

A Reflection on the Mahjong Table

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Integrative Project

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Introduction

A Reflection On The Mahjong Table, is the result of my one year integrative Project, researching the thesis question: “How can cultural commodities help multi-cultural people living in foreign lands shape their various national identities?”. This project is inspired by my first-hand experience because I purchase commodities that embody cultural values to help define myself as an international student in the U.S who has grown up in China and lived in England. I have re-designed a board game based on Mahjong, a traditional Chinese game. The icons show a collection of items inspired by Chinese or American culture.

I will investigate the relationships between identity and culturally-influenced personal possessions, as I am curious about how given personal possessions may serve as coping mechanisms or a means of self-cognition for people that are exposed to multiple cultures yet do not fit into existing cultural categories. For example, many of my friends are ABCs – American Born Chinese. They belong to a group the majority of the U.S population has some understanding of or concept of. However, there are many international people, like me, that are placed in the grey area of national identities, meaning not belonging to any named cultural groups. I hold a Chinese passport but have spent more time living and studying in foreign countries. Therefore, a sense of exclusion and isolation is always present because western people view me as Chinese, but my worldview and mentality is obviously massively different from native Chinese people. There are millions of Asians like this due to the 21st century trend of Asian parents sending their kids abroad to get a better education. They are under-represented, and my intention is to not only reflect on my personal journey but also to give a voice to people who have had similar experience with me.

Contextual Discussion

Personal possession in relation to national identity

Mark Cleveland and William Chang assert in their research that to “... recognize culture as the most powerful determinant of consumer attitudes, lifestyle and behaviors”¹. They aim to not only systematically analyse the concept of national/ethnic identity and immigrant experience, but also to logically comprehend the role of materialism against various national backgrounds: developed countries with highly heterogeneous cultures such as Canada, US and the ones in Western Europe, versus developing countries that attempt to emulate Western-based consumer culture and materialism. They use a case study that compares first- and second-generation Korean- Canadians to demonstrate how the values and attitudes of immigrants serve as an orienting and mediating framework that influences their consumer behavior and philosophy towards “possession”, a dominant factor that shapes identity.

The post-industrial materialism indulged the significance of “possession” and developed its three domains: as personal life “centrality”, as an approach to happiness and satisfaction, and as a symbol to infer success. Mark Cleveland and William Chang rationalise the abstract and complex emotions that drive people’s personal choice as a result of seeking individual identity while adapting to a new culture. The writers indicate that national and ethnic identity is a “pliable concept” because, as a product that is capable of both affiliating the past and adjusting to current circumstances, it stimulates need for materials in unsettled social and cultural conditions to anchor existing identity and create new ones, especially when the move is “voluntary and reflects an upward social mobility”.

Cleveland and Chang’s research studies the psychology of immigrants and sums up the overall and general interiority of cross-cultural people while the following source focuses specifically on the “third culture kid”, the closest resemblance of my identity but not entirely (because, again,

¹ Cleveland, Mark, and William Chang. “Migration and Materialism: The Roles of Ethnic Identity, Religiosity, and Generation.” *Journal of Business Research* 62, no. 10 (October 2009): 963–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.05.022>.

people like me are placed in the grey area of national identity that doesn't have an official descriptive term - this is also a central emphasis of my piece).

In "*Growing Up A Third Culture Kid-A Sociological Self-Exploration*"², the author K. R conducted an autopsy of the concept of "Third culture kids" based on her own personal experience moving back to the US from overseas countries, previous research on "Third culture kids" (TCK), and various micro and macro sociological theories.

A third culture kid is "... an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience. "(Pollock 1988)³

This article serves as a crucial reference because it brought up the notion of "sociological imagination" (C. Wright Mills' 1959)⁴ which means people are increasingly aware of presenting themselves to other people. Constant relocation fostered third culture kids' instincts of frequently reassessing their identities and roles in different surroundings and therefore they tend to consciously step back to contemplate the broader social interactions and patterns and present and project the images of themselves in various situations according to the learnt roles and norms.

K.R brought up Mill's theory⁵ and explained that "sociological imagination" is caused by individuals grasping history and biography, and the relations between the two within society. She also demonstrated that the behavior of projecting our identities (in my piece, specifically projecting our identities with certain possessions that embodies cultural value) allow people to

² K. R. "Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge". *Growing Up A Third Culture Kid -A Sociological Self-Exploration Essay*, *University of Massachusetts Boston*, 29-42. The Omar Khayyam Center for Integrative Research in Utopia, Mysticism, and Science (Utopistics): Ahead Publishing House (imprint: Okcir Press), 2011.

