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## **Classical Myth Complex Behind Art**

The inspiration of classical myth to my artistic creation

DOCTORAL THESIS

In the area of Fine Arts,

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## Introduction

Francis Bacon once said: "Art is the multiplication of man and nature."<sup>1</sup> "What art seeks is nature in human nature."<sup>2</sup> However, with the development of human civilization, art is not only a representation of nature, but human beings who have studied nature and projected more ideas from subjective consciousness into works of art. This kind of learning from nature has grown from naive to mature, from objective imitation to subjective creation. This state occurs naturally, so I think the pursuit in artistic creation is also the process of human natural growth, that is nature in human nature. So does human society, going through all kinds of ups and downs as a teenager, gradually increasing experience and maturity to be a man.

The general proposition of human society development is that through continuous attempts, all obstacles have been eliminated, and self-transcendence has finally been achieved. Just like the growth history of heroes in myths,<sup>3</sup> the Hero restless, so he crosses the threshold of the daily world and embarks on a magical journey. The various monsters and mysterious help along the way are not from the outside world, but from their own hearts. Therefore, the hero's trial road is actually a spiritual growth road, and the ultimate gift finally obtained is not a worldly treasure, but a sublimation of the soul. When the hero returns to the everyday world, he can face it freely, because he has been reborn.

I started my discussion with myth as the creative theme. Myth originally attracted me to many imaginative stories. Perhaps in contemporary society, little attention has been paid to myth. But as my understanding deepened, I found that classical myths

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon. *The Complete Collection of Bacon Essays*, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014, p.104. Pu Long translation.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Xian Da. *Nature in art*. Art information and communication conference. 2009. p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Different cultural systems have different definitions of heroes. Not all gods in mythological systems are positive heroes. Starting from the perspective of Chinese mythology, I tend to regard heroes in mythology as positive, at least they try to accomplish great things.

were absent from our daily lives temporarily, but never left. Although our civilization has developed so avant-garde and the world is so diverse, we may pay more attention to what the future looks like and the extent to which technology is updated. This mythical complex may disappear in our field of vision, but there is no dying with the development of the times. Mythical complex is a collective unconscious deep in our hearts. Myths can often give us new feedback in different times. This feedback may be religious, scientific or technological, or artistic. Here, the huge treasure house of myth has inspired me in artistic creation, and I will examine it in my treatise.

I divide the treatise into two chapters. In the first chapter, I talk about myth<sup>4</sup>, and try to define myth from the perspective of artist, it is important to my research logic. In the study of Western myths, I discovered the influence of myths in the past and present art scope. Combining my knowledge background, I use myths as the source of my artistic creation.

In relate to Art, Western myths have been interpreted by artists in many different eras. I select some artists as examples, and briefly introduce their works. These works have inspired me a lot, but what I know better and have a deeper understanding of are Chinese myths. This cultural differences has also caused me to differ between Eastern and Western mythological thinking. I attempt to explain Chinese myths and the beliefs of the Chinese people behind these myths. This kind of thinking has given me inspiration for artistic creation.

In the second chapter I will explain my work, the source of inspiration and describe my personal experiences and challenges. Then I summarize the artistic logic of my creation, and I will elaborate my future plan at the end.

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<sup>4</sup> My interpretation of the definition of myth is based on *Oxford Dictionary*. See: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/myth?q=myth> (access: 8.05.2020)

## Chapter I: Research Focus--The Myth

I would like to quote Joseph Campbell, author of *The Power of Myth*, about humans and myths as the beginning.

"The resurrection of Jesus is not a physical resurrection, but a rebirth of spiritual life. The suffering experienced by the Buddha was not an external suffering, but an introspective temptation; we were driven out of the Garden of Eden not because of the wrath of God but from us Attachment to life. The reason why we are alienated from the abundant wisdom of myth is because we have lost the instinct to interpret myth and misread the language of myth! No matter what the myths around the world are, they are actually calling for our deep awakening to life itself."<sup>5</sup>

Myths are spread throughout the history of human civilization. Almost all nations in the world have their own colorful myths. As an important and unique cultural phenomenon, myth has been born from human childhood, and has been accompanied by human growth. In the mythology, it is deeply engraved with the imprint of the thinking, emotions and social life of the human group on which it is born and inherited. Therefore, mythology provides us a window how to understand the human spirit, wisdom, thinking and social development process.

Myth is a very ambitious proposition, and Mao Dun once made a discourse about it:

"Ancient myths are indeed something that euphemistically changes with people's subjectivity: historians can find history from myths, believers from religion, and philosophers from philosophy. So when ancient physics and astronomy were first developed, myths were explained by physics and astronomy; when history was first developed, myths were explained by history: and finally, when comparative philology was on the rise You get a philological explanation. Judging from the past facts, the new trend of thought of an era often puts a new coat on ancient myths, and it is undeniable."<sup>6</sup>

Myth is a very complex cultural phenomenon and it is difficult to define it in a few

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Zhe Jiang Publishing House, 2013, p.2

<sup>6</sup> Mao Dun, *神话研究*, Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 1981,p.3, Han xu dong translation.

sentences. But the true meaning of the myth is what is hidden behind the myth. Our job is to discover and analyze those hidden.

In fact, this kind of research is destined to be subjective, and even sometimes people's interpretation of myths is "more incredible than the most incredible absurdity that myths have."<sup>7</sup>

### **1.1 The Artistic Definition of Myth**

Therefore, if the myth is defined in the scope of this treatise, I tend to think of the myth as a spiritual need that is gradually generated by human beings about the unknown and unexplainable phenomena in the universe. The need is based on belief born from the expectations of real life. This belief has greatly influenced people's way of thinking, It has structured the human spiritual world, and gave human civilization different support and source power in different times, Human civilization also enriches the meaning of myth through constant interpretation.

Mythology is a very grand proposition, Greek myth, Nordic myth, Egypt myth, Indian myth, two river basin myths, each myth has a long history and huge internal logic. Classical myths represent national memories, cultural context and symbols. At the same time, the belief behind the myth is also one of the important sources of human thinking. Also because of the strong cultural attraction of myth, they have been researched in many fields, including the arts. Mythology has become an important source of subject matter in many artistic creations from ancient times to the present. The relationship between the spirit of myth and artistic creation has caused my thinking.

However, it must be acknowledged that my understanding of the vast system of Western myths is not comprehensive enough, I would like to use the elements of myths I know as inspiration for my artistic creation.

Like all artists, I have been trying to establish my own unique artistic expression. What should I do? How to do it? These must be continuously explored from the experience of life and memory. My focus is on classical myths, and starting from this point, I think there will be gains.

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<sup>7</sup> Muller, *Comparative Mythology*, Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1989, p.4, Jin ze translation.

## 1.2 My Research Source

My first exposure to mythology was a result of growing up in a very traditional village in northern China. China is a cultural entity dominated by family clans. Ethnic groups of the same surname constitute the most basic unit in society. The concept of "family" and "I" exists in all Chinese myths. Behind this concept is a view of life that has long been influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The myths and legends formed by this outlook on life form the most basic background of Chinese culture. The heaviest things in Chinese culture are in the traditional Chinese countryside, and Chinese myths are born in this kind of environment.

Chinese myths are numerous and complex, one of them is the story of Lord Cook (the god of the kitchen in Chinese tradition). The Chinese have a tradition of praying to the Lord Cook before the Spring Festival, my grandmother would pray in front of the statue of the Lord Cook which was affixed to the kitchen for a whole year. The implication is to congratulate the King of the Kitchen for ascension so that he can go to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor (the highest god in the traditional Chinese mythology system of Taoism). The Jade Emperor will reward or punish the family for one year's actions. This is the first myth I heard that I remember, very simple and humane.

The image of the Lord Cook is also a very interesting work of art. It is usually printed by woodcut. After a simple engraving and print, the artist will simply color it. According to different regional cultures, the appearance of the idol also has different looks. As time goes by, the image of the God gradually changes.



Figure 1, Unknown artist, *Lord cook prints*, woodcut and hand made color, Nei qiu shen ma exhibition, Tian jin, 2016

The Chinese have a tradition of pasting the door god on the door during the Chinese Spring Festival. The door god is usually shown as two warriors.<sup>8</sup> The implication is to protect the family and keep them safe. The root cause of the Door God can be traced back to the tradition of Buddhist mythology, the Door God is the guardian of the Buddha. In Taoist mythology, the Door God is different two gods. The divine residences from two religions may appear in the same person's home. This phenomenon is unimaginable in other belief systems, but in the Chinese belief these can all exist. I will talk about the myths and spiritual beliefs of the Chinese in a later chapter. The prints of these idols were my earliest knowledge of myths, but I didn't realize these characteristics of Chinese myths, until I came into contact with Western myths.

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<sup>8</sup> The door god is a protector of the family. In different historical dynasties in China, people are willing to use heroes of different times as a model of the door god. Usually it is two ancient heroes, because in ancient China the entrance consists of two doors, so each door needs to be pasted with a door god. This pair of heroes are collectively called the door god.





Figure 2, Unknown artist, *Door God prints*, Shen Tu and Yu Lei, Woodcut and hand made color, Nei qiu shen ma exhibition, Tian jin, 2016



Figure 3, Unknown artist, *Door God prints*, Qin Qiong and Yu Chi Gong, Woodcut and hand made color, Nei qiu shen ma exhibition, Tian jin, 2016

### 1.3 The Relationship Between Western Myths and Art

I have been involved in the field of Western mythology, but most of my knowledge of Western mythology is obtained from digital media and some literary works that were created under the influence of myth. This fragmentary cognition is bound to be not objective and comprehensive, because every media inevitably incorporates the subjective ideas of producers. These highly subjective works are very attractive, which also makes me and my interest in myth more and more exciting. I want to make a deeper research into it, because there are many different ideas from various authors on the same subjects.

