

# ***Re-Imagine Chinese Mythological Creatures with Present-Day Look Development Techniques***

**Yan Hanqing**

*Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts, Shanghai, China*

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**Abstract:** There are few written descriptions of how Chinese mythological creatures would be physically represented, and the traditional Chinese visual style does not stress realism, which made Chinese tradition myths having some difficulty on spreading around the world. This thesis will focusing on re-imaging Chinese mythical creatures with present-day look development, digital modeling, and lighting will be emphasized. This will provide a deeper appreciation of Chinese mythical characters. This thesis will do research on Chinese myths and legends, and analyze one famous Chinese mythological creatures in pop culture, including T.V. series and film. The goal is to learn how characters in myths evolve and create a re-imaged version of them. This thesis will then do a re-imagination of the creatures from the Chinese legend of the sons of the Dragon Lord, including a choice of a quadruped reptile, a bird and a mammal, each of them contains a concept design and a few renders.

## **1. Introduction**

Using modern modeling and visual effects techniques can help with re-imaging Chinese mythological creatures. Many mythical creatures exist in ancient Chinese books, folk tales, and novels, and many of these fantastical stories have been developed and shot as films or T.V. series, such as the well-known characters among the Chinese, the Monkey King.[1]

Based on Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, "Read other people's myth, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms off-acts—but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message." [2] Sometimes the visual interpretation may imagined differently by storytellers and artists from other cultures.

When examining characters from Chinese mythologies, a lot of people don't have a basic idea of the figure of many Chinese mythical characters. This thesis will re-imagine the characters of the Children of the Dragon Lord with digital modeling and visual effects techniques in order to create a new aesthetic from the original myths.

## **2. Chinese Myths and Legend**

Chinese mythologies can be divided into two main categories: First are the shaman stories from the early Qin dynasty (200 B.C.E.), which are primarily the stories of the *ShanHaiJing*. In these stories, gods are usually described as half-human, half-beast, in which their beast parts are usually

based on serpents, birds, and dragons. Most of these are depicted by the clothing and accessories of the shamans. These shamans were known to use some hallucinogenic plants and fungi to get messages from the gods. They usually will hold a serpent in their hand as appearance in that era.[3][4]

One example is the story of the goddess Nü Wa, the mother of humankind. She has the lower body of a serpent. "Serpent is symbolic of the bondage to the earth",[5] written in *Power of Myth*. As the mother goddess of mankind, which is why elements of snake existed as part of her appearance.

The Han Dynasty gave rise to Taoism and Confucianism. Under the influence of the two religions, the Chinese mythology system changed from shamanistic tales to religious stories. In these stories, they described a heaven based on the Chinese bureaucracy.[6] As depicted, the heavenly government leads hundreds of gods, including gods of mountains and seas, gods of different elements, gods of walls and moats.[7] There are many gods of the constellations, as well as thousands of spirits, to ensure everything in the universe runs harmoniously. While many mythological structures define gods as immortal, in the legends of the Han Dynasty they have and can have a lifespan of 10,000 or more years.

A crucial concept in these stories is that there are two ways for mortals to go into the heaven. One is to learn Taoism magical powers, Another is to gain entry to heaven after judgement in the underworld after death.[8]

An example is General Guan Yu from the late Han Dynasty (160 C.E. to 220 C.E.). After his death, Guan Yu was worshiped in shrines and was bestowed the title of the God of Victory by the emperor.[9] Taoists call him Duke Guan, and Confucianists call him the Saint of War. He has always appeared as a male with red face and green clothes.

Another important element in Chinese myths is love stories between humans and mythical creatures such as goddesses, beautiful fairies, animal spirits, and ghosts. Common spirits in these stories are fox spirits which can change into beautiful woman. One example for fox spirit is the nine-tail fox. She transforms into a beautiful woman named Da Ji, who charms the King of Shang and persuades him into killing and tormenting his citizens, which directly causes the end of his kingdom.[10]

### 3. Evolution of the Monkey King in pop culture

The most well-known figure of the Monkey King is from the novel *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng'en.[11] Based on this novel, many directors shoot their films by their understanding of the character.

