

# Artistic Reinvention of the Literary Image of the Classic of Mountains and Seas in the Context of Digitization

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**Abstract:** The changing times and the arrival of the digital age, like a giant tree, involve all areas of people's lives. The popularity of the combination of digital media art and the ancient book "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" continues to rise, but the so-called cultural inheritance is mostly superficial and preaching, and people need to experience the true meaning of excellent traditional culture. Therefore, the inheritance and development of traditional culture urgently needs to find a new path that fits the background of the times. The creators began to re-examine the "Shan Hai Jing", combined with the "Shan Hai Jing"'s characteristics of the times and cultural orientation, and launched new attempts and explorations. Digital media technology is an emerging technological means, which has developed human society to a whole new level. With the continuous improvement of people's living standards, the demand for spirituality is getting higher and higher, while the traditional Chinese culture has not been well reflected. China has a vast territory and a long history, and countless excellent cultures are waiting for us to inherit and carry forward. Artists should follow the trend of the times and use digitization as a carrier to inject concepts and use China's own cultural values to develop and create Chinese contemporary art works. Steady progress on the road of combining art and culture.

**Keywords:** Digital Media Art; Cultural Heritage; The Classic of Mountains and Seas.

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## 1. Introduction

The advent of the digital age, akin to a colossal tree in the firmament, has permeated all facets of human existence. The combination of digital technology and traditional art forms has led to the emergence of new art categories, which are perceived by people through the Internet. This has resulted in a significant enhancement of their quality of life. A significant number of artists have utilized policy support to integrate exemplary traditional culture with emerging technologies, resulting in the creation of a series of outstanding works. This has led to the pinnacle of traditional culture industrialization, driven by public attention and interest. In recent years, the industrialization value of many traditional cultures has been explored, and the artistic recreation of classic literary images has become increasingly prevalent. The ancient book "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" has been designated as a "national IP," and its popularity has remained high. Concurrently, digitization technology furnishes a bountiful presentation space for the advancement and reproduction of cultural texts. This not only fosters a growing intimacy between cultural texts and the public but also propels the artistic evolution of cultural texts and the multifaceted evolution of literary images, thereby considerably amplifying their impact on the public.

As time progresses, digital media art is akin to a growing tree, with its connotations and extensions undergoing a continuous process of development and change. The conjunction of digital media art and the classical text "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" has been gaining momentum. However, the term "cultural heritage" is largely superficial, and for people to truly grasp the essence of exemplary traditional culture, they must engage with it at the level of the people. It is therefore imperative to identify a novel approach to the transmission and evolution of traditional culture that is aligned with the prevailing socio-historical context. In light of these developments, creators have initiated a process of re-examination of the "Classic of Mountains and Seas." This

process entails the integration of contemporary characteristics and cultural orientations, leading to the formulation of novel attempts and explorations. Digital media technology represents an emerging technological means that has the potential to facilitate significant advancements in human society. As living standards continue to improve, people's spiritual needs are becoming increasingly sophisticated. However, traditional Chinese culture is not effectively reflected in the current context. Therefore, it is necessary to challenge the conventional, stereotyped image of traditional culture. This can be achieved by employing digital art forms to disseminate and popularize the excellent traditional culture in an immersive experience. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the modernization and inheritance path of traditional culture from a new perspective.

## 2. The Current Status of Artistic Research on The Book of Mountains and Seas

The ancient book "Shan Hai Jing" has a long history covering everything, research shows that "Shan Hai Jing" had a primitive ancient map, since the pre-Qin period has been related to drawings and paintings have been circulating, Jin Dynasty Guo Pu, Liang Dynasty painter Zhang Shengqiao, the Northern Song Dynasty school of Shu Ya has also drawn the relevant drawings, but they have long disappeared, Ming and Qing Dynasty "Shan Hai Jing" map book is the oldest version we can see now.

