THE BOY WHO DRAWS CATS:
3D ANIMATION AS A MEDIUM FOR TELLING CULTURALLY-SPECIFIC GHOST STORIES

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ABSTRACT

People have always taken great interests in supernatural subjects. Animated films that subjected in ghost and supernatural themes has also increased in recent years. As an animation scholar, my interest is to study why the topic of ghosts has had such enduring charm over the centuries, and wish to make an animation subjected in Eastern ghost story that resonate with the Western viewers. The first part of this paper will examine the most important features that are needed to know about ghost stories in Eastern and Western culture, including the similarities and distinctions. The second part of this paper connects the theory and the project. Inspired by Lafcadio Hearn’s ghost story collection, The Boy Who Draws Cats presents the important substantive qualities and perspectives found in traditional Eastern ghost stories. The process of making the project includes concept development, story design and scene-by-scene design of The Boy Who Draws Cats. In this part, two important visual storytelling tools “backstory” and “mise-en-scene” has been analyzed to communicated characteristics in a culturally accessible way that makes it easy for Western viewers to understand and accept the alternative values that are commonly presented in an Eastern ghost story.
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CHAPTER 1.
INTRODUCTION TO MY INTERESTS OF GHOST

I’ve always been interested in supernatural stories - stories about actions and events that are caused by unknown or unexplained forces. When I was young, I read through many books about mysteries that were documented all over the world. I spent a lot of time thinking about why they happened and became very interested in subjects such as supernatural power and the existence of ghosts.

In Western countries, people have always taken great interest in supernatural subjects. The popularity in Western culture can be seen in the prevalence of certain fiction, television, and cinematic series (From Bram Stoker's Dracula to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein to The Walking Dead, from the writings of Anne Rice to Stephen King, to the True Blood series, and to many series of so-called paranormal romance stories). Animated films with ghosts and supernatural themes as subjects also increased in recent years. From Tim Burton’s The Nightmare before Christmas to Corpse Bride, from Laika Company’s Caroline to Paranorman, the trend shows that supernatural and ghost topics started to gain popularity among animation directors in the Western counties. On the other hand, ghost and spectre theme is also very popular in Eastern culture (especially for China and Japan), which can be commonly found in their literature, screen media, comics and games. As an animation scholar, my interest is to study why the topic of ghosts has had such enduring charm over the centuries, and I will explore the distinctions between Eastern and Western ghost stories from a cultural point of view.

Contemporary supernatural and ghost stories are a powerful part of popular culture, and they actually have deep connections to the history of supernatural beliefs in the East and
the West. In ancient China, mysterious forces are often associated with Taoism. In Taoism, people believe that mountains, springs, rivers and trees—everything in nature—have animated forces. One has to cooperate with these natural and supernatural forces in order for life to run smoothly. (Fowler, J. D., 2005, 4). According to this notion, we are all living in a spirit world, and people should attach importance to showing respect to all beings and their forces in order to seek a harmonious co-existence across the gamut of spirits and beings. This belief in the interrelatedness of all things led to the propitiation of all kinds of gods and spirits in the natural world, including the spirits of the deceased. The belief in natural spirits and the quest for harmony in Taoism are the foundations of Eastern ghost culture throughout history.

Later beliefs incorporated with Buddhism stress the principle of cause and effect (also known as Karma). According to Buddhism, each person’s good and evil deeds during her or his lifetime are all recorded by the registers of Heaven, and these records will determine the fortunes of that person’s life and afterlife (Fowler, J. D., 2005, 245). Good deeds include showing respect to all the living and nonliving creatures in the world, so the notion is similar to Taoism. Ghosts and evil spirits are often viewed as harmful to human from the perspective of Western culture, but in a Buddhist’s view, they are likely to bring good fortune to the living if they were properly respected and comforted.

Many scholars believe that supernatural belief is fundamental to cultural traditions and that it provides cohesion to the group. (Goldstein, D., Grider, S., & Thomas, J., 2007). Ghost stories usually reflect specific cultural orientations (values, attitudes, stress and conflict), that are worthy of analysis. Chinese writer Pu Songling (1648-1714) collected hundreds of folk stories about ghosts, supernatural beings, magical animals and monsters. These stories appear in Chinese literature and textbooks and have continuously influenced Chinese literature and popular culture. As such, they are a valuable collection of stories about the supernatural to study as expressions of cultural beliefs.
People in Pu’s strange tales often display a range of attitudes when engaging ghosts and supernatural beings. In some stories, ghosts help the poor fulfill their wishes and live a better life. In others, people treasure the time and memory of being with these beings. Other stories reflect traditional cultural morality such as the importance of bravery, modesty and filial piety. Through learning and engaging with these stories, readers have a better understanding of the world we inhabit and they expand their knowledge about different cultures.

The importance of these stories to Chinese people is also demonstrated by their role in my own life. Influenced by Pu’s fantastic stories and my belief of that my ancestors will return from the dead, I became interested in the meaning behind each story at a young age. I believe that everything happens for a reason, so my exposure to these strange stories must also have happened for a reason. But the potential importance of the ghost stories of others has also been reinforced by the fact that my family has a ghost story of its own. When I was a child, my mother told me the following ghost story which is based on her own childhood experience.

“Guardian Ghost” as told by my mother

Around the year 1970 in a small town in XinJiang province, in the far northwest part of China, lived a family with three children. They owned a small property of land on a hill where they grew cotton to make a living. The economic conditions were tough in that area. Both parents were farmers who usually had to work every day in the fields from morning to night in order to make enough money for their children to go to school. At that time, transportation was not well developed so people had to walk long distances to get from one town to another.

The name of the eldest child in the family was Aifang, but she had not always been the eldest. This family endured the sad experience of losing their first-born son to a gun fire accident when he was only fourteen, leaving Aifang with the responsibility of caring for
her little brother and sister at the early age of nine while her sad parents worked so hard on their behalf in the field. Because their own town was too small to have a school, Aifang had to bring her little brother with her to the school of a neighboring town every day. Their little sister was too young to go to school so they made her stay at home. The long tiring walk to school included a trip down a long road and the crossing of a river.

On one of these walks to school, it rained heavily. The sky was dark and it was hard for the children to see the road. The whole day was stormy. On their way back home, Aifang told her little brother to move carefully and to watch out for deep water puddles on the ground. When the children arrived at the bridge, the water level was almost the same height as the riverbank. “Watch your step,” Aifang said to her brother, who listened carefully. But when they approached the far side of the creek, it was Aifang who lost her footing and slipped, falling into the river. Everything happened so quickly that she could not call for help. The last thing she saw before submerging in the water was her little brother’s terrified face.

After two hours or so passed, Aifang’s family found her lying on the bank of the lower part of the stream. Thankfully, she woke up quickly and she was not injured or traumatized. “I felt like someone lifted me up from the water,” she told her parents, although they believed it was just her good luck that saved her. But Aifang knew differently. She believed that the spirit of her elder brother was the force that had saved her. And for all the years that followed, even when Aifang could hardly remember her brother’s face, she still believed that he was always near, watching over and protecting the whole family.

I believe this story provides a way of remembering and understanding my family and its history. For my mom, it is also a way of comforting herself and remembering her lost sibling. The story later served as a helpful and positive force that guided my mother to find her way through her life. By telling me, the story also serves to influence me and my attitude towards ghost and spirits. Because of hearing and believing in this family story, I developed an early belief that spirits and natural forces of all kinds dwell anywhere around us in the world we inhabit. Some may have negative or resistant effects on humans if they
try to work against them. On the contrary, people can also achieve helpful and positive power if they follow their movements and cooperate with these forces. That is the reason that I have never been afraid of ghosts and unknown forces, and have even thought favorably about understanding and coexisting with them.

Attitudes toward ghost stories about the supernatural and the dead vary greatly between Eastern and Western cultures. Although ghosts and spirits are not something to fear or an aggressive factor in Chinese and Japanese folklore, there often are in Western culture. I want to examine how animation can be used to express what distinguishes the ghost stories of Eastern and Western cultures. I will do this using animation as a medium to communicate the characteristics and values of ghosts and supernatural beings in Chinese culture. Because animation allows the creation of a visual three-dimensional world that does not have to be rooted in reality, it is a perfect medium for this purpose. By animating a traditional folktale, I hope to encourage viewers to reconsider what is possible with regard to the role of the supernatural and to explore how the use of animated images can impact the effectiveness of storytelling within the context of ghost stories.

In general, there are significant cultural differences between Eastern and Western concepts of mythology, philosophy, language, religion, art and custom. All these factors influence the ways that people perceive and observe their environments. Prior studies indicate that East Asians are likely to see visual images contextually, paying more attention to background and relations, which makes them more sensitive to contextual information. This suggests a different kind of psychological sensitivity to observation than that used by Westerners (Masuda, T., Gonzalez, R., Kwan, L., & Nisbett, R. E., 2008, 1260-1275). Also, ancient Chinese people may be more likely to personify the things that surround them such as animals, plants, non-living objects and nature phenomena and they tend to interact with them in a very imaginative way. For example, the sound of loud thunder and the flash of lightening might be interpreted as the rage of a dragon in olden times, and people then believed that they had to provide sacrificial offerings such as food to stop its anger. (Wang, X., & He, J., 2011, 840-843). On the other hand, Westerners are likely to focus on the
more obvious, less metaphoric qualities of objects and their properties when they attempt to describe their attributes and the categories into which they might be arranged (Masuda, T., Gonzalez, R., Kwan, L., & Nisbett, R. E., 2008, 1260-1275). These differences may lead to peoples’ different attitudes and aesthetic preferences toward ghost stories as shown in differences in literature, art and screen media.
CHAPTER 2.
UNDERSTANDING GHOST STORIES

This chapter introduces various short stories from folklore and literature with ghost and other supernatural subjects that are considered across cultures. Western ghost stories are mainly contemporary American tales that are collected from *Things that go bump in the night* by Louis C. Jones (1959) and *Coffin Hollow, and other ghost tales* by Ruth Musick (1977). Eastern ghost stories are mainly collected from *Strange Tales from a Chinese studio* by Pu Songling (1680) and *Kwaidan: Ghost Stories and Strange Tales of Old Japan* by Lafcadio Hearn (1904). These stories have been analyzed from the aspects of their character development, their story content, people’s attitude towards ghosts, and ideas about love and other emotions that are reflected in the plots. This chapter also examines how cultural differences in the presentation of ideas about mythology, philosophy, language, religion, are reflected in distinctions that can be found in ghost stories, and it considers how we can make use of these features to communicate ideas that cross cultures through screen media.

2.1 Types of ghost characters in American ghost tales

Belief in ghosts first appears in the medieval period in Europe. There is a deep connection between the sixteenth century religious notion found in both Catholic and Protestant contexts that the body and soul are separate and that the soul survives after death and the cultural perspective that spirits of the dead still occupy the earth. This spectral belief has been defined primarily as a Catholic superstition but it is underpinned as a Protestant notion about a spiritual world that communicates with the living (Handley, S., 2007).
Beliefs such as this later led to the fact that ghost stories played key roles in the production and representation of Victorian subjectivity in an extensive literature of spiritual visions. As Andrew Smith explained in his book *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: A Cultural History*, “ghosts” are manifested somewhere between the unconscious and conscious; because the image of spectrality has the capacity to invoke ideological tension and contradiction, ghost stories always incorporate some of the political debates about economics, national identities and the gender of literary imagination in the middle nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, ghost stories were more closely associated with moral integrity and social justice issues instead of more political issues. Spectral warnings in literature after 1800 encourage an understanding of the need to modify behaviors that are reflected in the stories. These issues show how the history of ghosts represents their subsequent identities in the literary culture of the nineteenth century (Andrew, S., 2010).

In American ghost tales, stories often follow similar plot patterns, and they also have similar types of characters and actions, or circumstances that trigger the presence of ghosts. Generally speaking there are three main types of Western ghost stories.

Many ghost stories center on things that seem to be inhabited by a supernatural spirit. We might think of them as “haunted objects.” Often these objects belonged to or were associated with a particular deceased person. Often they are personal domestic objects such as furniture, books or crafted objects that are very relatable to readers and can represent a deceased person’s will or interest. For example, in a story called *The Light in Mother’s Room*, a lamp that turns off and on without human intervention seems to contain the spirit of the protagonist’s recently departed mother. When the protagonist and his siblings cannot agree on how to manage their inheritance and quarrel with each other, a strange light that can be seen through the window from miles away always appears in their deceased mother’s room. The story suggests that the mysterious light in their mother’s chair is the expression of her discontent over her son’s bad behavior, because it ceases its supernatural behavior once their disputes are resolved.
The second type of ghost story features characters that often keep performing their duties after death. These types of ghost characters are good people when living, so they return to repay a debt or fulfill unfinished business after they have died. For instance, in the story called *The Mysterious Music*, the ghost of an old engineer takes care of the railroad track bed and provides good access to it so that living persons who encounter it are not endangered.