Hollywood movies and Western modern science fiction are very good examples. In these works, the artists did not just retell those classic myths, but combined them. Based on these works, they examine the current situation of the development of human civilization, and have a deep discussion on the products of modern civilization such as science and technology, religion, and politics. A good example is the movie entitled *Prometheus*<sup>9</sup> from the *Alien* series. The director used the classical myth *Prometheus* to discuss the development of life and civilization in the universe, but here, technology has become the god who rules everything in the universe, and has become the creator. It is reflecting the blind self-confidence of mankind in science and technology at the moment, and proposes that the future of mankind should worry about where to go.

Another example is the film *Western World*<sup>10</sup> created by the Jonathan Nolan. They draw on the story of God's creation of humans, but Adam and Eve in this Garden of Eden are robots created by humans. Humans play the role of God, they wantonly destroy and change their creations. just because humans think they are higher beings and have supreme authority. In the end, these robots awakened from their consciousness, spontaneously rebelled against their creators, and thus left Eden. In this instance Nolan uses classical myths to express his pessimistic thinking about

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<sup>9</sup>"Prometheus" directed by Ridley Scott in 2012. The film tells a team of scientists on a thrilling adventure, which will test their physical and mental limits and leave them in a completely different world, where they will find the ultimate problem that has plagued humanity answer, and the ultimate mystery of life.

<sup>10</sup>"Western World" is a science fiction movie which produced by HBO in 2016. The originality is from the movie of the same name in 1973, Jonathan Nolan is the Director.

human civilization.

Both of the above examples involve classical mythology and modern technology. The relationship between them is a bit like the old god and the new god in myth. Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*<sup>11</sup> gives a precise and accurate description of this metaphor. People have forgotten that the number of followers of the old god has gradually decreased, and the new god derived from technology has replaced it, and the return of the new god is simpler and more direct, it is the god of media, the god of network big data. The new god earns believers by fast feedback. The supply of big data is a stable return. As long as there is worship, there will be a response. The old god relies on inspiration, cultural accumulation and rational precipitation. This phenomenon is very interesting and extendable.

Regarding the parallelism of art and technology, we can make the statement that art and technology develop in parallel, one after the other. When the technology develops fast, art creation will go fast. The development of science and technology is closely related to the history of art development. The rapid development of science and technology is like a person running desperately. The running man is desperate for speed and even abandons clothes and shoes. Clothes and shoes represent other forms of human culture besides technology. When human civilization ignores the development of other cultures and only focuses on the continuous progress of technology, the entire social civilization will produce some kind of confusion, the meaning of art is to comfort humanity at this time, open the fog, and enlighten the direction of civilization, such as London after the Industrial Revolution. The consequences of pollution, besides affecting the living environment, also have a great impact. With the social and cultural trend of thought, at this time, artists need to stand up and explain to people what is happening now, and even point out the future direction. Standing behind the art is the ancient collective unconsciousness in mythology, which comforts people and is human beings, the most original tenderness.

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<sup>11</sup> N. Gaiman, *American Gods*, Sichuan Science and Technology Publishing House, 2006.12. Qi Lin translation.

From my personal point of view, some myths are more interesting than the other, just like the Noah's Ark and the flood of God, story of the Tower of Babel. It is also fascinating that different myths have different world views and a variety of heroes, such as Prometheus who stolen the fire, Sisyphus who always pushes stones to the top of the mountain, the story of Odin and the dusk of God. Each myth has a very deep history and regional culture behind it. These deep background is not easy to explained briefly. I focus on the myth story itself. I tend to understand myths from an allegorical perspective: myths are very symbolic, this characteristic is a bit similar to artistic creation. Therefore, my concern is how to use classic myth to metaphorize the present and express the characteristics of today's society in a artistic way.

Of course I'm not alone. There is also a group of contemporary artist, who reinterpret myths in their own way. And also in the past, people did the same thing. They used myth as an excuse to map the present. Walter Buckert said: "Specific myths have particular appeal to artists in different historical periods. They use myths to symbolize contemporary ideas and to suggest contemporary events. For modern artists, classical mythology retains the same meaning to contemporary people as it did in ancient times."<sup>12</sup>

Some interesting examples of such interest in myths can be found in the work of Albrecht Dürer. As we all know, he was a very outstanding artist of the Renaissance, and some of his works are very good evidence of Walter Buckert's point of view.

One of his most famous works the woodcut *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is based on the story told in Bible. When the end of the world will approach, the four horseman (representing War, Plague, Famine and Death) comes, to oppress and kill mortals sinners.

In the print image we can see four horsemen gallop, War wields a sword, Plague tightens the bowstring, Famine holds the balance, Death holds up the trident; all the

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Bucket, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Berkeley- Los Angeles, 1979, p.3.

sinners were killed regardless of their richness or poverty. But for Dürer it is not only an illustration of the biblical vision. The period in which the artist lived was a specific time in German history, so he used this work to metamorphose the condition of the society and the shortcomings of the times, the confusion of thoughts and beliefs, the famine and plague (black death), and the intensification of social conflicts.



Figure 4, Albrecht Dürer, *Four Horseman Of The Apocalypse*, woodcut print on paper, 1498., <Dürer prints>, photoed by Qing yu jian

Albrecht Dürer's works use myth as the theme to guide people's attention to reality. In contrast, the contemporary Romanian artist Constantin Brâncuși encourages viewers to use their imagination and discover the abstract beauty from myth. He

pursues the beauty of simplicity and abstraction in his works, so he often gave viewers more space for imagination when viewing a simply shaped sculpture.

*Sleeping Muse*, one of his representative works, is based on the story of a muse taken from Greek mythology, in which the muse is the collective name of the nine literary goddesses of art and science. I think the myth about this muse has a certain symbolic meaning in Western culture, because people often use the muse as a metaphor in literature, art, inspiration, etc. Constantin Brâncuși created a bronze head with beautiful and peaceful expression, while other parts of the body are not created. But the viewers might complete it in their mind. They will naturally start the infinite imagination of the work from the theme of the Muse. This is an awakening of the underlying imagination in myth.



Figure 5, Constantin Brâncuși, *The Sleeping Muse*, Bronze sculpture, 1910

As I mentioned before in modern society, the development of art is accompanied by the continuous innovation of science and technology. Each technological revolution will be accompanied by the subversion and change of artistic thoughts. It is no surprise, that artists use fresh vocabulary also to reinterpret myths, to give them more contemporary overtones.

One of such contemporary artist is Cildo Meireles. He "is a Brazilian conceptual artist, installation artist and sculptor. He is noted especially for his installations, many of which express resistance to political oppression in Brazil. These works, often large and dense, encourage a phenomenological experience via the viewer's interaction ."<sup>13</sup>

His installation "Tower of Babel" was displayed at the Tate Gallery in London (2009). This is a large sculptural installation, in the form of a circular tower which was built with hundreds of radios. The radios are layered and each radio is debugged. They are tuned to different frequencies, so they compete with each other and produce a low, continuous sound, preventing the audience from getting all the information, sound or music. This overload of information can be seen as a metaphor for intricate relationships between different countries and groups. The significance of this work is obvious: the intersection of different cultures and civilizations generates a large amount of information, and when a large amount of information is cross-spread, some of the information is prone to misunderstanding, which often means that the relationship is infinitely complicated. This work re-interprets the significance of the myth of Tower of Babel in modern society: in spite of the increasingly strong connection between various cultures in the world today, there are always misunderstandings and differences between civilizations. This work moved me and inspired me, so I made a work to explore it. I will introduce it in the chapter about my works.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cildo\\_Meireles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cildo_Meireles), Contents of chapter 1 (access: 8.05.2020).



Figure 6, Cildo Meireles , *Tower of Babel* , installation, 2001, Tate Modern



Those works with myth as the origin give me a very intuitive feeling. Their symbolism is very strong. Those myth stories are very systematic, they always have beginnings and ends, and artists can always find the source from these cultural systems in their creative methods. As far as I know, some of these systematic knowledge come from a well-known cultural background, and this cultural system is usually eternal. But Chinese myths are a bit different. Unlike the Western mythology system, Chinese myths have never formed a clear and unique mythological structure. The same myth story may have different symbolic meanings in different times. Chinese myths are fragmented, changeable, there is no systematization, they also tend to be eclectic and harmonious. To talk about Chinese myths, I must introduce the Chinese beliefs from my perspective.

#### **1.4 The Chinese Myths and Thinking as A Source of My Inspiration**

In the course of historical development, like the birthplaces of other civilizations in the world, China has also established its own culture, but China has not formed a complete religious belief system. These kind of independent and complete religious systems like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which originated from other cultural traditions and have a significant impact on the human spiritual field have tried to enter the Chinese consciousness field. However, Buddhism only survived at the cost of changing and adapting to the beliefs and customs of the Chinese.

When talking about Chinese religion and philosophy, people naturally talk about Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It seems that Confucianism and Buddhism are Chinese religious philosophy and represent Chinese culture. All three theories have incorporated the characteristics of Chinese culture, but in the process they compete with each other in order to gain dominance and enhance social influence. This is a competition that changes their core ideas based on people's needs.

