

Dear Srivi

My name is Shuhua Dai, from Beijing, China. I am a columnist and a writer. I happened to see your illustrations on Internet and fell in love with them in the first glance. I'm really eager to talk to you and make more Chinese readers know you and your fantastic works.

I have a column called "Shuhua's World" on Chinese monthly magazine Fellow Traveler, which was founded in 2008 and focuses on international culture and global communication. Our magazine is distributed on China's nationwide high speed railway and has 250,000 monthly circulation. About 8,500,000 railway passengers read it each month. In my column, I do interview with interesting people around the world to present diverse lifestyles. The interviews I made in 2012 have been collected and published as a popular E-book "The Character of America" on the biggest E-book website Douban in China. Here is the link: <http://read.douban.com/ebook/323158/>.

Right now I'm preparing a new series of interviews with international illustrators. The title of this series is "The Forest of Illustrations". These interviews will be published on both magazine and E-book.

So far I have interviewed 13 artists around the world, including Holly Clifton Brown, Josh Agle, Yaeko Abe, Guy Robinson, Kelly Rae, Colobockle, Marco Marella, Katepugsley, Adolie Day, Kirsan Ulve, and so on. I appreciate if you have time and interest to share your ideas and art. Please see the attached is a copy of my column in which I interviewed British illustrator Holly Clifton Brown.

The following is the list of interview questions:

1) Could you take some time to tell us a bit about yourself, like where you are from and where you are living?

I am Srivi Kalyan, short for SriSrividhiya Kalyanasundaram. I live in Chennai, India. Our family has lived across a few cities in India, but I have spent most of my time in Chennai. I have spent a year in the US and travelled to other countries as well. I am 32 years old and enjoy working with children, teaching, creating art, reading, travelling, writing and thinking about various things. I run my own company called FOONIFERSE ([www.fooniferse.com](http://www.fooniferse.com)). Through it, I am building a space/ movement that will look at the wholesome nature of arts in education, life, and society.

2) You have some amazing illustrations, have you studied at all? If so where and what did you study?

Thanks for your heartfelt comments about my work. I have always enjoyed drawing and my parents have encouraged me to follow my heart. My mother was my first guide and I was encouraged to explore and paint on my own from when I was 2 years old. My art teachers in school also encouraged me to explore my ideas about art independently and did not interfere with my style or teach me any formal methods to work. So, I spent my early years discovering art from within, exploring media, learning about myself and what I enjoyed expressing through art. I did my bachelors in History of Fine Arts, Drawing and Painting(2001) and Masters in Fine Arts with a specialization in Graphic Design(2004)from Stella Maris College in Chennai. These five years of study gave me a solid ground in History of Art, painting and design. I was able to refine my ideas further and find a direction for future work. I then went on to study Masters in Arts Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, USA. (2007). This program created an opportunity for me to interact with artists from different disciplines- visual arts, theatre, music, dance and art education helping me build my ideas and work in the field of art education, media education, and development of educational media.

3) When and how did you decide to be an illustrator?

As a child, I always enjoyed reading books and also the many wonderful illustrations that were part of these books. As I grew up, I continued to love children's books and books with different kinds of illustrations. I started working on writing and illustrating my own books in school days and then expanded the ideas during my college years. I got a lucky break when my mentor Mr.A.V. Ilango introduced me to Delhi(India) based publishers, Katha in 2004. My first illustrated work "Hanuman's Adventures in the

Netherland” got published in 2005. Since then I have illustrated, co-authored and designed close to 40 books for different organizations.

4) [Along the way of achieving your dream, what decisions you made deeply influenced your future career when you look back?](#)

One of the biggest decisions was to study art formally after high school. My family has faced several years of economic hardship and it was a difficult decision to make since survival in the arts is always tough. However, my family is supportive of my passion and what I am able to do now is deeply influenced by that critical decision I made when I was 17. For my undergraduate project, I chose to work on writing and illustrating children’s books and creating ideas for products for children. I also built an idea for a company that would bring together arts, thinking and social work. This also helped me streamline my ideas further and has had a big impact on all the work and directions I have taken since then. But the biggest decision that keeps me going is an almost childlike yet very strong commitment I made to work in the arts. I hold myself to that commitment through the tough and good periods, taking each step forward slowly.

5) [Does being an illustrator accord with your initial expectation?](#)

I thoroughly enjoy illustration and it is a rewarding experience to create art that resonates with a story/song. Through illustration I find it possible to travel very far into the story, the minds and spirits of different characters and discover much about the immensity of life through these journeys. Also, I predominantly work with children’s book illustrations and enjoy working with children to learn from them and understand them. This exchange of emotions, knowledge and sharing of children’s worlds help me work in a more holistic sense. I enjoy feeling the world through children’s eyes as an illustrator. It also helps me keep my inner child alive with all her wonder and simplicity in this complex world.