The earliest illustrations of the Shanhaijing that we can see are the Shanhaijing drawings in the early Ming Dynasty Yongle Canon, namely the Overseas Eastern Canon, "Xuebiqi", and the Hai Nei Bei Jing, "According to Biqi" (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Ming Yongle Grand Dictionary

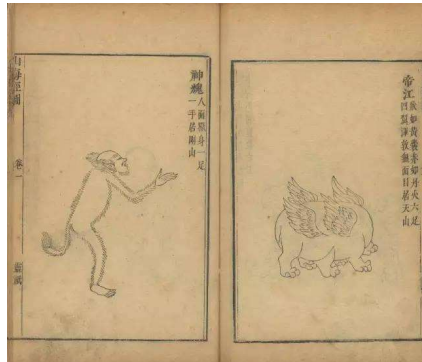


Figure 2. Compilation of the Shanhaijing by Hu Wenhuan

Hu Wenhuan's Ming Dynasty Shanhaijing (Figure 2), with a total of one hundred and thirty-three drawings, is highly distinctive in both content and art, with a richly illustrated text and a monster and a drawing, and is the earliest engraved copy

of the Shanhaijing seen to date. The overall style is simple and ancient, using the traditional Chinese technique of white drawing, sketching the image with ink lines without any modification or rendering, making the whole picture rich in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The author combines the written descriptions of the images of demons and monsters depicted in the Shanhaijing with the information recorded in the relevant literature, incorporates his own ideas and understanding, and makes appropriate compromises to form the Shanhaijing that we see today, in which some of the illustrations are similar to those in the Yongle Dazhen, which is to a certain extent its inheritance, and also plays a great role in enlightening the creation of later generations of illustrated books of the Shanhaijing.

Ming Dynasty Jiang Yinghao, Wu Linfu's "Mountains and Seas Scripture Drawing Full Image" (Figures 3) a total of seventy-four pictures, "Mountains and Seas Scripture Drawing Full Image" is different from the Huben a monster a map a say, the image of its painted monsters and demons are arranged in the scene corresponding to the scene with a certain storyline, painted monsters and the environment of mutual fusion and interdependence. More emphasis on the connection between the beasts, illustrations in the image representation at the same time pay more attention to the scene to create momentum. Jiang's drawings are quite different from Hu's, and he has his own unique style, mainly using short lines, dots and circles to show different textures, the overall simpler and more natural, the beasts and scenes echo each other, giving a better reference to future generations, and has a far-reaching influence on the drawings of future generations.

