

山水

SHANSHUI

Witness of an enchanted land – Qiu Anxiong Art

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Qiu Anxiong 邱黯雄 is a new media artist — a “futurist of the past”. In the words of Luciano Berio, he engages in a practice that “rotates memory, letting it depart yet continuously move toward the future”. Over twelve years, he created the animated trilogy *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* 《新山海经》, using the primitive, mythic visual language of ancient times to portray modern civilization and reconstruct the contemporary world through a mythological lens.

Endowed with the inherent dynamic imagination of animation, his works transform elephants into armored vehicles, and empty cities into landscapes overgrown with strange flora and mythical beasts. From the earliest animation born with the phenakistiscope in the 19th century to the present day — what new imagination can animation still bring to reality?

There once was an illustrated *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 《山海经》, depicting human-faced beasts, nine-headed snakes, three-legged birds, winged humans, and headless monsters with eyes on their breasts. Today, in a quiet, dark space, a glowing screen takes the place of an open book. Fighter jets soaring through the sky become headless, birdlike creatures; through thick mist, a city at the end of days looms faintly. Sparse rooftop plants seem to devour all air; a man wearing an octopus mask stands amid the clouds and falls from a tall building. Surveillance birds stare down at deserted streets. Individuals type frantically on glowing turtle-shell computers; people with blurred faces lose themselves in virtual online realities. The idyllic natural world, once like the Peach Blossom Spring, becomes little more than an illusory, simulated spectacle.

Combining freehand ink-wash aesthetics with 3D imagery, enriched by multidimensional layers of “water”, this moving “book of screens” offers viewers a complex perspective: observing the “near-future present” from the vantage point of the “past”. In the here and now, an otherworldly realm, both real and unreal, unfolds gradually.

Moving from energy conflicts in the first part of the trilogy, to biotechnology and space technology in the second, and to the relationship between the virtual and the real in the third, *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* consistently centers on one question: how “human life” changes under shifting conditions. Following the camera, we wander through a fictional city rooted in reality. Much like VR technology, which provides a 360-degree view yet traps the eye within the frame of the headset, familiar everyday objects are defamiliarized by virtual reality devices. Tools and landscapes born

from technological progress merge with organic forms, remade into mobile cyborgs by an unknown civilization.

It echoes the experience of first reading the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* as a child: encountering Gou Mang, the god with a bird’s body and a human face riding two dragons; or Man Man, the creature with one wing and one eye that brings great floods. The strangeness and astonishment have led many scholars to interpret these beings through the lenses of deformity or alienation — yet in vain. We still know very little about “reality” and the “present”.

The uncanny entities in Qiu Anxiong’s *New Classic* — these “technological creatures” — are endowed with supernatural metaphorical power. The “technological” core hidden within “mythic” metaphors is renarrated: modern technological products, from airplanes to industrial tools, are reinterpreted mythologically. Today, technology has become a substitute for mythology.

At the same time, the city resembles a giant living ecosystem, filled with human will, yet digesting and metabolizing civilization itself. The ancient orogenic movements of prehistory are hardly different from the construction of steel, concrete, and skyscrapers today. Ink-wash landscapes gradually transform within the moving image, diffusing into floating architecture above the clouds. In this world rooted in ancient myth, “science fiction is the mythology of the present”.

As Qiu Anxiong explains: “*New Classic of Mountains and Seas 3* contains my reflections on the relationship between mythology and modern technology. Mythology points toward the past, science fiction toward the future — yet at their core, both contain mythic elements tied to the supernatural.”

Unlike narrative animations that simply tell a story, the *New Classic* series poses a question for our time: amid the rapid development of society and technology, what future awaits the environment, traditional values, and human civilization as a whole?

Born in Chengdu in 1972, Qiu Anxiong grew up with the classic animations of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. The spatial and temporal dynamics of animation opened up rich layers of expression unavailable in static painting. As an art form that allows diverse materials and independent practice, animation deeply attracted Qiu for its creative freedom, establishing him as a pioneer in introducing animated video into the context of Chinese contemporary art.



New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 1



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Qiu Anxiong's *New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 1* 《新山海经一》, begins with a view of the ocean. As the music plays—rhythmic yet somewhat harsh, with underlying tension—an island appears in the middle of the ocean. As we move closer to the land, the scene splits into three screens for a time. The land is cultivated, and a castle comes into view. Then a creature resembling a whale with several long fins flies over the Great Wall of China and drops a mysterious box, perhaps marking the beginning of civilization. It then moves on.