China has many myths, but most of the Chinese myths that can be transmitted to today have been influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, because these three ideas have existed in Chinese history for nearly two thousand years. Their thoughts and insights have penetrated into the minds of the Chinese people, they

guide the way of behavior and thinking of modern Chinese. I will mention the Chinese's outlook on the universe, the work of Chinese artists and the source of inspiration for the work later, so I think it is important to explain the beliefs and the reasons for the formation of Chinese myths as a basis for that. Secondly, this Chinese-style mythical thinking deeply affected the way I look at Western mythology, and this mixed mythical belief also affected my creative method. In the same way as the Chinese beliefs, you can also find a "mix" of different influences in my work. I will elaborate on these in the chapter II.

From a practical point of view: Confucianism is mainly concerned with the moral meaning and value of the existence of life, stressing benevolence, justice, reasonable, wisdom, and faith, but it cannot give an explanation about the roots and basis of suffering and happiness in the objective world. Taoism confronts the negative side of society, but it does not make a reasonable explanation. It guides people to pay more attention to the meaning of life itself, and to explore and improve the methods of extending individual life. Confucianism values society and human morality, while Taoism values the state of life today. Buddhism holds that life is suffering. The suffering in present life is the cause of the past. Good is good and evil is evil. Therefore, in order to not suffer any longer in the next life, we must do good things in this life to eliminate all kinds of desires. Buddhism values the meaning of the future of life. Through the concepts of karma and reincarnation, on the one hand, it explains the negative side of life, on the other hand, it points out the way to win a beautiful afterlife, which is a complement to Confucianism and Taoism.

Therefore, "Three Religions in One" is the most suitable for the belief needs of Chinese people. I think the main reason for the formation of the three religions in one situation is the historical characteristics of the Chinese. And in the process of integration with Chinese society, this kind of belief gradually put human in the main position, not God.

In the Chinese belief concept, "I" is the center of everything in the universe, which is reflected in many Chinese cultural phenomena. For example, in terms of architecture,

symmetry, fullness, and centering reflect the Chinese people's "I" -centered thinking. The layout of *Si He Yuan* (Chinese classical architectural style) in the north of China follows the basic modeling concept, that is, the "I" as the center extends to the surrounding, and the surrounding is the continuous appearance of the same building. In terms of art, people do not think too much about whether the objects are real and reasonable, but more about how to reflect people's understanding and hope in the art image.

Chinese traditional New Year prints are a good example to show this way of thinking. They often combine things such as persimmon, bat, fish, pomegranate, peach and laurel in one image. In the process of combining, people never consider whether the combination of these things is reasonable from a visual perspective. The idea of these combinations has significance, because in the Chinese thinking, different things may have the same pronunciation: bat and good luck have the same pronunciation, lotus is pronounced the same as continuous; pomegranate is a fruit with many seeds: its multiple seeds are pronounced the same as multiple children and grandchildren in Chinese. The same pronunciation allows people give them a similar meaning. If pomegranate and lotus appear in one image, they represent many children and grandchildren. Bat and fish can constitute auspicious meanings such as "everything is wishful", "blessed with longevity" and so on. Everything that has positive meaning can be used by people in the New Year prints.



Figure 7, Chinese traditional New Year prints, *Many children*, 2019, Photoed by Qing yu jian



Figure 8, Chinese building roof decoration, *Bat sculpture*, Shan xi ping yao, Photo by Han xu dong

In figure 7 we can see that a child is holding a special musical instrument. The name of the musical instrument is Sheng, its Chinese pronunciation is the same as "birth". The picture also shows lotus and lotus seeds. Lotus seeds represents multiple children and grandchildren in Chinese culture, so this work often represents the prosperous family and large population. In figure 8, we can see a bat-shaped roof decoration. I have mentioned it that the bat is pronounced the same as lucky in Chinese. Therefore, in traditional Chinese architecture, people usually put a lot of bat-shaped decoration on the roof, which means that the whole family is shrouded in good luck.

From a sociological point of view, "I" is also "family": China's social system is a social structure with the family as the main unit. The Chinese believe that the harmony of the family-centered social organization structure is the ultimate meaning of life. In the Confucian belief, improving oneself, the flourishing of the family, and a peaceful world are the ultimate aspirations of a man. In this case, people have no other form of pursuit, such as the spiritual world or previous lives, and therefore do not need too many religious forms. The Chinese people's spirit tends to be more secular, and they believe more in the power of man who can transform the world than the advent of God. Therefore, in most Chinese myths, there is no god with absolute power. The Chinese also define God from a human perspective and even create God as needed. And the gods in the mythology will have a human-like social structure and perform their duties. It can be said that there are many gods in China: the god of the cow, the god of the well, the god of the bed, the god of the door, the god of the prison, the god of the tea, the god of the mountain, the god of fire, the god of wealth, and so on. And gods of different pedigrees and backgrounds can even appear in one picture, in one person's home at the same time. Therefore, the Chinese regard the relationship between people as more important than the relationship between God and people.

From the perspective of the cognitive world, the Chinese are used to starting from a personal perspective, and from local influence to the whole. In poetic words to say, we will experience the coming of autumn from the fallen leaves. This way of cognition comes from the "pointing" in Buddhism, which means that when you turn

on one of the switches of a machine, the entire machine will evolve in essence, as if it were instantaneous from the steam age to modern society. This machine is a metaphor of human.

As I said before Chinese prefer to look God from a human perspective. This concept is more directly reflected in many Chinese myths. Good example is the myth of Hou yi shooting the sun. There were ten suns in the sky in this myth. They burn the Earth and humans couldn't survive. Finally, a god named Hou yi appeared, he shot nine suns with a bow and arrows, leaving only one sun. In mythology he is a god shooting the sun and saving mortals. This is the original version of this myth, which for the first time appeared in the Book *Shan Hai Jing*<sup>14</sup>, but in the *Shi Ji* of the Han Dynasty<sup>15</sup>, the story of Hou yi was changed. He was not a god but a king. He not only shot and killed the sun saving the people, and he also shot monsters and beasts that had caused disaster. But in the Ming Dynasty<sup>16</sup>, people have transformed this myth again. They were more willing to see him as a mortal with various passions, desires and a happy family, so they wrote the story of sadness and joy in his life.

Another example is the myth of Jing Wei's reclamation. Jing Wei was a daughter of God who drowned in the sea. So she wanted to avenge the sea and prevent more people from being taken away by the sea. This is why Jing Wei became a seagull. Being a bird she constantly brought stones and branches from the land, trying to fill the sea. This myth story is very simple, but in different dynasties in Chinese history, people gave this story different meanings according to different ideological needs. For example: in the Ming Dynasty dominated by Taoist thought, mythology represents the meaning of life and existence at the moment. In the Qing Dynasty dominated by Buddhist thought, the story of Jing Wei's reclamation represented the spirit of sacrificing oneself and saving the ordinary people. Therefore, the same myth had different versions in different times.

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<sup>14</sup> *Shan Hai Jing* is a book that describes ancient myths of China. It mainly includes geographical knowledge in folklore, including mountains, rivers, geography, nationalities, properties, medicines, sacrifices, and witch doctors. The specific time of writing is not certain, it is said that it was formed during the Warring States Period 476 BC ~ 221 BC.

<sup>15</sup> Han Dynasty, a dynasty of China, 202 BC-220 AD.

<sup>16</sup> Dynasty ruled from 1368 AD to 1644 AD.

There is also a myth about flood in China. We call it the story of *Da yu governing the flood*. In this myth, when the land is about to be submerged by the flood, a god called Da yu comes. He leads the people to overcome difficulties: he opens up mountains, clears river and builds dams. Hereby he protects people's home and let the flood flows into the sea. The differences between that story, and the story of Noah's Ark is clearly visible. Noah's Ark is a story of the punishment, and the myth of "Da yu governing flood" is about the struggle of human supported by god against the disaster. From this perspective, in the mythical worldview of the Chinese, there is very little idea that the gods must punish mortals, and mortals must endure. Instead, they strive to change disasters and believe in the role of mortal power. Here, Chinese myths maximize the meaning of "I".

We could find one thing in common above, there are too many traces of human in Chinese myths, which caused different versions of the same myth to appear in different times. The essence of this evolution is the gradual localization of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhist thought by the Chinese. This evolution is intermittent, the folk spontaneous, without a clear symbolic meaning, but full of romanticism. This mythical view is partial and very fragmented. This mythical thinking also affects the creation of artists, and these creations are mainly based on myths.

### **1.5 Context of the Myths: the Chinese Artist and Works**

A large group of contemporary Chinese artists are affected by this mythical thinking (a mythical philosophy based on Confucian Buddhism and Taoism), and this influence can be easily found in their works. Clear example of it is the installation made by Xu Bing.

His installation *Book of Heaven* (1987) was inspired by Chinese classical myths named *The Book of No Words*, which is an ancient myth in China. The main idea of this story is that when a person endeavors to improve himself and eventually become God, he leaves a notebook of how to become God, but there is no text in this book. This method cannot be expressed in words: all readers need to perceive this book by their own understanding. A person who wants to penetrate the heavenly book must use

his intellect to find his own knowledge from the book. The truth behind this story is actually a fusion of Taoist and Buddhist thoughts, which is to guide people to understand life and improve themselves.

