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## A STUDY ABOUT HOW TO CREATE A MYTHICAL BEAST SUCCESSFULLY, FOCUSING ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE NINE- TAILED FOX IN EASTERN ART

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A STUDY ABOUT HOW TO CREATE A MYTHICAL BEAST SUCCESSFULLY,  
FOCUSING ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE NINE-TAILED FOX IN EASTERN ART

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Fine  
Arts in Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

Mythical beasts appear in many forms across multiple cultures throughout human history. Their narratives and visual designs express important beliefs and desires of a given culture. By focusing on the aesthetics and history of the nine-tailed fox, a Chinese mythological, this thesis will explore the constructions and artistic techniques that have given shape to the myth. This thesis will also discuss my thesis project named Classic of Mountains and Seas. The ultimate aim of my creative project has been to develop an animation of new mythical beasts, and this paper situates my creations within the much broader history that has inspired them.

As a classic mythical beast, the nine-tailed fox is a popular and culturally significant one in East Asian art and literature. Through out the ages, the nine-tailed fox has been depicted in a large number of artworks across a wide variety of media, including painting, sculpture, fabric, and crafts. Additionally, there is a rich archive of records about the nine-tailed fox, indicating how pervasive this figure has been throughout history. It is precisely because of how its popularity and power have been maintained over such a long period of time that the nine-tailed fox will be regarded as an important reference for my own artistic practice as an animator.

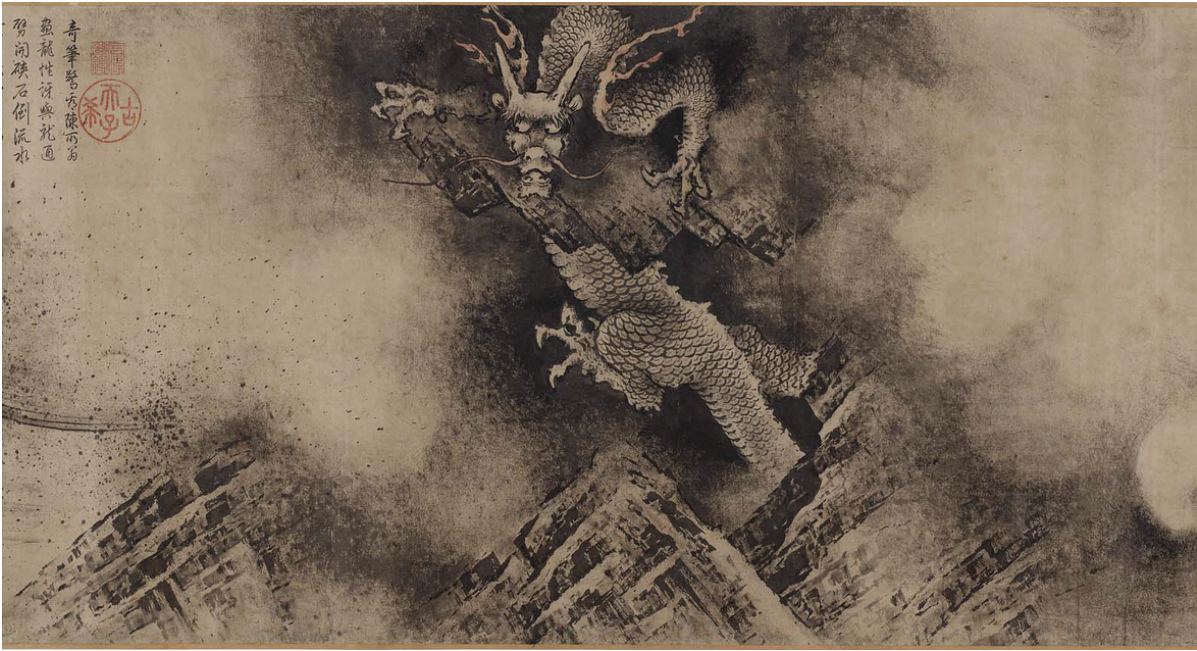


Figure1 : Nine Dragon (detail) , Chen Rong, China, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, A.D. 1244

## Defining the Mythical Beast

First, the mythical beast is an animal that does not exist in reality but rather, lives in myth, folklore, and art. For example, among the most well-known Chinese mythical beasts that have become popular all over the world is the dragon (fig. 1) and various fantastic creatures, such as the Bixie (fig. 2) and the Qilin (fig. 3), which are products of the human imagination. Second, the appearances of mythical beasts are characterized by their abnormalities. That is to say, while they may be visually similar to animals that exist in the real worlds, by bearing common features such as horns, tails, claws, or eyes, these mythical beasts also bear features that are unworldly. These abnormalities usually entail a unique combination of features that obscures comparison with real-world animals. Third, the written descriptions, paintings and carvings of mythical creatures have specific purposes that are related to human activities, such as praying, driving out evil spirits, or bringing luck. Thus, the mythical beast reflects human consciousness and a certain spiritual attitude towards this world.