The vast lands of China are developed, cities rise, and trees and forests give way to clusters of black buildings and silhouettes of black highways. As he shows the organic natural world transformed into a modern urban environment, Qiu's subtle yet powerful brushwork proceeds amid gloomy silence to depict the flow of water—an extremely difficult element to master.

The scene then shifts to a desert, split this time into two parts: on one side, women in black chadors, with only their eyes exposed and visible; on the other, men in white bodysuits, their eyes covered by protective visors. Veins of oil run like blood vessels through cross-sectioned geological strata, and machines resembling scorpions with their tails held straight up suck oil from the ground. A conspiracy leads to missiles being fired from submarines to destroy the oil fields. The black smoke rising from this destruction drifts across the sky as a single mass, like an emblem of hatred. Two symbolic buildings towering above the center of a distant city are also destroyed. This is a dark exchange between two sides, both in search of energy.

With eerie humor, Qiu has conceived the technological instruments of this devastation and depicted them as bizarre, fantastical creatures: tanks shaped like elephants, automobiles that look like turtles, long-winged flying monsters like military helicopters that spout fire from their heads, and other flying creatures that resemble stingrays but also evoke stealth fighters.

As the scenes of annihilation continue, the images split into three once more: corpses pile up between white people on one side and Black people on the other. Finally, a mushroom cloud rises from the ultimate weapon, and a black-cloaked figure stands motionless at the far left of the frame, like a scene from a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

The battle over development and oil resources is treated as a geographic text, through depictions of the topography of the city and the desert, and the creatures that inhabit them. A vast, silent sense of hopelessness pervades the entire landscape, expressed with meekness and calm. Qiu avoids the usual critical standpoint in such situations, and we

witness the cool-headedness of people living in an enchanted land watching with their own eyes as that world meets its end—much like the old man dangling his fishing rod in the ocean we saw in the very first scene.

The veins of oil, the tangled trees, the city, fire, the rampant creatures, conflict and annihilation, and the constant presence of the vast sky and sea within these images all illustrate a historical perspective consistent with spatial and temporal theories of a China that has moved well beyond dialectics.

New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 2

In *New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 2* 《新山海经二》, Qiu expands his focus to a universal macrocosm and a cellular, genetic microcosm, connecting the two through his imagery. The worldview expressed by the sky and sea in Part 1 now becomes the great void and the planets within it. Within this all-encompassing worldview, he describes in a comical yet unsettling way some of the topical issues affecting life on an individual level—from genetic recombination and cloned sheep to mad cow disease and bird flu.

Scene follows scene: birds collapsing in their cages and melting; cows falling in their barns; males being swept away in the heat of reproductive passion; the tragedy of a sheep taken to a laboratory, where her outward appearance may remain unchanged, yet she is transformed into something deeply different and contaminated, like a mutant monster. Images of blood plasma and viruses floating inside a body overlap with visions of planets and spaceships—resembling whales—drifting in space.

The Part 2 formally retains the hand-painted texture of ink animation, while its content departs from the first part, which focused on energy conflicts. Part 2 centers instead on the impact of space technology and biotechnology, as these two fields represent the limits of modern humanity's understanding of the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Through visual narrative, the work portrays a series of events in which technology reshapes nature in the course of human conquest and exploitation: massive dams are built, submerging ancient villages and towns; the leftover organs of slaughtered livestock are processed into feed to feed cattle; genetically cloned sheep are created; laboratory mice grow human ears; featherless chickens continuously develop wings. Countless dead cattle are pushed into deep pits by monstrous figures with huge shovels, then buried and burned. Humans live in cities surrounded by mountains of waste, until the final levee collapses and floods everything.

Just before submersion, a shark-like spaceship carries the genetically modified, human-eared laboratory mice into space. Floating among bizarre orbital creatures, the spacecraft eventually reaches

New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 1





New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 2

another planet and releases its living cargo. The mouse with human ears vanishes into the gorges of this desolate world.

All these grotesque episodes are rooted in real-world events. The work depicts an apocalyptic landscape caused by out-of-control technology. As humanity relentlessly develops technology to modify and exploit nature, it inevitably falls into the tragic fate of a self-created civilization.