Other stories about performing duties after death are sometimes associated with family issues, such as when a deceased family member keeps looking after the whole family. Bishop Porter Mansion, also known as Forty Acres, is a house in Massachusetts that is famous for being haunted. Throughout the years, many generations of Porters have found themselves being gently tugged at by a kindly presence, and they have seen an apparition next to their beds when they awaken in the night. The story of this house is that nearly a hundred years ago, Moses Porter, a Captain in the Militia, was killed by his rebel servant in his bedroom. The descendant said the tragedy broke the heart of Mrs. Elizabeth Porter, who never got over her grief for the rest of her life. That is why she returns to the house to be with and watch over her family members in the time since her death.

The third type of stories includes dead persons who want the living to learn some facts or do something for them. Often the fact to be discovered is related to the details of a murder or hidden secrets. After ghosts like this get the attention or the service they require, they can rest in peace. For instance, there is a story about a female ghost who often appeared on the porch of a house with a baby in her arms. She often showed up in front of the visitors and she indicated to them where her body and her baby had been buried. After their bones were found, the ghost stopped appearing. A similar story tells of a ghost who tapped on an oil painting on the wall with his cane every night. When someone finally investigated the wall, fifteen thousand dollars in cash was eventually found behind a painting and under the wallpaper.
All these ghost tales share one common feature: a causal factor leads to the existence of ghosts or the return of the dead. Suffering and strong emotions are important factors that cause the dead to return and the ghosts are usually visible to and communicative with the living persons who encounter them.

### 2.2 Definition of “Ghost” in the Eastern countries

In Eastern culture, the definition of “ghost” is very different than it is in the West. The notion of “ghosts” in Western countries refers in particular to the spirits of the dead, but in Eastern countries, the notion is expanded. The concept of ghosts in Chinese and Japanese folklore not only refers to deceased spirits and souls, but also includes supernatural creatures and beings. These invisible but tangible beings are primarily animals, plants or non-living objects that have acquired supernatural and shape-shifting power through hundreds of years practicing Taoism. In Chinese folklore, we call them “Yaoguai”. In Japanese folklore, these beings have the similar name: Yokai, but the concept has been further on expanded, and they don’t have to be dead. According to Japanese scholars, Yokai as a term encompasses strange phenomena, monsters, evil spirits of rivers and mountains, demons, goblins, apparitions, shape-changers, magic, ghosts, and mysterious occurrences (Shigeru, M., 1974).

### 2.3 Types of Ghost Stories in China and Japan

*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* is a collection of nearly five hundred supernatural tales written by Pu Songling during the early 17th century. Pu collected the stories from folk tales, legends and other oral narratives that featured ghosts, supernatural creatures and beings, immortals, demons and beasts. This book is considered the foundation of supernatural tales in China and it has had huge influence to Chinese popular culture throughout its history. Its influence can also be seen in the modern eras of Japan in works
such as *Kwaidan* by Hearn Lafcadio. This collection of old Japanese tales are similar in appearance to supernatural Chinese tales, but they have been given a traditional Japanese culture and history features.

These stories can be classified into four main categories. The first type is the love story between a human and a non-human being such as a spirit/ghost or an animal such as a fox. In this type of story, the ghost character is usually a beautiful woman who has been depicted to have a rich personality and who is faithful in love. For example, in *Nie Xiaoqian*, Nie was introduced as a beautiful female ghost who was forced to participate in the ritual murders of humans when she fell into the service of a demon. At one point, she falls in love with a scholar who was able to release her from her haunt. He then helped her escaped from the demon.

The second theme indicates the inner connection between living beings and ghosts. In these types of stories, the ghost or the supernatural phenomena is the symbol of the living’s attitude toward good and evil. In the story *Ubazakura*, a wet nurse prayed for the recovery of a child and sacrificed herself to life for life. After that the cherry tree in the yard bloom each year on the date of her death. In the story *The Boy Who Drew Cats*, a kindhearted boy who is skilled at drawing cats is hunted by a monster mouse in an empty temple. Later he discovers that it is the cat in his drawing that saved him by killing the monster while he slept.

The third type of Eastern ghost stories reflects hardship and injustice in society. In *Strange Stories*, a numbers of the stories show peoples’ complaints about the government and the corrupt examination system at that time. For example, in *Mei*, a female ghost asks a scholar to destroy her home so that she could rest in peace. Later the scholar found out the woman killed herself for having been falsely accused of a crime, when in fact it was a government officer who accepted the three hundred coins for bribes.
In the fourth type of story, ghosts usually have some relationship to history or historical figures. In *Hoichi the Earless* from *Kwaidan*, a blind man who is skilled at playing the lute is asked by a stranger to play the “Tale of Heike”. During the performance, his stunning skills impress the Heike family from the underworld. Hoichi nearly loses his life from an attack by the Heike ghosts because they want him to perform for them in the underworld forever.

Throughout Eastern ghost stories, people seeking justice and beautiful love and they think about reincarnation and karma. These thoughts and feelings are reflected through ghost stories. In addition, these stories help us understand old Chinese and Japanese characters such as warriors, scholars, farmers and merchants of all classes, and to learn about some classic battles in history as well as to learn about the attitudes and beliefs of ordinary people.

### 2.4.1 Comparison of ghost stories across cultures: Types of characters

The differences between the definition of ghost across cultures lead to different types of ghost characters in the stories. One remarkable differing feature found in Eastern ghost stories is the broad definition of supernatural characters. For instance, the concept of the “Yokai” in its Japanese ghost culture can be any of a broad range of creatures. (Mizuki, S., 1974).

In Eastern folklore stories, a great number of ghosts and supernatural beings are based in nature but seem to have special powers: many of them are talking animals with uncanny power; many of them are the spirits of the trees or flowers; and many of them are demons that were generated in unknown mystical places such as a wet land deep inside of a mountain. These beings were originally normal animals or plants, processing spiritual practice for thousands of years until they finally become self-aware. They can be very close to us, inhabiting our surroundings, but never be noticed by us.
In Chinese, the word “Gui (meaning ghost from the dead)” and “Guai (meaning Yokai)” usually come together as a phrase that is used to describe supernatural spirits. Stories about this subject are classified as “Zhiguai”, which mean “records or writings about weird, uncanny or supernatural things”. The oldest book about “Zhiguai” and Chinese mythology is *Classics of Mountain and Sea*. It is the foundation of the Chinese “GuiGuai” culture and also had huge influence on Japanese Yokai culture. It has existed since the fourth century BC and because it is so old, its author is not known. This purpose of the book is not clear but because it is not a narrative, it is thought of as an encyclopedia that presents detailed descriptions of mythic geography and hundreds of mythical creatures from ancient times such as the nine-tail fox, the metal-eating beast, and the giant flying fish. Any object that seems supernatural can be a Yokai, and anything unexplainable that happens is generally considered to be caused by them. The most famous Yokai would be “Tengu (or Heavenly Dog),” which appears frequently in orally transmitted tales in both Chinese and Japanese folklore. In ancient times Chinese people believed that a Tengu is a black dog that caused a lunar eclipse because it ate the moon. In Japanese folklore, Tengu is usually a giant black bird or human form with a long nose and crow-like wings. In some legends they are depicted as demons and they kidnap children. In others, they are considered to be a great white bird that resides in and serves as the god of a mountain and they protect the spirits of mountains and forests. Other famous Yokai such as “Kappa” (also known as River Child) is only found in Japanese folklore. Kappa is usually depicted as a troublemaker that drowns people and animals.

Asian people believe these supernatural beings are part of nature and they seek a harmonious coexistence with them. This is very different from Westerners’ view towards supernatural forces and ghosts. For Westerners, the concept of “ghosts” usually only refers to the spirit or soul of the dead, and this is why people usually have a negative attitude toward the existence of ghosts. American author Dennis Covington describes these forces as evil spirits, and he studied Southerners who put bottles on their trees near the entrances of their houses to trap evil spirits so they won’t able to harm the inhabitants (Covington, D.,
1995, xv). Other common types of haunted characters in American folklore and contemporary literature are spirits that dwell inside of houses. These spirits are usually dead souls that came from someone who used to live in the building before death but returned for some reason and caused supernatural occurrences to scare people. Many Westerners think that ghosts are beings that go against the laws of nature and need to be eliminated.

2.4.2 Motivation for ghost appearance

In both Eastern and Western ghost stories, there is always a reason or a cause that triggers the presence of a ghost (Here I only refer to the spirit of the dead, not Yokai or other supernatural beings that are alive). Although sometimes the motivation for the appearance of ghosts is unclear, we can still find some clues by analyzing the behavior and attitude of the ghost character. For instance, the situation that is most likely to trigger the presence of the ghost is murder or the unnatural death of the victim. This is usually set against the background of a haunted house. Other reasons, as previously noted, are performing duties after death, fulfilling unfinished tasks and telling some important facts to the living. Strong will, desire, duty, regret, injustice and suffering are all characteristics and emotions that can be factors that cause the dead to not be able to rest in peace.

Strong emotions not only cause the return of the souls, but they can also be the factors that cause the appearance of Yokai. Apart from the types of Yokai who are spontaneously formed from nature, there are other types of Yokai that are artificially caused by humans. In Chinese, there is a folk adage that says: *evil spirits and demons are generated in the inner hearts of humans*. Based on that notion, ferocious ghosts and supernatural forces turn out to be the physical form of negative emotions such as envy, hatred and agony in some Eastern folk tales and stories. For example, in the story *Ikisudama*, a young employer who usually feels dizzy and suffers when he works in the merchant’s house finally discovers that it was the grudge of the merchant’s wife that made him sick because she was jealous...
that he is smarter and better at working than her own son. Interestingly, positive moods such as affection, cherishing and feeling creative are also able to summon the presence of Yokai and their supernatural effects. Sensitive emotions can also be a factor that generates Yokai from a cultural point of view.

2.4.3 Differences in the ways they end

In Western ghost stories, ghost characters usually end up disappearing or resting in peace after their goal/desire has been fulfilled in the living world. This is very similar in Eastern ghost stories where Easterners’ attitudes are spirits and souls from the dead should not stay in the living world but should go the underworld and be ready for judgment and reincarnation. In Chinese mythology, the underworld is called “Diyu”, and Yama is the king of death and ruler of Diyu, who is in charge of passing judgments to all the dead. Ghosts with good deeds in their lifetime will be rewarded with a good future after reincarnation. However, ghosts who committed misdeeds will be given a miserable future or sent to torture and not allowed to reincarnate. Besides Yama King, there are also high-ranking ghosts who work as officers at Diyu. They sometimes appear in the living world, searching for ghosts who run out from Diyu and bringing them back.

The ending of a story based on a Yokai is very different from that of a traditional ghost. Sometimes Yokai are killed by Taoists due to their aggressive behavior toward humans, while some of them make friends with humans and are accepted by human society. Others peacefully continue their self-spiritual practices or enter into an unconscious sleep for thousands of years. Yokai are generally considered to live for over a thousand years and with the further self-spiritual practice of Taoism, they can evolve into immortal beings with strong powers that are similar to a god. In many stories, Yokai have been described as human-eating demons because they are seeking immortal life and stronger powers, and it is believed that eating humans can effectively shorten this process rather than spending thousands of years in self-spiritual practices. A famous classic Chinese fantasy novel
called *Journey to the West*, which was published in the sixteenth century, is the story of a Buddhist monk named Xuanzang and his three disciples who traveled to the West to obtain the sacred sutras. The book depicts hundreds of different Yokai and demons that lurked on their way, and who tried to capture the monk and eat him. However, these Yokai are usually beaten by Xuanzang’s big disciple Wukong (also known as “Monkey King”), who has the great power to fight and is able to take them under control. The most common ending of Yokai in *The Journey to the West* is that Buddha or Taoists usually take them away and teach them how to behave well.

### 2.4.4 Rhythm of stories, West vs. East

*But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow he will leave me, as my
Hopes have flown before.”
Then the bird said “Nevermore.”*

*(The Raven by Edgar Allan)*

What is the rhythm of writing? It is pattern, cadence, word choosing and arrangements, as well as punctuation. All of these factors help readers establish a sense of how slowly or how quickly to read, and where to pause. Through reading, the lengths of sentences, paragraphs and chapters affect the moods of readers and impact our perception of how a narrative unfolds. Longer sentences punctuated with cadence, rhymes and sensations help readers enjoy reading and immerse themselves in the scene. Shorter sentences or phrases that follow after long ones create a strong beat for the reader and emphasize an idea. In shorter works like poetry, it is the words and stanzas that determine the rhythm. Poetry is perhaps more likely to be written than to be spoken aloud, but certain kinds of books like
The Raven is a narrative poem by American writer Edgar Allan Poe. The story is about a scholar who had recently lost his lover. He forced himself to study in order to release himself from feelings of loss. While he was doing so, he heard knocking at his door and found out it was a large black bird known as a raven. A long conversation began between the scholar and the raven, but no matter what he asks the bird, it only answered with the word “Nevermore.” The situation subsequently leads the narrator into a form of madness because each time the raven repeats the word, a feeling of great loss and grief is suggested. When I read The Raven by Edgar Allan, I felt like I was in the darkness Poe described and I was struck by a fear of the unknown. The author’s repeating use of the word “nevermore” at the end of each stanza made me think of hopelessness, derangement and depression; of struggling between lucidity and madness. The speaker’s sadness over the permanence of his loss of Lenore is expressed through the raven’s repetition of its ominous prophecy.

