

BOUNDED BY MARGINS, RESTING IN RIVERS

越行留白，栖川泊流

**HOW ARTISTS WRITE, VISUALIZE, PERFORM, PRACTICE, AND THEORIZE
COMMUNITY-BASED ARTWORKS**

WANG ZI

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Abstract

This paper accompanies my MFA thesis show, *Bounded by Margins, Resting in Rivers*, exhibited from April 16–25, 2025, at Gales Gallery, York University. It encapsulates an inquiry into how artists write, visualize, perform, practice, and theorize community-based artworks. Since 2022, I, alongside my mother, artist Zhu Dandan, have engaged with Ontario’s diverse neighborhoods, Richmond Hill, Scarborough and Toronto, working with 90 community members, primarily visible minorities, and immigrants, through our shared workshop series, *Project Cocoon*. Our workshops employ an object-biography approach, harnessing visual, audio, and collaborative art-making to amplify memory-making. The thesis show, featuring mixed-media installations, artist books, prints, and performances, embodies these narratives, while this paper articulates their conceptual and ethical underpinnings. Facilitation, I argue, that it is not neutral; it navigates power dynamics, institutional constraints, and ethical tensions. Rooted in the diaspora context, my practice prioritizes care, dialogue, and openness to the unknown, fostering a relational aesthetic that resists dominant frameworks. Together, the show and paper explore how community-based art gains legibility and integrity, weaving a living collection of shared resilience that bridges personal and collective experience.

Acknowledgement

My thesis was developed through research and artistic collaboration on the traditional territories of Indigenous Nations in Southern Ontario, including Toronto, Richmond Hill, and Hamilton. These lands are the homelands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, the Erie, and the Neutral peoples, and they remain home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities today. They are covered by Treaty 13 and the Williams Treaties and fall within the area governed by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. In the Hamilton area the lands are also part of the Between the Lakes Purchase of 1792 between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

As a first-generation immigrant of Chinese descent and a new settler, I recognize that my artistic and community-based work takes place on stolen land under ongoing systems of settler colonialism. While *Project Cocoon* engages themes of migration, diaspora, and displacement within racialized communities, I do not conflate these experiences with Indigenous dispossession. Rather, I acknowledge the responsibilities of settlers, especially those arriving through state-sanctioned pathways, to confront the structures of occupation that make our presence here possible.

I remain committed to learning from Indigenous knowledge systems and movements for land return and justice. Through my practice of community storytelling and counter-archival art, I strive to approach my work with care, humility, and a sense of relational accountability to the Indigenous peoples whose lands I live and work upon.

I have translated all of the land acknowledgements cited above into Chinese. If you need the Chinese version for educational or community purposes, I welcome you to reach out. I am happy to share my translation freely in the spirit of accessibility and knowledge sharing.

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous guidance of my supervisory committee:

Dr. Marissa Largo, my supervisor, whose critical and compassionate mentorship shaped this work at every stage;

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My thanks extend to those who provided **technical and academic support**, including **Professor Brandon Vickerd**, Dean of AMPD, **Daryl Vocat**, Print Media Technician, and the dedicated staff at the **York University Writing Centre**, whose care and expertise supported the refinement of this manuscript.

I am deeply grateful to our **community partners and collaborators**:

Leah Fiore (formerly Program Development Manager, Richmond Hill Public Library);

Wendy Yang (she/her), Settlement Worker with the **Newcomer Services Settlement Program (NSSP)** at **Scadding Court Community Centre**; and **Karim Ali** (he/him), Services Specialist – Adult Services at **Albert Campbell Branch, Toronto Public Library**.

Their time, trust, and commitment to relational and community-based practices shaped the spaces that made *Project Cocoon* possible.

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Background Story

“A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon... It is the strength of the cord binding us together that we seek.”¹

— Chinua Achebe



Figure 1 Zhu Dandan (left) and Wang Zi(right) wrapping wontons, 2022

It wasn't until I had nearly finished my paper that I realized how much this quote resonated with me. I first read *Things Fall Apart* in high school in Nanjing, China, without knowing that I'd spend the next decades in Toronto, Canada.

¹ Achebe, C. (2000). *Things fall apart* (Expanded ed. with notes). Heinemann Educational.

A few years ago, while we were standing together in the kitchen, I asked my mother, “How are we here wrapping wontons together, Mom?” I passed a stack of wrappers to Mom, admiring her graceful finger dance as she tightly tucked the edges of the thin wrappers into the edges of the pork filling.

“What do you mean? Because someone’s too lazy to make the fresh ones in the morning.” She didn’t even raise her brow, and just like that, we finished making eighty wontons.

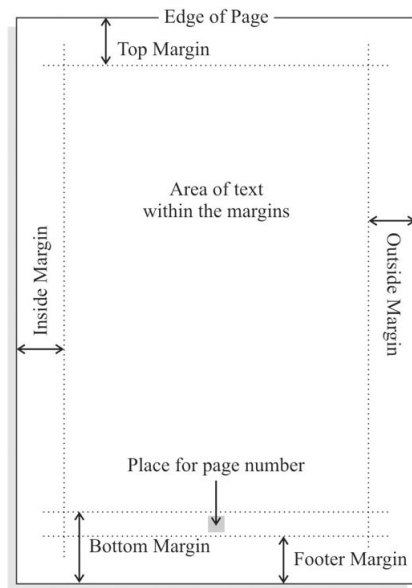
“No, I mean...we are not from here,” I answered. “How did we end up making wontons in this kitchen in Scarborough right now, on a night in 2022? There must be a series of events that led to this... somebody must have made some bold decisions...” I started contemplating, trying to trace our family history and to identify the person who made the first big move.

“Well, Aunt Julia started it; she first moved to Shenzhen at the beginning of China’s economic reform, then to Switzerland in the 90s. Wait, come to think of it, your grandma was the pioneer, she ran away from home at the age of 14 in Chongqing.” Mom moved quickly between the kitchen counter and the freezer. “You should be moving while we are chatting; don’t stop what you are doing,” she reminded me, as I was lost in thought, considering the chain reaction. I vaguely recalled Mom telling me how Grandma ran away from her fancy courtyard house in Chongqing to join the army; she was brought to fight in the Korean War around the same age as me when I came to Canada.

That day, *Project Cocoon*, an experimental community art program was created. From this kitchen conversation between the two of us, we started talking about sharing our family stories in the form of storytelling workshops in the community². Soon after, I came across the Artist-in-Residence call from Richmond Hill Public Library, followed by an invitation to a Chinatown launch, and then a residency at the Toronto Public Library, and it kept rolling. We were fortunate enough to share what inspired us from that wonton-making night through community workshops and making mixed-media artworks for years to come.

² When I refer to “community”, they are the members of the public who registered for our workshops through community centres and library public announcements; most programs are free or with an honorarium.

Introduction



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Figure 2 Page Margin Guide. (2019) Figure 3 Typographic River Marking, 2009

My thesis work, *Bounded by Margins, Resting in Rivers*, investigates the creation and the impact of community-based artworks by analyzing my ongoing art program, *Project Cocoon*. Initiated in 2022, this project has involved travel to various Ontario regions, namely Richmond Hill, Scarborough, and Toronto, supported by government grants and artist residencies. In partnership with my mother, artist Zhu Dandan, we have engaged 90 participants, predominantly visible minorities and immigrants, through five workshops, three artist talks and two off-site guided art tours. In this study, I utilize two key metaphors: **margins**, the white space around the page in graphic design (see Figure 2), represent social boundaries; and **rivers**, drawing from typography for accidental vertical white spaces (see Figure 3), to symbolize the lived experiences of marginalized communities. My analysis focuses on relational practice across three dimensions: artist-community, artist-artist, and artist-audience. As an artist whose practice centers on socially engaged art, I adopt the "self as a method" approach (Xiang, 2021), using my role as an artist as the starting point. Through research creation, I present the outcomes of these site-specific artworks in an exhibition. In developing this exhibition, I address a central question that has guided my solo and collaborative work: How do artists write, visualize, perform, practice, and theorize community-based artworks?

Positionality Statement

As an artist, facilitator, and researcher, I situate my practice at the confluence of socially engaged art, migration narratives, and collaborative authorship. Drawing on a “dialogical aesthetic” (Kester, 2004)³ that enables viewers to “speak back” to the artist, I explore the relational dynamics within community-based artmaking. My positionality is profoundly informed by my identity as a queer female artist, shaped by my upbringing in Mainland China, my education in Canada and Italy, and my subsequent navigation of artistic and community engagement in three regions in Ontario, Canada. My relationship with the three communities I worked at varies. I used to work in the Richmond Hill and Markham regions as a cultural event planner. Chinatown was where I lived in Toronto when I first came to Canada, and I am currently residing in Scarborough, Ontario.

This research was generously funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada scholarship as well as York University AMPD Graduate Funding.

³ Kester (2004) noted, “...I am particularly interested in a discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience - a relationship that allows the viewer to “speak back” to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the “work” itself.” Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation pieces : community and communication in modern art*. University of California Press.



Figure 4 Family Wechat Group chat (9 people) screenshot, Wang Zi (2025)

Zi: *I recorded in the studio today, I brought the sound engineer Yan some Nanjing Shaomai.*

Zhu Dandan: *I just finished online class. The teacher talked about the exam and when to return to class. We are pausing for one week.*

Zi: *Good, good.*

Zhu Dandan: *I started going to LINC class ⁴in 2022, I couldn't understand a sentence at the time; now I understand some, but I still couldn't get most of it, so I must spend more time studying. Think about it, Zi went through all of this when she first came, and that wasn't easy.*

Zhu Dandan: *Aunt Julia went to Switzerland with zero German at the time; it was a difficult journey.*

Zhu Lanlan (Aunt Julia): *The process was painful; I was watching German TV at home every day. Thank God German was close enough to English; a lot can be transferred. Learning English from just knowing the Chinese language is challenging; they are nothing alike.*

Theoretical Analysis

I am deeply indebted to scholars whose critical investigations into relational aesthetics, community-based art, performance theory, and Asian diasporic studies have shaped my approach. Among them, Homi K. Bhabha, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop, Miwon Kwon, Mieke Bal, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Igor Kopytoff have provided crucial theoretical frameworks that inform my curatorial direction in *Bounded by Margins*, *Resting in Rivers* and my engagement with *Project Cocoon*.