The New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 3

Drawing on China's traditional classic *Shanhaijing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*), Qiu Anxiong's animation trilogy interrogates the unrelenting pace of social and technological progress, alongside its costs to the environment, traditional values, and human culture at large.

In Part 3, the artist depicts an apocalyptic post-information age future, where environmental degradation has transformed humanity itself into a product of virtual reality. A masked figure plummets from a skyscraper; fish-eye lenses double as surveillance cameras, installed across empty, desolate streets. Urban landscapes are projected onto circuit boards trundling down a production line in a dark factory, while the once-pristine mountains and seas of nature have become a lost utopia confined to a virtual spectacle. These scenes unfold like a prophetic vision of a post-pandemic city, laying bare a worldview shaped by alienation and disconnection.

Qiu Anxiong is celebrated as a pioneer in deepening animation's emotional and artistic resonance by integrating ink wash aesthetics—a choice that complements his non-linear narrative, most vividly realized in Part 3. Blending imagery of the real and the virtual, the animation reflects on a contemporary world where the line between these realms grows increasingly blurred, and the fictional often amplifies our perception of reality.

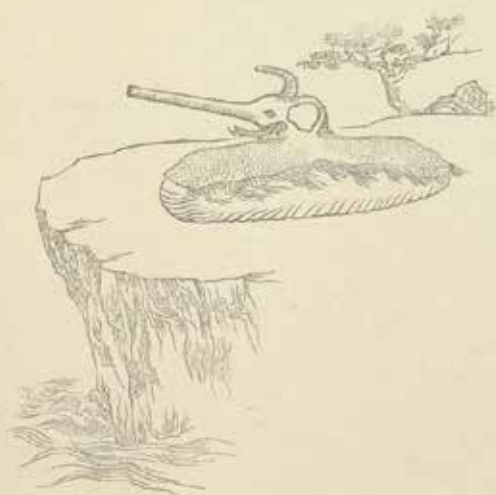
In Part 3, we navigate a fictional world alienated from our own, encountering objects and spectacles born from pressing social concerns: anti-air pollution masks, virtual reality gadgets, and tools tied to environmental crisis, urbanization, gentrification, mass surveillance, and technological advancement. In the film, these everyday technologies are reimagined as bizarre, cybernetic creatures—echoing the symbolic, metaphorical, and supernaturally empowered beasts of the original *Shanhaijing*. In Qiu's mind, all narratives rooted in the supernatural—whether ancient or modern—qualify as mythic. Part 3 frames our world through this mythological lens, infusing technological products with mythic meaning.

From another angle, today's technologies act as “modern alternatives” to mythology: they are projections of humanity's desire for “magical” or supernatural power. The *New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 3* distills Qiu's reflections on the relationship between mythology and modern technology: while mythology looks to the past, science fiction reaches toward the future—yet at their core, both genres are bound by mythic elements steeped in the supernatural.



New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part 3

西方之土有獸焉，象頭牛身，無足，頭生其背，身被吸甲，腹行甚速，鼻直可噴火，其名曰唐坦。



【唐坦】

【敖駝】



阿美利坎國始有獸，頭圓腹空，背甲似玻璃，眼大如炬，足設風輪，不食而飲油，日行千里，勝於駿馬，今世人皆服之，其名曰敖駝，又名奇機。

阿美利坎洲始有獸，曰亢普，末風羅，案字，即風末風羅，足而方，面能變現幻，能之術，寧字，扁平背有方甲，即風無足，以腹滑行，亢普體方，形似木杵，而體異，能觀人之思維計較，四獸共生，行影不離，其尾相支，今舉世皆伺之以為用，傳之而不能須臾忘也。



【亢普四獸】

【狂牛】



西洋布利華島有牛焉，食同類之脂，脂既生而狂，人食之亦狂，而亡，島民笑之不絕，他國並不食該國之牛。

大凡之西有鳥四翼獨尾四足獨趾其趾相連其聲句句如雷其名曰旋鵲

【旋鵲】



中土有鼠背生人耳其名曰羣鼠

【羣鼠】



【駭雲】

羅洲之西有黑色極高之雲萬狀萬形似燈凡所覆之處皆為焦土無復生物見則天下大亂其名曰駭雲又名黑燈



西洋布利勝島有獸無父二母而生壽短其名曰多利

【多利】







*"Ten thousand brushstrokes
cannot describe or express
what one or two strokes
can reveal."*

Wang Gai