Poe’s writings in general are considered important examples of literature that invokes the supernatural and explores the themes of death and loss, haunting and madness. He considered sadness to be one of the highest expressions of beauty, and that is why he preferred to write about death and madness in his work. According to Poe, "beauty of whatever kind in its supreme development invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones" (Poe, 1850). Poe mastered this kind of madness by creating a wave of intense atmosphere through well-crafted words and alliterated rhymes and stanzas in his poetry, especially The Raven and other famous works in this genre. In The Raven, all of these factors contribute toward a very dark and desperate tone. The rhythm accelerates as the poem unfolds, and little by little, readers are encouraged to reach the frenzied feelings of the narrator.

When a poem is read aloud with expression, it turns into an incantation – the charms or spells created by the words and rhythms that may evoke certain feelings and emotion depending on the mood and message of the work. That is the power of rhythm in a story.
In African folklore, there are various types of songs or spells that have been described to have magical power that cause physical effects. The authors of the book *Power and Praise Poem: South African Voices in History* argue that the performance of singing folk songs and poems work as metaphoric representations that link past values to present experience (Vail, L., & White, L. 1991). Other examples about the power of spoken language would be ritual prayers for blessings or other religious practices and also as superstitious gestures such as American’s tendency to pray for someone when they sneeze or to offer a repetitive prayer of thanks for food before each meal as a Christian tradition.

The Japanese culture has a similar concept that is known as “Kotodama”, which are the mystical and spiritual powers that dwell in words and names. The Japanese believe that by speaking them out, sounds can magically affect objects and influence the environment. The mystical basis of Kotodama is probably the belief that “everything is alive and has a soul” (also known as Animism in other cultures). Other explanations of Kotodama suggest that a word or sound has the power to evoke the intrinsic motivation of a speaker by encouraging them to act and think in an unconsciousness way. (Masami S., 2004)

The core of animation is telling a story and conveying messages using constructed moving images. So what is the connection between creating a narrative using the power of words and the visual imagination? Folklore storyteller David Heathfield tells us that oral storytelling is a spontaneous creative process, during which listeners can participate and be directly influenced by the story as it unfolds. The five methods of constructing the story he recommends to encourage the active involvement of listeners are: rhythm, rhyme, repetition, reasoning and response. “Rhythm, rhyme and repetition are common features for poetry and songs, in which the rhythmic and repeating phrases make the structure and build the cohesion of the story. Meanwhile, listeners become more conscious of their co-creative role in the storytelling experience.” (David H., 2005)

These characteristics are common to those used in Chinese storytelling as well. Chinese scholar James J. Y. Liu proposes that language is the combination of sound and meaning,
while poetry is the unity of rhyme and mood. Classic Chinese poems commonly use a few concise but vivid phrases to describe a moment, and these few words have the great power to evoke people’s feelings and emotions (Liu, J. 1962). The rhymes of each sentence make the poem easier and more pleasant to read, and the meanings beyond each phrase connect a reader’s mood with their perception of the imagery.

Unlike poems and songs that are built on the linguistic level, the narrative of animation, especially silent or non-dialogue animation, is rooted in visual perception as communication; it cannot be measured by the numbers of words and phrases, neither the sound nor rhyme of each ending phrase. So how can the rhythms of linguistic perception be transformed into visual perception? In what ways can the influence of moving images be used to enhance people's moods and experiences of ghost stories? Also, in what ways can they communicate cultural attributes of specific types of ghost stories?

2.4.5 Rhythm of images

If we say that for music or poetry, the arrangement of the sound or the words is the rhythm; then for animation, the arrangement of camera shots can also be used to strengthen the sense of rhythm. Animation is the art of moving images - by displaying a sequence of still images that slightly differ from each other at a constant rapid speed, the illusion of motion is created (Wells, P., 1998). Similar to the rhythm of writing, the arrangement of these shots is the key factor that helps viewers establish a sense of rhythm in animation. The length of each shot, and the speed of movements determine how slowly or quickly the content will be accepted by its audience, thereby influencing their perception of the narrative as it unfolds. Shots with fast movements accelerate the speed of the film and provoke excitement or tension at the moment, while shots with slow movements or without movements create a silent, melancholy mood that encourages members of the audience to immerse themselves in the scenes in a different way. In almost all kinds of screen media, the plot/scenario is usually composed in a certain way in order to provide a specific rhythm
for the narrative. In Western story-telling, the three-act play serves as a common narrative structure so that the climax of a story usually follows a deliberate pace through the setting up of the plot/premise, the unfolding of action that leads to conflict or tension, which has the fastest speed and highest level of drama. This is often followed by a moderate pace that changes the mood at the ending to resolution.

In addition to the rhythm of the overall narrative, the rhythm of each single shot used to communicate a story with cinematography also influences the expression of a scene. A fast movement can be displayed in a slow shot that lasts a relatively long time to emphasize the flow of the motion, the impact of each sensation, and the expression of invisible forces and emotions. This is also known as high-speed photography; a shooting technique that is usually used in filmmaking, especially for fast-paced action scenes like fighting scenes.

Scale is a critical factor too. We sense our world from a human’s perspective, and the forms (shapes, sizes, situations) of objects that surround us influence our perception. If an object is either too big or too small, we cannot define its shape accurately with our own eyes. Similarly, it is difficult to sense the existence of the movement of an object if it is moving too fast or too slowly. For example, the rapidly flapping wings of a hummingbird and the translation of twinkling stars in a night sky are great examples of movements and forces in nature that repeat and happen every day around us but that we rarely notice explicitly. However, with the control of speed and rhythm in displaying image sequences in animation, we are able to reveal those invisible forces to an audience, and provide a sort of supernatural experience and a unique opportunity to convey messages through movement. Because animation allows for the manifestation of unnoticeable movement and because usually inanimate objects are able to move through artistic representation, the subject of spirits and ghost stories fit into this approach to storytelling very well.
2.4.6 Analyzing visuals: composition and sensibility in various cultures

Visual products from different cultural backgrounds such as art paintings and photography and screen media such as films and TV shows have also shown some unique features that influence viewer’s visual preferences and aesthetic perception of composition, perspective, camera angle and color, which further helps us to understand their attitude and sensation towards the visuals, especially for those that are used to express subjects such as ghosts and supernatural phenomena.

One noticeable distinguishing feature of composition in art is whether or not the proportions are oriented toward the horizon, which differs a lot from East to West. Chinese ink paintings or Japanese woodprint paintings usually have a very broad point of view in the scenes they represent, and they tend to put the horizon very high, as it would looks from the point of view of a bird flying over the landscape. On the contrary, Western landscapes usually put the horizon low and less ground is seen on the view, as it would be seen from a human standing on the ground. The preference of a high horizon is not only found in East Asians’ landscape paintings, but also in their portrait paintings. They tend to lessen the proportion of the central figure by scaling it down and placing it off-center. They also pay more attention to depicting a broad background view. More details in the background provide more cues to the viewer, leading them to contextually find the connections between the character and surroundings. On the other hand, Western portrait paintings tend to focus mainly on the central figure, positioning it right in the center with a close-up view, while backgrounds tend to be dark and dim.

Besides the proportion of the horizon and landscape, the projection of perspective in composition also shows differences in the visual preference of people from different backgrounds. In the Western perspective, objects close to the viewer are larger and are characterized by acute angles while objects that are far away are drawn smaller with obtuse angles (Masuda, T., 2003). Ancient Chinese and Japanese paintings from the ninth century represent objects in an axonometric view which is a parallel projection where all the
buildings and objects are viewed from a skewed or angled direction in order to show more than one side in the same picture. Artists commonly use this projection method as a way to reveal background details and stage settings, providing more information not able to be seen from a normal perspective. Another reason the parallel perspective is widely used in East Asians’ paintings is the special format of the painting. Starting in the Song Dynasty, the period when Chinese art became more quickly developed, artists did drawings on long paper scrolls that could be as long as a hundred feet but only two or three feet height. Parallel projection works well with this long medium, because viewers are able to see the whole painting contextually from one side to the other, just like when reading a book.

The emergence of art paintings with the subjects of ghosts and supernatural phenomena in the Middle Ages of China was largely influenced by a series of books and beliefs that emerged in that period. Extensive Records of the Taiping Era collected unofficial stories from the Han to the beginning of the Song Dynasty, and more than forty chapters are about ghosts who are engaged in this fictional history. Censored by Confucius by Yuan Mei is a collection of ghost stories that depict the important roles that ghosts played in the lives of the Chinese of the Qing Dynasty. In the same period, Fantastic Tales by Jixiaolan and Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio provide hundreds of ghost stories mixed freely with history; reality mixed with fantasy. Many of these stories are accompanied by visuals or illustrations, including the imaginary appearance of ghosts and Yokai and magnificent fights between human and demons. All of these visuals help readers interpret and understand the stories. At this point, the subject of ghost art developed a more prominent platform and markets, and this is when their popularity and attractiveness was strongly established.

2.4.7 Attitude towards extraordinary things

Chi-lu asked how the spirits of the dead and the gods should be served. The master said, “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?”
“May I ask about death?”
“You do not even understand life. How can you understand death?” (11:12)

In Confucian Analects, Confucius says—Zi bu yu, guai, li, luan, shen. This has been translated as “The subjects about which the Master did not speak were extraordinary things such as prodigies, force, disorder and gods.” When his student asked “What is wisdom?” he replied, “To keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence can be called wisdom.” Confucius reminded his students that distance is a proper factor in the relationship between human beings and gods; not to respect this distance would be a sign of contempt. Confucius “not speaking of” certain things also shows his attitude toward life and death: when he was not sure he knew exactly what he was talking about, he chose not to speak because those speculative matters could detract people’s attention away from the more fundamental task – how to live and act (Norden, B., 2002). When Confucius decided not to discuss ghosts, prodigies, and life after death, those speculative subjects became a rich and challenging source for inspiration among Chinese scholars since the old times.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the most important features of ghost stories in Eastern and Western culture, including their similarities and differences. The topic is complex and large and it is not my intent to make over-generalizations. Instead, I have discovered the key qualities of each that I believe will resonate with the viewers of my project and have chosen to focus on them.

There are three main qualities that Eastern and Western ghost stories share. First of all, in both cultures, the idea of the existence of ghosts and supernatural beings originated from religious belief and folklore. The basis for the Chinese supernatural and ghost/Yokai can be found in Taoism, which includes a belief that everything in nature has a spiritual force
and interacts with everything else. Later beliefs that incorporated Buddhism suggest the notion that there is a spiritual world underground where dead souls go. This belief later spread to Japanese culture which expanded the notion of ghosts to include the concept of the Yokai: a spiritual animal/being that has been literally defined as a phantom or a strange apparition.

Western belief in ghosts originated as a Catholic superstition in the medieval period. Catholics conceive the body and the soul as separate entities that separate at the moment of death. The notion of the soul that lives on after the end of the physical body’s life underpinned Protestant notions that there is a spiritual world that communicates with the livings. These two belief systems together encouraged people to imagine the possibility of being reunited with others in the after-life and raised the possibility that one might even encounter the ghost of a formerly living being here on earth.

Secondly, the temptation of the emotional excitement raised by the possibility of encountering the soul or ghost of someone who had died intrigued persons in both Eastern and Western cultures. The extraordinary experiences and superstitions that built up around the potential of encountering a ghost provoked intrigue and curiosity for people seeking exciting sensations. Thus, the idea of ghosts and supernatural beings became great inspirations of literary creations in the popular cultures of periods when literary production particularly embraced emotional dramatic structure. In Western culture, Victorian literature of the mid- to late-nineteenth century embraced ghosts and supernatural stories as popular subject matter because such works played on people’s imaginative potential. In ancient China, since Confucianism did not promote the discussion of ghosts, prodigies, and life after death, those speculative subjects became a rich and challenging source for inspiration among Chinese scholars since the old times.

What’s more, in both cultures, ghost stories offered the possibility of encouraging the development of the moral integrity of readers. Ghost stories often have pedagogical meanings that help people know how to behave and act. For example, typical patterns in
ghost stories describe the return of the dead to pay off an unfinished debt or to keep complete one’s duties after death. Others are a reflection of society attitudes toward money, political debates or injustice at certain periods of history. Ghost story plots often include a causal factor that leads to the existence of a ghost or supernatural being. These factors include murder, theft of money, keeping of secrets, promotion of suffering and so on. People seeking justice, peace and love are encouraged to think about what is right or wrong because these moral thoughts and feelings are reflected in the stories of the supernatural.

In addition to having shared qualities, Eastern and Western ghost stories also differ in three key ways. First, the difference in the attributes of ghosts and supernatural characters is the most distinctive feature to notice in the ghost stories of both cultures. Western ghost stories mainly feature phantoms or haunted houses or objects that represent the forces of evil spirits and other spiritual beings that scared people. Some are featured in tangible threatening beings such as demons, vampire and zombies while others are represented by ephemeral qualities such as mist, light or a cool breeze that evokes an eerie feeling in anyone who experiences it. On the other hand, Eastern ghost stories have a much larger diversity in the types of supernatural characters and their attributes that are featured in Chinese and Japanese ghost literature. Besides sharing the notion of the return of the dead that is similar to Western ghost stories, Eastern supernatural stories feature a wide range of living and non-living beings, such as animals with uncanny power, spirits of the trees or flowers, evil generated from human heart, demons of the sea or mountain, self-aware crafts and so on.