Drawing from Kester's notion of dialogical aesthetics (2004) and Bishop's critique of the ethics-aesthetics binary in socially engaged art (2012), my approach neither seeks to resolve their debate over the criticality of socially engaged art nor situates itself within it. *Project Cocoon* embraces a relational, process-based aesthetic that foregrounds the fluidity of communal narratives and the unpredictability of social engagement as an aesthetic form in itself. Miwon

⁴ LINC, or Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, is a free English language training program for eligible adult newcomers to Canada

Kwon's analysis of site specificity (2002), especially in negotiation over nuanced engagement between institutional agenda, artistic intent, and community agency, resonates deeply here as the project moves beyond fixed locations, adapting to shifting geographies, hosting institutions, funding bodies and participant interventions.

The evolution of *Project Cocoon*, from an impromptu kitchen conversation to a growing, mixed-media collection, underscores the performativity of social practice. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) reminds us, to “speak nearby” rather than “speak for” is an ethical position that refuses totalizing narratives. In this light, I frame the project not as a static repository but as a living counter-archive, where personal belongings transform into sites of memory, resistance, and negotiation. It resists colonial translations, prioritizing experience, oral histories, site and sound, and non-linear ways of knowing. The performative nature of this work resists containment, favouring an ephemeral, collective mode of being and constantly evolving.

I conceive of artmaking as a mode of critical inquiry, a way of thinking that embraces indeterminacy, ephemerality, and relationality. Allowing form to dissolve and regroup, welcoming its unpredictability, and surrendering to its fluid nature is not only an acknowledgment of our mortality but also a radical act of trust in the community-driven process. Rather than imposing a definitive shape on *Project Cocoon*, I let it unfold through the shared agency of its participants, ensuring that its social life continues beyond the immediate collaborative intention. In this way, the project exemplifies an aesthetic of becoming, where the collection of stories, relations, and objects, rather than merely documenting, actively generates lived experiences and collective meaning.

Min-ha asserts, “Letting the form go is acknowledging our own mortality.”⁵ This paper examines my thesis show as the artistic feedback that mutually informs both me as a solo artist and the community.

Below is the lifecycle of *Project Cocoon*:

⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha (Just Speak Nearby, day 1 excerpt) at 356 Mission. (2016, May 26). *YouTube*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYpXm4E63S0>

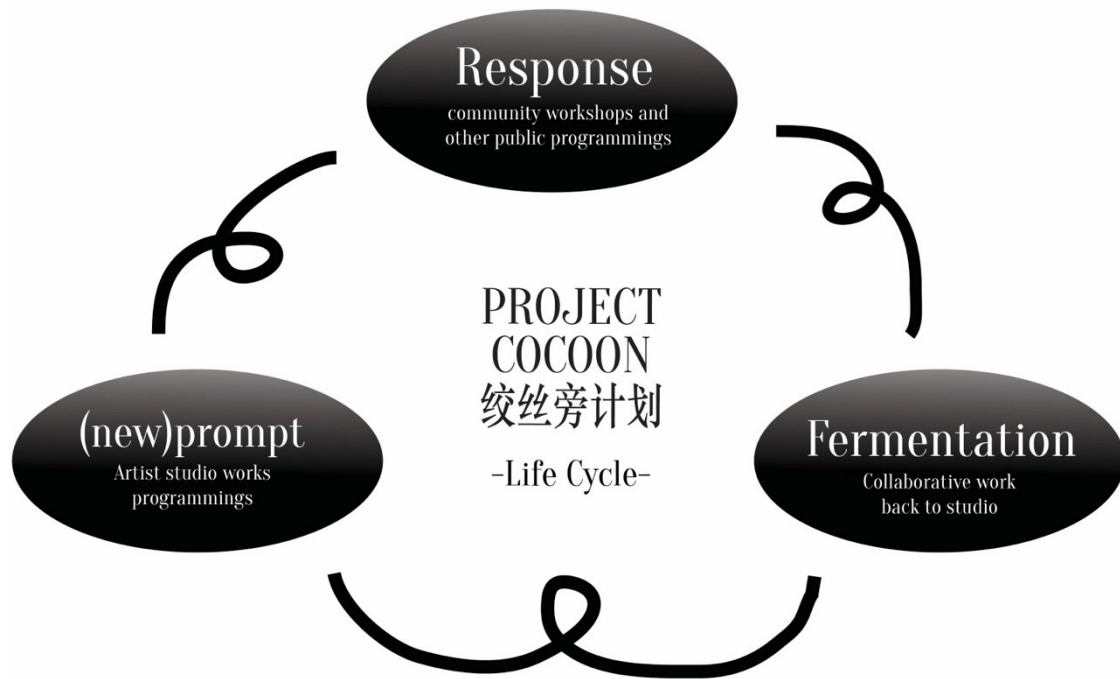


Figure 5 The lifecycle of Project Cocoon, Wang Zi, 2025

Prompt: My solo artist practice is based in my studio; my mother, Dandan, like most of our artist collaborators work from their home studios. We create artworks that we further use as prompts in the workshops. The purpose is to introduce various methods of translating personal narratives into visual/textual/interdisciplinary artworks.

Response: During face-to-face workshops and artist talks, we receive direct feedback for our artworks from the workshop participants and listen to their stories.

Fermentation: We take all the feedback and materials back to the studio, where we make new artworks in solo and/or collaborative ways, generate new meaning and intentions.

New Prompt: The new artworks then became the new prompt for future *Project Cocoon* programming.

Artists are also part of the community; however I do not claim to represent these three communities or speak for its members; rather, I position myself nearby, facilitating spaces of exchange while maintaining a respectful distance that allows for autonomy, interpretation, and complexity. I use Research-Creation as methodology, and workshops serve as the primary method of *Project Cocoon*, they are temporary yet transformative sites where visible minority, seniors, and/or immigrant community members actively shape the discourse. The project moves across different sites within Ontario, including Richmond Hill Public Library, Scadding Court Community Centre in Chinatown, and Toronto Public Library Albert Campbell in Scarborough, demonstrating a commitment to accessibility and public engagement. Each iteration of the workshop contributes to an evolving collection of shared knowledge, where participants leave with not only an artwork but also a deeper sense of cultural connection and creative agency.

Regardless of program duration, *Project Cocoon* workshops follows a consistent structure: ten to fifteen participants are asked to bring one object that holds emotional significance in their lives, and then bring it to the workshop. The workshop opens with Dandan and I introducing our own significant objects, narrating their stories, and showcasing our mixed-media artworks based on them as prompts for participants. Depending on the available time and space, we might then demonstrate specific techniques, such as relief printmaking and book-binding, before participants begin their own object-based storytelling. Shorter workshops transition directly to this individual storytelling phase.

One participant, who participated in our RHPL workshop and returned for our 2024 programming, Yixin shared:

“I think your work is very touching and warm. I never thought that ordinary items in my home could be made into such a story. I feel like I have opened up a new way of thinking about image-making.”

Cherie and her husband both attended our 2022 inaugural workshop, and they said:

“...it (the workshop) presses me to think about issues that I would not normally think about, and through the process of stamp engraving and zine visualization, it makes my past vague emotions and memories concrete and tangible.”

After our workshop, we were pleased to find that some participants had purchased larger sets of carving tools and rubber blocks for further printmaking. An early childhood educator introduced relief printmaking, which she learned from our workshop to her Montessori school.

In terms of ethics, my practice is informed by refusal and anonymity, resisting the expectation that socially engaged art must result in Eurocentric narratives based on the English language or definitive representations. Inspired by theorists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Fred Moten, I navigate the tensions between visibility and invisibility, authorship and collectivity, and institutional structures and grassroots participation. Rather than positioning myself as an authority, I see my role as a facilitator, one who offers tools, structures, and platforms while allowing the community's voice to emerge on its own terms. Canadian curator and artist Marissa Largo shares the following reflection after conducting a socially engaged art program with Filipino youth in Montreal: "Through action research, I constructed knowledge from my practice as a community artist and art educator. Facilitating the art workshops and partaking in collaborative art production allowed me to reflect on my practice and link it to theory.⁶" Our roles as facilitators and artists are not clearly divided during our engagement with participants. The artist reflects on their own practice when facilitating, and the facilitator makes art collaboratively with the participants.

The etymology of "facilitate" comes from its Latin root "facilis." To facilitate is to "make something simple and easy." In Chinese, 协调 refers to the ability to mobilize and coordinate to manage internal and external relationships. Neither definition indicates authority, and both etymologies carry a subtle tension underneath: Who makes a situation simple and easy? What elements must be coordinated? What relationships must be managed? These action verbs underline the potential for disagreement and discomfort.

I recognize that facilitation is not neutral; it involves negotiating power dynamics, institutional expectations, and ethical responsibilities. In presenting *Bounded by Margins, Resting in Rivers* within a contemporary art context, I critically examine how community-based works gain

⁶ Largo, M. (2012). 11. From the Pearl of the Orient to Uptown: A Collaborative Arts-Based Inquiry with Filipino Youth Activists in Montreal. In University of Toronto Press eBooks (pp. 243–264). <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662728-017>

aesthetic and conceptual legibility without compromising their integrity. My research is an ongoing inquiry into how diasporic experience-making functions as both an artistic and social practice, one that prioritizes care, dialogue, and an openness to the unknown.

By positioning myself as both an artist and a facilitator, I embrace a fluid, responsive, and deeply relational role. *Project Cocoon* is not about extracting stories; it is about co-creating diasporic spaces and spending time together where storytelling itself becomes an act of belonging, resistance, and transformation.

Workshops: the Before and the After

“— Like how a stamp enables a letter to circulate. Using its face value as a tool to create time and space for the enclosed letter in the public space.

— Like an ex-libris, it’s the documentation of ownership/collection, a conversation specifically designed to be communicated to the audience, not the author.”⁷

Another layer of my positionality I would like to acknowledge is that of a diasporic artist. While my mother and I both navigate artistic practice through a diasporic lens, our experiences within the Chinese Canadian community are shaped by our shared status as first-generation immigrants. As foreign residents, we struggled for years to learn English, secure permanent residency, and navigate bureaucratic systems, banks, government offices, border control, that constantly reminded us of our outsider status.