Figure 2: Bixie, Chinese, 202-220 B.C.



Figure 3: a large painted grey pottery figure of an earth spirit, China, 618-907 B.C.

## Background

As an artist who focuses on animation, video, and sound, mythical beasts resonate strongly with my interests in pursuing the unknown through imagination. Even before this project, many of my artworks have been connected to the origin, design, and cultural significance of mythical creatures. The idea of mythical beasts generates a host of famous ancient creatures, such as the Chinese dragon, the Greek unicorn, or the Egyptian griffin. Instances of these creatures exist everywhere – in modern and ancient times, eastern and western cultures.

While, the original expression of mythical beasts was through written and spoken traditions, they have been frequently represented in works of art, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and fabric. These visual representations were based on a particular artist's interpretation of the written and spoken records and each defining feature of the mythical beast contained special meaning. Each visual element attempted to express the larger narrative in which these creatures existed. In this way, the visualization of a mythical beast can be understood as a visualization of a culture's beliefs and desires toward humanity, nature, and history.

However, while mythical beasts were prevalent in ancient civilizations, only a few are remembered today. The nine-tailed fox is one of these remembered creatures because of its prominence in artistic representation and narrative description. The nine-tailed fox is widely represented but does not have a fixed existence. For instance, it can bear features that express a refined beauty or an untamed wildness, and it can represent the qualities of a defender or a destroyer. Unlike the more popular dragon, which has a symbolic association with strength and luck, what is most fascinating about the nine-tailed fox is that it has multiple, and sometimes conflicting meanings.

## **History of the Nine-tailed Fox**

The nine-tailed fox is a classic mythical beast that has a long history in East Asian culture. As the two main countries that have formulated different versions of this creature, China and Japan have important similarities and differences in how they each understand the nine-tailed fox.

### **I. China**

In ancient Chinese culture, images of the nine-tailed fox are featured as simple drawings accompanied by text. For instance, in the book *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which is a compilation of mythological texts from circa 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, it states that the foxes have four paws but nine tails in Greenmound Country.

Five hundred leagues farther south is a mountain called Mount Duck Beauty. Gold and jade are abundant on its summit, and on the lower slopes are numerous needle stones. There is an animal here which looks like a fox and it has nine tails...It makes a noise like a baby. It devours humans.<sup>1</sup>

Here, we have the first known documentation of the existence of the nine-tailed fox.

According to the text and drawings, the nine-tailed fox is similar to a regular fox with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Anonymous, The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, Translated by Anne Birrell, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 59.

exception of its multiple tails. In this way, the nine-tailed fox is not as fantastic as other well-known mythical creatures.

During the Six Dynasties<sup>2</sup>, Guo Pu<sup>3</sup>, a Chinese writer and scholar of the Eastern Jin period summarized the various features of the fox:

When a fox is fifty years old, it can transform itself into a woman; when a hundred years old, it becomes a beautiful female, or a spirit medium, or an adult male who has sexual intercourse with women. Such beings are able to know things that are more than a thousand-mile's distance; they can poison men by sorcery of possess and bewilder them, so that they lose their memory and knowledge; and when a fox is thousand years old, it ascends to heaven and becomes a celestial fox.<sup>4</sup>

Another interpretation of the nine-tailed fox is explained in the *Bai Hu Tong*, a document which records the court discussions of Confucian scholars during the Later Han period (25-220 AD):

What is the Nine-tailed Fox? When a fox dies, it turns its head toward the hill [where it was born]; it does not forget its [place] of origin. It means that in comfort a man must never lose sight of calamities [impending]. Why [this fox appear] with nine tails? When the nine concubines [of the King each] receive their proper place, his sons and grandsons will enjoy abundant peace. Why [is the emphasis laid] upon the tail? It is to indicate that his posterity shall be numerous.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these interpretations from the archives describes the nine-tailed fox as a wild creature that lives in a distant place that humans can never approach, and each interpretation raises the fox to a rather dramatic position, which most likely is why this mythical creature has held such power over the centuries.

Another influential story of the nine-tailed fox comes from the novel *Investiture of the Gods*, which also has the alternative name *Fengshen Yanyi* or *Fengshen Bang*. It is a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese novel and one of the major works on gods and demons written during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD). Consisting of 100 chapters, the work combines elements of

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<sup>2</sup> Six Dynasties, a collective term for six Chinese dynasties in China during the periods of the Three Kingdoms, 220-280 AD, Jin dynasty, 265-420 AD, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, 420-589 AD.