People’s attitudes towards ghosts that are reflected in the stories are also very different from East to West. For Westerners, the concept of “ghost” only refers to the spirit from the dead, and the notion of a ghost usually draws people’s negative attention because it is depicted as evil and harmful in many literary works. For Asians, however, because of differences in their religious beliefs, the notion of god, ghost and evil are all in the same category as powerful divine beings, and people show more respect to all of them, no matter
if those beings are doing good or bad deeds to humans. What’s more, Asian’s contextual psychological perspective helps them observe the inner relationship between the supernatural beings and humans in a manner that may be interpreted as more sensitive than the Western perspective that is rooted in a fear of supernatural spirits. Thus, a Yokai or ghost in Eastern literature is usually depicted with a rich personality and sensitive emotions.

In addition to there being differences in the ways that supernatural beings generate or instill fear in persons that encounter them in different cultures, there are also differences in the types of interactions persons in both cultures seek to have with them. Westerners often shy away from experiences that they fear as a means of self-protection from the unknown and ghosts often only leave or disappear when the conflict in the story that has generated their existence in the first place is resolved. Asians also tend to keep their distances from such beings, but for different reasons. Although the idea that harmonious coexistence with all the beings is supported by Taoism, getting involved with them too much is still sometimes considered a taboo. This attitude - the importance of keeping one’s distance from unknown beings - is reflected in many folklore stories and literature by allowing the ghost to exist alongside humans without being noticed. For example, Yokai often hide their identity when communicating with humans so that they can stay with them while avoiding discovery. If a Yokai is discovered, this often results in its disappearance.
With a clearer understanding of the differences between Eastern and Western ghost stories, two of the biggest initial challenges for this project were selecting an effective story and then conceptualizing the best approach to communicating its meaning. In order to accomplish the second, it became important to use the tools of effective visual storytelling: the communication of critical elements from the “backstory: and the use of “mise-en-scène” as a strategy for making the most of every frame. The first part of this chapter will introduce my understanding of the concepts of “backstory” and “mise-en-scene,” and how to use those concepts to make design decisions of both the story and the scenes. The second part of the chapter connects the theory and the project, including concept development and story design. I will explain my experimentation with the development of an original ghost story and the critical evaluation that led to my selection of an existing story as the subject matter for my animation. I will conclude by identifying why the chosen story offers conceptual opportunities to communicate the ideas and features of Eastern ghosts and supernatural beings to a Western audience. I will also explain the conceptual features I have chosen to present in my film to reinforce its ability to accomplish my project goals. The short story I have chosen to animate is entitled The Boy Who Draws Cats, from Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things by Lafcadio Hearn (1898).

3.1 Visual storytelling using “backstory” and “mise-en-scene”

Every complex narrative has a backstory, or elements that contribute to the story indirectly through implication. By providing depth and detail, a good backstory provides enrichment
to a story and makes it more believable to its audience. Direct information and clues combine to provide backstory elements that elevate plot development naturally and reasonably. In some storytelling, the backstory is revealed gradually as the main narrative unfolds and the audience learns layers of information from the past to help predict the future.

There are several ways that backstory is revealed as the main narrative unfolds, including dialogue, direct narration and flashbacks. Direct narration and dialogue use verbal description and language as a way to provide background information to viewers before or during the delivery of the main narrative. Flashbacks use visual images and sequences to show important pieces of the story that have already occurred. Both narration and visual flashbacks contribute depth and dimensions to the story that go beyond what can be known through a simple analysis of imagery or dialogue. In screen-based media such as filmmaking and animation, the audience can also gain insight into the backstory through a character’s appearance and the look of the background environment, however. For example, without knowing anything about the creature Gollum from the Lord of the Ring, viewers can guess that he is very old and that he has experienced some kind of disaster or hardship simply because of his wrinkled, crouching and gnarly outward appearance and through is mannerisms, speech patterns and facial expressions and gestures.

In Tolkein’s *The Hobbit*, the special look of the Hobbit’s village also contains information about the backstory. Most Hobbits live in “Hobbits’ holes” in the Shire: primitive architecture with round doors and windows that is found under the hillsides, riverbank and downs. Their living environment evokes the characteristics of the Hobbits: unadventurous and bucolic, pleased with their simple life, and prone to socializing while hiding themselves from outsiders.

In vivid settings and characters such as these, visuals become a powerful and efficient way to convey messages in place of writing because they can include little details that are evocative and engaging without being overly prescriptive or precise. In that way, they allow people to interpret and create their own meanings to flesh out the story. Figuring out how to take advantage of visual elements to describe the background of the story in short
screen media is one of the biggest challenges of my project because of its cross-cultural nature and because some of the characters are not human. To overcome these challenges, I developed qualities that can be symbolized in my visuals in a way that encourages viewers to recognize universal qualities and to relate to a range of character types.

A great way to integrate complicated information with visuals is to utilize the concept of mise-en-scene, which is a French word that means telling a story in visually artistic ways through cinematography, stage design, lighting, and the composition of sets and props for each scene in a theatrical or film-based production. Various visual elements in each scene not only provide rich information that makes the scene enjoyable to read or watch, but that also help viewers understand the plot by setting up a mood as the story unfolds. When the sets and props of the environment and the details of the costumes of characters are designed carefully, audiences are able to interpret the identity of the character and his or her past. In this way, mise-en-scene enriches even a single scene to the point that even a still image has the power to tell a story.

![Figure 1. Scene from Spirited Away (Miyazaki hayao, 2003)](image)

*Figure 1. Scene from Spirited Away (Miyazaki hayao, 2003) uses mise-en-scene to create a feeling of danger*
Mise-en-scene is a great tool to use to inform long and complicated backstories through the strategic design of the scenes. For example, in this particular scene from *Spirited Away* (2003), the environment design suggests that this place is a night street with shops and bars. There are shadows walking on the street, coming out of the bars. Their presence suggests that they are mysterious creatures and residents of this place. From the main character’s look and action, we know that she doesn’t belong to this place because she is in a panic and trying to run away. She may be running away from some issue or looking for someone for help, and because she is hurrying, viewers are forced to consider whether she belongs in the scene or whether she has accidentally run into this place. The building on the left, with its pink light and a sign featuring drawings of mouths, is probably a nightclub—an inappropriate and possibly dangerous venue for a child. All the visual clues encourage viewers to be curious so that they will explore the scene. They also encourage them to worry about the little character. As a result, this strange dark setting is one of tension and dread.

*Figure 2. Scene from Ohayo* (Satoshi Kon, 2008)

uses mise-en-scene to communicate multiple emotions
This second image shows the first scene from Satoshi Kon’s animated short *Ohayo* (2008). The set and props in the scene provide a lot of information for the backstory of this tale. We know that the girl lives by herself because the room is narrow and there is only a single bed. The wine bottles on the table suggest that she drank a lot the previous night, and that poses a likely reason for why she seems to be struggling to get up from her bed. The crumpled can on the tabletop encourages viewers to guess that she has experienced some kind of annoyance or has been upset. The dark blue color that fills the scene also suggests a negative feeling. The girl is separating into two figures, the less transparent one is shown awake and struggling getting up from bed, and the other one is still shown sleeping. These details allow us to read the character’s mindset: body is awake, but her mind is sleeping.

![Figure 3: Scene from Up (Pete Docter, 2009)](image)

*Figure 3. Scene from Up (Pete Docter, 2009)*

*uses mise-en-scene to suggest characters’ personalities*

In a third example, this shot from Pixar’s animated film *Up* (2009) also informs the audience about the backstory of the characters using visual devices and details. All the items on the mantle represent events from the characters’ pasts and what matters to them. On the mantle we can see a photo of a couple, two flight tickets, a telescope, post cards that have been pinned to the wall and an aircraft model. These details provide a clear
backstory of the people living in this house: they are, or were, a couple who love traveling. The photo of the child wearing a pilot’s hat is aged and faded compared to image of the couple. This could be the photo of the man as a boy and it suggests that he loved traveling and adventure ever since he was young. The large painting behind the assembly shows a house located on the top of a high cliff, reflecting the owner’s passion and spirit for adventure. This depiction of the house even hints that living on a cliff might be considered ideal, and in fact, as the film continues, viewers learn that this is the case.

Consolidating and being efficient and effective with the storytelling is particularly important when the project is an animated short film. Each frame has an opportunity to advance and extend the meaning of the work if it is carefully considered. When the length of a project limits the number of scenes and the length of time that viewers have to study or “read” them, designing meaningful environments for each scene becomes critical. Each individual scene offers an opportunity to create layers of meaning and a restricted but very valuable chance to help viewers speculate about the richness of the plot.

3.2 Identifying a Story

As noted in the last chapter, there are three key differences between Eastern and Western ghost stories. The most remarkable difference is that in Eastern ghost stories, spirits and souls that haunt people are not always the dead. While the Western ghost stories in popular culture commonly feature the dead or evil spirits that scare people, Eastern ghost stories have a much larger diversity in the types of supernatural characters. They include not only the dead, but also live spirits and changed beings. For Easterners, ghosts are everywhere. Some are doing good deeds, and some are not. Some have the power to influence humans and some “live” in isolation.

The second difference is that people’s attitude towards supernatural beings in Eastern ghost stories is not always fear. Often people’s association with ghosts can be characterized as respectful, affectionate or filled with sensitive and complex emotions.
What’s more, in Eastern stories, the ways that people interact with ghosts is very different than it is in Western stories. Easterners seek harmonious coexistence with supernatural beings, but they also tend to keep a distance from such beings with fear and respect. On the other hand, the spirits and supernatural beings that stay alongside humans also tend not to be noticed. This attitude - the importance of keeping a distance of species that take non-human forms - is reflected in much of the literature and folklore.

### 3.3 Designing and Evaluating an Original Plot

Because part of the intent of my thesis has always been to animate a compelling story, I began with the idea that I would write an original ghost story that I would tell using animation as a medium. Because my life-long interest in ghost stories was initiated by a story from my own family’s history, I experimented with developing a story about a child’s encounter with a being who was “caught” between the living world and the afterworld. My initial story’s characters were a girl named “Yuli” and the ghost of a young man named “Shin.” Yuli encountered Shin on a bridge at night after sneaking out of her house and chasing after some spiritual creatures in the village. After touching the ghost, Yuli learned that Shin had died by his own hand in a state of dishonor, and that he was seeking a way to be released from this unfortunate condition. The girl believed the legend that by following the “river lantern” (also called spirit boat, used in Eastern ceremony to commemorate the lost souls), one could reach the underworld, and she believed that this might help redeem the ghost. She placed a river candle on the water and asked the ghost to follow her. On their way between life and death, Shin encountered the spirits of his parents and they forgave him for his dishonor. By accepting the forgiveness from his beloved family members and the company of the kind-hearted girl on his journey between life and death, the story was to be one of redemption for Shin.

Some early examples of my storyboard for this narrative reveal my process. The frames of the story would advance the plot by showing the characters in a stylized environment and I studied the “look” of traditional Chinese villages and landscape to create the setting. Yuli
was to look like a realistic innocent child. The appearance of Shin was more difficult to resolve, however, because he was not human but was also not another kind of being. The harrowing danger of the story was also depicted with a realistic and linear portrayal of being chased and the scenes of Yuli’s potential drowning were equally vivid.

While developing the characters and a storyboard that included details about the appearance of the story’s environment, it became clear that making a story that “looked” Eastern in its inspiration would not enable me to communicate the range of qualities of Eastern stories that I believe are important. My story’s structure involved too much direct contact between the human character and the supernatural being. The redemption story line also seemed more modelled on the conventional Western story structure of the “hero’s journey” and my story lacked sufficient backstory to create the necessary level of depth and richness in the plot. Also, the threat of danger and death was more direct than implied, making my story seem like an example of Western ghost story telling conventions because it depicted the frightening action. All of these challenges encouraged me to pursue a different means of achieving my goals: identifying an existing ghost story or folktale from Chinese or Japanese culture to ensure that my challenges could be met in a more authentic way.

3.4 Selecting a Traditional Folktale

Inspired by the essence of my original story, I began searching for stories and folklore that represented more unique Eastern characteristics, especially the concept of “changing.” One of the things that interests me most about Eastern stories of the supernatural is the concept that spirits dwell in objects. Under certain conditions, a non-living object becomes self-aware (the notion that everything has a soul in Taoism), and possesses the ability to change its shape. In ancient China, people called these shape-shifting things “Wuguai (物怪),” which can be translated directly as ‘changed beings’. People believed that these changed beings, with neither voice nor shapes, were the cause of diseases, deaths and unsolved mysteries. This notion sometimes was also used to refer to a type of Yokai that cannot be
seen or heard. In Western culture, since there is not even a word or phrase that can properly describe this changing process, I believe this would be an interesting starting point for me to identify a story that conveys the unique Eastern ghost story ideas to Western audiences.