³ David C. Pollock (1939-2004), American sociologist known for his speeches and expertise on Third Culture Kid

⁴ Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962), American sociologist and professor at Columbia University

⁵ Ibis

articulate their upbringings and personal stories in more transitory circumstances when exposed to diverse culture and different lifestyle.

Mahjong and its history and representation

Mahjong is a traditional Chinese board game that has more than 1000 years of history and was significantly developed in Qing Dynasty⁶. Mahjong is a game of strategy and calculation with a degree of chance, commonly played by four players with a set of 144 tiles, on which are designs based of Chinese characters, symbols and numbers. The rules vary a lot according to the region and it was widely spread across the world throughout the 20th century. Currently it is also a very popular game in Asian countries such as Korean and Japan, as well as western countries.

Mahjong has an intimate connection with the development of Chinese history. It was widely played during World War II. This contributed to the rapid growth in popularity of it globally as many foreign invaders in China learnt the game through the locals, which is a fact that is reasonable yet disappointing. Chen Minjie⁷, in his article, discussed the relationship between Mahjong and the Chinese identities by analyzing the details of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). Fought 75 years ago between Imperial Japan and China, this war is indeed very significant to modern China, to contemporary China, and even to ethnic Chinese people in the United States. He focuses on how the Chinese immigrants residing in the U.S. including those Americans of Chinese ancestry, have been informed of ethnic Chinese experiences during World War II. He also referenced Krenn's⁸ article that Chinese people were the target of "the first legislative act to single out a race of people as undesirable immigrants". It was because of the Naturalization Act (1870), which limits American citizenship to "White persons and persons of African descent," barring Asians from U.S. citizenship and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspending immigration of Chinese labor.

⁶ The Qing dynasty, officially the "Great Qing", was the last imperial dynasty of China. Preceded by the Ming dynasty, Qing dynasty was established in 1636 and ruled China for almost three centuries from 1644-1912. As the world history's fifth largest empire, it formed the territorial base for modern China and was succeeded by the Republic of China.

⁷ Chen, Minjie. "Mahjong, World War II, and Ethnic Chinese in Multicultural Youth Literature." *MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION*, 2009, 9.

⁸ Krenn, M. L. (2006). *The color of empire: Race and American foreign relations*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books.

Chen Minjie also highlighted the issue of belongings among Chinese in America. They “never felt at home in America but strongly identified with their ancestral land—China”⁹ because of the early social exclusion and discrimination. Chen researched the published readings for Chinese ethnic U.S youth and discovered books on the topic of Mahjong among other books about World War II. He questioned the lack of presence of story and evidence of China during the Japanese war and said that Mahjong was the answer :“When they were not combating Japan and its collaborators, when they were not hiding from air raids, when they were not hungry and weary after fleeing from cities conquered by the enemy, when they were not caught in the terror of a bubonic plague and other endemic diseases spread by the Japanese army (they are playing Mahjong).”

Mahjong often appears in popular narrative films, especially the ones made by foreign people that reflect Chinese culture or history, such as *Lust Caution*¹⁰. Mahjong was used as a way for people to communicate and to exchange and extract information (as the cultural tradition is that people tend to talk quite a lot on the Mahjong table). Mahjong was particularly popular in Shanghai, which was the foreign leased area during World War II. So even back then, despite its more negative connection with western invasion, conquering, and indifference towards war of some Chinese, Mahjong already had the function and notion of channeling various statuses, cultures and nationalities. Therefore Mahjong, since the 20th century, has been broadly used to represent Chinese national identities for western audiences. For example, the recent all-Asian cast film¹¹ *Crazy Rich Asians*, conducted a major scene at the Mahjong table right at the end of the film. The mahjong table, in addition to its iconic representation of Chinese culture, becomes a place of cross fire arguments, building mutual understanding, giving up prejudices and resolving problems.

⁹ Yu, H. (2001). *Thinking Orientals: Migration, contact, and exoticism in modern America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ *Lust Caution*, Ang Lee, United States: Focus Features.2007

¹¹*Crazy Rich Asians*, Jon M.Chun, United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.2018

Contemporary Chinese art and artists



Xu Bing, Book from the sky, FIU's Frost Art

aligned next to each other to form large scale installation pieces that look like books of “Sky” and “sea” that appear seemingly professional, serious and profound but are actually unreadable and incomprehensible. Developed from his idea, I will create seemingly Chinese characters that are essentially made up of English letters on some of my Mahjong pieces.