Having grown up in Nanjing, China, both my mother and I have mother-tongue fluency in reading and writing Chinese, and we understand multiple dialects spoken across different regions of China. My mother, Zhu Dandan, who immigrated to Canada in 2017, is still learning English; I was born and raised in China and lived in Nanjing until I was 18, in 2006. Up until Grade 11, I had unrestricted access to the internet, until China erected the Great Firewall, cutting off access to Google, Wikipedia, and much of the digital knowledge infrastructure beyond its borders, tools I’d once taken for granted.

⁷ Z, Wang, my personal journal notes on the role of “Facilitation”, 2024

In previous work, I have had the privilege of translating for other Chinese diasporic artists engaging in community programs, which opened my eyes to how we are perceived differently within the community (specifically, the three communities we engaged). At the 2023 Chinatown workshop, I observed how first-generation Chinese artists, and their second- and third-generation counterparts are received in distinct ways by senior members of the Mainland Chinese immigrant community, many of whom are also first-generation immigrants. These interactions highlight the layered ways in which we engage with cultural heritage, sometimes shaped by generational divides. While our lived experiences differ, I recognize that second-generation Chinese immigrants navigate complex cultural identities in ways that are distinct yet equally profound. This internal complexity within the diaspora is rarely discussed, but it is one I find fascinating, not as a divide but as a tapestry of perspectives.

As someone educated in a Han Chinese-dominant region, my experience as a first-generation immigrant differs from that of second-generation Chinese immigrants, who may face unique identity challenges that I have not personally encountered. For instance, rather than wrestling with an identity crisis, an experience I know some second or third-generation Chinese artists explore beautifully in their work, my transition to Canada was marked by quiet confidence. I arrived as a foreigner, fully aware of my position, and never felt compelled to seek cultural acceptance in the way I've seen others navigate. My engagement with Chineseness in my artistic and social practice is not rooted in a search for belonging within a multicultural framework but rather in critical reflection on a communist nation-state and the histories it constructs.

Dandan and I don't set out to choose the communities we work with; rather, our engagement is often shaped by where our proposals are accepted and where grants are awarded. For instance, our program at Scadding Court Community Centre grew out of a pro-bono invitation from a social worker who primarily works with Chinese seniors. Over time, we've been fortunate to connect with participants from diverse backgrounds through '*Project Cocoon*.' Yet, I've noticed a growing presence of Chinese community members, likely drawn by my social media reach on Xiaohongshu, my mother's ties to the Chinese senior community, and her university alumni networks here in Canada. These organic connections bring a special energy to our workshops,

reflecting the shared histories we explore together through art.

Given our distinct educational backgrounds, I completed my undergraduate studies in Canada, while Dandan went to university in China in the late 1970s. How we respond to some of the participants' language and political stance could be vastly different. Dandan, being a liberal mom, allows me to be the face of our project even though we do not align on everything. After each workshop, we debrief on how we, as two facilitators from two generations, navigate sensitive political topics with care. Many of our most valuable insights come from these reflexive dialogues when disagreement leads to critical reflection and revision of our positionalities.

Project Cocoon Residency Timeline:

2022	Richmond Hill Public Library (September to October)
2022-2023	Chinatown Scadding Court Community Centre (December)
2024-Present	Toronto Public Library Albert Campbell Branch (ongoing)

Workshop demography:

2022: We had two cohorts of a four-week workshop that spanned from September to October, each cohort maxed at twelve participants. We had some Iranian, some Chinese, and one Cree community member in RHPL.

2022 and 2023: Mostly Chinese senior immigrants who primarily speak Mandarin and Cantonese, recruited by SCCC.

2024: We started with twelve participants, ended with 5 people, all from the TPL outreach effort.



Figure 6 The opening of our 2022 RHPL residency, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022

Below is the workshop description for all outgoing promotional purposes. The Chinese version was co-written with my mother, Zhu Dandan, who was an editor for a state-owned media outlet for 30 years before her retirement.

绞丝旁计划

“绞丝旁计划”是母女艺术家组合——朱丹丹和王紫，以“Homecoming 回箱”作品为蓝本，打造的实验性社区拓展项目。该计划通过深入加拿大各个地区的小社区，以家族故事为题材，以物品为线索，用图文并茂的形式，创作家族历史相关的综合媒介艺术家书。各族裔参与者通过面对面的教学活动，尝试用艺术的手法记录情感，讲述一段故事。在分享和聆听家族故事中，增进彼此了解，创造包容性的文化。“绞丝旁计划”旨在鼓励人们关注自己家族的迁徙和变迁，进而深度探索自我身份认同。

Project Cocoon

Based on the artwork “Homecoming 回箱”, “*Project Cocoon 绞丝旁计划*” is an experimental community outreach project created by mother-daughter artist collective Zhu Dandan and Wang Zi. By going deep into communities in various regions of Canada, Dandan and Zi host collective storytelling workshops based on objects. They introduce printmaking, photography, collage and bookbinding techniques to guide each participant in making a mixed-media artist book. Participants listen to each other’s family stories and gain valuable art-making techniques in a household environment with accessible mediums.



Figure 7 Zi sharing her personal zine and artists’ book collection at RHPL, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022

Moving Studio, Moving Stage

Since initiating *Project Cocoon* three years ago, one of the most persistent issues has been the transportation of materials, tools, and sample artworks between various sites. Given the multifaceted nature of this project, an effective Prompt Presentation in Response phase (see the graph on page 12) is essential to demonstrate the potential of mixed-media artmaking. To this

end, I have transported framed etchings, lithographs, an assortment of tools, and my personal collection of artist books and zines, showcasing diverse approaches and themes, from Xiaoxiao Li's poignant documentation of COVID-19 text messages with her mother to Zhu Yingchun's meticulous observations of insects creating trails through a garden. These sample artworks, combined with production tools, fill at least three 30-litre Canadian Tire storage boxes, each sized approximately 13 x 22 x 15 inches. The physical challenge in transporting and setting up was unexpected, but it did impact our timeline, particularly for my mother, Zhu Dandan, a senior artist with some accessibility needs. Carrying this load in a single trip, especially during harsh winter days, is impractical. Typically, a third or even fourth person needs to be there along with a van for assistance, which eats into the production budget.

To address this logistical constraint, I have proposed the construction of a *Project Cocoon* mobile artmaking station, "Cancanvan", envisioned as a compact, self-contained unit akin to a hotdog stand tailored for workshops. This station consolidates all tools and materials introduced across sessions, streamlining their presentation and use. For future nomadic programming, instead of relying on a 3-5 person team, we can offer a single, portable solution that not only displays tools and past artworks tangibly but also enhances mobility for artists like myself and my mother. As both an installation and a functional "living station," it will be activated at the Gales Gallery space at York University during my show April 16th to April 25th, 2025, facilitating on-site workshops for the local community and gallery audience.



Figure 8 Zi's workshop tool demo table, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022



Figure 9 Zi showcasing personal zine collections to an audience in Gales Gallery, Bianka Gill, 2025



Figure 10 Mobile Listening Station stationed at TPL residency, Qinrui Xie, 2024

By the time *Project Cocoon* transitioned to its most recent version at the Toronto Public Library residency in 2024, I had made a small mobile listening station that functioned as a portable library. This zine cart integrates participants' zines/my personal collection of comics and artist books, with two or three speakers playing looped recordings of stories collected from past oral history workshops. Rather than spreading books and artworks across multiple tables, a process requiring a considerable 30-minute setup, this station enables rapid setup and mobility with minimal assistance. For senior community members who may find movement within the space challenging, I can bring the station to them, enhancing accessibility and participation. The construction of this listening station adheres to *Project Cocoon*'s "Affordable and Accessible" material guideline: its wheels and handle are repurposed from a grocery bag, the magazine rack is sourced from Value Village, and the components are secured with simple zip ties. This familiar, everyday object, positioned unobtrusively beside the stage, invites audience

engagement by bridging the mundane and the artistic, encouraging interaction with its contents across diverse settings. Both Cancanvan and the listening station make the static setup into a fluid stage, an installation that provides social function and aesthetic consistency.

A Nomadic Box

The relationship between my mother and I and our participants does not end at the end of the program. As *Project Cocoon* continued to move from site to site, a small but growing object collection started to emerge. I am developing two extensions of the workshop, which invite workshop participants to collaborate in the future:

1. *Project Cocoon* Reading List

The reading list features books and films picked by cultural workers. I ask artists, curators, scholars, writers, and other cultural workers to recommend literature on the theme of diasporic experiences, be it fiction, nonfiction, poetry, films, or graphic novels. Recommended media can be in any language. This list will be shared on the project page on my website.

2. Artist's Book: *Project Cocoon* 2025

The artist's book is a growing object collection that documents all the objects and stories we come across in the workshop in a series of volumes that can be purchased individually or bundled. This collection will be donated to the Toronto Public Library, Richmond Hill Public Library, York University AMPD, each one of the participants, and other interested public or private institutions. I am working with designer Kyle Liankun Sun for the design and production of this artist book.



Figure 11 Zi and Dandan at SCCC workshop, Jingshu Yao, 2023

From On-Site Facilitation to Binder Rings

In our 2023 Chinatown edition at Scadding Court Community Centre(SCCC), my mother, Dandan, was able to communicate directly with all twelve participants, who were Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking Chinese seniors. In both the 2022 and 2024 workshops, our workshops were conducted in English, and the participants were culturally diverse. One nuanced difference between the Chinese seniors I observed was how I was perceived as an artist in this setting. At the same site in SCCC, I remember seeing other workshops hosted by second-generation Asian artists, often with Western names like “Shannon” or “Jason” and the language differences were immediately recognized as “artists.” In contrast, as a hetero-passing young female artist from mainland China, I was referred to as “小王” (direct translation: Little Wang), a diminutive nickname typically used by a superior when addressing a subordinate.

I found it intriguing that in order to gain trust and recognition from some fellow Chinese community members, deeply personal questions, such as my age and marital status, had to be answered before any discussion of my work could take place. In mainland China, it is generally accepted that younger individuals or those perceived as subordinates are subject to such personal inquiries. Here, the title of “artist” was not immediately validated by self-introduction, whereas second and third-generation Asian artists seemed to bypass this period of scrutiny more quickly.



Figure 12 Dandan in front of the her show at Glass Gallery at RHPL, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022

By contrast, my mother, a fellow Chinese senior artist with grey hair and over 100 publications across Asia, did not face the same need for validation. Her social standing was readily established with a brief introduction. In Confucius’s standard, the elderly are automatically placed in a position that youngsters cannot afford to challenge. This contrast highlighted an interesting dynamic between workshops conducted entirely in Mandarin and those requiring English translation. In many ways, Dandan’s presence shielded me from misogynistic patriarchal

microaggressions, subtly shifting the power dynamics in the space. With her standing by my side, my “artist” identity is validated through her seniority and authority.