Xu Bing spent two years and created thousands of words. These words are visually combination of Latin alphabet and Chinese characters. The Chinese characters have been graphicalized, and the Latin alphabet has been incorporated into the new text as a part of the selected Chinese characters. After reorganizing the Chinese characters that Chinese people are familiar with, these new characters give people a familiar and unfamiliar feeling (it is a familiar character structure, but in fact this character does not exist). The most interesting thing about this work is that he is not only aimed at Chinese who are familiar with the structure of Chinese characters, but also received positive feedback from people who are not native Chinese speakers. The reason for it was obvious: many people can roughly understand the meaning of this text by looking for the combination of Latin letters in the text created in the work. The most interesting aspect of this work is that the viewer does not need to look at any chapter in its entirety, any text, it only needs to start from different parts of the text, from partial to overall, from fragments to the entire work, everyone will draw different understandings.

This work originates from classical mythology, but expresses the convergence of various cultures in the world in a modern society where the internet is more and more developed, and it also examines the phenomenon of misreading between different cultures.





Figure 9, Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, Installation, 1987, Wu han He gallery, 2017

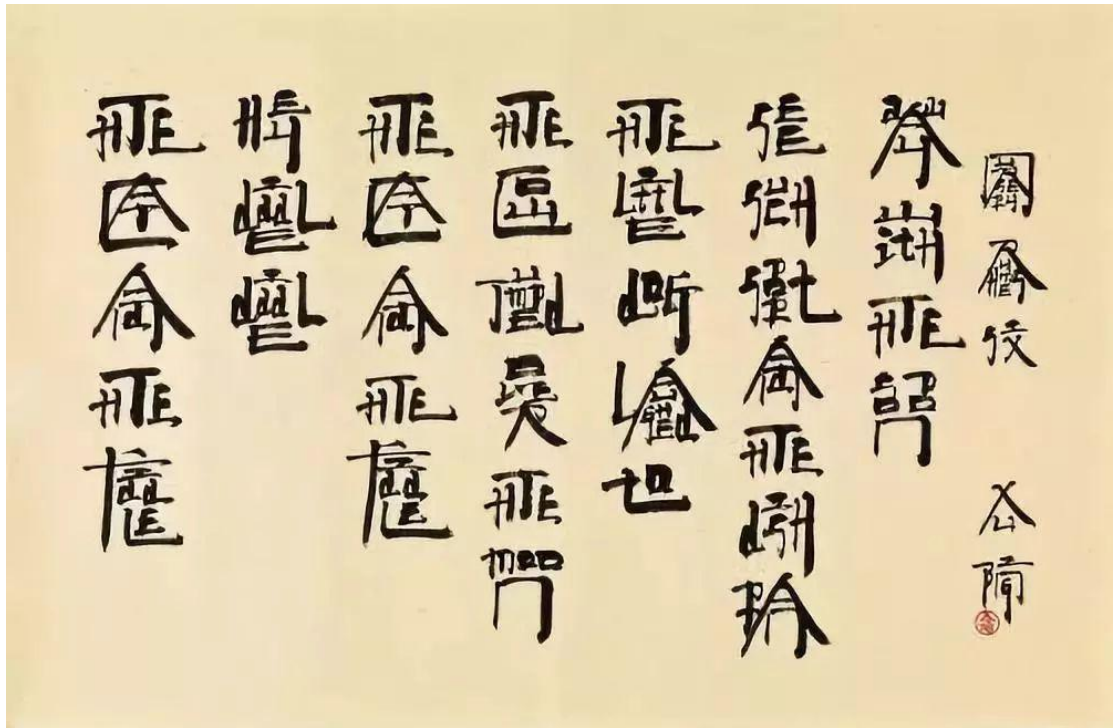


Figure 10, Xu bing, *Book from the Sky*, Installation, 1987, Wu han He gallery, 2017



Figure 11, Xu bing, *Book from the Sky*, Installation, 1987, (workshop) Wu han He gallery, 2017

## Chapter II: My Art Works

In this chapter I will introduce my art works, I divide this chapter into five parts, each title is a work of mine, I think it will be more clearly to explain my idea and show my creative process.

### 2.1 *From East to West*

Inspired by Xu Bing's work, I tried to create the work *From East to West* (2018). This work is the first I made, when I came to Poland. Sudden confrontation with cultural differences made me unable to change my role. I know a little about this cultural system, but I understand European myths. And the image is a way of communication without too many language barriers, so I try to start with what I know. Wherefore I decided to create some works with a transitional position, such as in ancient Greek Mythology and with elements in ancient Greek culture. In my previous cognition, the typical symbols of European culture are the sculpture and architecture of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. So, in this work I tried to add naked human bodies, white horses, "classical sky"<sup>17</sup>, and some abstract rectangles and triangles. I can observe that geometric shapes appear frequently in ancient Greek architecture and decorative patterns. Their applications represent elements of ancient Greek culture in my impression. On the other part of the work, I added fishermen, fences, fish, clouds, dense fog, and some other elements that often appeared in ancient Chinese myths. I display elements with different characteristics from the East and the West in one work, I hope that they can be perfectly integrated, so that I could have a strong breakthrough in style lacking in my previous work. It can be said that this work starts from the details and that the establishment of each element promotes the entire progress. In terms of materials, I chose to use copperplate engraving. The etching and engraving process shows the special texture on the plate, these print textures are carved directly on the copper plate and indirectly formed by chemical etching.

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<sup>17</sup> There are a lot of elements of landscape and social scenes in Renaissance oil paintings, usually the sky and background that give us a feeling of tranquility and solemnity. One of them is the sky, so I call it the "classical sky".

This combination of indirect technology and direct technology showed my mental state at that time, which is a bit of hesitating and exploring.

In this work, I try to think about my way of expression, also about my perspective, my personal cultural positioning. I come from China, but I live in another discourse system. I want to combine different factors to create an image that looks familiar but is actually strange to Chinese. There will be cultural misreading in this creative process. If the misreading is allowed to grow naturally, it will bring more inspiration to artistic creation, I think this state of constant discovery of inspiration is very good for artists.



Figure 12, Han xu dong, *From East to the West--I*, Etching and drawing on paper, 2018

## 2.2 *Xu Mi Mountain*

In the later period, I remodeled this work, so I have done the work *Xu Mi Mountain* (2018). Xu Mi is a mountain in the ancient Chinese myth *Shan Hai Jing*. In this myth Xu Mi is a mountain, that supports the entire world, but in a fact the mountain has no specific shape, or even does not exist. It encompasses everything in the world, and everything in this mountain is unreal. These illusory things can be constantly transformed and blended with each other. Therefore, I want to express the fusion of different elements in my work, or we could say: the fusion of different thinking.

But how to show this mountain? At first, I wanted to use the traditional Chinese ink painting method to depict it. The purpose of Chinese traditional painting is to express the artist's thinking with the texture produced by the mutual integration of water and ink. This way aims to present an image between figurative and abstract, and it force the audience to thinking something beyond the image. But I did not want to complete this work only by Chinese painting. So I used a combination of collage and hand-painting. I cut out parts of the work *From East to West*, and reassembled them to make them a part of the work. After that I used the traditional Chinese ink painting, hoping to make connections between the various parts of the work. Like the objects from *Xu Mi Mountain*, they merged into each other. This creative process is based both both traditional and modern methods, both Western and Eastern methods of creation. This work is inspired by ancient myths and stories, and generates reflections on modern civilization. This mixed way of creation is also my personal understanding of the relationship between tradition and modernity, and I try to express a metaphor with mythical meaning.

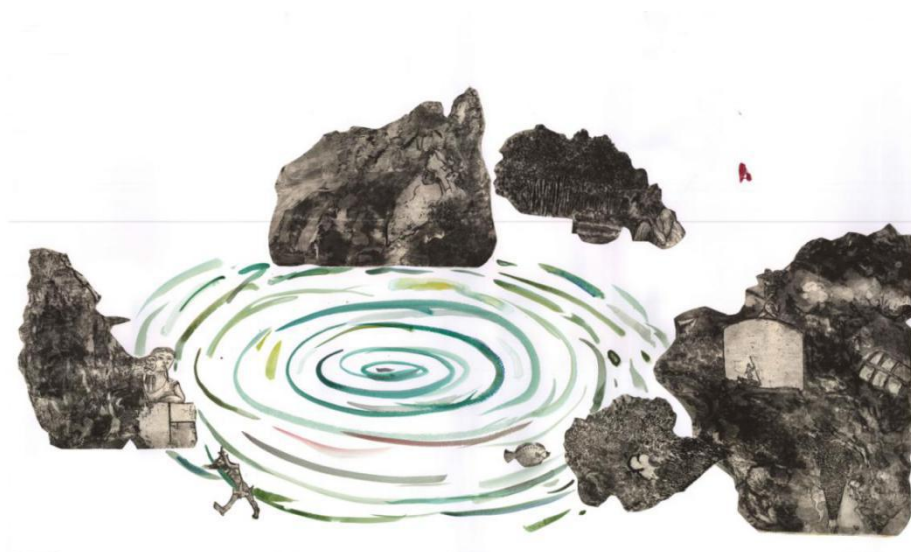


Figure 13, Han xu dong, *Xu Mi Mountain*, Integrated technique, paper, 2018

### **2.3 Zodiac Animals**

I used the mixed method of Chinese and Western elements also in the series of *Zodiac Animals* (2019). In Taoist mythology, Twelve years is a cycle, and each year has an animal as a representative. They are rat, bull, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake,

horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. On the basis of this story I created another set of works, they also represent these 12 animals, but each one of them was combine with some modern Western elements. For example, in the work of sheep, I used Arabic letters and Chinese characters to form the shape of a sheep. In the work of monkey, I was inspired by the image of King Kong from the famous movie<sup>18</sup>. This series of works is another attempt of mythology.