<sup>3</sup> Guo Pu, Taoist mystic, 276-324 AD

<sup>4</sup> Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ban Gu, *Bai Hu Tong*, Shang wu yin shu guan, 1995, p.15

history, folklore, mythology, and fantasy. The story is set in the era of the decline of the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BC) and the rise of the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC). Daji is a nine-tailed fox disguised as a beautiful woman for the purpose of tempting King Zhou. According to this story, it is because of the Daji that King Zhou became a tyrant, which caused to the eventual fall of his government.

In *Investiture of the Gods*, the nine-tailed fox is not only a mythical beast that lives in a wild environment, but is also a human figure that participates in human life, altering the course of human history. The story describes the fox's transition from animal to human and the fox maintains this dual identity throughout the narrative. This shifting of identities has been important to the development of the nine-tailed fox in mythological history.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a collection of stories called *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* documents many fascinating and miraculous tales involving various fox spirits, which is the broader category under which the nine-tailed fox belongs. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* contains close to five hundred tales in the “zhiguai” and “chuanqi” styles, which serve to critique social issues allegorically. The main characters of these stories are ghosts, fox spirits, immortals, and demons. Here, the humanity of the fox spirit obtains a significant development through the many stories that describe the relationships between humans and foxes. Some of these fox spirits are kind to humans, some are evil and violent towards humans, some are scholarly and some are illiterate. In this book, an entire society of fox spirits is charted, and it is in this way that the stories are able to offer social critiques.

## **II. Japan**

In Japan, the nine-tailed fox is similar to the one that was prevalent in ancient China, and there is a great deal of folklore surrounding this mythical creature, which in Japan is referred

to as Tamamonomae. According to legends, the nine-tailed fox with golden fur can personify beauty in order to tempt kings and create political unrest. In the earliest Japanese narratives, the nine-tailed fox arrived in Japan following a Japanese mission to Tang, China. It personifies a young beautiful woman that eventually tempts Emperor Konoe during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but is driven out and killed by the military. Before its death, the nine-tailed fox was able to imbed its spirit into a stone that was said to emit a poisonous gas that would kill anyone who approached it.

Another folklore is about Hakuzousu, a monk whose nephew made a living killing foxes and making coats out of their fur. Because of this hunting, many of the descendants of the old fox spirit of Meng Mountain were killed. One day, the old fox spirit embodies the human form of the monk, and visits the hunter's home. After persuading the hunter to no longer kill foxes, the old fox spirit gives him money and spares his life. However, the man spends all of that money and goes to the temple to visit the monk. The old fox spirit kills and re-embodies Hakuzousu before the nephew arrives. Several years later, during a hunting expedition by the Japanese aristocracy, the hunting dogs detect the fox's scent and kill him, along with the old fox spirit. In order to appease the spiritual world, the town's natives built a temple for the old fox spirit.

Similar to ancient Chinese stories, there are many Japanese tales in which a fox spirit develops a close bond with a human. One of the most famous examples of this is the man who gets injured while saving a fox that is being hunted. The fox takes the form of Kuzuno, a beautiful woman that saves the injured man and even marries him. Shortly thereafter, Kuzuno gives birth to a child, and when that child turns five years old, he witnesses her true identity as a fox. Kuzuno returns to the forest as her true self and leaves behind a poem for



her husband. This is one of the most popular legends in Japanese history, and Kuzuno's tale has been narrated and represented in a variety of media, including paintings, plays, animations, and comics.

An important similarity between the Chinese and Japanese versions of the nine-tailed fox mythology is that the creature does not have a fixed symbolic meaning. On the one hand, the fox spirit can be menacing and untrustworthy, creating political unrest and violently attacking human beings, but on the other hand, the fox spirit can be generous and loving. Some of the stories that feature the fox are didactic and express warnings, while other stories are warm and romantic.

### **Creation Method 1: Turning to History**

Through reviewing the history of the nine-tailed fox, a significant insight is that the profound influence and popularity of any mythical beast is not tied to a specific artist or storyteller but, rather is deeply bound with the artistic and narrative traditions of a culture. Each story and representation contributes to the development of the mythical creature by adapting and revising its essential physical features and character traits.

### **Figure of the Nine-Tailed Fox**

In the two sections that follow, I have drawn out some important details about the nine-tailed fox that are gathered from the continuing historical survey.

#### **I. Text**

In the *Classics of Mountains and Seas*, the nine-tailed fox is described as the figure of a wild and violent animal. In the *Investiture of the Gods*, however, the nine-tailed fox acquires the ability to transform from animal to human. Because of this book's popularity and canonical status in East Asian literature, the figure of the nine-tailed fox becomes widely associated with this transformative capacity. Whether that transformation is for the purposes of good or evil varies with each new story or visual representation. The rich creative possibilities that are opened up by this transformative capacity is developed in a variety of ways through the stories in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*.