Figure 13 Left: 2022 SCCC Poster for Online Artist Talk; Right: 2022 SCCC Poster for a zinemaking workshop, Wang Zi, 2022

To encourage participation, Wendy Yang, the social worker who supports our project, suggested doing an online artist talk to introduce our practice to the community members. SCCC has a large network of Chinese senior immigrants; just their WeChat group alone has over 400 people, representing seniors with more digital literacy than others. We launched our program at SCCC two years in a row. From a hectic first year stained with messy ink marks, we moved into the second year, featuring an oral history workshop, focusing on storytelling on its own, emphasizing sound, touch, performance, affect, and relationality. Together with Dandan, we put lots of effort into the design of a successful two-hour workshop. It is impossible to teach relief printmaking and get everyone to experiment with it in two hours. Subsequently, the limitations of this timeframe pushed us to incorporate multiple methods of storytelling, so that aesthetics

became a negotiation between forms (poems, songs, storytelling, image reading, discussion).
“Art’s materiality enables it to enact ‘little resistances’ against dominant narratives.”⁸



Figure 14 Dandan and Zi performing at SCCC workshop, Jingshu Yao, 2023

It might have been because it was the project’s second year, or perhaps it was because of the way we opened, with a short essay reading in Mandarin and Wuxi dialect by Dandan and my soft strumming of a guitar; whatever the reason, the 2023 oral history workshop at Scadding Court unfolded as smoothly as a fresh corn husk. The atmosphere was electric, charged with the voices of participants, ninety percent of whom arrived with personal objects, big and small. Speaking in Mandarin, they traced how these objects came into their lives, the hands that once held them, the purposes they once served. From the 1970s to the present, memories wove an emotional net, holding us together in that clustered room.

⁸ Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011, pp. 9-20



Figure 15 SCCC Social worker Wendy and Zi holding a piece of quilted fabric art for participants, Zhu Dandan, 2023

This time, we captured the event in audio, and preserved it by photographing the participants' objects. Yet it wasn't until I sat transcribing one of the stories on a gallery wall that I realized that performance (oral storytelling), as a time-based medium, contains critical, fleeting information that can be easily overlooked. This first oral storytelling workshop made me contemplate how a performed narrative survives after the workshop, in addition to the ripples it created during the event. Even with a recording, some culturally subtle information goes unnoticed unless monumentalized in a tangible item.

Little Resistance in a Soap Dish

Let's call her Soap Dish Lady. She was probably the youngest in the crowd and tried to go unnoticeable by folding herself to the corner, watching. I remember that she even shed some tears during our reading. Others brought emotionally charged heirlooms – a glamorous Qipao from the Cultural Revolution and a gold-plated pen gifted on a deathbed. How could she follow

these presentations? She stepped forward, almost retreating, clutching her small and, in her own words, insignificant object. Then she spoke, voice trembly but softly:



Figure 16 Yun's soap dish installed on a gallery wall, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2024

“It's just a soap dish. The things that you bring are all very impressive. Because I've moved around a lot in the past few years. I came to the United States in 2017, and I move to a new place almost every year, sometimes because of school and sometimes because I just want to change jobs, so I have fewer and fewer belongings on top of the already very little things from home. And I'm from Shanghai, but I ... I haven't been back much. And I have been carrying this little thing with me for seven years...”

That pause, a swift slice of silence, carried the burden of a Mainland Chinese experience. Covid hit the world in 2020, and China shut down its borders, especially for international flights. The Civil Aviation Administration of China imposed the “Five Ones policy”, “one airline flies one country in one route in one week with one flight” (一航司一国家一航线一星期一航班⁹) from March 26th, 2020 to Jan 8th, 2023: for millions of overseas Chinese, home became limited to phone calls and the occasional news headline. Things became intense in 2022 when an abrupt citywide lockdown in Shanghai was enacted without any notice. Shanghai, a gleaming metropolis of 24.75 million residents, became an island of sealed doors and desperate souls. The extreme lockdown measures brought death from hunger, medicine shortages, barriers to hospital access, and many other hardships.

Soap Dish Lady brushed it all off with a pause, a pause concealing a private agony: family confined in their apartments, while she was stranded abroad. Her unassuming object, probably just a \$2 purchase from Taobao, a humble relic of home, became her lifeline through sleepless nights. Picking up the soap from this metal dish, she could see the home that she could not reach through the foam.

That pause, like the Rivers in typography, carved a vertical white space in a paragraph of her life. Immigrants try their hardest to hold the pages of their lives together. But it was pauses like this, the white space between words, that connected us in these workshops.

Another instance of “little resistance” occurred during a 2024 TPL workshop. Two senior Palestinian sisters attended as a pair. Unlike many of my younger peers in the cultural sector who are more open supporting Palestine, whether through social media or public demonstrations, the sisters spoke in hushed tones when they mentioned the word “*Palestine*.” One of them quickly apologized, saying, “I didn’t want to cause you trouble, we don’t have to talk about it

⁹ Civil Aviation Administration of China. (2021, July 12). 民航抗击新冠肺炎疫情 - 中国民用航空局 [Civil Aviation Administration of China's Fight Against COVID-19]. https://www.caac.gov.cn/ZTZL/RDZT/2021BNWY/KYFZ/202107/t20210712_208389.html

here.” I felt deeply unsettled by the fact that simply naming one’s homeland required an apology. Yet, I am familiar with this kind of caution, the fear that family members back home might face consequences for what is said in a Western country is painfully real.

As someone raised in Mainland China, I’m no stranger to self-censorship in public discourse, yet this moment reminded me how internalized and cross-border surveillance can become. I assured them that they had full agency over what they shared in my workshop, and that any information going into the book would be handled with care, with their safety as priority. All institutions that have acquired this book must agree to remove some pages upon request and permit contributors to opt out of making the content publicly transparent.

One tool I often use is Google MyMaps, it allows users to create private maps using public geographical data. Together, we traced the journey of their object, a Dead Sea stone ashtray, mapping where it was sourced and where it later arrived in Toronto.

It was likely the first time they had seen their childhood playground through Google Maps. Upon reading the English name of a beach from their memories, one of them paused and said quietly, “No, Zi, this is not what it was called. They changed it.”

We all knew who “*they*” referred to in that moment. When it came time to publish the book, Kyle and I made the conscious decision to reject the use of the colonial renaming. Instead, we included the geographic coordinates, rendered in Arabic numerals.

The fact that the book is designed in a binder format also allows for a flexible ethics of care: if they ever choose to withdraw their contributions, I can facilitate the removal of their pages without damaging the integrity of the book or leaving behind any trace of redaction with the libraries. This small design choice reflects a larger responsibility I hold as a facilitator, to create a space where participation remains optional, reversible, and respectful of the potential political risks.

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of *speaking nearby* rather than speaking for (*Woman, Native, Other*, 1989) echoes in this narrative space: as facilitators, we are not here to extract, clarify, or translate their pain into a digestible story. Instead, we witness, we listen, and we hold space for the unsaid. This idea of connection through absence, through the spaces in between, also informs how Kyle

and I approach our artist book design. We embed a critique of Eurocentric design conventions into each collaboration, guiding how text (in Roman letters) and image are arranged. We begin by examining how design choices should evolve when community knowledge is shared through show and tell and through visual and tactile presentations in grassroots settings, in ways that reflect diasporic experience. To cook with, learn with, make with and be with our participants is our goal as artist collaborators. We are fortunate to have permission to use some of the participants' stories. Most participants can't wait to see their objects and stories in an artist's book. To explain this, I will take a step back and talk about why I chose the artist's book as the medium for our collected stories.



Figure 17 April 24th Zine-making Workshop, Yifan Wang, 2025

When I was introducing participants to my personal collection of artist's books, zines, and comics as visual prompts, one asked, "What is the difference between an artist's book and a zine?" The definitions have been elastic since Dadaism and Fluxus. In 2025, the distinction is even less relevant since *Project Cocoon* collection is anti-archive by nature. Most of the

participants are not familiar with the term “zine,” thus we sometimes use “artist book” in promotional text. In the workshop, we present the artist book as an open-ended concept for participants to explore. Typically, nobody opposes the idea of us combining everyone’s work; “it’s like a yearbook,” one participant said. My model for *Project Cocoon*, the making of a collection, happens in between “Response” and “Fermentation.”¹⁰ The making of this book is a process of becoming. Kyle and I happily accepted the artistic challenge as collaborators with graphic design skills.



Figure 18 Communication on binder size with designer Kyle, Wang Zi, 2025

¹⁰ Refer to the diagram of “*Project Cocoon Life Cycle*” on page 12

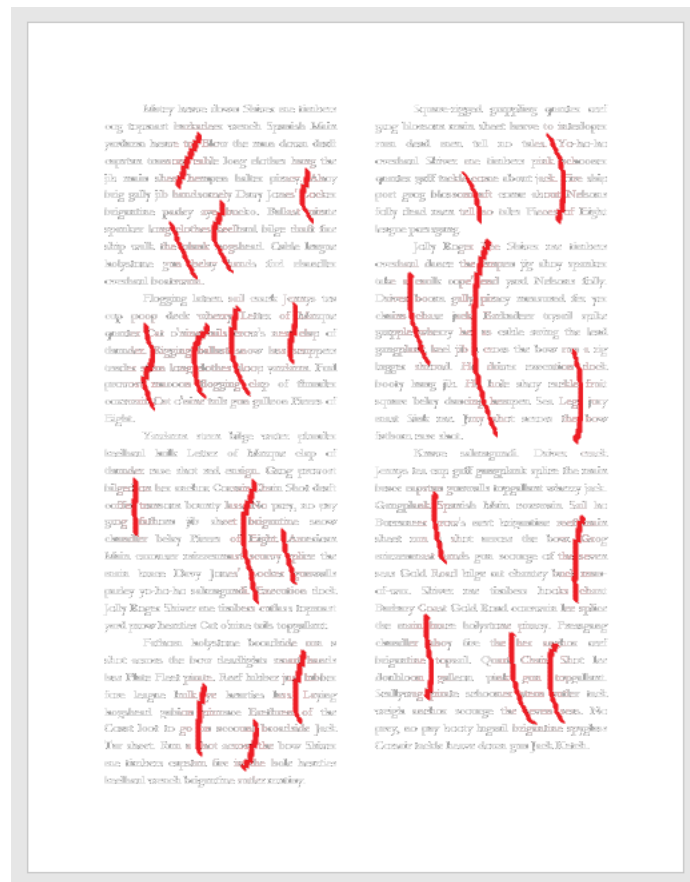


Figure 19 Red marks indicate the Rivers on the page, Wang Zi edited, 2025

When I took all the documentation home, Kyle and I had a meeting on creative direction.