In the novel *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King was born from a stone on the peak of a mountain.[12]. He learns magic from a Taoist monk and get his name Sun Wukong.[13] When he finishes his study, he gains a metal rod as weapon, started a war with the heaven, wins the battle and declares himself "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven". But he is then imprisoned by the Buddha under a mountain for 500 years.[14]

In prison, he makes a deal with the Buddha to protect a monk traveling from China to a sacred mountain in exchange for his freedom.[15] The story ends with the Monkey King finished his mission and becomes a Buddha for his reward.

One example of the Monkey King in pop culture is in the T.V. series *Journey to the West*. The director developed the Monkey King instead of a 4 feet tall monkey, but a heroic 6 feet character. This better fits the ideal of a hero.

Many other producers and directors have recreated many different versions of the Monkey King based on the original character. For example, in the 1995 Hong Kong, China comedy film *A*

*Chinese Odyssey*, the director interpreted the Monkey King in a more nonsensical humorous way.[16]

From the examples of the same character produced for different media, the design and concept of the same character changes significantly based on the interpretation by each group of artists in each medium.

#### 4. Methodology

In an ancient Chinese myth, the character of the Dragon Lord has fathered 9 children, all born as different species. In the most common version of the story, written by the scholar Li

Written by Li Dongyang in his work *Huailutang Ji* from the Ming dynasty, the nine children of the dragon lord are the following: Tu Niu, son of dragon and buffalo; Ya Zi, son of dragon and wolf; Chao Feng, son of dragon and bird; Pu Lao, son of dragon and toad; Suan Ni, son of dragon and Lion; Bi Xi, son of dragon and Tortoise; Bi An, son of dragon and Tiger; Fu Xi, son of dragon and Snake; and Chi Wen, son of dragon and fish.[17]

As an exploration of re-imaging characters drawn from myths, three of these will be created as 3D models: Chao Feng, Bi Xi, and Bi An. The choice was based on different types of creatures: these three choices of creatures contain a quadruped reptile, a bird with feathers, and a mammal quadruped creature with fur.

##### 4.1 Character Design: Bi Xi – Son of Dragon and Turtle

The creature Bi Xi is the 6th son of the dragon lord. The design of him mainly focuses on his essential figure as a combination of tortoise and dragon. The references for this design are based on alligator turtle, giant tortoise, and crocodile skin. The reference to the shell and limbs of Bi Xi is from the giant tortoise (Figure 1), which was used to imitate how the shell of the giant turtle grows, including the thickness and volume of the shell and how the edge of the shell grows.



Fig. 1 Giant Tortoise (“Tortoise”, Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tortoise#/media/File:A.\\_gigantea\\_Aldabra\\_Giant\\_Tortoise.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tortoise#/media/File:A._gigantea_Aldabra_Giant_Tortoise.jpg))

A color palette of dark green, yellowish green, and grey was used to highlight its tortoise feature (Figure 2).



Fig. 2 Concept of Bi Xi by Hanqing Yan

Figure 3 is a reference sheet for Bi Xi. Designs of heavy rocks were added on its limbs and back to emphasize the creature's symbiosis with stones and its habit of carrying heavy items. The head of Bi Xi is designed in a dragon-like style, added with scales based on western dragon around the neck of the creature (Figure 4) to emphasize Bi Xi is half-dragon, half-tortoise. Chinese dragons usually have a long mouth and jaw, but considered turtles normally have short beaks, the design of Bi Xi's head and mouth follows the concept of a head of a traditional Chinese dragon with a shortened mouth.