In Japanese mythology, the nine-tailed fox undergoes a similar evolution, and Tamamonomae can be regarded as a variation of the Daji legend in China. Furthermore, the story of Kuzuno bears striking similarities to a story from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. However, there doesn't seem to be a similar point of reference in Chinese art and literature for the old fox spirit that embodies Hakuzousu, the monk, as the religious elements of the story are strongly local.

## **II. Images**

Because the most popular stories about the nine-tailed fox are associated with some form of evil or destruction, visual representations of it are rare in China. However, because the positive connotations of the mythical beast are grounded in Japanese literature, it has been popular among visual artists and has inspired paintings, drawings, sculptures, and plays. Ukiyoe, one of the most prominent styles in Japanese painting, has also been used to depict the many different evolutions and characteristics of the nine-tailed fox.

Visual representations of the nine-tailed fox have three mainstream forms of expression. The first is the animal shape (fig. 4), depicted as simply a fox with nine tails, the second is the

nine-tailed fox accompanied by a female figure (fig. 5), and the third is a fox-human hybrid in which a human is drawn with animal features such as a tail, fur, or claw (fig.6) . Even today, these three types are prominent in the representation of the nine-tailed fox in comics, animation, and video games.



Figure 4 : Hokusai, Fleeing fox spirit as Lady Kayō, Sangoku Yōko-den, A.D. 753

## Creation Method 2: Anthropomorphosis

As we have seen in both the literary and visual representations of the nine-tailed fox, one of the important features of this mythical creature is its anthropomorphic capacities. That is,

the nine-tailed fox embodies a human form, and by doing so, is able to interact with the human world in politically or interpersonally significant ways.



Figure 5 : Hokusai, The Nine Tailed Fox, A.D. 1760-1849



Figure 6 : Yoshikuni, Nakamura Utaemon II as a Nine-tailed Fox, A.D. 1765-1850

In the field of representation, one type of anthropomorphosis is human mimicry. Instead of possessing total human likeness, a non-human entity under human mimicry still maintains its animal form but possesses or expresses some human qualities. Thus, human mimicry opens up a wide range of possibilities for experimenting with the representation of mythical anthropomorphosis by making unfamiliar realistic features that human perception might take for granted.

### Creation Method 3: Creating a Story

The historical survey of the mythology surrounding the nine-tailed fox demonstrates how essential narrative is to the construction of any mythical beast. Most of these stories occur

in the human world as opposed to a fantastical space, because these stories establish a connection between humans and fox spirits. Once this connection is established, the mythical beast engages in familiar modes of human behavior and interaction. It is perhaps due to this connection that the nine-tailed fox has remained such a powerful and influential figure.

The creation of a story for a mythical beast will inevitably be constrained by the physical limitations of any artistic medium. However, mythological narratives can be constructed with careful attention to depth and detail especially in cinema, animation, and video games.

#### **Creation Method 4: Construction Strategy**

The construction strategy offers a blueprint or platform for designing a mythical beast. When a popular mythical beast, such as the nine-tailed fox, is visually represented, it usually follows some conventional approaches and concepts that are drawn from its own history. Such efforts can then be analyzed according to those conventions, and the most popular visual representations of mythical beasts always strike a balance between retaining familiar characteristics with innovative additions.

##### **I. Animal Prototype**

The first step of the construction strategy is mapping out the animal prototype and for most mythical beasts, the animal prototypes can easily be detected. For example, the prototype of the nine-tailed fox is the fox. Selecting the animal prototype will shape some of the fundamental properties of the mythical beast, including appearance, scale, behavior, and environment. The prototype also generates higher order properties, such as symbolic meaning, historical background, and cultural significance.

In the case study of the nine-tailed fox, its fluffy fur, bright colors, and slim figure have made it easier for artists and storytellers to associate it with the female form. As a result, many of the narratives that involve a fox spirit embodying a woman express the dynamics of the gender roles of ancient East Asian culture. Furthermore, foxes in East Asia are traditionally associated as wild hunting targets. Unlike animals that can be domesticated, foxes are especially difficult to be tamed. Thus, the human attitude toward foxes is characterized by an ambivalence, and it is precisely this ambivalence that gets captured in the many legends and representations of the nine-tailed fox.

There are a few important questions that can be inspire the artist when approaching an animal prototype in the construction of a mythical beast. What emotions do the artist feel when seeing the animal in its natural environment? In what ways is this animal a part of the artist's life and personal history? What are some of the higher order symbolic meanings that this animal has in the artist's culture? What kind of person do as the artist associate with this animal?