The concept of ‘changing’ can be grouped into two general categories. The first type of ‘changing’ is one in which an object or artifact develops a kind of spirit that embodies its own identity over a long period of time. In Japanese folklore, ‘Tsukumogami’ is the type of changed being that typically fits into this category. According to Yin Yang theory from Taoism, people believed that after a span of a hundred years, containers, tools and instruments receive souls and can trick people. They are called Tsukumogami, or tool specters (Noriko T. Reider, 2009).

The second type of ‘changing’ is one in which a non-human animal or plant develops a creatural or anthropomorphic behavior. In Chinese folklore, animals or plants gain spiritual power through absorbing the essence of heaven and earth, or through accumulating the feelings of the Buddha or the practice of Taoism. Sometimes the accumulation of resentment or the feeling of affection can also be the factor that triggers the ‘changing’ process. The Bakeneko (‘changed cat’), a type of legendary creature from Japanese folklore, originated from the belief that an aged house cat would turn into a Yokai with various special abilities such as shapeshifting into humans, speaking human words, dressing up and dancing, cursing at people or attacking travelers. There are similar stories about the concept of ‘changed cat’ in Chinese folklore. In Jing Hua Mao, a short story from Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, cats that have been raised for three years have the ability to lure humans and trick them after absorbing spiritual energy from the moon. (Pu, S., & Minford, J., 2006)

Understanding the concept of changing and how it applies to the cat as a type of being drew my attention to a story entitled The Boy Who Draws Cats from Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things by Lafcadio Hearn (1898). This brief work tells the story of a little boy who has the talent of drawing, especially the ability to draw cats. In the story, the boy seems like a failure to his parents because his preoccupation with his artistic activities
causes him not to join in his family’s activities of farming and working in fields. Out of frustration, they send him away to a school where the priests who teach him also fail to instill what they see as discipline and drive. He continues to demonstrate an artistic ability to draw cats, but this gets in the way of his learning more traditional lessons. Expelled from the school, the boy fears returning to his home because he knows that his failure to succeed at his school will disappoint his parents even more. This fear results in his running away to a forest in the mountains where he finds his way to a temple on the middle mountain. Although its lights are on, the boy finds that nobody is around, so he decides to stay for a night to see if the monks come back the next day. His love for drawing cats is so strong that he cannot help himself—he starts drawing cats on the walls and on scrolls that he finds in one of the main rooms of the temple. As he sleeps during the night, a loud noise causes the boy to awaken and because he is scared, he hides himself in a closet. When he emerges in the light of day, he discovers that there is a giant monster mouse lying dead on the ground, and that there is blood on the mouth of one of his cat drawings. At that point, the boy realizes it was the cat on his drawings that killed the monster to save him.

The reason this Japanese folktale interests me more than others is because it expresses several unique Eastern concepts and ideas about ghosts and supernatural beings. As I concluded in the last chapter, Eastern supernatural stories often include animal characters that change and plants, objects and other living or nonliving beings that are self-aware, and that these are critical features when communicating the key features of such stories to a Western audience. In the story The Boy Who Draws Cats, one of the supernatural characters - the drawn cat - obviously belongs to this unique category. The drawings in this story become powerful spiritual beings, jumping out from the pages and influencing their surroundings, and even changing the boy’s fortunes by killing the monster that threatened to hunt him. This phenomenon is known as a “changing process,” meaning that objects develop behaviors by becoming alive under certain conditions. Such behaviors include moving themselves, influencing their surroundings and interacting with humans. The certain condition here is the boy’s action of drawing, and the way that this action triggers the line work coming to life. To understand this process, we can interpret that the spiritual cats perceive the boy’s love and affection as a talented creator, and that they intend to stay
by his side, watching and protecting him. Another way to interpret this idea is that the living drawings are growing out from the creator’s heart because of his lifelike drawing skills. But the boy doesn’t sense it at all until he sees the blood on the drawing. It is only at this point that he starts to realize everything that is going on.

The other supernatural character, the monster mouse, seems to be a very common evil-side character that is often found in supernatural stories. However, what I interpret here is that the formation of this giant evil being is not simply the monster that dwells in the old building. From the descriptions of the story and the unique spiritual features from Eastern folklore, we can guess the giant mouse is probably a “changed mouse,” which explains why it has the scary enlarged body size. With the notion that everything that happens has a cause in ghost stories, there ought to be a reason that explains the existence of the mouse that changed to an evil being. It is common in Eastern countries for parents to warn their children to not run far away by telling them about the existence of child-eating monsters. Children regularly behave well because of their fear for these unknown monsters. In this story, the little boy committed several taboos: disappointed his parents, running away from the school, and staying overnight in a strange place. The accumulation of his fear of his parents and his own regret for bad behavior may be understood as some of the factors that trigger the existence of the evil being that hunts and threatens him.

The idea of “guardian living drawings,” as shown by the cat drawings in the story, is also a key feature of Eastern ghost culture and philosophy that I hope to communicate to my viewers. Buddhists say that the world is how one feels it, and that one’s mind determines what he would see and perceive in his world. In the same way, because the boy keeps drawing, the spiritual cats always stay by his side, watching and protecting him. As long as he learns how to pursue his talent for drawing rather than running away, he learns not to fear the darkness in his heart. The death of the monster mouse shows that he has a hopeful future because it can never appear and hunt him again. To make it simple, we can interpret this story in this universal way: the spiritual cat (in the form of living drawings) is a metaphor of creativity, talent or skill that can change one’s future if the skill is properly used and developed.
There are other Eastern characteristics reflected in this story. The spirits are hidden until they are needed; supernatural beings are always implied instead of directly influencing the action that is seen. What’s more, fear and threat are not direct elements of horror in this ghost story. On the contrary, the cats are understood as spirits that protect the boy and they are not to be feared.

In conclusion, the important qualities and perspectives addressed in *The Boy Who Draws Cats* perfectly match the standards I used to choose my story. In Chapter 2, I concluded the shared and distinguished features for ghost stories from different regions, and what qualities would be powerful to communicate to Western viewers. In Western stories, the death of hatred or other negative emotions usually motivates the appearances of ghosts. In this story, the talent of the boy and his affections triggered the existence of spiritual cats. What’s more, Western stories usually end with the curse being lifted and people returning to regular life, or they make friends with the ghosts. However in this story, the spiritual cats are implied and only appear when needed. Westerners usually treat ghosts and the extraordinary with a negative attitude such as fear or madness, but here in this story, the spirits protect the boy and he understands that there is nothing to be afraid of in his heart.
CHAPTER 4.
DESIGNING THE ANIMATION

In the last chapter, I concluded that three of the most important qualities of the story I have chosen to distinguish it as a typical Eastern supernatural story are that a human’s mental force can trigger the presence of spirits and can influence surroundings; that spirits are nothing to fear, and sometimes they are even guardians; and that spirits tend to hide unless they are needed. One of my biggest challenges is how to make these ideas meaningful and attractive to Western audiences. In this chapter, I will describe and analyze my approach to using storyboarding as a tool to study and reveal the potential of the content of the story and my approach to using storyboards to communicate the story’s message and its value. I will also explore the usefulness of storyboards to study how to make a story visually attractive to a Western audience. In the process, I will also discuss how 3D animation plays an important role in my storytelling by making the most of visual imagery. My decision-making process includes the exploration of overall style, modeling from concept art, making textures and materials, and using digital lighting, camera position, character pace and movements and sound compositing to tell the best story possible.

4.1 The initial story structure: 4 “chapters” and early storyboards

Once I determined my conceptual approach to my animation, I began to think about how to animate *The Boy Who Draws Cats* by developing the storytelling structure within the notion of separation and reunion such as seen in in Kishotenketsu (an Eastern form of play structure based on four acts). I first defined a timeline for the story—introduction, development, suspense, and revelation—that could become the basis of the four acts and I
explored them in detail by developing detailed storyboards for each stage or chapter of the story’s progression. The storyboards allowed me to think about the visual quality of my story but also about the numbers of scenes and range of characters and points of view that would be required to tell it in its entirety.

My first draft of the introductory chapter provided details about the boy’s identity by showing what he always did at home, as well as his passion and earnest interest in drawing cats. Because I hope to make the most of the environments I design to tell key features of the narrative, I proposed that he lives in a village in the foot of the mountain where the houses are all a traditional Japanese wooden style. I presumed that he had his own cat and that he did life sketches of his cat all the time as an explanation of how his skills developed. The earliest storyboard for Chapter One showed the boy’s house in detail and shows him as an artist using his cat as a model.

![Figure 4. Preliminary storyboard 1 of “The Boy Who Draws Cats” showing the boy drawing his cat at home](image)
In order to focus more on the main character (the boy) and his drawings in the second chapter, I chose to simplify the story by cutting off secondary characters and plotlines. I eliminated the teacher and the school and explored the possibility of changing the reason the boy left home to a focus on his desire to sketch wild cats in the forest. I also proposed to change the reason he discovered the suspicious temple to a sudden rain that forced him to look for shelter. I developed a storyboard that depicted the transition from a domestic to a wild setting.

![Storyboard 2 of “The Boy Who Draws Cats” showing the boy’s experiences with drawing in nature.](image)

The third chapter – set in the temple - needed to be the most suspenseful and supernatural setting in the story. Upon entering, the boy explored the room by lighting candles so that
darkness and dim light could contribute a feeling of suspicion and tension. However, the lack of description from the original story made it extremely hard to visualize the fight between the monster mouse and the spiritual cat. I experimented with the concept of separation and reunion as a tool to express those actions. I proposed that at the moment when the mouse threatened the boy, the boy’s drawings fly toward the shadow, and then I provided a cut to black, which left the audience more space to imagine the action. The storyboard that represents this approach shows the role of smoke and shadow to communicate the fight.

*Figure 6. Storyboard 3 of “The Boy Who Draws Cats” showing experiments with representing the violent encounter*
I dedicated my plan for the last chapter to revelation and conclusion. By showing the cat drawing with blood after the chaos, the audience is encouraged to immediately link the blood to the dead mouse, thus realizing that it was the cat on the drawings that killed the monster. The boy would not have noticed anything during the chaos until he awakened the next day. I proposed that he could even pray for the monster that was trying to hunt him to suggest his kindness. My storyboard for this chapter tries to capture his enlightenment in a way that makes it clear to the audience too.

![Storyboard 4 of “The Boy Who Draws Cats” illustrating discovering and enlightenment](image)

With the division of the story into four parts, I undertook a critical review of my alterations to the plot, revealing several weak points in the adaptations I first made to the plotline as shown through the storyboards. First, I determined that the “changing process” is not represented clearly enough throughout the story. Each time the boy draws, although he has a serious look, his drawings – those inky brushworks – would likely be interpreted by a Western audience as regular sketches instead of as high quality artistic achievements. The importance of the seriousness of his passion for drawing and his care for his work needed
to be shown more significantly. Also, the drawing scenes have to be strong enough to foreshadow the spiritual quality of the cat drawings that comes later if the viewer is to understand the idea of “guardian drawings” that is presented in this story.

Secondly, the absence of a visual representation of the family’s attitude toward the boy and his interactions with the priests at the school threatened to make it hard for the audience to get closer to the character and feel his emotion since all the secondary plots had been cut off. In the original story, for a lot of time the boy felt stressed: he respected his teacher but could not help drawing during class; he was afraid to disappoint his parents and chose to leave home; and he wanted to find somewhere for shelter and then happened to enter the suspicious temple. Simplifying the original story created new challenges to communicate the complex ideas of the original story, and the important warning from the priest to “avoid large places, and keep to the small” was also missing.

Thirdly, this four-chapter storyboard seems not fit the medium of the animated short film because the narration itself seemed too long without a particular emphasis. Audiences could easily get lost for there were too many time and space changes in a small range of time.

Therefore, eliminating the four-chapter storyboard seemed like a good choice to clarify and edit the number of scenes in the storytelling. My challenge became to identify other means of conveying messages to Western audiences about the essential qualities of Eastern ghost stories. Returning to my goal of using visuals and the dynamics available in animated storytelling to communicate cross-cultural ideas, I turned to strengthening the visual communication of the backstory using mise-en-scene as a more important part of my creative conceptual strategy.

### 4.2 New approach developing visual concepts

In the story *The Boy Who Draws Cats*, the most splendid and spiritual part of the story is the supernatural activity that happens inside the thrilling temple because the monster that
haunts the temple is defeated when the boy’s drawings come to life. If the animation’s main focus is to depict this event, the next question is how to focus on the part of the story that takes place in the temple without losing all the background story of the character.

In the original story, the first several paragraphs describe the background information that the readers need to know in order to push the plot forward: the main character, the little boy who is small and thin, and does not contribute to the community as much as the rest of his family does. He has his own interest, which is drawing cats. He draws cats all the time at home, and this made his parents concerned that he should do something else. When his parents sent him to the priests at the school, they thought it would be good for him to read more books and to become a priest when he grows up. However, because the boy was quickly tired of school life and began drawing in the classroom, his teachers thought he did not fit in priest school and he was dismissed. It is important to note that the boy did not leave the school without learning anything, however, because with his expulsion came a metaphorical and premonitory hint from one of the priest teachers to remember not to call too much attention to himself and to remain in the shadows and avoid large open spaces.