Through these works, it is easy to see my thinking process of mythical thinking and artistic creation. In practice, I first mixed the Chinese and Western elements in the picture. Afterwards, I began to explore the relationship behind these elements. During the summer vacation in 2018, a part of my life experience made me think deeply about mythical thinking and started some different experiments.

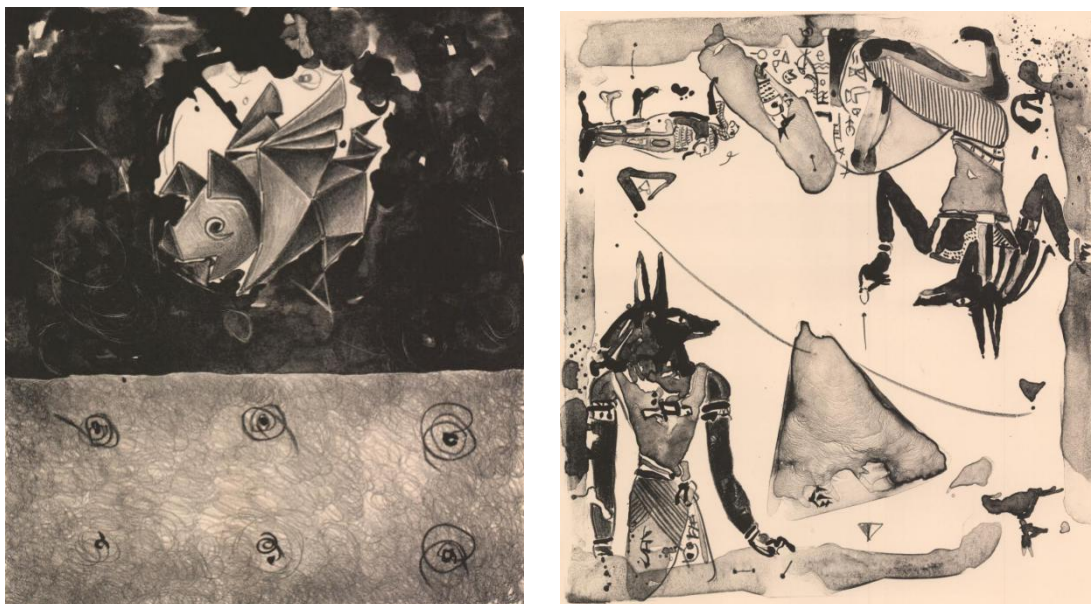


Figure 14,15, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals--Pig,Dog*, Lithography, paper, 2018

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<sup>18</sup> *King Kong* is an adventure movie released in 2005, remake of the classic film of the same name "King Kong" in 1933, it was directed by Peter Jackson.



Figure 16,17, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals--Bull, Cock*, Lithography, paper, 2018



Figure 18,19, Han Xu Dong, *Zodiac Animals--Tiger, Horse*, Lithography, paper, 2018

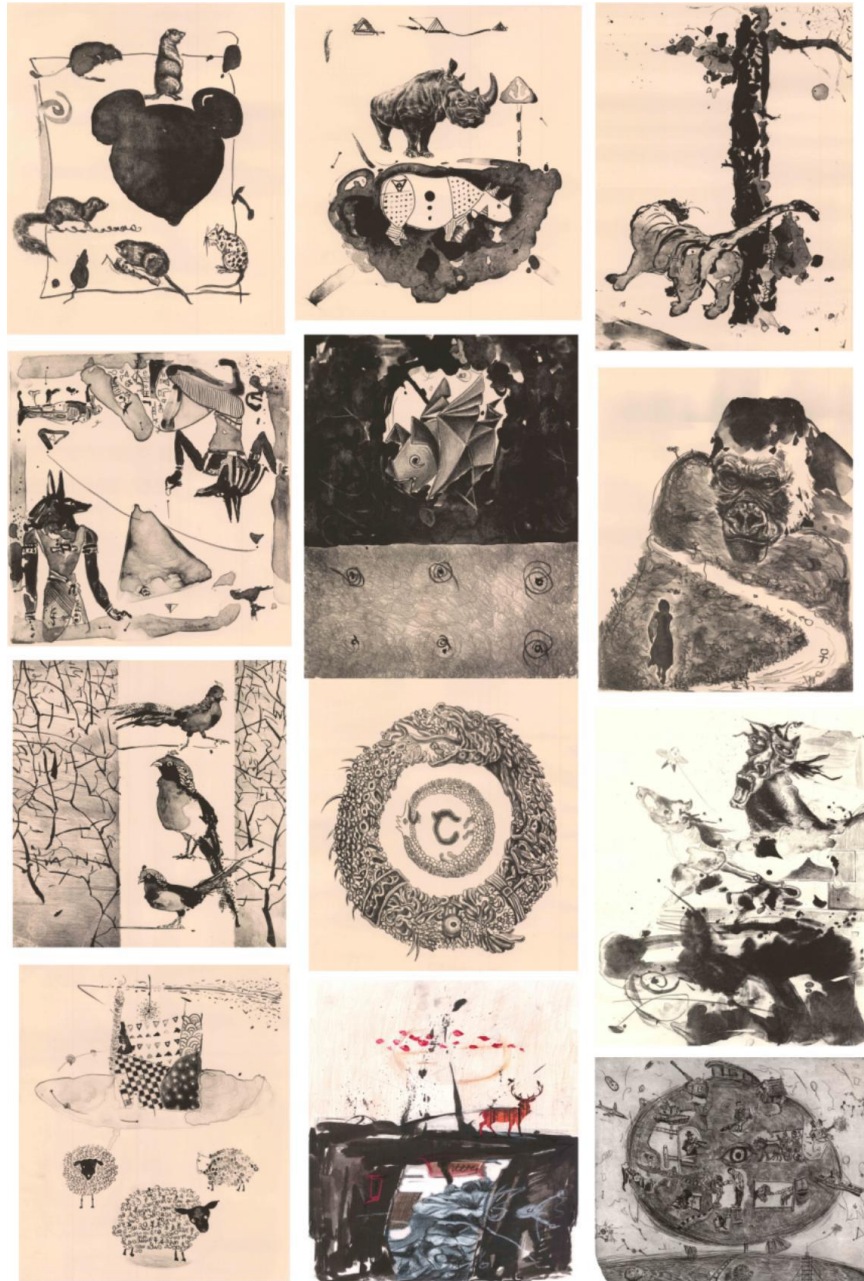


Figure 20, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals*, Lithography and Etching, paper, 2019

## 2.4 *The Tower of Jia ma Babel*

During my research I lived for a month in Yunnan Province of southwestern China. This is the place where ethnic minorities. There are various festivals here, and correspondingly, there are various ethnic myths. I was invited by a local friend to participate in their festival of worship, which is similar to the ancestor worship. At



the ceremony, they came up with a variety of woodcut prints with the images of the mountain god. The name of this print is *Jia ma*. they put it on the rock. After the ceremony is completed, the prints will be burned, which means that the disaster will be eliminated and good luck will be prayed for. Later I discovered that not only the mountain gods, but also all kinds of animal, and various myths correspond to *Jia Ma*. The more interesting thing is that different peoples have different “Jia ma” and myths regardless of ethnic group. Although people are speaking the same language and doing the same things, they cannot communicate with each other in terms of mythology. It looks like a story of *Tower of Babel*.

This phenomenon gave me great inspiration and later I created the work *The Tower of Jia ma Babel* (2019). I collected a lot of “Jia Ma” and put them together. Then I added some drawings I had created, which are based on the West Mythological story. The final work shows a plausible feeling to me. Everyone may find the familiar elements of image in the work, but in the overall work, it looks reasonable but a bit strange, even the viewer could be lost in it. The viewer may look at the annotations of the work, but the annotations will not make him understand more thoroughly, and finally he must stay focused on different images. Isn't this the Tower of Babel?

In this work, I drew some images from the Western mythology. These images are mixed in the group of “Jia Ma”. At first, my idea was that they could be drawn, but later I decided to present them in the form of printmaking. The process of making this print has a sense of ritual, and ritual can usually make things formal and solemn. When the fake play is really done, the power of art becomes stronger, which is similar to the "mindfulness" in Buddhism.



Figure 21, Han Xu Dong, *The Tower of Jia Ma Babel*, woodcut and drawing , paper, 2019

## 2.5 Noah's Ark series

Noah's Ark is a very good theme. Around this theme, different artists have done a lot of interpretations, such as the installation work *The Deluge: Noah's Ark* (2015) by Hung-Chih Peng. In this series of works, he discusses myth, history and human nature together, and explores the reflection of contemporary cultural phenomena in history. On April the 16th, 2014, a cruiseship *SEWOL* which carried 470 people sank in a

flooding accident in Southwest Korea<sup>19</sup>. The artist was shocked when the accident happened. In addition to reminding the people this incident, he also wanted to express more thinking in the work. *The Deluge: Noah's Ark* represents the environment after the Industrial Revolution and the whole essence of human civilization, as well as the future development direction. This is a kind of contradiction. Noah's Ark is a very symbolic object, and the work raises this question to the audience instead of the artist. He used 3D printing technology to make the ship. During the exhibition, he constantly used this technology to modify the ship, and the appearance of the ship has been changing. The usage the most advanced modern technology to create the most original Noah's Ark, this is also a metaphor about modern technology and primitive myths. It asks the questions: is the impact of post-industrial civilization on the direction of human development good or bad ? and does this influence have an end?