## **II. Increase or Decrease**

The next stage in the construction of a mythical beast is to increase or decrease, the number of basic physical properties within the animal prototype, such as the tail, head, eyes, legs, ears, and so on, which will be increased or decreased in order to create an experience of abnormality. For instance, our case study focused on a fox that possesses nine tails instead of one. That is, the tail's number is increased from 1 to 9, and this generates a unique visual experience. The overall shape of the nine-tailed fox is similar to that of a traditional East Asian fan. Thus, there is a deformity that results from this increase, which does not seem that strange. However, consider the possibility of a fox with has nine eyes, which could seem rather strange. Increasing and decreasing specific features can generate pleasure or



disgust, among other emotions. Furthermore, the number nine in China not only symbolizes power and infinity but is also an odd number, which represents the Yang in the interdependent principles of opposition in Chinese philosophy. The Yang, which symbolizes heaven is why the nine-tailed fox is commonly seen flying through the skies in paintings (fig. 10).

### **III. Scale Deformation**

Scale deformation refers to the enlarging, shrinking, stretching, and shortening of the physical properties of the animal prototype. Here is a classic description of two famous mythical beasts, the K'un and P'eng:

In the northern darkness, there is a fish and his name is K'un. The K'un is so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is P'eng. The back of the P'eng measures I don't know how many thousand li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.<sup>6</sup>

Here, these two mythical beasts are a giant fish and a giant bird, but their only physical abnormality has to do with scale deformation. Much like number, scale also bears broader significance and generates various emotional and conceptual associations.

### **IV. Features Combination**

The next step in the construction of a mythical beast is combining the features from two or more animals. This combination strategy is not reflected in the nine-tailed fox, except in those instances where a fox-human hybrid has been visualized. However, a good example of features being combined in mythical creatures is the Qilin, whose body is fully or partially scaled, and often shaped like an ox, deer, or horse.

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<sup>6</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Free and Easy Wandering*, Paragraph 1, Chapter 1.

Two important methods for the combination strategy are piecing together features or organically bonding them. Piecing together features entails placing different physical properties from one or more animals and combining them regardless of the aesthetic unification of the animals' skin, fur, and posture. This method is seen most frequently in earlier visual representations of mythical beasts. Organically bonding features entails adapting various physical properties from different animals while paying close attention to adjusting the physical details like color, texture, and size based on principles of visual harmony and unification. Most of the popular mythical beasts belong to the latter category. For instance, the figure of Qilin (fig. 7 and 8 ) has been a prominent mythical beast in Chinese history and culture. According to historical descriptions, the Qilin has the head of an ox, the body of a horse, and the tail of a deer. In its earliest versions, drawings of the Qilin were pieced together rather haphazardly, but later versions adapted various techniques for organically bonding or blending the disparate properties in order to offer a greater sense of realism.

## **V. Texture and Color**

The texture and color of the animal prototypes can be adjusted in accordance with the different conceptual and emotional associations of the mythical creature. In the case of the nine-tailed fox, the color of the tails change in various stories and paintings. For example, the nine-tailed fox has golden fur in Japanese mythology, but it is white in the Chinese book *Investitures of the Gods*. Colors arouse different feelings, but they also possess different symbolic meanings in different cultures and periods. For instance, in the Qing dynasty of China, the period during which *Investitures of the Gods* was written, yellow was the color of the emperor, and common people who wore the color would often be executed, according to the law. Extending beyond the Qing period, yellow had a special cultural connection with natural phenomena like the weather:



Saturn represented earth, and when it met Jupiter in the same ‘house’, it brought good fortune to the empire. However, if Saturn appeared white and round, mourning and droughts were in store. If the planet was red, disturbances were to be expected and troops might take to the battlefield. If it was green, there would be floods, if it was black, sickness and death would descend upon the land. If it was yellow, China would see prosperity”<sup>7</sup>

Concerning texture, ancient visual representations of mythical beasts used brush, pigment,



Figure 7 : Qilin, China, 1609



Figure 8 : Qilin, Toshiyuki Enoki, Japan, 1961

clay, ceramics, jade (fig. 9), wood, bronze (fig. 10), and stone. Such material would affect the hardness, transparency, gloss, or the texture in the visual experience of the mythical creature. Moreover, using non-realistic materials like jade and ceramics added a heightened sense of mystique to these representations because of their individual physical properties.

## VI. Natural Element

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<sup>7</sup> Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life* (Kessinger Publishing, 1961).

Adding aspects of the natural world, such as fire, water, lightning, ice, and gold for decoration has been an important characteristic of visually representing mythical creatures. In ancient Chinese mythology, various dragons possessed different powers to harness the natural elements. One such creature is able to change the colors of clouds, alter the wind and rain patterns, and bring about massive storms, adding a threatening atmosphere to this particular mythical creature.