This fairly detailed and complicated backstory presents a big challenge to my ability to interpret it and communicate it using mise-en-scene in my animation. Considering the sequence of the scenes, the careful design of my characters and developing environments or sets for the story that say a lot is critical.

“According to Buddhists, the world is how you feel it. Our perceptions of the world will change with the changes of our mind; our creative artistry springs from our heart.”

Before starting the story, there is something I want to put at the very beginning of the animation to help western audience understand the general principle of Eastern supernatural, as well as setting up the atmosphere of Eastern mystery. As I discussed, what I want to communicate in the story is the “changing” process in the drawings, and what triggers this phenomenon is the changes in people’s mind. In Buddhism, the perception we have of distinct phenomena resulting from different causes and conditions is called “relative truth” or “delusion.” (Richard, M., & Trinh, X., 2001) Our daily experiences
make us believe what is real, but this way of seeing phenomena is just one’s mental construct. To sum up, human perception and mental forces are the factors that trigger the supernatural phenomenon (the “changing” process). With these information showing up at begin of the story, it would be easier for audience to link the supernatural phenomenon and the mind changes of the character.

So what is the best point to start the story? Since the most significant moment for the whole story is that the living drawings that came out from the page helped and protected the boy when he was in danger (which I want to communicate as the process of “changing” in this story- that the drawings get life and power because they perceive the boy’s caring and enthusiasm), it is important to show the audience the boy’s passion towards drawing cats in an early stage. I made a decision to compress the earliest portions of the narrative about the boy’s relationship with his family and his experience of the school by depicting the boy as a failed worker and scholar leaving his past (as represented by his village). My narrative begins with him on his way towards the thrilling temple and I focused on showing his skill of drawing cats. There could be some hints in the environment that reveal the backstory such as his appearance as a slight rural boy who seems alone and a bit lost. He also drops paper scrolls from his bag as he walks away as a symbol of his disregard for his studies and to signify that his drawings are prolific.

However, two important pieces of information from the backstory needed to be revealed as part of this new narrative. It is important to show the boy’s talent and interest in drawing cats using visual language through the motion. His action of drawing needs to be expressive and impressive for the audience to feel what his emotions are and what is in his mind: the great joy of drawing cats. To achieve this, the best solution is to visualize the boy’s mind when he is drawing cats and to show it directly to the audience. This animating process of showing substantial human emotions and thoughts is also perfect for representing the process of ‘changing’.

Another important part of the narrative is to show the boy’s awareness of the words “avoid large spaces and keep to the small.” The boy’s reaction to these words, or the other visual that help to communicate them as I designed the shot, should be able to help the audience
understand that the source of this advice came from the boy’s earlier experiences (the school, which is unseen in my animation), to help them appreciate the significance of this advice from his teacher. I chose to solve this challenge by depicting scrolls that contain the advice and that return to the boy in his imagination when he needs that message. When the boy determines to leave his village, he drops a scroll that contains the advice about avoiding large spaces. When the danger finally arrives, the scrolls appear again along with a background voice that repeats this message so that the audience can understand that the boy was told such a thing earlier as part of an experience that he wished to leave behind.

4.3 Scene-by-scene analysis

Rather than relying on the small panels of the storyboard to communicate my ideas about the “mise-en-scene” of my story, I shifted my process to sketching discreet moments that I think are the most significant for the effective telling of this story. By loading certain backstory elements from the original story into these set drawings, I began to see added ways that they could start to communicate the ideas I felt are necessary. The following explanation presents the development of each of these scenes and how they contribute conceptually to the effectiveness of the storytelling.

“The youngest child, a little boy, did not seem to be fit for hard work. His parents took him with them to the village-temple one day, and asked the good old priest who lived there, if he would have their little boy for his acolyte, and teach him all that a priest ought to know.

One day after he had drawn some very clever pictures of cats upon a paper screen, the old priest said to him: ”You will never make a good priest, but perhaps you will become a great artist. Now let me give you a last piece of advice, and be sure you never forget it. Avoid large places at night;--keep to small!” He could not understand those words, and he was afraid to speak to the priest any more, except to say good-bye.”
Because I am leaving out some of the literal detail at the beginning of the story, the first scene has to convey as much key information about the backstory as possible. It needs to communicate the basic identity and the background of the main character. One solution to communicating the background efficiently is to tell the backstory through the look of the environment that is the setting for the initial action. In this village scene, the roofs of the houses are a traditional Eastern style of architecture, which lets the audience know that the story has an Eastern cultural background. The wheeled tricycle and straw bags suggest that the villagers, including the boy’s family, do a lot of farm work. I chose to place several small Buddha statues in the scene to hint that people in this village believe in Buddhism. This is an explanation for why the boy’s parents would have sent him to a school run by priests to study. The other reason is because it is a traditional Japanese and Chinese custom to have small Buddha stone on the side of the road so that travellers can pray at the stone statues for a safe journey.
Part of the backstory is told by the look of the character. The boy himself is small and thin and he wears a loose adult’s shirt that does not quite fit him. This shows that his family is not wealthy and that he does not fit into his family. He stands at the entrance at the village, and the camera position is a long ways away from him to make him look even smaller. The backpack and hat he wears suggest that he must have just come back from a long travel, but he does not seem excited to be back home. In stark contrast to the warm and saturated color of the village buildings in the foreground, the boy himself is under a shadow with a sad emotion. In the next shot, we can see the boy more closely. He is holding a brush tightly and his face is upset. As he slowly turns, a book drops from his backpack but he seems does not care at all. All the details are designated to communicate the emotional feelings of the character and to show that he does not have a strong or happy relationship with his family.

*Figure 9. Scene development 2 - In the forest*
“He left the temple very sorrowfully, and began to wonder what he should do. If he went straight home he felt sure his father would punish him for having been disobedient to the priest: so he was afraid to go home. All at once he remembered that at the next village, twelve miles away, there was a very big temple. He had heard there were several priests at that temple; and he made up his mind to go to them and ask them to take him for their acolyt.”

In this paragraph from the original story, we learn that the boy feels upset because he knows that his parents would feel disappointed with him if they learned that he had been expelled from the priest school. With nowhere to go, he rambles in the forest, which is a place where he feels comfortable and where he can forget about his trouble for the moment. I believe that this shift in the boy’s attitude and mood is a good time to show the boy’s real talent. I placed the camera at a low angle to make the figure of the boy seems taller and bigger, as well as filled with confidence. He waves his brush in the air, and a giant cat made of ink lines running across the scene. At the same moment, the forest is rustled by a blast of wind, as if nature is reacting to his art. The mood change reminds us of the contradiction between the boy and his family, but viewers are reminded that he continues to value and practice his drawing skill.

It is important to tell the audience more about the boy’s talent at the beginning of the film so that this new idea uses the camera to link his literal drawings with his imagination in a way that the original storyboard did not. Rather than focusing on his line work on paper to communicate his talent at drawing, and expressing his earnestness and passion by showing his serious look, the final solution of having him dance and draw in the air is a more powerful and intuitive way to communicate his talent at drawing. It also provides a dynamic way to describe the “changing process”. This also becomes a way to remind Western audiences of the instruction of the prologue: “our creative artistry springs from our heart” as a way to better understand the unique Buddhists’ view I want to convey here: that one’s mind is strong enough to bring non-living objects to life and create another dimension of the world. This scene also starts to establish the elegant Eastern-style atmosphere of the film.
“He thought some priest would be sure to come very soon, and he sat down and waited. Then he noticed that everything in the temple was gray with dust, and thickly spun over with cobwebs. So he thought to him self that the priests would certainly like to have an acolyte, to keep the place clean. He wondered why they had allowed everything to get so dusty.”

Once the boy enters the temple, it is important to set the scene quickly. I placed a Buddha statue in the lobby to show that this place is a temple. However, trash, leaves and dirt are everywhere, around each corner. “There needs to be someone to help do the cleaning,” the boy thinks as he steps into the hallway, trying to find the people who live there. All the details in this scene suggest that this temple was abandoned not long ago, but the boy does not notice.
“What most pleased him, however, were some big white screens, good to paint cats upon. Though he was tired, he looked at once for a writing-box, and found one, and ground some ink, and began to paint cats.”

In order to communicate the transition in the boy from fear to preoccupation to comfort, I developed two shots to communicate his backstory using “mise-en-scene.” First, the design idea for the main temple room came to me quickly. From the description in the story, we know that the temple was abandoned because it was being haunted. The village sent several warriors to quell the haunting but none of them came back alive. The boy doesn’t sense the danger at all because he immersed himself in another world quickly. I made the decision that this room is the place where the monks prayed and rested, and showed this by putting cushions and desks with candles around the space. On the floor on both sides of the room, long sheets of paper covered the floor. This becomes the first thing that draws the boy’s attention when he enters the room. However, there are also arrow marks and broken wooden pieces hanging from the ceiling, which shows a feeling of unease and suggests that
this is not a perfect place to stay for the night. With this scene, the audience learns something that the boy does not seem to know.

When the boy starts to draw, viewers learn more about his inner world: through drawing cats, he can forget all the annoyances around him. His affection and reliance on drawing triggers a second “changing process” when we see that the brush lines of the cat transform into a living feline that floats over the paper and neatly walks away. I used an empty background to separate the boy’s world from my depiction of his reality, again echoing the theme that *the world is how you feel it; one’s creative artistry comes from one’s heart.*

*Figure 12. Scene development 5 - The warning*

“He painted a great many cats upon the screens; and then he began to feel very, very sleepy. He was just on the point of lying down to sleep beside one of the screens, when he suddenly remembered the words, *Avoid large places; keep to small!*”
Because the boy never receives advice from his teacher literally in my interpretation of the story, figuring out how to represent his memory of the encouragement to stay hidden was one of my biggest storytelling challenges. I decided to represent this idea by connecting to the scroll that the boy drops from his bag in my first scene. The first shot that creates this transition shows the moment when the boy feels that something else is in the room. The light of the candles start flashing, which makes the boy aware that this place might not be a safe place. The composition of the ceiling structure, columns and ground form a deep perspective of the room, emphasizing the feeling that the small boy is in a large place. On the other side of the room, in an area that is unseen by the boy, the audience gets more clues about what happened before in this temple. The scattered cloth, weapon and skeleton suggest that people have been killed in the incidents that have taken place there. The scratch tracks on the wall suggest that a fierce monster as also been involved in the fight.

The advice from the priest is imparted to the boy through the presence of narration which is the only voice present in my film. In this scene, I want to express another feature of Eastern beliefs about the supernatural: that mysterious power or spirits dwell in language or voices, and that spoken words may influence one’s fortune. One visual solution to interpret this scene is to represent the voice as scrolls. Those scrolls appear one by one as the sentence is been spoken out word by word, and finally they encircle the boy to isolate him from the outside large empty space. The text in the scroll is the Buddhist Sutra that he had to learn when he was in school. Those spirits are trying to protect him by vividly showing him that he needs to find a smaller space to stay for safety, which connects the advice to his Buddhist practices.

“Very late in the night he was awakened by a most terrible noise,—a noise of fighting and screaming. It was so dreadful that he was afraid even to look through a chink of the little cabinet: he lay very still, holding his breath for fright. The light that had been in the temple went out; but the awful sounds continued, and became more awful, and all the temple shook. After a long time silence came; but the boy was still afraid to move.”
This scene requires the portrayal of the boy’s feelings of being unsafe, fearful and tense. When the voices appear in his mind and he remembers the warnings of his teacher, he realizes in that moment that he is exposed and vulnerable in the large space and he freezes in fear. Then he holds his breath, and moves backward slowly into the cabinet behind him. To emphasize the feeling of suspense, the camera is shooting the room from a high angle in this scene which suggests that the boy is being watched. At the same time, the ceiling structure at the top part of the frame looks very close to the character, which suggests a sense of pressure to audience.

From the gap of the cabinet door, the boy sees a dark shadow appear in the room. In this scene, the character is given more space in the overall composition in order to show this is a small place. The camera zooms into his eye and viewers see a white cat in its reflection. This visual technique helps viewers know what the boy sees with his eye as well as what he thinks in his mind. He sees that a cat has saved him by killing the monster, and we are able to tell this because we see everything through his eye. However, because this story is
also a depiction of the idea that “the world you see is how you feel,” it is not possible to know exactly what happened in the room as well as what the boy imagines. I want to experiment with this notion in my film: that the film one sees and the plot one interprets depends a lot on one’s mind or personal experience, and these things vary from person to person with different cultural backgrounds. The monster mouse could be the real thing that dwells in the temple and haunts people, or it could be the boy’s negative emotion that triggers the monster’s existence, or it could be that everything that appears to happen is the boy’s mental construction. It would be interesting to investigate audiences’ opinion of the mouse after watching the film in order to know how they understand the story differently with or without the basic knowledge Eastern ghost culture and Buddhism.

Figure 14. Scene development 7 - The fight
“Then he got out of his hiding-place very cautiously, and looked about. The first thing he saw was that all the floor of the temple was covered with blood. And then he saw, lying dead in the middle of it, an enormous, monstrous rat, a goblin-rat, bigger than a cow!