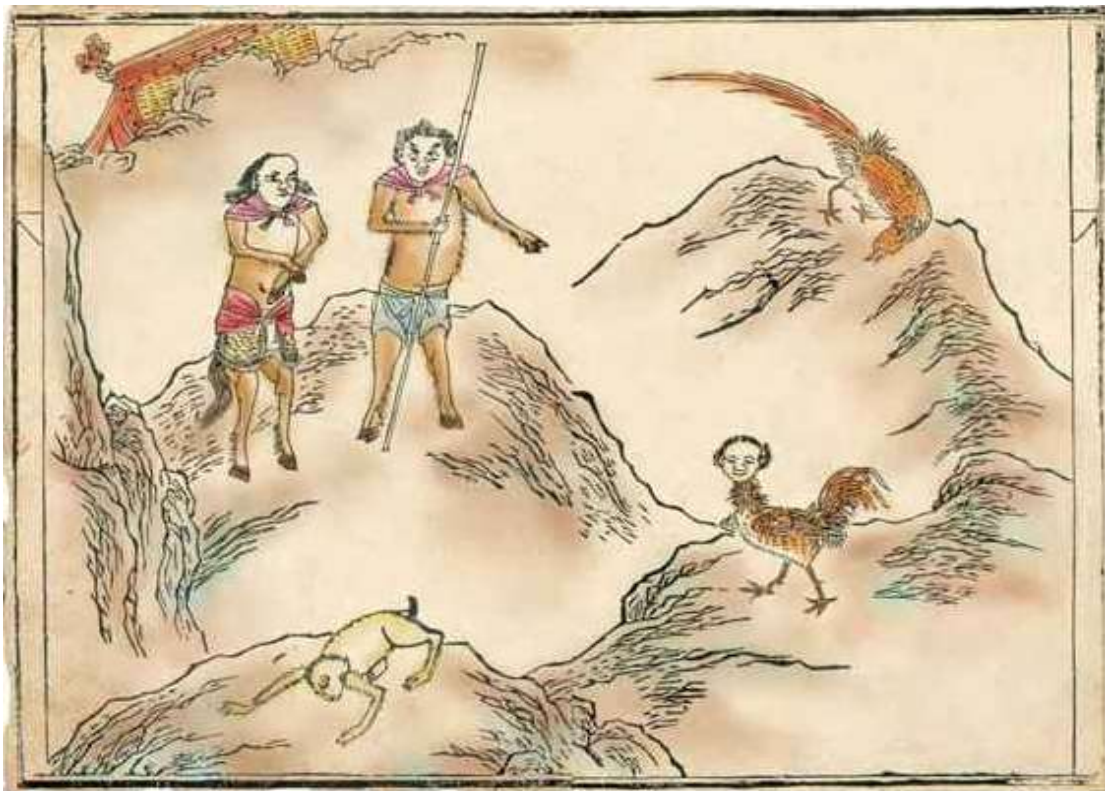


Figure 3. Full Portrait of the Classic of Mountains and Seas" by Chiang Ying-ho

Wang Sash's Shan Hai Jing Cun (The Classic of Mountains and Seas) of the Qing Dynasty (Figures 4), with a total of four hundred and twenty-six pictures, is similar to the arrangement

of Hu Wen Huan's version, that is, without a background, with a picture of many gods or a picture of one god. There is no fixed pattern in the presentation of the images of demons and

monsters, but the overall images are extremely vivid and evocative, and although they are gods and monsters, they do not lose the style of realism. In terms of painting techniques, they tend toward realism, and the images of demons and monsters are depicted in depth, with natural ink and brush strokes, and the brush strokes are strong and powerful.



Figure 4. Wang Sash, "The Scripture of the Mountain and the Sea"

The five volumes of the Shan Hai Jing Tu (figs. 5)



Figure 5. Wu Rinchen, "Completing the Eigyo Shanhaijing Guangzhu"

appended to Wu Renchen's Extensive Notes on the Qing Dynasty, with a total of 144 drawings divided into five categories of gods, beasts, birds, insects, and exotic places, are a concentrated representation of the drawings of previous generations. Wu Renchen redrew them based on Shuya's Shanhaijing (Classic of Mountains and Seas) of the Song Dynasty, but the basic modeling of the main demonic figures was taken from Hu Wenhuan's version, which inherited the style of the Ming Dynasty. Wu Renchen's drawings are more crude, and the images and shapes are simple and full of childish interest, but also have a divine charm, showing the simple style of popular folk carvings.

Japan's Edo period "strange birds and beasts scroll" (Figure 6) to China's "Classic of Mountains and Seas" and its illustrated book as a model, according to the scroll is divided into 30 kinds of birds and 46 kinds of beasts, painting is quite detailed, beasts and animals are flexible and vivid, in the colorful painting at the top of each picture with the name and explanatory words. There are some obvious similarities between the Japanese version and the Qing Dynasty Shanhaijing, but each has its own unique characteristics, and the gods and monsters are depicted in color, making them more vivid. Unlike the line drawing method used in previous versions of the Shanhaijing, the Japanese scrolls are painted with colorful brush strokes, and the images are amazingly realistic, with emphasis on eyes and facial expressions.



**Figure 6.** Edo period "Strange Birds and Animals" scroll

There is a big difference between traditional Shanhaijing and modern drawing methods. Contemporary Shanhaijing series of drawings use a variety of creative techniques combined with modern Western painting techniques of light and shadow, greatly enriching the artistic expression of materials, while at the same time drawing on the essence of Chinese painting, showing a full Chinese flavor. Compared with the classic mountain and sea illustrated books of the Ming and Qing dynasties, contemporary artists are more clear and delicate in their depiction of animals, using a variety of dynamic gestures, depicting the animals side by side, and integrating their own understanding of animals, with a variety of styles, but in a way that is in line with modern perceptions.

