

# Week 6 | Mythical Animals and Power Structures

written by Luosijie Ding | 3 March 2026



## From Eryao to multi-scale power

This week, my research has become more structured, focusing on myth and power, starting with Eryao's "Wishing your child becomes a dragon". In this work, the function of "dragon" is as an everyday myth embedded in the family structure. Drawing lessons from Roland Barthes, I understand myth as a communication system. Here, the dragon is not just a symbol but a mechanism to naturalise the expectation of success through repetition. The circular structure of the film reinforces the idea that there is no beginning and no end, which reflects how social expectations are constantly copied. Power operates at the micro level and is internalised in daily life and family narration.

[link: Week 5 | Shadow puppetry, Images and Dragon Myth](#)

[link: Reading week | Understanding Tradition in Dialogue: An Artist Interview](#)

[link: Curatorial Pitch](#)

## Expand research and management objectives

From this point of view, I asked if mythical animals could reveal different scales of power. Through lectures, reading myths in Western and Chinese theoretical frameworks, and exhibition research, I explored the works of Ai Weiwei and Kiki Smith.

In Animal Kingdom, the zodiac animals are placed in the historical and political background. They originated from Yuanmingyuan and became a symbol of national trauma and are now circulating in the global art market. Myth operates at the macro level and is shaped by imperial power, national identity, and capital.

link: [Zodiac Heads, Ai Weiwei](#)

In Constellation, the constellation is brought to the ground so that the audience can overlook the “sky”. This inversion reveals cognitive ability, and human beings organise nature through naming and expression. Through this process – from analysing the two medicines to expanding research and then to choosing artists – my curatorial goal becomes clear: to show how mythical animals build their strength on different scales, from family life to national history and knowledge systems.

link: [Constellation, Kiki Smith](#)

## **JIJU Collective Curator: Hometown and the Structure of “Shell”**

In the group project of JIJU Collective, I led the collective members to determine the theme of our curation and the design of the main work of the curator. The curatorial mode of “image matching”: each person chooses two pictures, one from their original hometown and the other from Edinburgh (as the new “hometown”), and the two need to form emotional or memory connections. For example, I paired the Wukang Building in Shanghai with a similar building in Edinburgh.

In space, we plan to put the images on two opposite walls and connect

each pair of images with red lines, hanging above the audience, forming a structure similar to a “shell”, implying the relationship between protection and connection. However, while developing this display strategy, it also prompted me to consider the feasibility of the exhibition, particularly in terms of spatial constraints, installation methods, and audience movement within the space, which is prepared for my next week’s research.

## Bibliography

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Ai Weiwei. Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads. 2010.

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## Curatorial Pitch

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## Project Overview

This curatorial project explores how traditional mythological imagery can operate within contemporary exhibition frameworks—not as preserved

heritage, but as an active narrative structure that continues to organise perception, identity, and social expectation.

Drawing from Roland Barthes's proposition that "*myth is not a story, but a system of communication*," the exhibition approaches myth not as narrative content, but as an ideological mechanism.

## **From Symbol to Structure: Re-reading the Dragon**

[link: Eryao, Wishing Your Child Becomes a Dragon, 58 seconds, Stop-motion animation](#)

### **At the centre of the curating project is Eryao's shadow play work, *Wishing Your Child Becomes a Dragon***

Traditionally in China, the dragon signifies fortune, authority, and success. However, through Barthes' framework of second-order signification, the dragon is reinterpreted here not as folklore imagery, but as a cultural structure

The idiom "Wish your child becomes a dragon" becomes more than parental aspiration—it means intergenerational pressure, mobility anxiety and identity shaped through expectation. Within the exhibition, the dragon operates as a mechanism that normalises these structures across the process of visiting the exhibition.

## **Curating as Cultural Translation**

Extending Carolee Thea's notion of the curator as mediator, this project positions curating as an act of **cultural translation** rather than preservation.

Tradition is not displayed as authenticity; it is re-articulated within a new perceptual and discursive system.

The exhibition does not "present" myths. It **restructures how myth is experienced**.

## **Spatial Realisation: Summerhall as Site**

The exhibition is proposed to take place at Summerhall, specifically within a ground-floor gallery space equipped with an integrated black box environment, which is named the Sciennes Gallery.