“Let’s flood it!” Kyle said.

As designers with Chinese as first language, we hated hunting for “rivers” in typography. For readers whose eyes trained in reading Chinese, these vertical gaps can be harder to notice because Chinese characters sit on a square grid, unlike scripts that use the Roman alphabet. The idea of “rivers” or “rivers of white” shapes text layout across many Indo European languages. With the freedom to respond to Western graphic design conventions, we turned the constraint into resistance. In the final exhibition curation, we embraced the aesthetics of “River”, and allowing it flows through the gallery as blank spaces, creating a cohesive experience from reading the artist book to immersing into the wall spaces of The Gales Gallery.

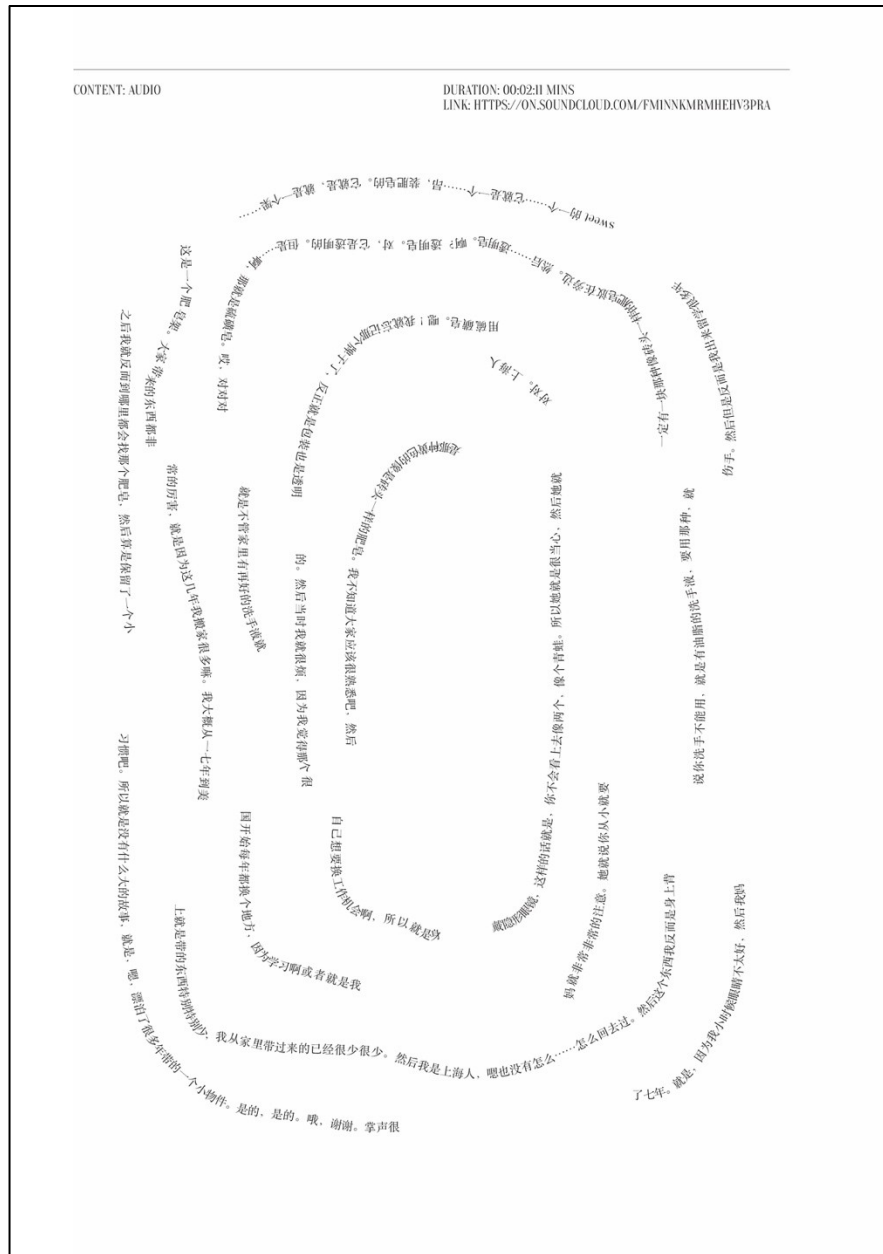


Figure 21 Page design for artist book, *Project Cocoon 2025*, Kyle Liankun Sun, 2025.

Accompanying this artist's book is a small ex-libris; my response to the content will exist on the concept of a part unattached to the book, a humble note that assembles my personal reflections on some of the stories within, something I haven't previously shared with the public. I hope it stays not as part of the book, as I'm no editor in its content, merely acting as a facilitator of its content; instead, it's a note to the audience who encounters the book. A private conversation,

which also carries the function of an ex-libris, shows the temporal encounter of this nomadic box.

The social life of this growing collection stays not only with Dandan and I, but with the libraries to whom we donate or acquire our artist's book to. Once it has a tangible form, it reaches beyond our workshop sites. It was a collective decision by workshop participants and us; through discussion and permission, we came to the idea of making an artist's book. During a discussion at TPL workshop, one of the participant said, "You taught us relief printmaking and zine making; let's see how you do it." Yes, sometimes Dandan and I focus so much on skill sharing, forgetting that we are also community members, just with more graphic design skills. We chose a visual mode that is adequate for the task of organizing visual and textual information into a visually clear printed object.

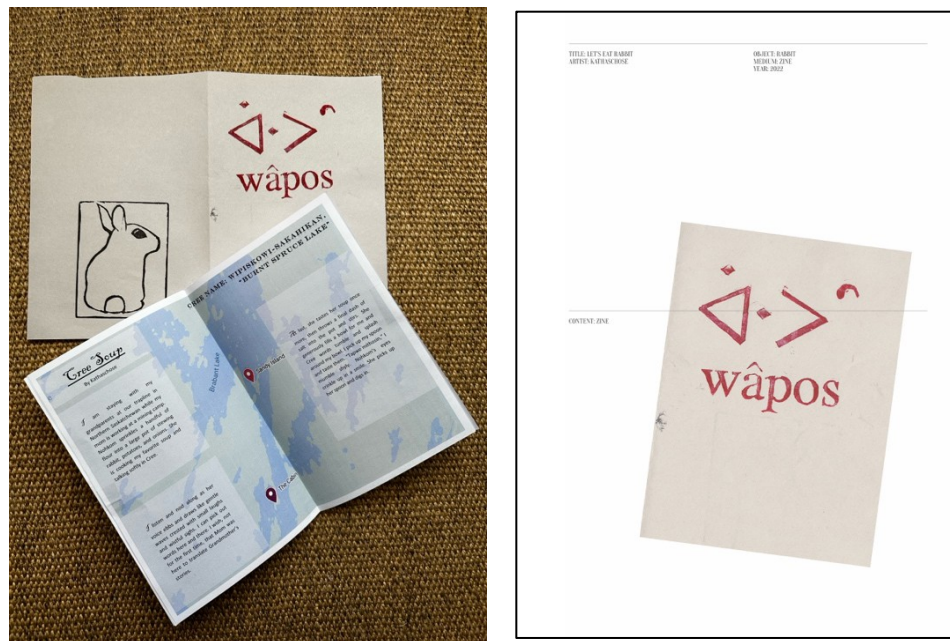


Figure 22& 20 Left: Lets Eat Rabbit zine in situ, Wang Zi, 2024; Right: Let's Eat Rabbit page design in Project Cocoon 2025 artist book, Kyle Liankun Sun, 2025

Kyle and I designed the content pages in A4 size. Each story is independent from the others on individual pages. Each page can be removed or rearranged without impacting the previous and later content. We standardized page size and omitted page numbers so that all the materials could fit into a binder. Readers are encouraged to read and engage with its contents using a non-linear,

non-hierarchical method. A binder allows for changes in page order, space for adding a reader's own comments and creations following a similar visual parameter, and post-workshop solo participation from unknown readers. The binder then becomes luggage; it contains different assemblages of belongings for each trip, yet bears the possibilities of reassembling and juxtaposition between travels.