Suddenly the boy observed that the mouths of all the cats he had drawn the night before, were red and wet with blood. Then he knew that the goblin had been killed by the cats which he had drawn. And then also he understood why the wise old priest had said to him: Avoid large places at night; keep to small.”

After the chaos, the boy comes out from the cabinet and is amazed to see a giant mouse corpse on the other side of the room. The boy traces back the blood trail and finds that it starts from the piece of paper where he did his drawing. Then he notices the blood marks on the mouth of his cat drawing and realizes that they have come to life and protected him. In this scene, the camera follows with the boy’s eyesight: focuses on the corpse for a while, then follow the blood trails all the way back and stops at the drawing. In this way the audience learns what the boy has discovered at the same time - a giant mouse corpse with blood everywhere - and that strengthens the intensity of the atmosphere and the dramatic
shock to the character. The camera stops and closely focuses at where the blood trails end - the drawing - and the audience has enough time to discover that there is also blood in the mouth of the cat drawing and to figure out what has killed the monster. In the next shot, a giant spiritual cat lays behind the boy looking directly at the viewers, but the boy seems does not notice nor sense it, and only looks at his drawing. I believe the ending resolving the whole story in a understandable way - that both the boy and the viewers figure out that it is the spiritual cat from the drawing that killed the monster. The ending is also open for interpretation - it encourage viewers to think about what may become after the boy realize the value of his talent and the importance of following his heart.

4.4 The animation process

In addition to defining the key settings and moments of transition to communicate the storyline, I also needed to make initial decisions about the aesthetic appearance of the animation. I started with a few concept background sketches that explored the art style and color palette that I thought fit the tone of the story best. Japanese Ukiyoe paintings are a great reference source for what I had in mind because this technique is often used to show supernatural subjects of ghosts and Yoika. I used a lot of brownish color to try to create the feeling of the age of the story and its setting in the rural countryside since the story happened around two hundred years ago in a small Japanese village. The lines I used to draw the architecture are very flexible and tilted near the corners of buildings to communicate the feeling that they are handmade houses. I designed the trees and grass in a watercolor style because brush and ink painting is one of the most influential and recognizable art forms among Eastern traditional painting techniques. The goal is to have Western audiences recognize the visual styles of Eastern art when they take their first glimpse.
4.5 The role of technology and software

To reproduce the style of Eastern paintings in a 3D environment, I conducted a series of experiments using different technologies. For the ink brush style, my solution was to use the brush images as a texture map with different transparencies and then to place them around the scene. However, the lack of depth and contrast in the visuals did not contribute enough of the aesthetics of an Eastern painting style. Also, it was hard to control the brush strokes - by duplicating these elements, the scene turned out to be extremely busy. Additionally, the 3D houses in the scene seems not to match the flat ink brush image planes well. The conflict of integrating 2D with 3D made me proceed to my next possible solution - using the depth channel in the final output, which only contains the information of the distance. This method did a good job of rendering the elegant flow of transparency and of creating an atmosphere of perspective from a distant view. However, the lack of details and color information made me keep looking for better way to achieve the style I wanted.
Having explored the stylistic options for a while, I realized it is essential to develop my own shader tools and materials to achieve the Eastern artistic look I sought. However, developing shaders is not easy work; it requires an understanding of a wide range of techniques and resources. As a matter of fact, I gradually moved my focus from defining the style of the film to exploring how visual content and details in the scenes could contribute to the establishment of style. The image below is a rendering test using only pure models and lights rendered in Maya Mental Ray. The more details and props I added to the scene, the better the results I got from the lighting and shadows. Since the power of computer graphics is the accuracy of calculating lights and the capability to hold details, I decided to make use of these advantages.
4.5.1 Finalizing the style in Renderman

With my knowledge of the potential visual contributions made possible through the use of the Renderman software, I decided to focus on realistic lighting and shadows to define and enhance the environments that contribute to the telling of my story because realism in lighting and enhanced levels of details in rendering are powerful ways to tell stories without using words. You can see the evolution of my understanding of this idea in the initial rendering of my first scene (the entrance of the village) and in those that followed.

I started with some 3D models and placed them around the scene based on my concept sketch. However, transforming my 2D ideas and designs into 3D digital environment is not a simple task because sketches do not require accuracy in the layout of perspectives but 3D models do. To match the 3D models to the proportion of the initial 2D design, I had to squeeze or extrude the models somewhat. Because of this, the models look right from the angle of the main camera, but they look wrong from another perspective. But since the audience can only see the scene from the angle I provide, the deformities in the models would not draw the attention of viewers.

New technology is able to create delicate details using only a map, such as the tiles on the rooftops or the sculpted face of the stone Buddha. Those details in the scene also contribute to the communication of the message through the concept of mise-en-scene. What’s more, by applying the volume material to the models that function as environment
fog, the whole scene looks warm and quiet. My hope is that the softness of this image helps viewers know that this is the hometown of the character.

![Image of a village scene with fog]

*Figure 19. The process of constructing the scene using Renderman*

Converting 2D concepts and designs into 3D environments does not just mean reproducing what is there, but it includes a process of discovering and exploring the best way to
visualize the world using computer technology. The image below is the render test of the temple lobby. Compared to the initial design, the actual interior model is very different because during the process of building the scene, the structures and props are moved back and forth as I tried to find the best cinematic composition from the point of view of the main camera. Because the angle of the camera in the 3D layout elevates toward the ceiling to a certain degree compared to 2D designs, the environment tends to look wider and deeper, which supports the development of the storyline that emphasizes the largeness of the temple space.

Besides providing options for 3D layout, computer technology also helped me explore the balance of color in an efficient way. When I am creating, I am usually not sure what I need until I see a possible result. The lighting system in Renderman provides an efficient solution for me because the lights and shadows generate brightness and darkness to the models quickly and accurately. I then could adjust the attributes of the lights (the angle, intensity, color, etc) to improve the contrast and focus of the scene until I achieved my desired result.

![Figure 21. Converting 2D sketches to the 3D layout](image-url)
4.5.2 Character development based on research and sketches

According to the backstory of *The Boy Who Draws Cats*, the boy is small and thin, and does not contribute to the community as the rest of his family does. He has his own interest in drawing cats. We can conclude from the information we know about him from the story that one of the main conflicts of the character is that he does not fit the world around him. The conflict between himself and his family, and between his own interests and reality, all need to be reflected in the appearance design of the character to support viewers’ perception of his personality and experiences.

In my design, the outfit of the boy is loose and used. This suggests that the boy does not fit his clothes, and it also implies that he does not fit in his family. His clothes have probably been passed on to him from his elder siblings, and that is the reason they do not fit. This further suggests the parents do not care too much about their youngest child, or perhaps it is just that they are very poor. Either way, conflicts between the boy and his family are revealed by the character’s look.

The boy’s large hat and bag communicate the information that he is leaving and traveling far from his home. The backstory is that the boy left home and studied at the priest school.

*Figure 22. Finalizing the scene ‘the temple lobby’*
for a period of time. It is reasonable that he carries a bag with his belongings and property when he left home. In the past, hats were seen as indispensable for travelers to protect people from sunlight and rain. The exaggerated size of the large hat also exaggerates the thinness and smallness of the boy.

Similar to the process of visualizing a 3D environments from sketches, I started with modeling the polymesh of the body of the character and then adjusted the mesh to match the shape of my initial design. The clothes and other props (shoes, hat and bag) along with the character were separate pieces that were matched to the body’s shape. However, during the process of modeling and adjusting the character, some new problems came out and need to be solved. The image below is my first attempt at building my 3D character. One of the problems is that the shape of the hair and face needed to be refined and detailed. The character’s face looked too flat and lacked details. Another problem is that the textures looked really off for the props, especially for the hat and clothes. Since I had decided to use realistic lighting and shadows using Renderman, it became necessary for me to come up with better solutions to achieve better results for those details.
In order to get better results for the visual quality of my character, I sculpted and painted all the necessary details and then applied the texture maps to the character, especially for the face (forehead, nose, lip and eyebrows). I used the same method to generate the texture of the hat and clothes. The result was improved because with detailed textures and sculpting information, the clothes appear as a more realistic Hessian look. For the hair, I modified the original mesh into large numbers of curves assigned with Renderman hair shader. The results turned out to be dramatic under the cinematic lighting.
Figure 25. Finalizing 3D character modeling

Figure 26. The actual result of compositing character into the scene
4.5.3 Creating movement using motion capture

Motion capture is the process of recording the movement data of a human or objects. It is widely used in filmmaking and video games to capture the actions of actors who use motion capture devices and equipment, and then use the data to recreate and animate digital props in computer animation. The advantage of motion capture is that no matter how complex the movements are, they can be easily and accurately be recreated using this technology.

The reason I decided to use motion capture for my animation is because, for several shots, my little character is drawing and is immersed in his own world, and this technique made it possible for me to bring the natural and fluid body movements to the animation as well as conveying the mood. In order to test how the model looks with motion, I used the motion data I captured from myself and applied the data to my character. In this way, I got my first piece of animation done with motion showing ‘the dancing boy’ (the image below).

![Figure 27. Screenshot from the motion capture test ‘Dancing Character’](image)
The success of this test animation was a good starting point because it demonstrated that my model and riggings were ready to be captured. But before I started recording, there were a series of things that I needed to think about such as how the actor would perform for each shot and what each movement should look like and how to make all movements impressive and meaningful supports for the story. I also needed to consider the length that each shot should take. All those factors needed to be carefully decided as an animator and film director.

To answer the questions, I started with making a pre-visualization of a play-through for my film. The pre-visualization process is basically just moving characters around to determine the timing and location without any secondary animations. This process allowed me to animate the character quickly to see the general results. After working and experimenting with the play-through, I was able to make detailed decisions about how to act for each shot.

![Figure 28. Playblast of ‘The Boy Who Draws Cats’](image)

After the general timing and movements were decided for each shot, I developed a motion capture work plan for all the shots. Luckily Jessica Cavendar, a graduate student in the OSU Dance Department, was willing to act as my little character. Before capturing, we
discussed how she should act, including consideration of the body language that would be significant to reveal the character’s emotional change and mental activity. In my story, the most important movements for the character are his ability to ‘draw the unseen,’ and the motion required to bring something to life. In the capture session, the actor was in a special suit with reflective markers attached. The markers sent translation data to the 3D character through the motion capture device in real time, so she was able to see how the action looked on the character when she performed. With the understanding of my film, she performed the character with her body language expressively for each shot as I designed.

4.5.4 Lighting effects and Compositing

After cleaning and editing the movement data, I imported the animated character to each scene. The lighting for the environment also needed to be readjusted in order to provide the best cinematic effect for the character. In order to complete compositing the character and the background, I rendered the footage of the character animation and the background animation separately, and then brought the two layers of footage together into After Effects for the final composition. In this way, the overall rendering time was reduced because the scene was less complex. This gave me easier control of each individual elements in the shots in the later composition.

Figure 26 is an example of how I re-lighted the scene of the boy drawing cats in the air in the forest after the character was added. The initial background footage (the right one) was dark and less saturated, which made it hard to have the character stand out from the environment. So I raised the brightness of the background, and added soft light to create the overall atmosphere to support the joyous emotion of the character.
Figure 29. Relighting and compositing the scene 'In the forest'

For some of the short scenes, when the camera is stable and no animation gets involved in the environment, I am only using one single frame for the background. Then I add the character animation layer on the top of it. This method allows me to effectively reduce the rendering time for the environment while retaining the quality. The image below is an example of using this method. The character and the piece of paper underneath him are on different layers. I did some color correction and lighting adjustments to make the overall composition looks natural and consistent. The complex environment of the temple room, as the site of the story’s most significant and dramatic action, uses lighting and contrast to help viewers focus on the boy and the effect of the supernatural qualities of the story on his experience.
4.6 Integrating sound to support emotional qualities and clarify meanings

Sound and music are important elements for the viewing experience because they are essential in the creation of a film that appeals broadly to the senses of the viewers. Without a soundtrack, a film seems incomplete because the sound and music are able to enhance a film's ability to communicate the mood, emotion, and the meaning of its narrative.

Sound is also particularly important in the case of ghost stories or other horror genres - they are a type of narrative that appeals to both emotions and the senses. Ghost stories - Eastern and Western - communicate what is important by causing their audiences to react to them on an emotional level, either by feeling intrigued by the mysteries of the supernatural world or by feeling scared or at least spooked of the “unknown”. Sounds can dramatically enlarge those feelings if they are being designed and applied to the film considerately.

From the beginning of my process, I had decided to tell the story of the *The Boy Who Draws Cats* without dialogue so that I would test my ability to communicate the vast
majority of the story’s meaning through visual elements; particularly through the environments I designed. Still, I knew that sound and a musical sound track would be essential to reinforce the mood and meaning of the story and to make the film complete. For my film, the process of making audio includes three parts: sound effects recording, music composition and the voices.

I started by identifying places in the film where particular kinds of sounds are needed to complete the actions or meaning of the visuals. With this list of needed sounds in mind, I made pre-recordings for all the sound effects that needed to be included in my film. These recordings include the sound of footsteps on a wooden floor, the rustling sound of paper, the friction between clothes, the sound of a door opening, and some sharp cracks, etc. I put all those sound effects in my film, which provide the believable, realistic ambience of the environments being portrayed. They also work as generating the premonitions and suspense - a sudden sound can effectively draw the attention of an audience and make viewers curious.