Figure 9 : Mythical Animal, China, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, BC 202-220



Figure 20: Figure of a Dog, China, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, BC 202-220

## The Mythical Beasts in Classic of Mountains and Seas

My thesis project, entitled *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, is an independent animation inspired by the nine-tailed fox and depicts the fantastic worlds the mythical beasts might inhabit. In this section, the mythical creatures that I have designed, using the strategies described above, will be analyzed and explained based on my construction strategy. This section will also discuss my visual and aural decisions in relation to the narratives being portrayed.

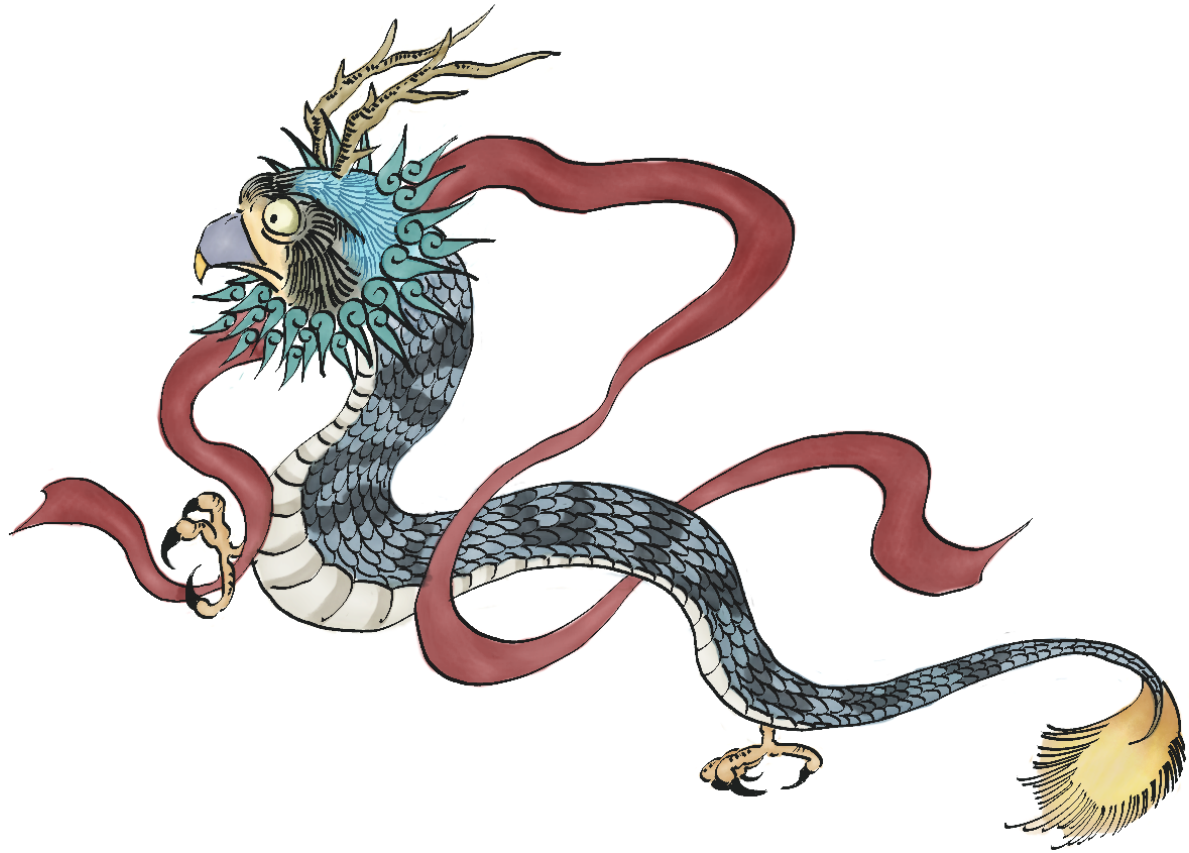


### Green Fish

The Green Fish takes the fish as its prototype. I gave the fish plant-like qualities, so its tail and fins are in the shape of leaves to represent the hybrid of a plant and a fish. I used green with different hues to alternately strengthen its botanical properties and fish qualities.

Instead of using a horn, I decided to use a bamboo shoot, inspired by the unicorn, a classic

Greek mythical creature, and a plant that has a unique position in Chinese geography and culture, to allow for greater organic blending of the combined themes.



### **Eagle Dragon**

The historical reference for the Eagle Dragon derives from the Chinese dragon. Giving my dragon the head of an eagle offered a way to bridge the difference in styles of the dragon between Chinese and American cultures. There are many blue features surrounding the head, and those features are designed to turn into rain drops to moisten the bamboo shoot of the green fish. But even if the green fish benefits from the eagle dragon in this way, it still risks being caught, which is showed in the animation from 1:47s to 2:44s in the timeline.



### **Jewelry Crane**

As the prototype, cranes are a symbol of beauty and nobility in East Asian culture. In order to strengthen these qualities, I used the texture and color of jewelry so that each feather of the crane looks like the golden headdress of noble women in the Qing dynasty of China. Meanwhile, in terms of scale deformation, the feathers are stretched very long in order to simulate the magnificent skirts that women of this period wore.