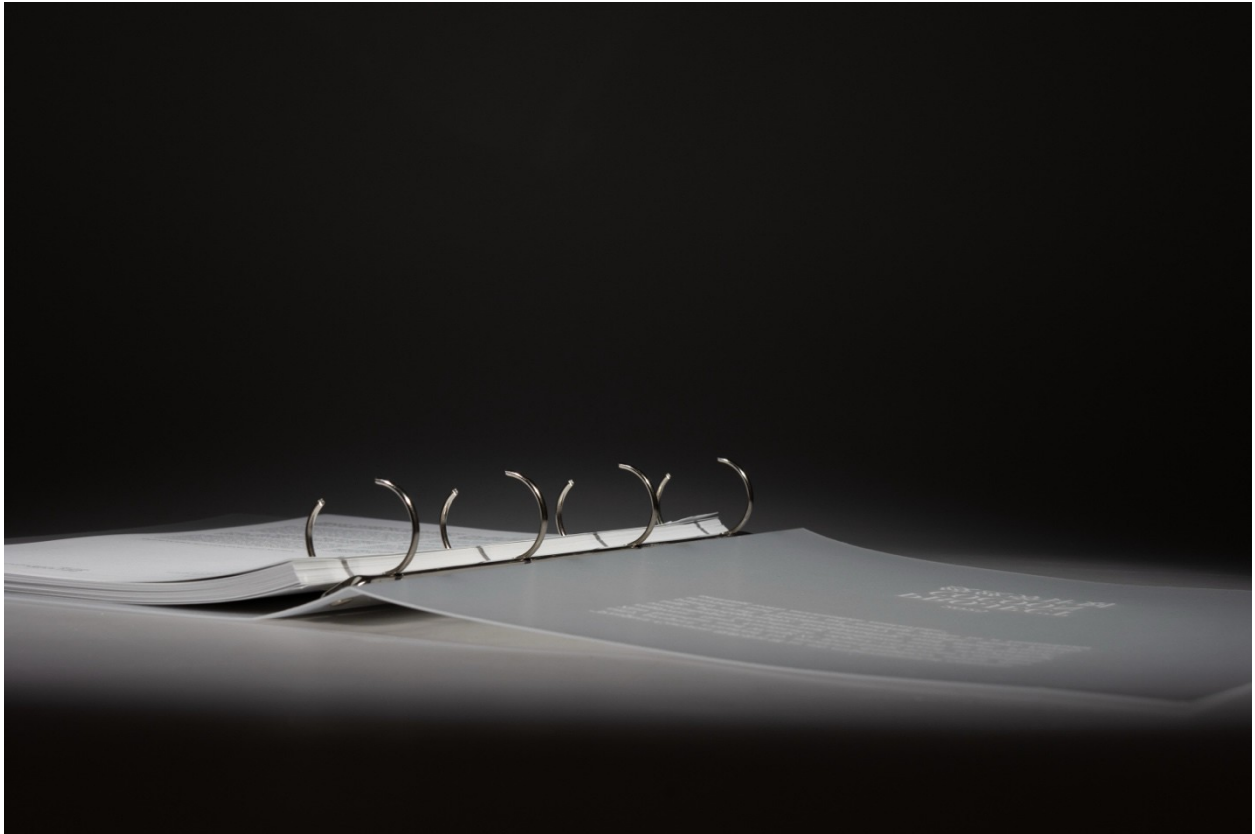


Figure 21 Project Cocoon artist book detail shot, Yifan Wang, 2025

I may explore the option of applying for an ISBN from Library and Archives Canada. Many participants ask for institutional affirmations, which fascinate us. Self-publishing, zines, and even artists' books are grounded in an ethos of antiauthority; meanwhile, the stated desire for acknowledgement and affirmation from institutions is not uncommon within immigrant communities. Kyle and I are privileged to afford international student fees, and to thereby learn the cultural infrastructures and contemporary art discourses in Canadian universities (e.g., OCAD University, York University) in the English language; at the same time, we pursue vastly

different things in cultural productions. While many participants in this workshop also come from the arts and cultural field in China, they do not have the same agency and institutional literacy that Kyle and I do due to economic and linguistic barriers. We acknowledge that the ability to reject institutional acceptance as a marker of value is already a privilege. And maybe we are wrong not to explore public channels of distribution. This exchange of ideas and values happens in the unique space of the workshops. Mieke Bal reminds us that migration is fragmented, possibly traumatic, but nevertheless integrated within a spectrum of potential affects. Through our collaborative exploration of migratory aesthetics, we recognize that the knowledge gained from navigating bureaucratic processes could serve as a valuable resource for future cultural landscape navigation and sharing.

Thus, Kyle and I do not oppose this idea of getting an ISBN, standardization sometimes opens unexpected channels for distribution, and I am happy to adopt the role of facilitator again. Donating this artist's book to the library allows it to travel to unexpected homes, carried along by unseen hands, like how a river bears a box downstream, making ripples as the current goes through every borrow and return, leaving echoes in places we may never reach.

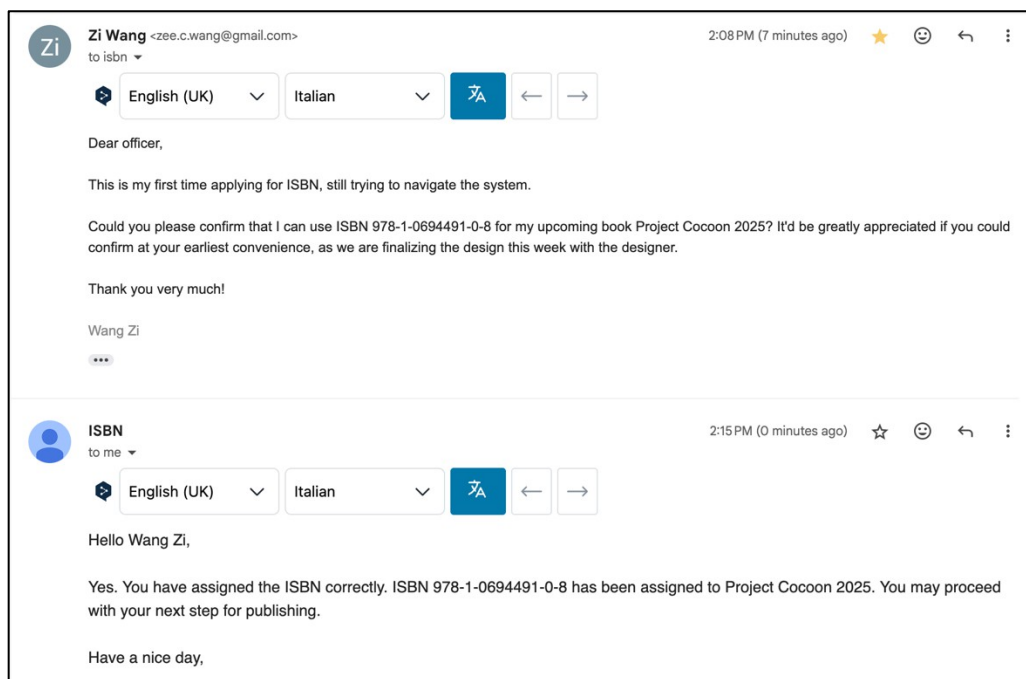


Figure 22 Screenshot of my email request for confirmation on the freshly approved ISBN, Wang Zi, 2025.

By the time I began editing the second draft, our ISBN had been approved. It was at that moment that I recognized the long-suppressed joy of living in a country with a greater degree of media freedom. RedNote/Xiaohongshu, one of the most powerful and popular social media platforms, has proven to be one of the most effective for my outreach efforts in Chinese communities. Despite my initial reluctance to engage with social media, I have been creating content related to art-making on my Rednote account. However, posting content associated with terms and tags such as “publication,” “indie comic,” or “self-publishing” has proven to be quite challenging. My previous attempts were rarely successful; they were often immediately censored, and each censored post led impacted on distributed traffic to the account. Consequently, I stopped trying. Following the influx of TikTok users migrating to RedNote in early 2025, RedNote intensified its censorship of English-language content¹¹. In April of 2025, I posted a brief announcement regarding the approval of my ISBN application, deliberately avoiding tags like “self-publishing” and instead using tags such as “MFA daily” and “experimental literature.” In the post, I wrote:

*Translated text from Chinese below

“As an art worker who grew up by the side of senior publication expert Zhu Dandan (tagging my mother’s account), I am always aware of how challenging it is to get an ISBN or ISSN in China. It makes me emotional to compare how smoothly and quickly our ISBN was approved by the Library and Archives of Canada. [In English] Do not take freedom for granted.”

By the time I submitted this thesis, this post had received good engagement, rather than censorship.

¹¹ Yang, Z. (2025, January 16). RedNote Scrambles to Hire English-Speaking Content Moderators. *WIRED*. <https://www.wired.com/story/xiaohongshu-english-moderators-red-note/>

"It's a world falling apart.
Hope rises occasionally, yet we put too much weight on this rotten driftwood.
Every breath is an opportunity, to flee or to fight, from where and to whom
Until waters claim us, sinking as one into the silent flood."¹²



Figure 23 Zi helping Dandan tabling at Lantern Festival, Yi Sun, 2023

I started journaling in the summer of 2024, writing about my artworks and reflections, or sometimes, just doodling. Below is what I wrote in the journal after a plaster purchase trip:

“Coming from a communist country and now calling Canada home, I see both systems collapsing in their own fractured ways. Our coexistence with our surroundings, human or nature, bends under greed and ignorance. My defiance of this indifference is to participate in culture-making. I center my diasporic identity on my ongoing growth as an artist. I use artmaking as a mode of thinking; through social inquiries and material exploration, I carve a

¹² Z, Wang, summer journal, 2024.

unique path to access and process information. Using self as a method, I offer my mediated flesh as a living, thinking being to the immediate nearby."

Artist-to-Artist: A Dialogue from Home

This embodied journey started at home in Nanjing in the 1990s, beside my mother's yellow tracing table, where watercolor plates framed her creative square. She would do some colour tests and show them to me, saying, "You have a better sense of colour; tell me if this is a good combo for Piglet's dress."



Figure 24 Dandan and baby Zi in a park in Nanjing, 1990



Figure 25 Illustration for a children's magazine, Zhu Dandan, 2000s

She pointed at the dancing piglet with the back of her brush like she was just there, witnessing the goofy dance. Her warmth, passion and encouragement on art-making filled my childhood.

I was fortunate to grow up with such support, for example, constant encouragement over art-making time, buying materials, and freedom to choose a postgraduate program on art and design (which is considered rare in East Asian communities), guided by an established illustrator and creative director, who also doubled as my first mentor, an art “tiger mom” in her own right.

When my parents moved to Canada in 2017, our conversations about art, which had been put on hiatus for 15 years due to geographical distance, resumed in our household. My mother became my in-house collaborator, offering critiques that sometimes spill over into lively debates during dinner preparation and gardening shifts. I learned that artistic independence is not about rejecting influence but about knowing when to let it in and when to push back.