The next step for me to take was the music compositing. Music contributes by helping to establish the rhythm and pace throughout the film, influencing the viewers’ emotions and changing the mood as determined by shifts in the narrative of the story. For the development of a musical soundtrack and the integration of the sound effects, I received assistance from Maria Zaharenia, a senior student in the OSU School of Music. We discussed what the most significant characteristics of my music should be in order for it to evoke the kind of feelings I need to reveal the character’s emotions. There are several significant moments in the story that require that the mood and pace change dramatically. For example, in the scene where the boy enters the forest, the moment when he starts waving the brush in the air, the mood is relaxed, lively and enjoyable. But when the boy slowly enters the temple, the mood becomes mysterious, heavy and suspicious. When he starts drawing again on the large piece of paper with the fast movements of his hand gestures, the music becomes rhythmic, serious and concentrative, which brings a stronger rhythm and faster pace to the atmosphere. All those changes reflect the character’s
emotions; the alternation between the fast and slow pace also brings rhythm to the viewing experience.

Although I chose to eliminate dialogue from my film so that I could focus on telling the story with sound and visuals, I did decide to incorporate one voice. This voice can be heard in my film when the spiritual scrolls rotate around the boy, encouraging him to avoid large places. Considering that the story is based on Japanese folklore, I first considered delivering the warning message verbally in Japanese. The language of the prologue of the film is written in Chinese, however, so I made the decision to record a talking voice and to filter it so that it is an unrecognizable, echoed voice in no language in particular. I believe that this mysterious voice fits well with the warning of the spiritual scrolls, since with the subtitles, viewers are able to understand the ‘spiritual talk’ and in this way, I have avoided any overt cultural incongruency.
CHAPTER 5.
CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

This chapter is a reflection on my creative process, including how I translated my story and its backstory into a 3D animated short film. It presents a detailed description of how I used animation as a medium to communicate the qualities of an Eastern ghost story to a Western audience effectively. Reviewing my journey of developing the project and the viewing experience of the final film, there are some achievements I successfully communicate the qualities of Eastern ghost stories through the story. There are also many places that could also be improved if I were to undertake this project again. My reflection on my successes and areas for improvement will be presented in three parts. First, I will talk about my achievements and challenges in presenting a compelling viewing experience. It is important to reflect on this because the film depends entirely on visuals to communicate the story. Second, I will discuss the possible solutions for my future improvements.

5.1 Achievements

With regard to my plot design and my approach to interpreting the original story, there are four main ways in which I believe that I have successfully communicated the Eastern way of telling a ghost story. First, even though the temple is “haunted” and a little scary, the motivation for the most supernatural element in the story - the transformation of the drawn cat into a real cat - comes from positive forces. The boy’s talent triggered his drawings to become spiritual cats, and their desire to protect the boy and ensure his safety is what causes them to muster a spiritual power that was strong enough to kill the monster mouse. Building up these forces is suggested by portraying the act of drawing multiple times and
this acts as the main thread that pushes the story forward. Secondly, the boy and the cats maintain a distance from one another that is typical of Eastern ghost stories. It would be unlikely that the cats would become real characters to accompany the boy on his journey in an Eastern ghost story. Easterners respect their gods but maintain some fear and are aware of the importance of keeping some distance from supernatural elements—this mentality is reflected in their literature and other types of communication and media in popular culture. The ending of this story is a strong way to communicate that essential characteristic. Also, the violence (the fight between the mouse and cat) in the story is not vivid or seen in detail. When the boy is in danger, the audience sees abstract drawings of a chase between a cat and a mouse. It is more subtle so that the focus stays on the positive role played by the guardian ghost. What’s more, the story does not end with total resolution. There are still questions about what will become of the boy even though his survival and the knowledge that he is protected suggests to viewers that drawing cats will become the thing that ensures his success.

Although I have not conducted a comprehensive study of viewers’ reactions to my work, I believe that I have successfully communicated the plot and backstory by designing communicative stage sets and utilizing the concept of mise-en-scene. As I discussed earlier, mise-en-scene is a great way to convey rich information from the backstory in a compressed period of time. Besides the efficiency of compressing information, rather than using text or dialogue, the visuals communicate the story to Western audiences in a culture-friendly way and I believe that it is easy for them to understand and accept alternative values in an Eastern ghost story. There are three great examples of how mise-en-scene contributes to the overall storytelling. First, the forest scene of the boy, drawing in the air and using his imagination to see the cats, communicates as an introduction of Eastern supernatural elements. The animation of the brush strokes transform into a black cat that leaps through the forest and represents the process of ‘changing’. Also, the boy’s continuously fluid motion is an effective way to portray his love of drawing and his expertise in drawing cats. All of these factors help establish an essence of Eastern supernatural characters to Western audiences. Secondly, the use of the image of the boy dropping his scrolls at the beginning of the film is an effect that represents his former life.
as a student and his disregard for that work. In the later temple scene, when the scrolls fly around the boy and warn him to hide, the audience should quickly link these scrolls to the one he abandoned earlier which helps to communicate that these warnings came from his former life. Finally, the dark and cold color, as well as the messy condition, of the inner temple room also communicate that it is a place where something dangerous and traumatic will take place as effective foreshadowing.

Since the story relies entirely on visuals to convey the motion and emotion of the story rather than depending on dialogue, the narrative clarity and understanding of information was a significant challenge. I believe, however, that the overall story and the main topic is understandable because there are levels of clues and details that encourage the audience to dig deeper for backstory information.

In addition to the visuals, the music and sound also contribute to three aspects of the storytelling and they take the place of dialogue to set the tone in these ways. Firstly, several traditional Eastern instrumental elements and sound effects were added to the background music - wooden flute, wind chime, and stringed lute - and all those elements established a mysterious Eastern atmosphere to the viewing experience. Secondly, the music helps to articulate the mood and pacing. The plot needs the rhythm that brings dramatic cinematic effects and resonates with the character’s inner emotions. Finally, the sound compensates for information that the visuals cannot communicate alone. For example, the sharp cracking sounds add drama and bring intensity in some of the eerier moments.

5.2 Challenges and weakness

There are also some weaknesses in my film that need to be improved. Compressing all of this content into a three minute film is challenging for me as the maker and it challenges the viewers too. Some of the challenges that affect the viewing experience and make it difficult to ensure that the details of the story will be understood are as follows:
First, leaving the former life of the character (his family issues and negative school experience) out of the story is an omission that is not clarified completely through visual means. Although it does not damage the ability for the animation to portray the role of cats and drawing or other spiritual essences, it does limit the audience’s understanding of the boy’s feelings and emotions – particularly his feelings about his family’s disappointment in him. The mise-en-scene does communicate some of his feelings through the visuals, and the music helps to suggest changes in mood. Still, there is a limit on the audience’s ability to fully understand the whole story. The use of the imaginary scrolls to dance around the boy and remind him of what he learned from the priest is visually interesting and a good way to connect the beginning of the story to the main part, but without knowing the story prior to viewing the film, the true meaning and source of the scrolls may be a little confusing to some of the viewers.

Besides the challenges that I encountered in re-telling this particular story with effective scene design and character development, there are also limits on the technical level I was able to achieve to influence the overall expression and communication of the plot. Due to the of the shortness of production time and the limitation of my technical experience, I chose to spend more time on creating the body language of the character rather than the facial expressions. However, the lack of facial emotions affects the effectiveness of the film to a certain extent. For instance, in the first close shot of the character of the village scene, the boy appears stiff and unnatural because it is not easy to read his emotions in his face. I also encountered technical challenges representing the movements of the monster mouse which seem more rigid than I would like. The only time that the mouse is shown in motion is about three seconds in length, and because rigging the skeleton of that character was very time consuming, I decided not to rig the mesh but to move it around directly by faking its limb motion in the dark environments. The viewing experience for these shots has been sacrificed to a certain extent by this technical compromise.

Although traditional Japanese images were examined closely and attempted with the software, their nature and what the software would and would not allow led me to the use of a more realistic aesthetic in the end. Areas in the film that provide transitions from 2D
to 3D rendering look more realistic than the scenes that are completely 3D. A realistic style was chosen, therefore, because the software allows realism more easily. The Eastern style is still present through the meaning behind the story and also in the choice of elements shown in the setting and in the character’s costume. Also, visual decisions like creating asymmetrical compositions for many of the shots helps the film “look” more Eastern. Relying on mise-en-scene to communicate portions of the story that are not included literally is supported by using animation as a medium because of the ability to portray the imaginary and manipulate the pace and tone of the storytelling.

## 5.3 Future improvements

I’ll keep exploring the possibilities of telling culturally-specific stories through animation, and I understand the value of enriching the viewing experience for the audience through careful storytelling and making good technical choices. The possible improvements for storytelling include investigating and revealing the backstory more deeply to enhance viewers’ understanding through the design of the plot, the environment and dialogue, and by exploring how other visual elements might help to communicate the essential characteristics of Eastern ghost stories. Because this film, *The Boy Who Draws Cats*, does not include conversation or dialogue, it would be interesting to explore how verbal elements could possibly enhance the storytelling and clarify the backstory. For example, including a background descriptive narration at the beginning of the film to provide a description that includes when the story takes place, who the boy is, what his state of mind is, and what his experiences are, including where is going and where he is leaving. The inclusion of this kind of overview of the character’s background and condition would make the beginning of the film more like the opening of a play and it would build empathy for the boy’s plight with the audience. Additional uses of narration could be placed at certain strategic parts of the story - especially where suspense and revelation require description to ensure that they are understood. In doing so, my work would be more similar to the four-act-play structure used in Eastern storytelling. I gave up the four-chapter storyboard.
because it seemed not to fit the medium of animated short because a complete narration seemed too long and lacking in emphasis. However, with the addition of the descriptive voice to explain the character’s backstory only at the beginning, this problem could probably be solved and a great deal of clarity could be added to the viewers’ understanding of more aspects of the original story’s plot.

Additionally, a stronger rhythm and pace could also improve the storytelling by creating tension and focus for particular moments as needed. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the length of each shot and the speed of movements determines how slowly or quickly the content of animated works are accepted by audiences, thereby influencing their perception of the narrative as it unfolds. For my future projects, I will pay more attention to crafting and amplifying the rhythm and pace of my stories. Some animations need a faster pace for showing the passing of time, and some need to be played in slow motion or by using repetition to emphasize the hard-to-see changes. The alternation of different rhythms and paces is an effective tool for storytelling especially for the ghost story or supernatural theme because rhythm can be manipulated to evoke cinematic perceptions of time and space that provoke specific sensations such as suspense or fear. For example, an extreme slow pace can be used to strengthen and amplify the moment when the character encounters the unseen, the process of “changing,” or other expressions of invisible forces and emotions. Different rhythms and paces can also be used to help describe different types of characters, depending on their special attributes. For example, in this film, at the moment when the spiritual cats come out, time could pass very slowly and everything could feel frozen in order to create a silent, melancholy and mysterious mood to encourage the audience members to immerse themselves in a spiritual world.

For the visuals, other possible improvement include exploring ways to achieve designated visual styles using computer graphics. At the beginning of this project, I experimented with a series of art styles for designing the look of my film from Japanese Ukiyoe art to traditional Chinese ink painting. Japanese Ukiyoe paintings are often used to show supernatural subjects of ghosts and Yoikai, while Chinese brush and ink painting is also influential and recognizable art forms among Eastern traditional painting. However, one of
the reasons I did not select any of these traditional art styles was because the realistic look for the lighting and shadow was easy to achieve using 3D technology, and I chose this style to focus more on the details of the environments. For my future projects, rather than using a realistic style of lighting and shadowing, I would like to try replicating the characteristics of traditional paintings to stylize the visuals from the aspects of composition, perspective, camera angle and color, so that I can explore how the style resonates and influences viewers’ visual preferences and the aesthetic perception of the subjects of ghosts and supernatural phenomena.

For the technology part, integrating the character’s emotion through facial movements and simulating the fur and cloth dynamic systems could definitely improve the overall expression of the film in its current realistic style. In this film, for example, creating a more realistic look of the ferocious face and the flowing fur of the monster mouse would add another way to provoke the fear of unknown beings and help the audience members immerse themselves in this scary moment.

5.4 Conclusion

Reviewing the entire journey of the production of my film, from the investigation of culturally specific ghost stories, to researching the unique differences between Eastern and Western ghost stories, to the story selection and concept development, to the pre-production for the stages and scenes, and through the production, rendering and final compositing, I am pleased with the final result I achieved with my film and with everything that I learned during the process of making it. However, as with any project, I can see many ways that my film could be improved, including clarifying the storytelling and communicating the character’s emotions more vividly. There is still a long way to go before I tell a story that really touches people, but I believe I have demonstrated that it is possible to communicate an Eastern ghost story by making an animated short about a supernatural character. I would like to encourage other animators to use culturally-specific
characteristics in their work to help communicate to a broader audience so that we can promote the appreciation of other cultures and their artistic productions.
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