As early as the 1980s and 1990s, animated short films based on Shanhaijing such as "Quafu Chasing the Sun" and "Nuwa Mending Heaven" were released, but the theme of Shanhaijing had a cultural "pause" until the arrival of the digital information age and the popularization of Shanhaijing IP in online literature, when the number of various Shanhaijing-related film and television works began to increase significantly, and then exploded. Along with the

popularity of Shanhaijing IP in online literature, the number of various Shanhaijing-related film and television works began to increase significantly and then exploded.

In today's digitalized world, the Shanhaijing has an extraordinary reproduction value in modern society, and "Immortal Punisher," which successfully draws on a large number of resources from the Shanhaijing, is one of the most representative. In the story framework of "Immortal Punisher", allusions to "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" appear frequently, and a lot of related geography and museum knowledge can also be seen in "The Classic of Mountains and Seas". From the beginning of the series in 2003, to the release of the online game of the same name in 2007, to the huge success of the TV series and handheld game in 2016, and finally to the release of the movie of the same name in 2019, it is truly a long-lasting success. Big hit dramas and movies such as Flowers and Bones (2015), Demon Hunters (2015), Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Peach Blossoms (2017), and Shang Qi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) (Figures 7) have also adopted and adapted the resources of Shan Hai Jing to varying degrees.



**Figure 7.** Shangqi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

In the field of animation, the most representative are Journey to the West the Return of the Great Sage (2015), Big Fish and Begonia (2016), The New Classic of Mountains and Seas Trilogy (2006, 2007, 2016), and Inhumanity (2018). Major animated films such as Journey to the West, The Return of the Great Sage, and Big Fish and Begonia borrowed mythological elements from The Classic of Mountains and Seas to tell new stories. Most of the beasts in The Classic of Mountains and Seas existed as characters in it, and Hou Tu, Zhu Rong, Jumang, and Di Jiang in Big Fish and Begonia are all from The Classic of Mountains and Seas. Qiu Anxiong's ink cartoon "New Shanhaijing" is unique in that it uses the ancient book "Shanhaijing" as a reference to depict the

strange landscapes of contemporary society from the perspective of ancient times, in which the phenomena of modern life become mythological material, presenting an absurd and wonderful scene. And "Inhumanity," adapted from the manga, combines a variety of ancient mythological texts and extracts character images, presenting an everyday line of work that is different from other metaphysical works. Here, the characters prioritize social attributes, and "labels" are placed all over the characters, while natural attributes are reduced to visual settings in everyday life, and then enlarged when humor is needed to create a contrast that shapes the characters' charm.

In the field of digital art, a large number of artists have also

taken the "classic of mountains and seas" as a theme, combining a variety of art forms with digital media to create amazing works. Young CG artist Wu Junda (Xision) won the Grand Prize for 2D Art in the Campus Category of the 3rd GGAC Competition for his series "Mountains and Seas Have Spirits" (Figs 8), based on the Sutra of Mountains and Seas, with its grandiose scenes, brilliant light and shadow, and exquisite details, which brought out the charm of digital painting art. Japanese digital sculptor Keita Okada also created works such as "Kirin" (Figure 9), based on the beasts

of the "Classic of Mountains and Seas," with highly detailed conceptual art and amazing visual effects of creatures full of fantasy colors. While maintaining the typical features recorded in ancient texts, these works combine multiple elements of the Shanhaijing with digital media by adapting and reimagining them so that people can experience the artistic appeal of the Shanhaijing through multiple senses, and reimagine the beasts from a new perspective in an attempt to breathe new life into traditional culture.