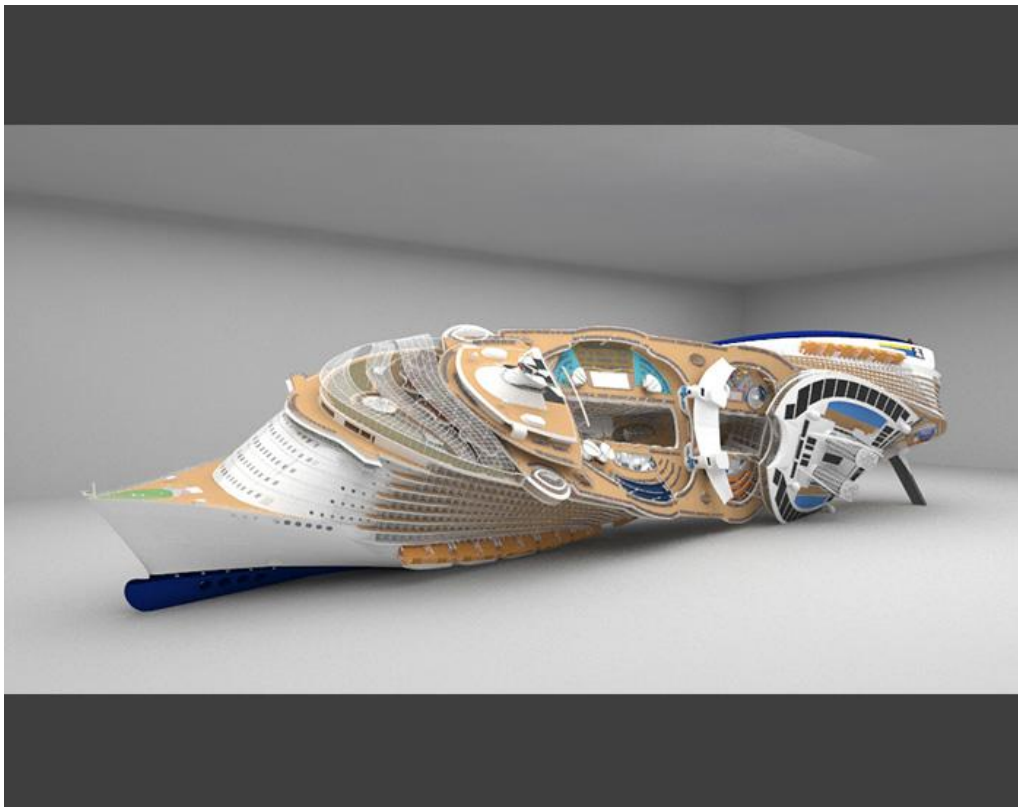


Figure 22, Hung-Chih Peng, *The Deluge: Noah's Ark Project-I*, installation, Taipei Museum, 2015

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<sup>19</sup> 4.16 The shipwreck of Shiyue, South Korea. At 8:58 am on April 16, 2014, a cruise "SEWOL" carrying 470 people sank in a flooding accident in Southwest Korea. 172 rescued, 296 confirmed dead, and 8 still missing



Figure 23, Hung-Chih Peng, *The Deluge: Noah's Ark Project-2*, installation, Taipei Museum, 2015

Hung-Chih Peng raises a question about the direction of human development, this question worthy of consideration by human society, but the key behind this question is classical mythology and modern technology. And as I have wrote before (page11), classical mythology complex and modern technology are like the old and new gods in Neil Gaiman's novel: they grow and depend on each other, but they also compete with each other, they seem to be opposed to each other, but they cannot be completely separated. This phenomenon also inspired me and drove me to think about making some works to describe this state.

In my *Noah's Ark* series (2018-2020) I draw the *Ark* based on the originally myth, but I thought it was not enough to present my idea, so I added elements of different times and different natures: from natural animals and mural-like animal images, to mechanical punk-like animals; from humans building ships, and soldiers in warship,

to rising weapons. Yes, this is a huge Noah's ark. On the ark, all things have undergone different transformations along with history. But these changes are mainly caused by the progress of human civilization. In what direction will this progress lead the world? What will the future look like? If we can build Noah's Ark of another sense in contemporary society, will the contemporary Noah's Ark be yet another refuge for human civilization to escape disaster? We do not know.

The original look of this work is a depiction of the story of Noah's Ark. In the process of conception, I added some of my thoughts. I divided this series into four parts, each of which is the structure of a half ship. In this way, every two and a half hulls can form a complete ship. The four ships are: the most primitive Noah's ark saved the life-saving spirit from the flood. Then, with the development of human civilization, humans began to stand at the top of biological chain. Technology has gradually become a new ark carrying humans to new fields. Finally, humans think that technology can replace all primitive spirits and turn the ark into a warship with a symbolic meaning. At the same time, I am also thinking about adding a concept of reincarnation to this series of works. After using the lithography to complete the work, I continued to draw on the prints by hand. I added many elements that represent modern spirit, such as machine, internet and digital media. On the next one, ark looks like a warship, I added elements with classical symbols, such as primitive totems, such as the Parthenon. Around these works, I added some different boats, and each boat added different elements. I tried to show the whole series of works as a kind of reincarnation. This kind of reincarnation is a bit similar to the reincarnation in Buddhism. The Ark changed from its original appearance with the development of human civilization, and returned to its original point after undergoing numerous changes. It looks Like the rebirth after Nirvana.

The Noah's Ark is a classic theme. The ark is not just exist in the past, it is also happening now, for example: COVID-19 incident has become an element of my *Noah's Ark* series. This incident that affects the world is a challenge to human society. Our human civilization order, science and technology, and even ethics have been tested in this battle against the COVID-19. I have experienced the outbreak of the

COVID-19 incident in China. At that stage, almost everyone stopped outdoor activities and protected themselves at home. All mankind began to fight against disease when the COVID-19 began to appear around the world. The entire human society was riding on a Noah's ark again this time. But floods were replaced by diseases. While avoiding disasters, we are trying to face the challenges bravely through cooperation, sharing of information and science and technology. In No. 10 and 11 of *Noah's Ark* series I expressed my views on this incident. In the work, there are busy people, many kinds of equipment, and everyone on the ship is doing their job, and they will overcome the difficulties together. I think this is the Noah's Ark representing 2020.



Figure 24, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -I*, Lithography and drawing, Paper, 2019



Figure 25, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -2*, Drawing, Paper, 2020.



Figure 26, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -3*, Lithography, Paper, 2019



Figure 27, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -4*, Lithography, Paper, 2019



Figure 28, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -5*, Lithography, Paper, 2019



Figure 29, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -6*, Lithography, Paper, 2019





Figure 30, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -7*, Lithography, Paper, 2019

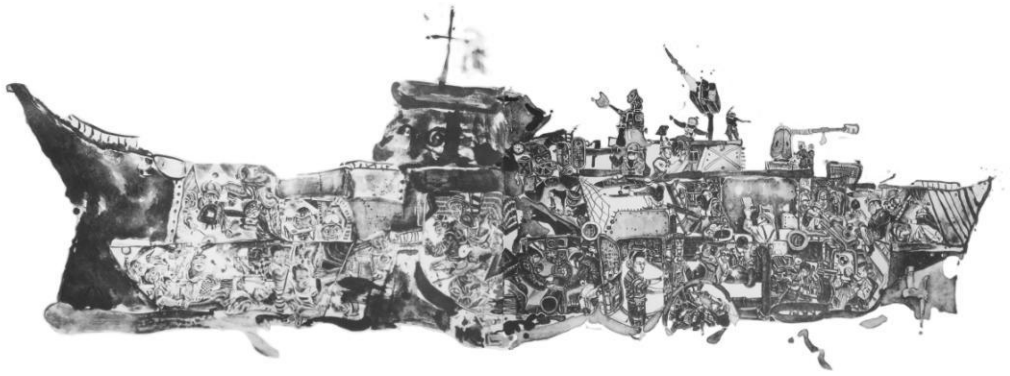


Figure 31, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -8*, Lithography, Paper, 2019



Figure 32, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -9*, Drawing, Paper, 2020



Figure 33, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -10*, Drawing, Paper, 2020



Figure 34, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -11*, drawing, Paper, 2020



Figure 35, Han Xu Dong, *Noah's Ark -12*, Lithography and drawing, Paper, 2020

During the COVID-19, I stay at home for a long time. In addition to caring about daily news, I also observed other people's reactions and attitudes to this incident on social media. They produced various interesting phenomena. They started to spend enough time with their families at home, to learn new life skills (such as improving cook skills), and some do activities that usually need to sit together through a network that does not require direct contact. The state of most people is very optimistic, even very humorous. Most of these phenomena have benefited from the development of science and technology. In fact, because of the support of science, in the face of this incident, our way of thinking has undergone a rapid and positive change. Powerful social media allows us to communicate more frequently, although it reduces our time alone. They also avoids social loneliness. When the only outdoor activities are, people consciously express their greetings in a calm way. As if this epidemic has created new rules for human society, we seem to have returned to the original social state of human society. This state is simple, natural and traditional. We also have more time to think about modern civilization. These phenomena is very interesting. I made some drawings based on these phenomena to supplement the work of Ark. I think this will make the whole series of works look more dynamic.