This site is particularly suitable because the Sciennes Gallery in Summerhall has two large windows, which allow natural light to enter and also allow necessary controlled lighting conditions for shadow projection and moving images. The black box structure of this space

supports the immersive display of Eryao's stop-motion animation film and television devices. In addition, Summerhall itself provides a variety of space types, including not only a gallery for exhibitions but also places that can be used for public activities, such as reading clubs, film screenings, and exchange activities. This provides strong support for expanding the exhibition form and enriching the audience experience. Its close ties with the University of Edinburgh make the site geographically accessible, academically consistent, and economically feasible.

link: [Summerhall's overview](#)

## **Spatial Structure**

Rather than retelling this narrative, the exhibition spatialises it. The exhibition was held in three interconnected areas in the environment.

### **SPOT A — Readable and touchable Tradition**

At the entrance, the audience will see the shadow dragon created by Eryao hanging on the glass window. The sunlight just outside the window can be used as the light source for shadow play works, which makes the materials of the works clearly visible: leather fragments, seams, and other structures.

At the same time, before the beginning of Eryao's works, the curatorial text was provided, and the cultural meaning of the dragon and the idiom "*Wishing Your Child Becomes a Dragon*" were introduced, which provided a convenient introduction for international audiences.

At Spot A, tradition is readable and touchable, and the audience is allowed to interact with the shadow play works installed on the window.

### **Corridors — Myth in Process**

From this still dragon body project, the audience enters a narrow corridor. In this transitional space, the single-channel projection displays the stop-motion animation sequence frame by frame.

Dragons slowly assemble themselves through obvious repetition. Limbs can change. The body will get longer. Movement is mechanical, not smooth. The projection scale is slightly enlarged, so that the shadow goes beyond the picture and overflows the wall and floor.

The corridor acts as a compression. The audience must personally experience the transformation of the dragon. Here, myth becomes a process.

Scattered phrases appeared faintly on the wall, almost illegible: "Expectation." "Success." "Obedience." "Future."

### **SPOT B — Myth as Endless Cycle**

The last area leads to a darker projection space. This one-minute stop-motion animation is played continuously and circularly on a big screen. There are no seats. Visitors are free to come in and out.

The dragon's movements are unstable. Its segmented body bends awkwardly, becoming less proud and more like a monster. There is no narrative climax. No transformation is complete. The cycle starts again.

The time of this exhibition is cyclical and nonlinear. The lack of a

fixed starting point reinforces the concept that cultural expectations are inherited rather than chosen.

Engaging with moving image exhibition theory, particularly the writings of Erika Balsom, this project imagines the exhibition space as a temporal architecture rather than a static display.

Time in this exhibition is not only media duration. It is cultural persistence—the long repetition of expectation across generations.

### **Academic Framework: Integrating Chinese and Western Theory**

To strengthen theoretical grounding, the project integrates both Western critical theory and Chinese mythological scholarship.

### **Western theoretical framework**

- Roland Barthes – myth as ideological system
- Erika Balsom – exhibition as temporal
- Carolee Thea – curatorial mediation

### **Chinese theoretical framework**

- Yuan Ke – systematic construction of Chinese mythological frameworks
- Mao Dun – classification and cultural interpretation of myth
- Ye Shuxian – myth as cultural coding and archetypal structure

This dual framework ensures that Chinese myth is not reduced to a visual motif, cultural interpretation retains local epistemology and

subjectivity, and the exhibition avoids purely Western theoretical dominance.

These books and documents will also be displayed in the window as an archive, which will help audiences from all backgrounds to better understand the significance of the idiom of “wishing your child becomes a dragon” in China.

## **Ethical Scale**

If myth influences how we understand the world, and exhibitions influence how we understand myth, then curating is never neutral.

Instead of celebrating the dragon as cultural heritage, this exhibition questions how such narratives shape identity and expectation in contemporary society.

The project, therefore, operates not as cultural nostalgia but as a speculative curatorial method testing how traditional narrative forms continue to organise contemporary life.

## **Bibliography**

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# Reading week | Understanding Tradition in Dialogue: An Artist Interview

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