Figure 8. Wu Junda The Spirit of the Mountains and the Sea - Xuanwu



Figure 9. Eita Okada, "Kirin"

In the field of contemporary art, there are also many outstanding artists at home and abroad who present their own versions of the myth of mountains and seas. Artist He Liang's "Sacrifice of the Magical Elephants" takes the sacrificial gods as its prototype and uses a combination of materials in an attempt to present a primitive, brutal and mutilated image. On the other hand, Wei Jialin's ink painting "History Creation" represents the great fusion of ancient and modern Chinese and foreign cultures with the expression of traditional Chinese painting. Drawing on the traditional Chinese "Shanhaijing" and Dunhuang frescoes, and linked to Peter Bruegel's masterpiece "Tower of Heaven", the artist injects the emerging elements of the development of the era into the bizarre and absurd story of the Shanhaijing, and reinvents the traditional myths and animals to present a fantastical and happy world of the future, Making history and the world of gods and goddesses a new and exciting world, where history and history are intertwined in an attempt to present a primitive and brutalized image, Happy future world, let history and the future mix organically.

### 3. Linguistic Features of Artistic Reinvention in the Digital Context

The earliest version of the ancient book "Shan Hai Jing" has been passed down in the later generations because of many reasons, resulting in a lot of valuable graphic and textual information in the book not surviving, which is extremely regrettable. In the digital background, the cultural inheritance and dissemination of "Shanhaijing" are not limited to paper media and oral tradition, which can be easily realized through modern digital technology. The artistic recreation of "Shanhaijing", also known as the secondary design of "Shanhaijing", refers to the artistic creation process with the elements of "Shanhaijing", which, according to the specific needs of the creation of the combination of art categories, material forms, art characteristics and aesthetic principles, uses new design ideas and specific technology to create a new and unique design. New design ideas and specific technical techniques to redesign and reprocess the

elements of the Classic, so that the secondary design of the works of the Classic produces a new sense of hierarchy, rhythm and unique visual art effects, maximizing the potential creative beauty hidden in the Classic, and one of the essential aspects of the basic elements of the body of the extraction of the re-creation of the work of art to make it more watchable, artistry and make it more attractive.

The digital recreation of the artistic image of Shanhaijing was born and developed in such a background, and we can analyze its artistic recreation from the following four aspects.

### 3.1. Nonlinear Language

Under the background of digitalization, new technology brings new changes, computer, Internet, artificial intelligence and other technologies make art creation realize diversified fusion, heterogeneous mixing and cross-over symbiosis, which together promote the digital reengineering and modernization transformation of traditional art.

Non-linear language is the symbol of the digital era. Non-linearity, i.e. supra-temporality, refers to the creation of works to get rid of the single line forward, just like the digital theater that can be fast-forwarded, rewound and paused, and non-linearity makes the process of art creation can be retracted and reset. In the past, art creation and appreciation were subject to the linear constraints of time and space, and even through editing and splicing of different shots, the audience still has to follow the linear timeline to watch. By using the digital non-linear language, the artistic recreation of "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" completely breaks free from the constraints of time and space, making it possible to move quickly to desired destinations spatially, while presenting a fragmented, disorganized and non-linear character temporally.

For example, in the digital sculpture "Kirin," based on the theme of "The Classic of Mountains and Seas," Japanese digital sculptor Eita Okada creates a virtual sculptural space through computer hardware and sculpting software, freeing himself from the heavy dependence on tools, location, and support in traditional creation. Using the mouse and pressure-sensitive pen, he creates the various textural details of the unicorn with a delicate and rich brush simulation. The digital tool records every step of the user's operation, and the creator is no longer bound to a linear workflow; the canvas can be infinitely reused and reworked, and the work can be modified repeatedly and indefinitely until it is satisfactory. Artwork can be saved, modified, and copied with a single command.

Creation becomes reversible, and efficiency increases significantly. At the same time, "Kirin" is multi-linear, working on material, texture and bone bonding simultaneously, which fully realizes non-linear design and greatly reduces costs, and finally, through 3D printing technology, it is transformed from virtual to reality, realizing batch production.