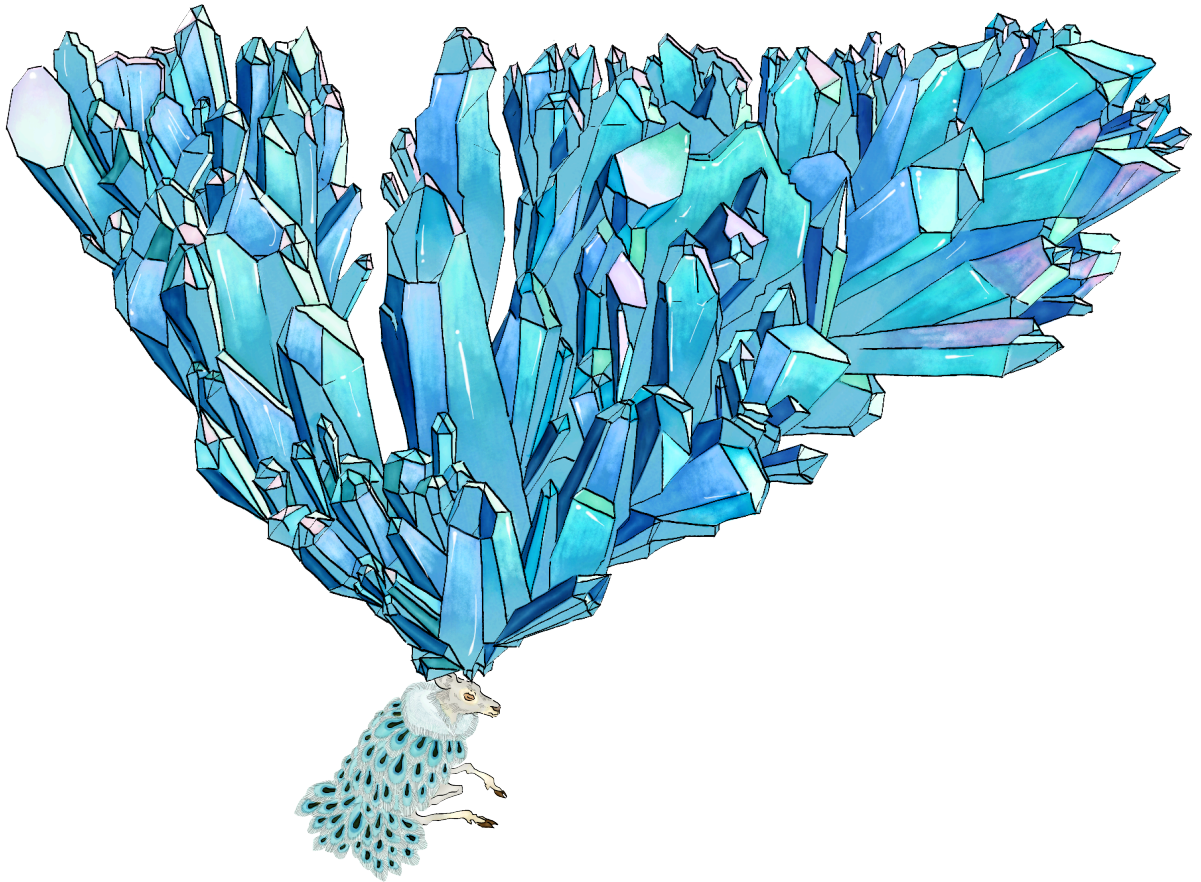




## Fire Rabbit

As the prototype, the Fire Rabbit invokes the Chinese legend of the Jade Rabbit, who lives on the moon, and during the annual Dragon Boat festival, the rabbit makes rice cakes. Even today, in celebration of the Dragon Boat festival, people enjoy rice cakes, and the rabbit figure is brought out to symbolize the moon and the harvest. In my *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, there are many suns in the fictional world, and each is responsible for specific days of sunshine. When the suns complete their task, they find shelter in the center of a lake that is filled with magma. Many suns are sleeping in this lake. The Fire Rabbit, who is

responsible for raising the suns, comes with clouds of fire and lifts the suns up to offer their light to the world. This vignette is in my animation from 4:57s to 5:52s in the timeline. For the fire rabbit, I used the anthropomorphic strategy of human mimicry. In dramatically utilizing scale deformation, I depict the rabbit holding a sun at the end of his stick and he carries a basket that is filled with many suns while fire erupts from the big rabbit ears.