However, I feel that as a field, illustration is a tough place to be in, especially in India. It is still evolving as a field here, and often due to time crunches and deadlines, we don’t get enough time to create. Also, sometimes it is very difficult to work with the publisher creating something that both of us agree on. Since people often see illustration as commercial art, the freedom of creating a work of art that resonates with your personal vision is not easily accepted. I find that very stifling sometimes. It is not possible to make a living only through illustration. Also, since there are many illustrators and it is as competitive as any other field, making a mark as an illustrator is also tough. Further, in India there are no organizations that bring illustrators together to help them discuss, share or exchange best practices. I often feel the lack of this kind of communication.

Sometimes I have had good relationships with publishers/clients and in such situations the work has been very rewarding. Some very good illustrators in India have also become my friends and been very supportive over the years.

6) [Did you ever have difficult times in your career? How did you overcome it?](#)

A career in the arts is always difficult and it is a constant struggle to make ends meet. Some years are good, some are bad. Mostly they are a mix of bad projects, good projects, less income, difficult clients, and good ones. I think it is a constant learning process to figure out how best to handle the situation. Sometimes I feel depressed and spend time with good friends, re-think what I want to do, how differently I can perceive the situation and move on from the tougher times. Other times, I just take it in my stride and move on. There isn’t always time to brood over the worst. I innately believe life is beautiful and special and hence, just spend time watching a flower or a tree, a beautiful evening sky and regain my spirit.

7) [Do you have big project on hands now, or do you have a big plan?](#)

Building up ‘Fooniferse’ as an international arts and cultural organization is one of my dreams for now. I am working slowly on it. In the midst of sustaining myself and evolving projects that are meaningful, sincere and have depth and quality, it feels like a slow and long journey. I am enjoying myself at the moment wondering, dreaming, planning and creating small projects towards my larger goals. You can visit

[www.fooniferse.com](http://www.fooniferse.com) to get a better understanding of the depth and scale of the project. As an entrepreneur, I am learning a lot of different things from planning and accounting to marketing and management. It is a new experience and as difficult as it is fulfilling.

- 8) Since most artists I've interviewed are from western countries. Your illustrations look very different and unique. They keep reminding me of eastern culture. How do you define or describe your art style?

My work has a strong influence of Asian art. I deeply enjoy studying about many forms of Indian folk and classical art and the life on the streets. I have a strong influence of other Asian art forms that include Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Persian. I also have a more western design sensibility. So much of my work is an amalgamation of many styles that inspire me.

As a researcher, I spent much time exploring the eastern philosophies and their approach to art during my Masters program in India. Hence, my approach to work is Asian/ eastern in many ways. I see art as a form of meditation and building deep inner compassion and silence. Much of the self-reflection I do is a means to create art that has an inner sense of peace and joy.

I trained in Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form for over 15 years. Much of my art is therefore distinctly influenced by the sense of movement, rhythm and emotional expression that comes from dance and in turn music. I find the arts are interdependent and each form enriches the other. This belief comes across in my work, finding various visual forms giving it a distinct identity. To describe it, I would say it is contemporary. At the core of my work is the conversation between the bold and the subtle; the form and the formless, existence and non-existence. How they interact, challenge and respond to each other defines the tension, fluidity and composition in my work.

- 9) What are some visual influences that make their way into your work?

My visual influences are very varied and depending on the project I work with different forms, colours and visual sensibilities inspired by many things: Chola bronzes from India, Buddhist art, various kinds of folk art forms like Madhubani, Gond, Warli, Patachitra, Bastar bronzes, Channapatna toys from across India; Some comic art books, works of impressionist artists from the West, traditional forms of architecture, intricate design styles from a lot of Persian art, zen gardens.

Mostly, I am drawn towards visuals that capture the deep silence of the universe, while representing the joy and celebration of life. Observing and learning from Nature in her myriad forms is my strongest influence though.

Speaking particularly of the Chinese influence in my work, I love Chinese brush painting and mostly work with the Chinese bamboo brushes for my watercolours. Though I have never formally learnt it, I am often inspired by it. I still have copies of some Chinese children's books that I have loved much over the years and continue to seek inspiration from.