This new creative language greatly enhances the freedom of artistic creation, completes the subversive innovation of artistic production relationship, and provides a brand new generation rule and paradigm for digital art recreation works.

### 3.2. Interactive Language

The most important feature of digital media technology that distinguishes it from traditional art is interactivity. In the past, art creation was too far away from ordinary people, and although traditional art is also partly interactive, the public is still generally in the position of the audience, and this interactivity is more spiritual. And when the audience enjoys the interactive nature of digital art works, the works will produce links with the audience, and can even participate in digital media art creation through various ways to produce the physical level of interaction, thus presenting a new form and concept. Under the role of interactive language, the audience takes the initiative to connect with the work and integrate the whole body into it, instead of just watching it from a distance, the deep interaction between the audience and the work will lead to the transformation of the work as well as the consciousness of the participants, and complete the artistic innovation.

The artistic recreation of the classic Thousand Mountains and Sea in the context of digitization uses the language of interactivity to bridge the virtual and the real, the online and the offline. For example, NetEase Games and the Palace Museum teamed up to create the interactive handheld game Eizhen - Myriad Brush Thousands of Mountains (Figure 10), which uses the Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains as a backdrop and combines the many characters of the Classic of Mountains and Seas to create a very oriental flavor of the game screen. Players independently explore the mysteries in the scrolls, interact with the badlands of the picture, solve puzzles, advance the plot and learn about the world in the picture step by step. Players engage in real-time sensory dialogue with the paintings through voice, gesture, touch, and displacement.



Figure 10. Eizhen - Myoho Chisan Character

Drawing on ancient painting techniques, the creators divided the game's ground surface, rocks and vegetation, combined with hand-drawn and 3D modeling, and used

unique rendering technology to transform static drawings into dynamic presentations through the self-developed NeoX engine and proprietary game technology development

platform, making the green mountains and green water mesmerizing. The unique interactivity of this digital technology brings the audience closer to the work, greatly promoting cultural heritage and the development of digital media art, and perfectly demonstrating the charm of the artistic recreation of "The Classic of Mountains and Seas".

### 3.3. Virtual Language

In the context of digitization, many works of art have no physical substance, and their creators use the language of virtuality to create a sense of mystery that is both illusory and unreal. The digitalization of the literary image of "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" establishes one virtual space after another through anthropomorphism, dislocation, and imagination, allowing the audience to "roam freely in the time and space dimensions of different logics, such as history and the future, matter and spirit, and emotion and reason". The high degree of simulation of virtual art scenes satisfies people's pursuit and imagination of the fantasy world.

Relying on the primitive aesthetics and ancient mythological system nurtured by the Classic of Mountains and Seas, the 2020 Asia Digital Art Exhibition invites a number of outstanding artists from home and abroad to bring together different forms of works, such as installations, videos, new media, etc., and combines diversified exhibition modes, such as sound, light, electricity, etc., so as to fuse the simplicity and innocence of the first blossoming of life into the ancient and profound "Oriental Wisdom". "The exhibition will be organized by the artists in different forms, such as installation, video, new media and other works.

Curator Chen Huoyang's digital media work "VR-Eye Movement Shanhaijing-Travel Guide" is an interactive VR travel guide to the world of Shanhaijing. The story unfolds from the perspective of the "Nine-Tailed Fox", and the viewer visits the mythological stories of Shanhaijing by following the reincarnation of the nine-tailed fox over and over again. Between the jumps of the algorithmic creatures, the viewer travels through an imaginary labyrinth based on Shanhaijing stories. The work shows the wormhole imagination of "Nuwa Mending Heaven" and the gene-editing imagination of "Dayu Ruling Water": "Nuwa Mending Heaven" is transformed into a "Star Gate" that closes the gap between the stars and the earth in Chen's work. In Chen's work, Nuwa is transformed into a "Star Gate" that closes the gap between the stars and the Earth, and Dayu turns into a bear every time he treats the water, expressing the idea of increasing human strength in the future through the means of gene editing. In the image, the "water" that Dayu treats is represented as a river of human genes.