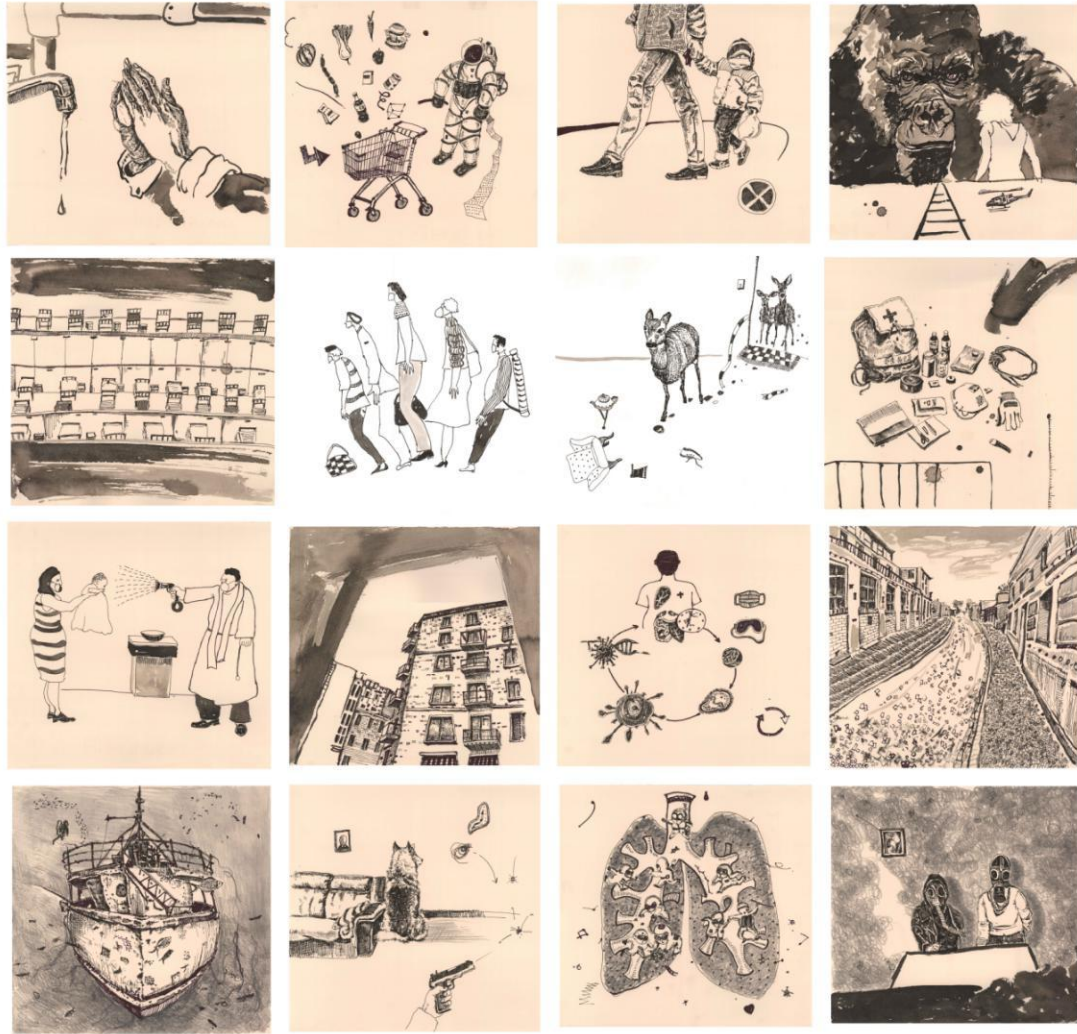


Figure 36, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19*, Drawing on paper, 2020

## Summary

Myth is that adults speak to adults in the tone of children. Listen more, think more, people can return to their original state.

In the Oxford dictionary, the explanation of myth is *a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people*<sup>20</sup>. In my eyes, myth is actually a container of things (value, ideals, history).

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/myth?q=myth> (access: 8.05.2020)

They are the very important part of the culture. This container includes the characteristics of culture and humanity, which also reflects the universality of the myth itself (the vastness, inclusiveness, universality). While the myth is influenced by the culture, it also nurtures the culture, it conveying certain universal values while reflecting specific culture. Myth is a level that cannot be ignored in the cultural development experienced by the entire human race. It is a vital phenomenon that has influenced human spiritual life for thousands of years. No matter in early civilizations or modern times, people are always concerned about the exploration of themselves. The heaven of the gods is not on the dome, but in the hearts of people.

I choose myths as the source of creation. In fact, I want to use the myths to reflect the changes of our modern civilization and express my understanding and attitudes to these phenomena. I also use these ancient texts in human civilization to compare them with the current life, I hope to find more answers that can reveal our current civilization dilemma. I look at Western myth from the perspective of Chinese. This process has made me more objectively aware of the significance of cultural differences. When I put this way of thinking into artistic creation, this kind of ideological mixing will bring some mixed state to the face of the work. And this mixed artistic appearance is my gain and growth, it is also the basic logic of my artistic creation.

This cultural mix is a ritual, in which we inherit the ancient experience of our ancestors and combine them with the current life to select new ideas. This is also the nature of art. When new and full of creative creativity absorbs and challenges old traditions, art gains progress. The research on myth has benefited me a lot, and I have many new plans and ideas on the future art path.

### **Acknowledgment:**

I would like to use this treatise to remember my life in Wroclaw forever. These three years have a great significance to me. The first time I have heard about Academy of Art and Design in Wroclaw was when my master tutor, Mr. Fan Min told me about it. Then I met Professor Małgorzata Et Ber Warlikowska and PhD. Marta Kubiak, who

visited Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts in 2016. I am so happy to pursue a doctorate in this beautiful city. In Chinese thinking, we call it "fate". I am very grateful to my mentor, Professor Jacek Szewczyk, and I want to thank him for his support and guidance. Throughout my creative process, he has provided me with great help and support. I would like to thank the Professor Paweł Frąckiewicz, his rigorous creative attitude has greatly benefited me. I would like to thank professor Christopher Nowicki, his encouragement always inspired me a lot, I cherish the time I spent talking with him. I would like to thank PhD. Dorota Miłkowska, her profound knowledge and rigorous academic attitude have benefited me a lot. For all faculty members and colleagues in the Graphic and Media Arts Department, I really love you. In the past three years, I am happy to work with you. This time is an unforgettable period of my life.

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## Illustration List (not mentioned above)



Figure 37,38, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals--Monkey, Rabbit*, Lithography, paper, 2019

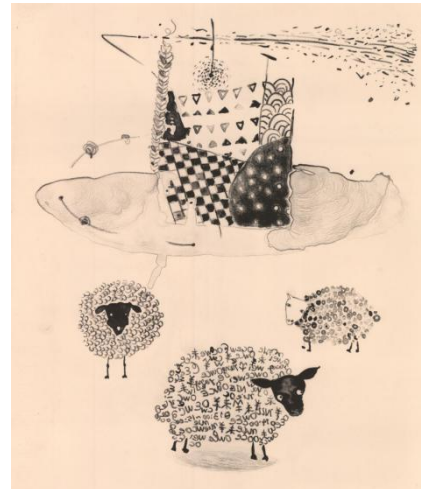
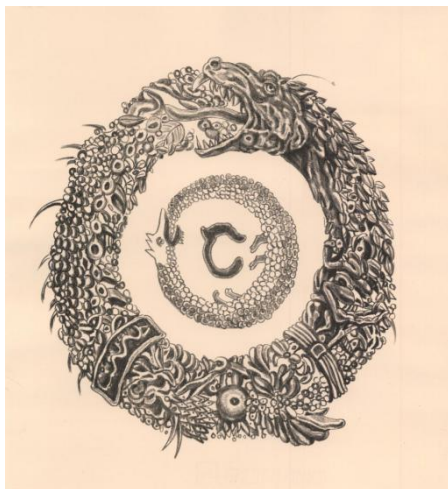


Figure 39,40, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals--Snake, Sheep*, Lithography, paper, 2019



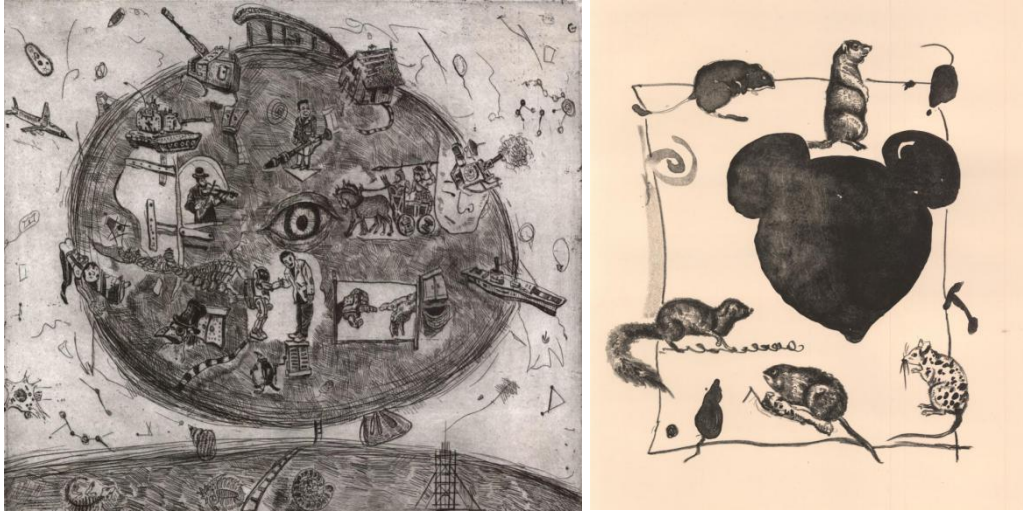


Figure 41,42, Han xu dong, *Zodiac Animals--Dragon, Rat*, Lithography, paper, 2019