- Three sweaters – Text by Wang Sen, Paintings by Ho Yen-jung Foreign Languages press, Peking 1975
- Chaoshutun and Nannona – Adapted by Ah Hsiu from a folk narrative poem of the Tai people, Illustrated by Cheng Shih-fa, Foreign languages Press, Peking, 1961
- Dotting the eyes on a painted dragon – Text by Cang Yangqing, Illustrations by Lu Fusheng, Zhaohua publishing House, Beijing, 1984
- Who's lost a Handkerchief?, Text by Shanghai Education Bureau, Drawn by Wen Quanyuan, Foreign languages press, Beijing

- 10) How long does a picture usually take you from design to finish? What are the steps?

I work with various styles and depending on the style the time taken to complete it varies. I have done books with 24 illustrations in less than 15 days also and over a period of 6 months also. I do enjoy working fast and most often when a work is commissioned, I usually need to work within a very short timeline that

usually ranges between a week to 4 months including feedback and changes from the publishers/ clients. However, more recently, I choose to work slowly, working on a few illustrations for months in a very intricate style and exhibit these work independently. (Kabir)

11) [Could you share your mental approach to developing concepts for your Illustrations?](#)

Depending on the story that I am working with, my approach to illustrations change. Usually, I spend time reading the story, trying to get a feel for it, connect to the emotions that the author is trying to bring out. I do initial sketches to get a sense of form/ colour. Post this, I go about researching into the time-period of the story, look at the mythological, cultural, artistic, nature related contexts and look through many different visuals. Then I start sketching, building up a style that matches with the mood of the story. When I am working with a publisher, at this stage, there is a discussion on the art, and we agree on a set of changes and I re-work on the illustrations. Based on the stylistic decisions taken with the publisher, I create my final set of works. Sometimes, I also design the final version of the book.

12) [Could you give a list of your favorite works you ever made? And could you tell us a bit about these works, like where do you get the inspirations, and what do you want to express in each picture?](#)

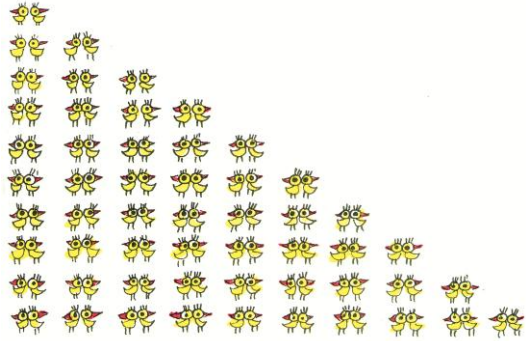
It would be quite tough to choose my favorites from my work. Here are a few that I really enjoyed creating.

1. Hanuman's adventures in the nether world (Katha Publishers, New Delhi) – I was asked to create the Monkey God- Hanuman in a style that would be very different from all the existing ways in which he has been expressed. I wanted to create someone very simple like a child's drawing, made out of simple shapes. I enjoyed creating many illustrations in this book. One of my favourite ones is that of Hanuman flying.



2. Sky Queen (Katha Publishers, New Delhi) – Rising from the ocean – a moment of inspiration that came from connecting to the depth of sorrow and compassion that moves a being like the Sky Queen to arise out of the earth. The forms were inspired by the musical instruments from North East India.



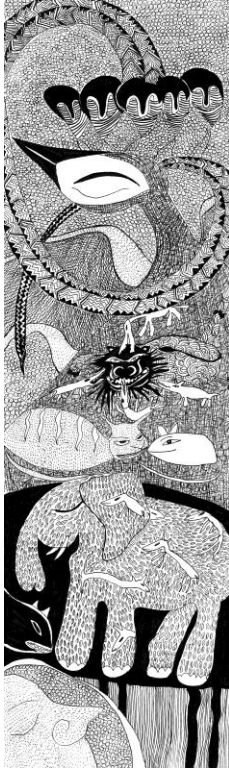


3. NCERT math textbook – 2times table/ King and the Horses problem- NCERT, New Delhi, India. This was a fun exercise, I felt like I was learning math all over again by recreating it visually. I experimented with several folk art styles from India to create different visual experiences for each chapter. The vision of the Math text books was to introduce Math through stories, art and everyday life. It was my first foray into educational design and I have since then enjoyed creating several educational products that bring art and learning together in different ways.