### **Ice Deer**

For the Ice Deer, its horn is dramatically enlarged and an ice element is used to build the shape and texture of the horn. The huge horn looks like a crystal forest. In combining features of the deer with those of a peacock, the deer is clothed in peacock features. As an instance of human mimicry, the deer wears the features as a human would a coat. In East Asian culture, the deer bears suspicious connotations, and yet the pronunciation of the Chinese character for deer is similar with the pronunciation of Lu (禄), the Chinese

character meaning wealth. The Ice Deer attempts to capture the positive cultural associations of its animal prototype.



### **Fox Monk**

Finally, the Fox Monk takes its inspiration from the classic Japanese legend of Hakuzousu. The figure of the fox monk employs human mimicry to maintain the original prototype's physical appearance, including the fox's head and tail. However, it can stand up and has a posture similar to human posture. The clothing that the fox monk wears is a typical East



Asian monk garb. The purple, pink, blue, and green colors that were added to the garment are most frequently associated with women's clothing. Through this use of color, I wanted to invoke the various connotations that the nine-tailed fox holds in relationship to femininity and beauty.

### **Visual Narrative in the Mythical Beast**

Visual narrative is very important part in construction of mythical beast because narrative can enrich and develop those beasts like the example of the nine-tailed fox. In building a narrative for the animation, I was mindful of the following approaches to crafting the story:



### **I. Environment Construction**

With the canonical East Asian myths, mythical creatures inhabited unknown and distant territories, and this was carefully constructed to the point where entire mythological geographies were written. In my animation, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, color and

various visual cues were used to differentiate the geographical territories of each mythical beast. For instance, the Green Fish inhabits the Green Mountains, the Eagle Dragon inhabits the Blue Clouds, the Jewelry Crane inhabits in the Gold Pavilion, the Fire Rabbit inhabits in a place of Red Smelter, and the Ice Deer inhabits in the Ice Universe. Through differentiated environment constructions, the mythical beasts acquire backgrounds that could stimulate the human imagination regarding their behaviors, personalities, and pasts.

## **II. Interaction**

Interaction will help establish connections between the different mythical beasts. For example, in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the Green Fish is caught by the Eagle Dragon, but the green fish also benefits from the dragon's fur. The mythical beasts in my animation are not isolated, but rather are members of a shared mythical world. Gradually, the narrative develops a hierarchical relationship between predators and prey.

## **III. Event**

An event can initiate an interaction between mythical beasts, but an event doesn't necessarily include other beasts. Instead, an event might prompt a mythical creature to establish an important connection with the landscape or objects in the world. The fire rabbit engages with the many suns in this way. Additionally, the eagle dragon's fur generates yellow flowers that grow on the clouds as he flies pass. Those yellow flowers are components of the jewelry crane's tails, which helps transition the narrative forward.

## **Aural Narrative in the Mythical Beast**

Sound plays a crucial role in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. At times, it helps heighten a narrative event, and at other times, it introduces new elements into the narrative structure.

### **I. Background Sound**

Background sound or music is utilized to establish a style and atmosphere. In my work, the background sound is restricted to the narrative and provides an emotional weight. For instance, during scenes of transition, the background sound will either react or foreshadow an important change in the story. The background sound of my piece, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, helps connect the, at times, disparate elements into an experientially unified world.

### **II. Environmental Sound**

Environmental sounds offer more information about the physical and emotional space of the narrative. Birds chirping in the forest, water running in a river, and the rolling waves of the ocean are all examples of environmental sounds. Typically, the environmental sounds in my piece correspond with the images, but I also include instances of off-screen environmental sounds in order to expand the viewer's sense of space. For example, in the animation's section devoted to the jewelry crane, because the landscape is occupied by typical East Asian buildings, a man's vocal track was inserted to heighten the sense of human existence, despite there being no actual human figures shown in the animation. Who are these people? What is their role in this mythical world? By using environmental sound in this way, the narrative possibilities that can be imagined are opened.

### **III. Sound Effect**

There are two types of sound effects. First, representational sound effects are those which can be described accurately by its source, such as the sound of a footstep or laughter.

Second, abstract sound effects are those whose origins are difficult to be identified, such as digital sound effects and special plug-ins. Some sound effects can be both representational and abstract, but this depends on the case. The example shared above regarding the human vocal track is one that is an environmental sound that is representational, because we know it's the voice of a man, yet, because the narrative has not introduced humans into this world, the effect might generate an abstract association. As another example, in the section devoted to the Ice Deer, I add representational sound effects, such as the sound of ice cracking when the ice mountain moves so that its texture might be represented through sound.

### **Conclusion**

This paper discusses the strategies I employed in animating mythical beasts and constructing narrative. By first turning to history and examining the nine-tailed fox as a case study, I was able to identify certain characteristics of storytelling and representation that I have attempted to use in my own animation project. In breaking down construction strategies, I have demonstrated how I've adapted historical methods and aesthetics into my own creative work.