As discussed above, Mahjong itself carries a historical and cultural significance. However, the re-designing process of mine should highlight how different products reinforce the identities of intercultural people. In Xu Bing’s “*Book from the sky*” and “*Sea of books*”¹², he redesigned all of the Chinese characters to be unreadable and made them into books. These books are

Another project is Zhang Peili’s video piece “30 x 30”¹³, in which he breaks a mirror with his two hands in latex medical gloves. This project employed similar philosophy with mine since it visualizes people’s certain purposes of having a specific item. This



Zhang Peili, 30x30(still), 1988. Collection Of The Artist, Hang Zhou



Zhang Peili, X?, 1987, oil on canvas, 39 × 31 1/4". 1986–87.



Zhang HongTu, “Quaker Oats Mao”, 1987

¹² Xu Bing, “The Origins of Creativity”, Helmut Stern Auditorium, University of University Museum of Art, 7th Oct 2018

¹³ Hung, Wu, Contemporary Chinese Art: A History 1970s to 2000s. Thames & Hudson. 2014

project indirectly demonstrated Zhang Peilio's obsession with latex gloves: (1) It anchors his family background as both of his parents worked in a local hospital. (2) It reflects the social context, which is, in this case, the outbreak of hepatitis A in 1988.

Furthermore, Zhang HongTu's: "Quaker Oats Mao" in 1987 visualised the idea of east meets west and he added the image of Mao on a tin of "Quaker Oats". This project commented on the impact of pop culture on China after the "Reform and Opening up" policy promoted by Deng Xiaoping. More importantly, it highlights the idea of "the strategy of 'marketing Mao' as a pop icon" which subtly commented on the historical event of Mao's propaganda during the Great Leap Forward movement and Cultural Revolution.

Methodology

I started with a comparatively broader topic at the beginning of my project. Along the way, I have distilled my final thesis by undertaking different sub-projects. I usually spent three to four weeks on each sub-project to explore different concepts and artistic techniques and to test out new possibilities. This process helped me to prevent consequences from potential false investment, and to realise what the real significance is for my project. Most importantly, to logically build a solid foundation for the intense crafting process of my final exhibition.

The thesis question at the beginning of the semester:

"How can purchased items help people shape their identities and personalities?"

Evolution:

"How can ~~purchased items~~ **cultural commodities** help **(multi-cultural)** people shape their **(national)** identities and personalities?"

The thesis question at the end of the semester/Final thesis:

"How cultural commodities help multi-cultural people shape their various national identities?"

The initial research question for my IP is "How can purchased items help people shape their identities and personalities?" I have always had an interest in materialism and I was motivated to do research on particularly the economic perspectives of consumer culture and behavior and to discuss how they relate to the context of all types of identities, mainly gender, national and ethnic identities. I conducted three photo shoots with a Ph.D student, Will, who is also a drag

queen called Ariana, to explore gender identity representation. After that, my attention shifted to an exploration on national identities with Chelsea, who is greatly influenced by both Chinese culture (mother's side) and American culture (father's side). Enormously inspired by this body of work and the subject of Chelsea, I decided to concentrate on just the cultural/national identities for my final piece as this is something that I resonate the most with, being an international student here in the U.S who lived in England and comes from China. Therefore, I decided to research the question of "How cultural commodities help multi-cultural people shape their various national identities?"

I started off by creating both still images and moving images of my subject Chelsea. My goal was to combine projection with photography in a new and creative way. In previous exploration of gender identities with Will, I projected images on the subject first and then took the photos. For this project, I printed my photos on transparent paper first and then recorded an interview with Chelsea about her intercultural experiences as well as the symbolic meanings of certain possessions of her, in this case, her cheongsam, which is a traditional Chinese costume widely worn by Shanghainese women during the Second world war. The video is then projected on her picture. Therefore, there is the presence of both still emotionless photos and videos with movements and sound. In this work the largest printed photo measured 36" x 64".



Among Chelsea's possessions that she talked about, except the traditional Cheongsam (which she wears above), her story of "making both Chinese and American friends through the Mahjong game" caught my attention and this is where the initial idea of adapting Mahjong in my work comes from. She felt that playing Mahjong with western friends in her summer school became a mutual learning experience as well as her being comfortable as both Chinese and American, whereas playing Mahjong with Chinese people, a culture she identifies more with, instead makes her appear to be more of a "stranger" to native Chinese people. This idea seemed fascinating and that led to my curiosity towards the representation and symbolism of Mahjong,

which is backed up by relevant research mentioned in the Contextual chapter. This led to my next stage of the project: building actual mahjong pieces.