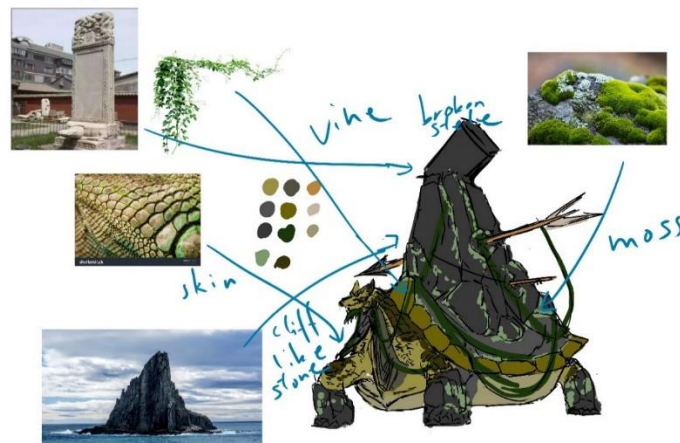


Fig. 3 Reference Sheet of Bi Xi by Hanqing Yan



Fig. 4 Head design of Bi Xi by Hanqing Yan

Figure 5 compares the gray model and the textured version of Bi Xi. It was made gigantic to exaggerate his ability to carry heavy rocks. Figure 6 is a close-up shot of the model.



Fig. 5 Gray model and Textured version of Bi Xi, rendered in Unreal Engine by Hanqing Yan



Fig. 6 Close-up shot of Bi Xi, by Hanqing Yan

#### 4.2 Design of Chao Feng – Son of Dragon and Bird

Chao Feng is the son of dragon and bird, and he inherited many features from birds. According to the description, “The motif of Chao Feng was placed at the forefront of the animals on the eaves of buildings.”[18]



Fig. 7 Design of Chao Feng by Hanqing Yan (Left)

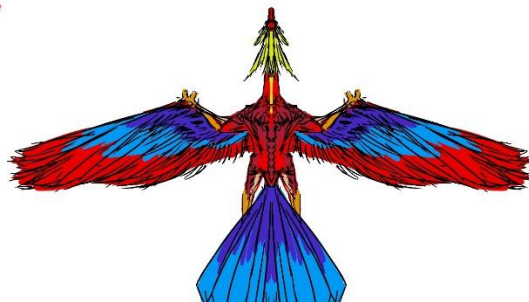


Fig. 8 Design of Chao Feng by Hanqing Yan (Right)

The design of this creature mainly focuses on combining the elements of dragon and bird. Because this beast was originally conceptualized by the Chinese, the design references an unique bird species in China, the golden pheasant, using the tail feather from peacocks as the prototype of this creature. It also references some traits of raptors, including their wings and claws, because it is designed as a predator. Figures 7 and 8 are designs of Chao Feng.

The design for Chao Feng emphasizes that it is a predator which can fly at high speed, so it references raptor wings and swallow's wings.

Figures 9-11 are renders of the model of Chao Feng done in Unreal Engine 5.

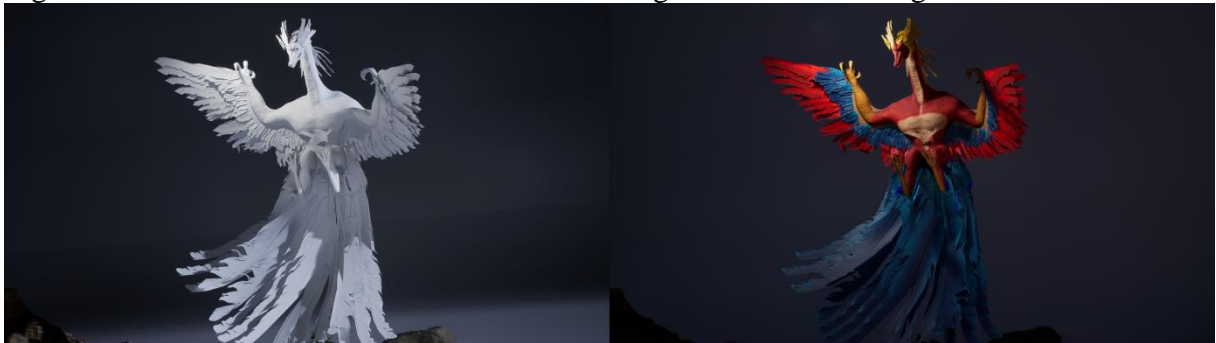


Fig. 9 Grayscale render and Textured Render of Chao Feng in Unreal Engine 5 by Hanqing Yan