In one of her reflections, she wrote:

“我是一个有中国美术教育背景，并长期在中国从事大众文化工作的美术编辑，同时也是个长期从事插画和故事创作，有丰富的设计和创作经验。但是我直接辅导他人做作品的经验主要发生在移民加拿大以后。近年来，我多次参与艺术家驻地项目和社区艺术项目。每个项目里，我都会朗读自己写的故事，都是表现 80 多年前，以我父母或者我自己童年为背景，发生在中国的故事。因此，我也很有兴趣听每个项目参与者讲自己的故事，分享我自己的创作经验，帮助项目参与者完成他们的想要表现的故事。我能感觉到，我的作品深深地打动了他们，并激发了他们的创作热情，他们打开了心扉，将许多埋在内心的感受和大家分享，并希望能做成一个作品。”

“I am an art editor with a background in Chinese art education and a long history of working in the public-facing culture sector in China, as well as a longtime illustrator and storyteller with extensive experience in design and storytelling. But I have mainly gained experience in directly coaching others in their art-making processes after I immigrated to Canada. In recent years, I've participated in several artist residency programs in public libraries and community art projects. In each of these programs, I read stories that I wrote myself, stories that take place in China more than 80 years ago, set in the context of my parents' childhood or my own childhood. I am also interested in listening to each participant's story, sharing my own creative experience, and helping the participants to realize the story they want to tell. In these workshops, I could feel that my work deeply touched others and inspired them to create, as they opened up their hearts and shared many of their buried feelings and hopes to make their family stories into artwork.” (D. Zhu, personal journal, 2025)

AFTERWORD

PHOTO INFO:

- (1) Left to right: Julia Lanlan Zhu-Müeller, Zhu Liang, Zhu Shanshan, Wu Zhiqi, Zhu Dandan, approx 1996-1997, Nanjing, China
- (2) Left to right: Wang Zi, Zhu Shanshan, Zhu Dandan, Wu Zhiqi, April 24th, 2016, Wutaishan Swimming Pool, Nanjing, China

(1)



From Zhu Dandan

我曾记录了父母口述的童年经历，想要以此为蓝本，创作以童年的父母为主角的图画书。现在我的女儿将这个主题扩展和设计为另一种艺术面貌呈现，我倍感欣慰。

I once documented the childhood experiences narrated by my parents, hoping to create an illustrated book for each of them, featuring them as children. Now, my daughter has expanded and reimagined this theme, presenting it in a new artistic form, which fills me with profound satisfaction.

感谢我的父母朱良和吴智颖！你们的馈赠成了我们的创作源泉。我知道，你们一定会满意的。

Thank you to my parents Zhu Liang and Wu Zhiqi! Your gift became the source of our creativity. I know you would be pleased.

感谢女儿和我共享这些家族记忆，希望你走得更远！

Thank you to my daughter for sharing these family memories with me. May your journey take you even farther!

父母已逝，我也进入老年。那些和父母一起追忆往事的情景不时闪现，令人回味。

My parents have passed away, and I have also become an elderly person. Those moments we reminisce together flash before me from time to time, bringing back fond memories.

朱丹丹 2025 年 4 月于多伦多
Zhu Dandan April 2025, Toronto

(2)



From Wang Zi

我的外婆，吴智颖女士，曾经说过：
My Waipo, Madame Wu Zhiqi, once said,

“女孩儿嘛，要大脚走四方！”
Especially for a girl, she should traverse the world with bold strides!

谢谢外婆，给我灵感和力量。
Thank you for being my inspiration all along.

王紫 2025 年 4 月于哈密尔顿
Wang Zi April 2025, Hamilton

Figure 26 Afterwords page of Project Cocoon artist book, Kyle Liankun Sun, 2025

Accessibility in Migratory Liminal Space

The 'accessible and affordable' guideline for *Project Cocoon* emerged from Dandan's personal struggle as an artist navigating an unfamiliar cultural and institutional landscape. After moving to Canada, her vibrant practice stalled, caught in a web of linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Street names blurred into confusion, ID cards kept multiplying, and the overwhelming design of Toronto's Union Station felt like a maze, reminders of her displacement, turning her into a more introverted artist than she had ever been before. The barriers, linguistic, cultural, and bureaucratic, were not just inconveniences but structural limitations that made her artistic identity nearly invisible. Yet, before retirement, she had big plans for her new creative journey in Canada, only to find this new context a challenge she had never expected. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011) suggest, migratory culture reveals such tensions, where art becomes a site of resistance. For Dandan, her graphic design skills in the Chinese language and her illustration style aren't easily translated here. While immigrants in STEM, service, and food industries often find ways to transfer their skills, the same cannot be said for cultural workers. The artistic currency built in one's home country rarely translates in the Canadian arts sector, where networks, institutional recognition, and funding structures favour those who are already embedded within the system. *Project Cocoon*, then, becomes a diasporic experience where affordability and accessibility turn barriers into bridges, fostering a poetics of relation, as Glissant (1997)¹³ might say, through shared making.

¹³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).



Figure 27 Dandan and Zi at their artist talk, Kira, 2023

If Dandan, as an accomplished artist in her own right, struggled to find resources and navigate the Canadian arts and culture landscape, many first-generation immigrants, myself among them, might encounter similar experiences. Our collaboration was never just an act of sympathy; it was also an inquiry and shared exploration. I'm drawn to understand what it means to rebuild an artistic life in a new landscape. Beyond the objects and artworks, what networks of support, trust, and collective resilience take shape? How do community members feel when their stories ripple back to them and to others in the community space through their work? When resources and institutional support fall short, what are the unintended social benefits (connections, agency, or belonging) for those joining us in *Project Cocoon*, to co-establish the "little resistance" (2011)



Figure 28 Zi teaching relief printmaking at RHPL, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022

Resource sharing has emerged as one of the most meaningful yet often overlooked social benefits of *Project Cocoon*. Take relief zine-making as an example: instead of relying on expensive, specialized printmaking equipment, we adapted. We sourced tools and materials from Walmart, Canadian Tire, and Dollarama, swapping the professional glass inking slab for a \$2 Walmart plastic placemat and introducing Caligo Safe-wash ink. This alternative can be cleaned with regular dish soap in any kitchen. By prioritizing accessibility, we assembled a complete relief printmaking kit for as little as \$30 before tax, ensuring that this creative practice remains within reach regardless of financial constraints, making printmaking more accessible outside of a professional studio. Many of these materials, chosen for their affordability and longevity, can be sustained far beyond a single workshop in a household environment.



Figure 29 Zhu Dandan, Wang Zi and Leah Fiore, previously Richmond Hill Public Library Program Development Manager, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2022

Beyond physical tools, *Project Cocoon* also facilitates access to institutional resources. At every library residency, I bring participants for library facility trips together. One of my collaborators, beatmaker and producer SoyTippi found a hidden gem through the tour in TPL Albert Campbell branch: its 3rd floor is equipped with a 3D printer, professional-grade recording devices, and a photography studio with an infinite wall. At Richmond Hill Public Library, we asked local archivist Peter Wilson for a guided tour of the archive room, home to the most extensive genealogical collection in the York Region. Even the recommended media lists we compile serve as more than just reading suggestions, they act as personalized resource roadmaps, guiding participants toward tools and knowledge they may not have otherwise encountered.

For Dandan and many other community members, the experience was eye-opening. Having spent most of her life in Nanjing, the former capital of China, she never had access to the Second Historical Archives of China, which houses the most significant collection of records from the Republic of China (1912–1949). As one of the most highly classified archives in mainland China, entry typically requires endorsement letter from a state unit and is not open to the general public. In contrast, encountering the relative accessibility of archives in Canada revealed an entirely different approach to historical preservation and public engagement.

“And all these are FREE?” Dandan looked back at me in disbelief when Peter talked about the opening hours for this quiet archive room. “We should come every day!”

Both of my parents worked for Chinese state-owned media before moving to Canada. This level of information access was something they had never experienced. In “*Bounded by Margins, Resting in Rivers*,” one of the ways to activate the gallery space was similar programming, archive visits, to our workshops. As members of the York University community, I am blessed to have the Archives of Ontario conveniently located on campus. During the show from April 16th to 25th, one program is a guided tour of this provincial-level archive by an archivist. This tour will be a short walk from Gales Gallery to Archives of Ontario, open to all audiences; whether these audiences are coming for the exhibition or the tour, they can benefit from both spaces, and possibly become future participants in *Project Cocoon*. This project operates through the lens of the counter-archive, prioritizing visual and oral histories while embracing non-colonial languages. Understanding public archives is essential to building our own counter-archive. To engage, problematize, confront, and challenge dominant narratives requires, at times, nothing more than “little resistance” (2011) , a quiet but deliberate reclaiming of space, memory, and history.

Fermentation is a Group Activity



Figure 30 Left to right: Soytippi, Zi and Alex recording a promotional video, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2023

My studio practice, printmaking, performance, and sound-making are solitary, but my work is rarely done alone.

During the Fermentation work period, I collaborated with Dandan, Kyle, SoyTippi, Kerr and Alex(my other artist collaborators). Each of us comes from a different artistic background, yet we found a way to work within the same conceptual space, negotiating ideas, challenging each other's assumptions, and expanding our methodologies.

Collaboration is not always seamless. It is friction and fluidity at once. With my mother, the friction comes from our generational and cultural proximity, the near-instant understanding that sometimes makes our disagreements sharper. With other artists, the challenge lies in translation, not just across languages but across artistic frameworks. How do you enter someone else's artistic logic without losing your own?

With Kyle, I learned the patience of material experimentation.

With SoyTippi, I learned the importance of slowness, of letting a work sit before declaring it done.

With Alex, I learned the joy of breaking things apart and piecing them back together.

With Kerr, I learned the power of margins in sound-making; that a pause is also part of the rhythm, and that without silence, there can be no sound.

With Dandan, I learned the sensory perspective of aging¹.



Figure 31 Left to right: Kerr, Zi and Dandan performing Gold-trimmed Stone Bridge, Anran Guo, 2025

¹ All of the artist bios and portfolio sites can be found in Appendix B.

As part of the Prompt, Dandan, Kerr, and I co-created a live sound-making performance in response to the repeated urge to translate works into English by community members.

Using my mother Dandan's essay "Gold-trimmed Stone Bridge" as the starting point, I sent both Chinese and English versions to Kerr Lee and invited him to create a sonic response on guitar. I picked some of the objects from the essay and brought them to the gallery as instruments for sound-making to simultaneously accompany Dandan's reading. I did not act as a foley artist but as a live soundmaker using objects mentioned in the essay, drawing landscapes and character interactions through time.

Originally written in Chinese, with dialogue in the Suzhou dialect and Northern Jiangsu dialect the essay was not translated into textual form for the performance. When translating it as an internal document, I struggled to convey the atmosphere of a Watertown in Jiangsu in English. This led me to ask:

Is the cultural context of the writing more important, or is the sound of it simply taking up space?

In Canada, a colonized country with a large immigrant community, when do we typically read or hear a language other than English or French? Other than someone's domestic space, often, these moments occur in service industry spaces, restaurants, nail salons, laundromats, where linguistic presence is tied to labour rather than cultural expression. Many immigrants with arts and cultural backgrounds transition into service industry labour or other entirely unrelated industries after migration.

Project Cocoon creates a diasporic experience, negotiated between the public and the domestic, where we reclaim the time and agency to make our voices legible, both literally and metaphorically. Here, creative expression, often confined to private notebooks or hummed quietly during lunch breaks, finds an audience that shares similar experiences, then echoes back in the now.