I experimented with multiple materials and eventually cut small wood pieces as my mahjong set, which measured 30cm x 40 cm. The pictures below show the progress of making a 24-piece prototype that created both optical and auditory setbacks. Visually, the prototype appeared to have poor quality and the pieces were less precise. Due to the soft texture of wood, the shape of each pieces could not be maintained exactly and the round corners on each piece varied quite a lot. Additionally, Mahjong has a unique sound while playing. The strong presence of the unique tile noise gets ignored when playing but seems very off without. The experience of me testing it out but being so oddly quiet made me feel like I was not having an authentic Mahjong game. Therefore, I researched on the original materials to make a mahjong set and table and eventually decided to move on to building my final exhibition, that is to create an interactive sculpture of a re-designed Mahjong game on a Mahjong table with a guaranteed authentic Mahjong experience.



As mentioned in the “Contextual discussion” section, a whole set of Mahjong has 136 pieces. In each set, there are 34 different types of icons repeated four times. The mahjong set should showcase 34 types of designs of mine based on numerous products and items that are heavily influenced by culture and history. The visual presentation should be strong and provocative enough to trigger different thoughts, reflections and emotions among players according to their national, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These 34 icons should exhibit an ambiguous narrative towards the cross-cultural experience, with some content identifiable particularly to people who are familiar with Chinese and American society. This is a trace I left in this piece to project my own upbringing. For the next stage, I began to conceptualise the appearance of my

individual mahjong tiles. Combining interviews and my own stories, I have drawn a variety of cultural items from Chinese using red, a colour that is representative of China.



Creative Work

A Reflection on the Mahjong Table is an interactive media installation within the gallery space, measuring approximately 2m x 2m, combining the techniques of video projection, graphic design, game design, sculpture and performance art. It features re-designed icons on a set of Mahjong, a traditional Chinese board game, using designs I have drawn. For Mahjong game, tiles



from three different themes are constantly collected and thrown back to the pile in the middle of the game by different players in order to win. In the traditional and authentic mahjong, these three themes all used very simple and abstract symbols: characters, stripes and circles. When I re-designed the Mahjong game, I intended to let players recognise each individual theme immediately by emphasizing the distinctions between them through cultural references, with assistance of different colours, and these designs are based on possessions that have helped shape individuals' cultural and national identities: One theme shows Chinese cultural products. For example, I have drawn a key ring I own that has a mini Chinese Opera mask on it to remind me of my Chinese origin. Also, I'm from the capital Beijing and Beijing Opera is one of the most prestigious, well-received genres of opera in China. Therefore, this key ring also embodies my



regional pride. One other theme features American items such as an American football and Coca Cola in its traditional packaging. The last theme visualises fake seemingly-Chinese characters composed of English letters. This idea is inspired massively by Xu Bing's Book from the Sky project (See Contextual Discussion) and it is also a metaphor of my personal identity: You look at me thinking I am Chinese (Chinese characters) however when you get to know me you realise



many parts of me are significantly influenced by western cultures (the English letters) .

It also features a mahjong table and an audio telling the stories of inter-cultural people. The audience are welcome to sit by the Mahjong table either playing the re-designed mahjong game with each other or listening to the audio piece according to their own wish. The media immersive experience has three potential messages: 1. I want the audience to understand the experience of people with ambiguous national identities trying to anchor themselves. 2. I want to create a circumstance where the audience can reflect on how certain belongings they own may assist them in navigating their lives in various cultural circumstances and situations. 3. Audiences may be from different races, countries, ethnicities or social backgrounds and they start to play my mahjong game together (there are four seats), the installation itself will become a place where people are connected, and cultures are exchanged. I strive to use my project to contribute to viewers' understanding of globalization and diversity.

Conclusion

According to Firat, "To live and to be human is increasingly synonymous to consuming and being a consumer." I have been studying how people define and express their identities, which is abstract and invisible, using products and possessions that are concrete and explicit, throughout my research. Essentially, I am considering the relationship between products and people. K.R in her essay raised the point that we are "all products of our experience", which was fascinating to me and to a degree answered my thesis question. A project like this not only fulfils my goal to connect people from different backgrounds by playing Mahjong on the same table, but also serves as a cathartic purpose to allow me to tell my own story, and that is what greatly inspired me. Especially in the current sociopolitical climate, I am motivated to let people reflect on culture-mixing and globalization. The piece is potentially a performance art piece that allows spectators to transform into active participants that help complete this piece. As a performance student, this is also the first project I have undertaken that I do not perform myself but rather subtly encourage the audience to take my place. It broadened my definition toward what a performance piece can be.

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