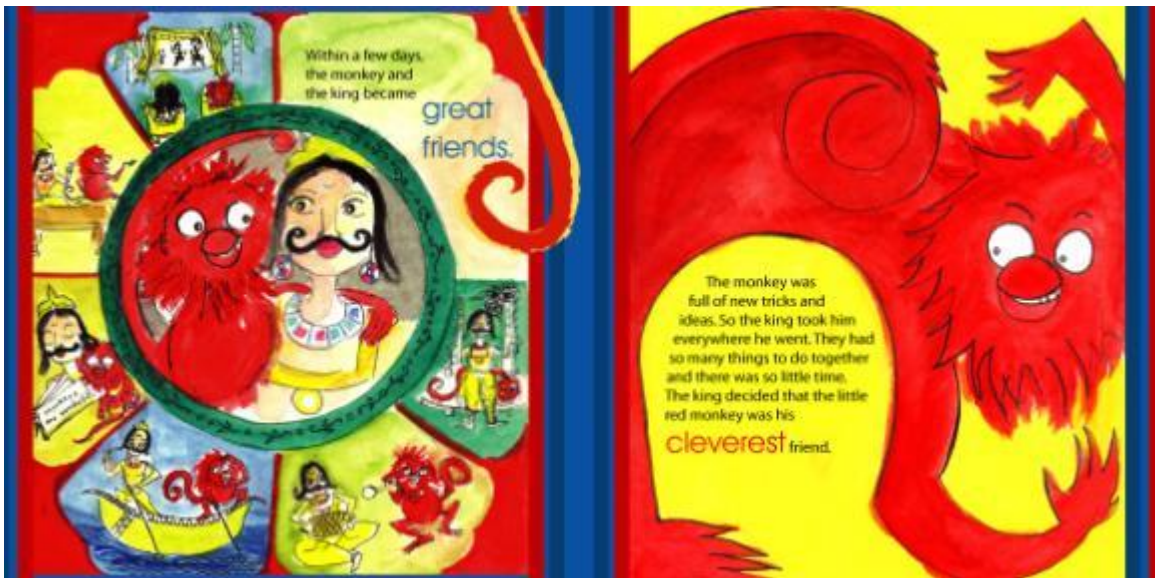


4. Parthiban’s dreams – Lady and the moon, Battle Scene, Katha Publishers, New Delhi, India – Young love, romantic and beautiful, I enjoyed creating this moment of waiting and yearning. Inspired by the sculptures of Mahabalipuram, 7<sup>th</sup> century Pallava style, it was challenging to break away from traditional forms, while staying true to their spirit.

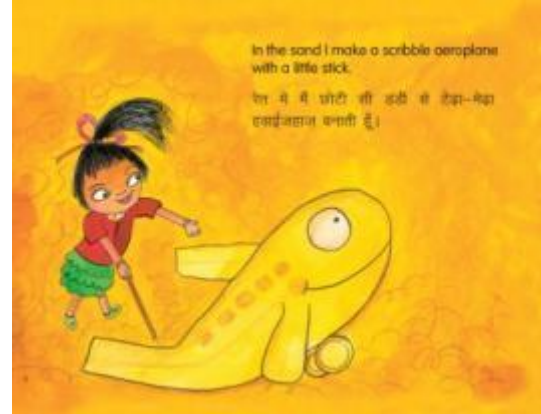
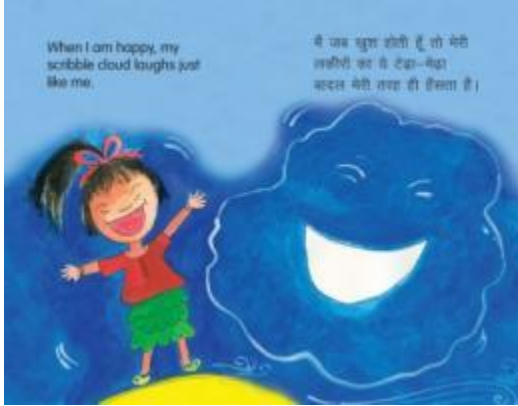




5. Kabir poetry collection art work(personal)  
Kabir is a fifteenth century mystic poet. I have been working on illustrating some of his poetry for the last couple of years. The intricate patterns coupled with bold folk-like forms take me a long time to create. But I enjoy the detailing and it helps me relax and meditate.



6. Foolish red monkey, Pages for Ages, Chennai – a traditional folk tale re-interpreted with vibrant forms and colours. I was just delighted with the idea of creating several funny episodes with a little red monkey.