The artist creates an immersive virtual scene using VR equipment and eye-tracking devices. The audience is willing to indulge in the sensory feast and can hardly escape. The

exhibition uses LED, virtual reality, holographic projection and other virtual reality art and the material world to build a dream-like world, this kind of absence of presence, virtual reality, all make the "VR - Eye Movement Shan Hai Jing - Travel Guide" exude the unique charm of "true is also false when it is false, where there is nothing there is also nothing".

### 3.4. Dissemination Language

With the help of network information technology, the public can see works of art easily and quickly, no matter when or where they are, which greatly enhances the freedom of viewing art and is more in line with the busy rhythm of the public's life. The threshold of art appreciation disappears under the influence of communicative language. The high degree of development of communicative language has transformed the elite's exclusive access to elegant art into the general public's sharing in popular culture, and has broken down cultural barriers with an open attitude. Artistic creations in the digital age have thus become inclusive without losing their originality, accessible without lacking a distinctive personality. This also makes it clear to creators that, with the support of the language of communication, they should realize the unity of objectivity and subjectivity, and that they must fully understand the relevant knowledge content before creating specific works, so as not to do whatever they want to avoid the "form and spirit" of the works not being the same. At the same time, they should focus on the understanding of commonality and individuality, pay attention to the trend of the times, and pursue the integration of public perception and aesthetic expansion.

Zhejiang Museum of Art's "New Classic of Mountains and Seas - Contemporary Art Exhibition of Chinese Mythological Metaphysics" (Figure 11) relies on the immediacy of digital information dissemination, the permanence of cloud storage, the collection and uploading of all the works of the exhibition to the Internet, the combination of different cultures of many countries, It collects and uploads all the exhibition works to the Internet, combines different cultures of many countries, translates multiple languages, carefully designs the guiding process in combination with the public's cognition, and creates a fascinating immersive experience through story-driven to build an illusory and perfect online museum. It has collaborated with Chinese cultural centers in Wellington, New York, Berlin, Costa Rica, Sydney, Stockholm and other places to launch online exhibition activities, which have attracted widespread attention and praise from the local community. Without leaving their homes, people from all over the world can experience the possibilities of curators and artists to expand the space of Chinese mythological memory and gain a new definition of traditional Chinese mythological consciousness and images.

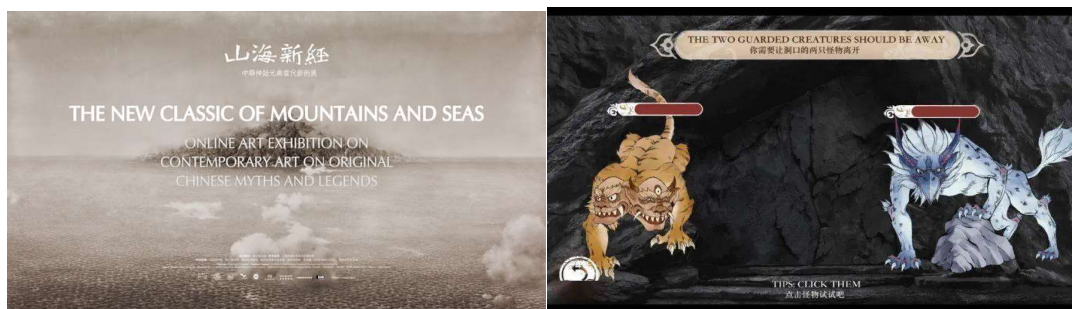


Figure 11. Cloud Exhibition of "New Scriptures of Mountains and Seas "

This digital communication language brings the artists and the audience into the same context, the digital works uploaded by the artists are delivered to all corners of the world, and the real-time feedback from the public is transmitted back, where the opinions and insights of different groups of people collide and are exchanged, and the cultural heritage is realized in the collective relay of the public.

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