Figure 43, Han xu dong, *From East to the West--2*, Digital and Etching, paper, 2018

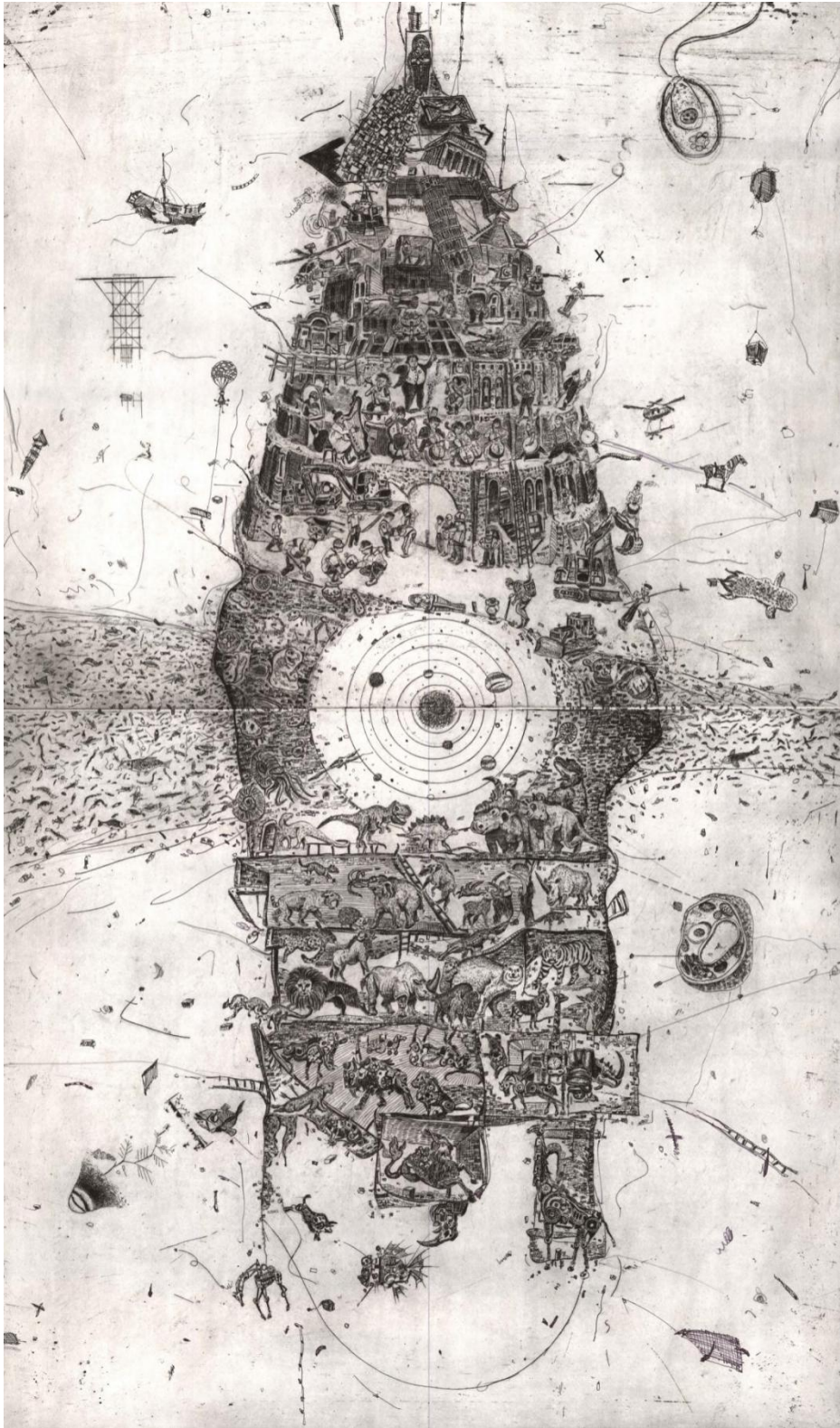


Figure 44, Han xu dong, *Tower--2*, Etching and drawing, paper, 2019

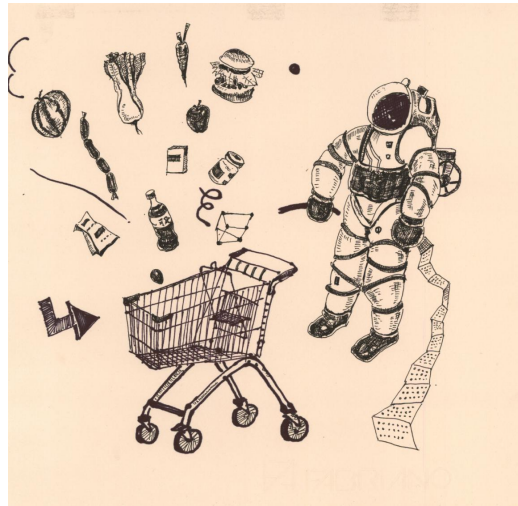


Figure 45,46, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19,1--2*, Drawing ,paper, 2020



Figure 47,48, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19,3--4*, Drawing , paper, 2020



Figure 49,50, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19*, 5--6, Drawing , paper, 2020

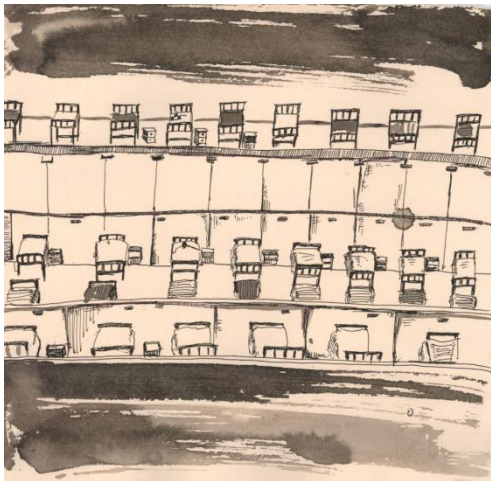


Figure 51,52, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19*, 7--8, Drawing , paper, 2020

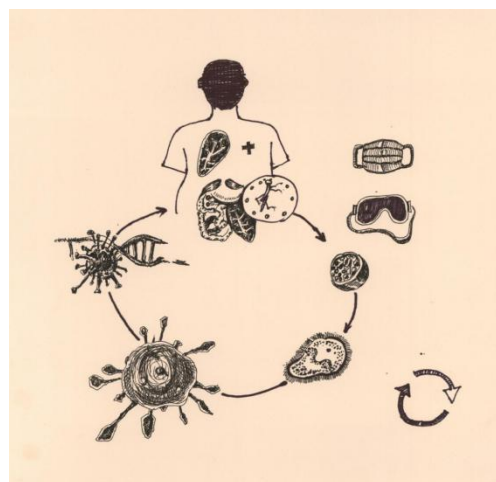


Figure 53,54, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19*, 9--10, Drawing , paper, 2020



Figure 55,56, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19, 11--12* Drawing , paper, 2020

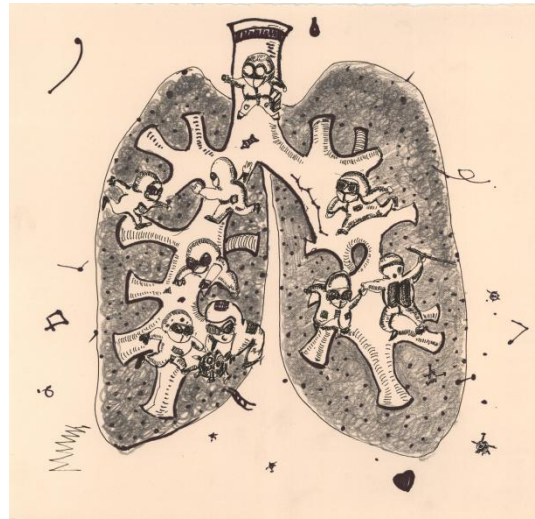


Figure 57,58, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19, 13--14*, Drawing , paper, 2020

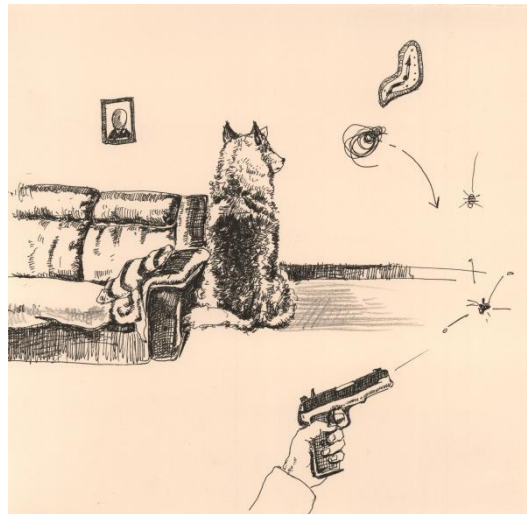


Figure 59,60, Han xu dong, *What is happening during the COVID-19, 15--16*, Drawing , paper, 2020