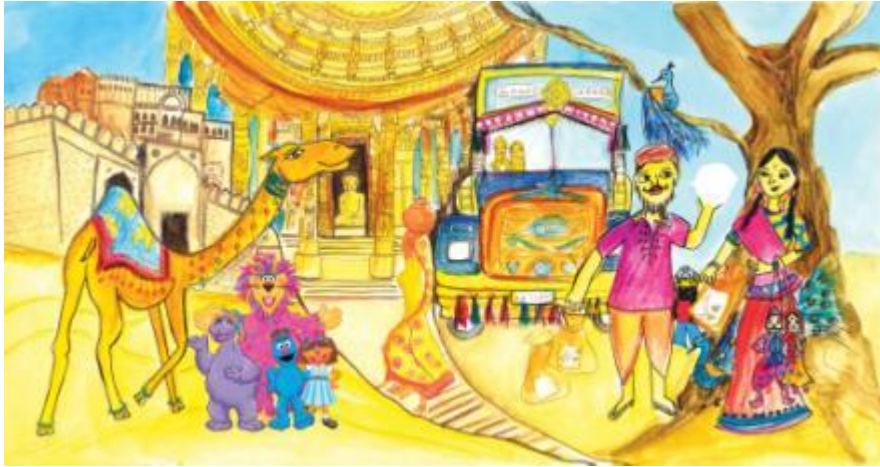
7. Scribble world – Girl drawing cloud/ airplane, Sesame Workshop India – One of my favourite educational design products. A little girl explores the ends of imagination and her emotions through scribbles.



8. Chowkor Raja – Raja and the mirror, Sesame Workshop India, a fun story about a King who loves square shapes, the entire book was illustrated using square patterns created digitally. While the story reinforces the idea of geometric shapes, it also guides children to think about the relevance of each shape and how it affects the design of many things around us.



9. No cualquier dia, Mother and child, Ediciones Castillo, Mexico. A poignant and hopeful story of a child with leprosy, this particular scene where a mother and child are begging and someone hands over a slice of pizza to them was very moving and touched me very deeply.



10. Journey of a Coin, Sesame Workshop India, A storybook that teaches the relevance of money through a small ten rupee coin that travels across India, this scene depicts a puppeteer selling his puppets and spices to a lady tourist. Each spread in the book explored a state of India and I enjoyed the research it involved as well as creating a feeling of each state and the many things that make it special.

13) [Being a full time illustrator you draw a lot and with that comes tools, what does your workstation consist of?](#)

As mentioned before, I am not a full time illustrator and do several other things. However, illustrations do take a lot of my time. I work with different media. I enjoy working with my hand most of the time. I work a lot with water colors, inks and color pencils. Oil pastels and acrylics are other media that I enjoy. Black micro tip pens/pigment liners, a range of pencils, multi-colored pencils and a wide range of brush sizes from those used for Indian miniature paintings to the beautiful bamboo brushes used in Chinese painting are other media that fill my work space.

I also have a workstation with my scanner and computer and use them primarily for designing and putting together a book, sometimes for editing or building further layers on a painted work. As a designer, I do work a lot on the computer as well.

14) [Could you describe your typical day?](#)

No one day looks like the other. Since I run my own company, I work across different things and tackle whatever new stuff comes every day. Some days I spend a lot of time working on the computer, designing, writing or reading things on the internet. Some days I am working with children and teaching them. Some days I paint and read, listen to music. Other days, I spend time writing stories, reflecting on my experiences, and putting my thoughts together. Also, I have come to understand that the way we see day and night as the standard frame of time doesn't always work. Time is cyclic, permeable and illusory. So often a thought that began 6 or 7 months ago, comes into full fruition on a particular day. And I realize that through the entire time frame, I have been working on it consciously or unconsciously building several aspects of it, till it becomes a work of art. I enjoy thinking that some days I am on Jupiter and one of my days there is in itself many years on earth. It is kind of a fun play with time that helps me explore many different things and understand myself better.

15) [What are your hobbies? What do you do in your spare time?](#)

I enjoy walking, spending time in nature, travelling to natural places away from the city life, listening to music and reading. A lot of times the art I create for myself also becomes a hobby. Often I get frustrated doing commissioned work that ensures survival, but does not have the freedom of exploring the kind of art one wants with depth and intensity. So just creating for myself is also one of the things I enjoy doing in my spare time.



Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed, any last tips for up and coming illustrators?

Stay true to your heart if you want to create life in your work. As the story 'Dotting the Eyes on a Painted dragon' recounts Zhang Zengyao's story, when he paints the eyes of the dragons, they are brought to life and fly into the heavens. Keep learning. Keep practicing, experimenting and exploring. Money is important; making a living is important but let their pursuit not be at the cost of your soul and the gift that you carry through your being. Reflect on yourself and on life discovering your inner goodness, silence and beauty. Then infuse your art with both passion and strength and the very breath of life.

My personal work can be viewed on my website [www.sriviliveshere.com](http://www.sriviliveshere.com),  
<https://www.facebook.com/Sriviliveshere>

Srivi Kalyan