in comics, but these characters

often have cultural appropriation problems. For example, some scenes place a stone lion indoors, which is unreasonable in China. To avoid this problem, it is best to consult experts from the local culture, or through the Internet, film and books to understand these cultures as much as possible in the early stages of story development, in order to work these elements together into a coherent design. The United States, as a major producer in the animation film industry, uses the design of other countries' cultures. I think that *Kubo and the Two Strings* is also a good example. It is also produced by an American animation studio, Laika. This animation uses Japanese traditional elements to film an American story. Studios are becoming more aware of the importance of better research in these projects and I want to use my art as a catalyst for this global cultural meshing.

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Chinese traditional costume. Accessed May 9, 2020. <https://m.91ddcc.com/t/148453>.

Vita

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Minna Zhang is an illustrator, cartoonist and children's book artist who was raised up in south China. Her works were deeply influenced by United State animation film and European independent comic. She likes strange, creepy and cute design. Minna always create of children's theme artworks, children's books, animation. She is intensely curious about the world and try to describe this world from different view. Most of her works are digital piece but she will try more traditional work. Graduate from South China University of Technology as an industry design student in 2016. Change her major to illustration at Syracuse University in 2017.