Fig. 10 Render of Chao Feng in Unreal Engine 5 by Hanqing Yan

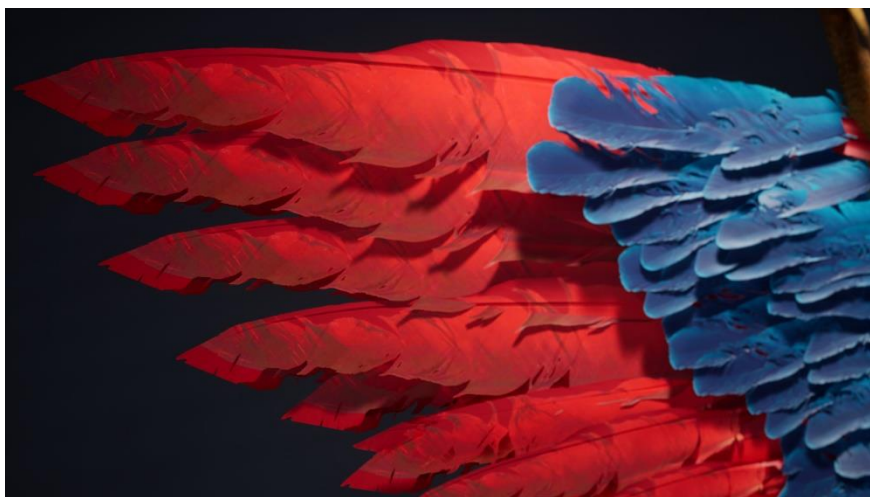


Fig. 11 Render of Chao Feng in Unreal Engine 5 by Hanqing Yan

### 4.3 Design of Bi An – Son of Dragon and Tiger

Bi An, is the child of dragon and tiger. Bi An is the symbol of justice and judgment, so this character is often found in courthouse.[19] He is usually described as a beast with a flat, round face.

Large cats have different types of fur depending on their habitat. For example, lions and cheetahs who live in the savanna of East Africa will tend to have single-length, short hair that can help them live in the hot weather there. On the other side, creatures living in cold climates, like coniferous forests or tundra, will have long heavy fur to keep them warm. The primary color palette includes orange, cream, and brown. Features like heavy furs from Siberian tigers (Figure 12) are referenced in the design of Bi An. The design of Bi An is a combination of elements from multiple large cats, like lion's mane and tiger's hair and stripes (Figure 13).



Fig. 12 Siberian tiger (“Siberian Tiger at the Leipzig Zoological Garden”, Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberian\\_tiger#/media/File:P.t.altaica\\_Tomak\\_Male.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberian_tiger#/media/File:P.t.altaica_Tomak_Male.jpg))



Fig. 13 Design of BiAn by Hanqing Yan

Figure 14 is the comparison of the gray scale render and textured render of Bi An.



Fig. 14 Grayscale model and Render of Bi An by Hanqing Yan

## 5. Conclusion

Ancient classics, novels, and religious stories that have originated with Chinese myths, such as *Journey to the West*, have been recreated many times in many formats. When designing the characters from the original story to the screen, the character designers usually will get their references from the original text and the costumes worn in traditional operas. The result of a character like the Monkey King on screen is a combination of traditional Chinese elements.

The design of the three characters from the story of the Children of the Dragon Lord followed the theory of getting references from original texts and the creatures in real life. The three characters' result is a re-image based on the original text and a combination of elements of multiple animals. Because of the need for an original description of the appeal of these mythical creatures, there are multiple answers to how these creatures may look.

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