Working with other artists is a process of fermentation, each of us bringing something raw, something unfinished, and watching it transform through exposure to one another. Some ideas dissolve, others intensify, and sometimes, the unexpected emerges.

And maybe that's the point. To surrender to the process, to let the work take on a life of its own, knowing that something, however small, will be left behind, imprinted in the final piece.

Alone, Together

Two other installations in the show feel like entries from my personal diary. Reflecting on my artwork, *Homecoming* (2018), a series of printmaking works that traces my own family history, I found myself immersed in the conceptual and physical space of a suitcase, its contents, its exterior, and the history it carries.

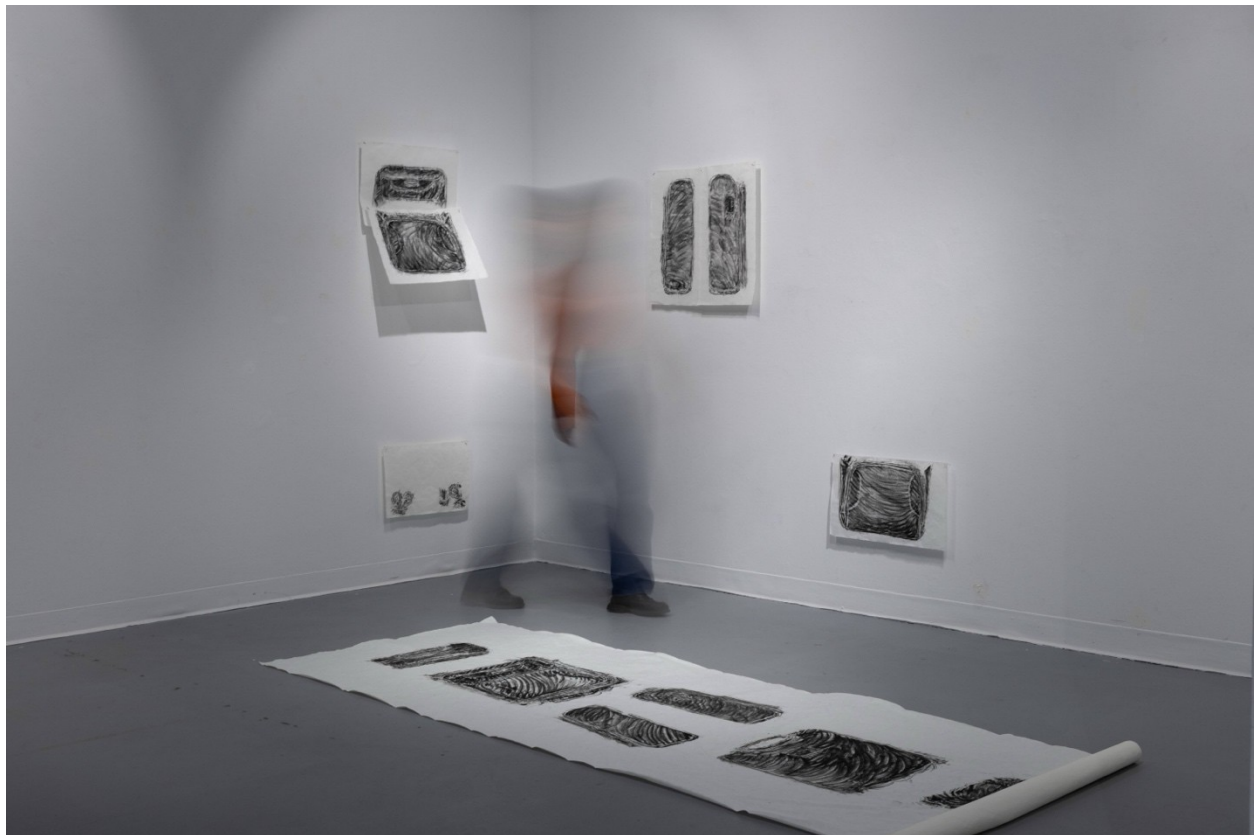


Figure 32 Zi walking past Travel Land in a gallery, Alex Haochuan Xu, 2024



Figure 33 Detail shot of Travel Land, Bianca Gill, 2025



Figure 34 Zi rubbing a luggage handle, Anran Guo, 2024

In my journal, I wrote: “Travelling humans are too busy to notice how the carry-on also carries something back, the dust it collected through airports and train stations from another side of the world.”

“What goes into the luggage are decisions immigrants made before they migrated. What comes with our journey is the well-travelled dust from each of our stops. They lay on each other and quietly become part of the next journey, an ongoing weight that immigrants carry. Sometimes invisible to human eyes, they eventually became part of our diasporic identity. Travel Land is an installation that grasps the surface of carry-on luggage with charcoal rubbing on kozo. Each piece is pinned on the wall; this loosely supported installation lets the paper lightly wave as the audience moves. Travel Land monumentalizes the transient experience of travel and presents the journey from an object biography perspective.”

Rubbing is an intimate act, a direct communion with an object. Water, humidity, paper, charcoal, and, most of all, time, join as collaborators in this process. I use *shuiyin banhua* (水印版

画), a traditional Chinese woodblock printing method, to prepare the kozo, soaking it for an hour. The moment it is lifted from the waterbed, time's gentle clock begins to hum. As the paper dries, I must move quickly, with care and focus, pressing, rubbing, capturing every detail before it fades. The motion of rubbing mirrors a mother's hand tenderly tracing the worn edges and hidden sufferings of her child.



Figure 35 Detail shot of Inside Travel Land, Wang Zi, 2024



Figure 36 Inside Travel Land, Bianka Gill, 2025

Inside Travel Land employs a similar gesture to that of *Homecoming*, except that here, the plaster traces the luggage's inner folds. This time, the plaster luggage was placed on an airport security table, a place where all personal belongings are examined with absolute authority. Sometimes, we bring forbidden items not on purpose, and decisions have to be made on whether to keep or abandon them onsite at the security area. These casted creases are margins in migratory experiences that are barely talked about. The moment we purchase a ticket, departure begins ticking closer. When the damp kozo is draped blind over a piece of luggage, or wet plaster is laid inside a suitcase, there is no visual guide, only touch. And I trust touch, no sight to guide me, just my fingers dancing big and small parts of the suitcase. The indexical marks are traced by charcoal and plaster, showing how my fingers trace the zipper's edge and the folds where fabric gives way to metal. I learned about this suitcase through feeling and memory, by the way its surface holds the echoes of all the places it has been. These creases, these margins of migratory life, murmur what's seldom sung: the haste of packing and unpacking, the rivers that

flow through a traveller's page. Both rubbing and casting become acts of *deverbalization*¹⁴, a concept in simultaneous interpretation, a process of getting the core meaning of a paragraph and skinning it from its linguistic form, in our case, from luggage to kozo paper, liberating the time and experience from the suitcase onto other collaborative materials and artistic languages.

Conclusion and an invitation

In tracing the journey of *Project Cocoon* across Ontario's varied sites, from Richmond Hill to Chinatown to Scarborough, I unravel how artists write, visualize, perform, practice, and theorize community-based artworks not as static objects but as living processes of becoming. Like the silken threads of a cocoon, community art weaves together disparate elements: stories carried across oceans, objects held through displacement, and voices speaking from the margins. The work exists in the spaces between, the rivers of white that flow through text, the pauses in conversation where humanity manifests, the negative spaces where meaning accumulates.

As artists, my artist collaborators and I write community not through single authorship but through collaborative inscription, allowing multiple hands to mark the page. We visualize through what Mieke Bal (2022) calls "image-thinking", an embodied interpretation that honours materiality and sensory engagement. We perform through the everyday rituals of making: the folding of wonton wrappers, the pressing of ink to paper, the interaction with a suitcase's interior geography. We practice through constant negotiation between structure and openness, between guiding and following, between speaking nearby and stepping aside. And we theorize not through abstraction but through lived experience, through what Xiang Biao (2021) calls "self as method," where theory emerges from practice rather than dictating it.

Project Cocoon reveals that community-based artmaking occurs across three critical dimensions: in the dialogical spaces between artist and community, where facilitation becomes a form of care rather than control; in the interrogative relationship between artists, where collaboration breeds

¹⁴ Seleskovitch, introduced the concept of *deverbalization* as a key stage in the interpretive process of translation. (1978, p. 29)

friction that polishes new ideas; and in the speculative realm between artist and audience, where work continues its social life beyond our intentions. These dimensions do not exist in isolation but flow into one another like tributaries of the same river.

The nomadic box we create, this growing collection of stories, objects, and relations, is both container and contained. It holds our collective experiences while itself being held by institutions, communities, and individuals who encounter it. Like a cocoon, it transforms what enters it, yet remains permeable, breathable, alive to change. And like a river, it carves new paths through established terrain, sometimes flowing quietly, sometimes surging with unexpected force.

In the end, I find that artists do not merely make work about communities, we make work with and within them. We bind ourselves by the same margins that frame our participants' lives; we rest in the same rivers that carry their stories. The ethics of such a practice demand not neutrality but an active engagement with power, language, and institutional structures. It requires what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls "speaking nearby", a positionality that acknowledges difference while seeking resonance.

Project Cocoon, in its material forms and immaterial relations, demonstrates that community-based art is fundamentally about creating diasporic experience, neither institutional nor domestic, neither entirely public nor entirely private, where different ways of knowing, making, and being can coexist. In these spaces, the humble soap dish becomes as profound as the heirloom Qipao; the pause in speech carries as much meaning as the spoken word; and the \$2 Walmart placemat transforms into a printmaking surface as legitimate as any professional equipment.

Through *Project Cocoon*, we learn that community-based artmaking is not about producing fixed artifacts but about nurturing what Édouard Glissant calls a "poetics of relation"¹⁵(1997), an ongoing, unpredictable, and generative flow between people, places, and practices. Like the cocoon that gives our project its name, the work envelops while transforming and protects while enabling metamorphosis. And like the rivers that run through our pages, it carries forward not only what we intentionally place within it, but also what accumulates along its course, the

¹⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

invisible sediment of lived experience that, over time, reshapes the very landscape through which it moves.

I extend my invitation to everyone who reads this paper to provide feedback, participate in our workshops, and/or work as a collaborator. My email is Zee.c.wang@gmail.com for everyone who is interested in taking part in any phase of the project.

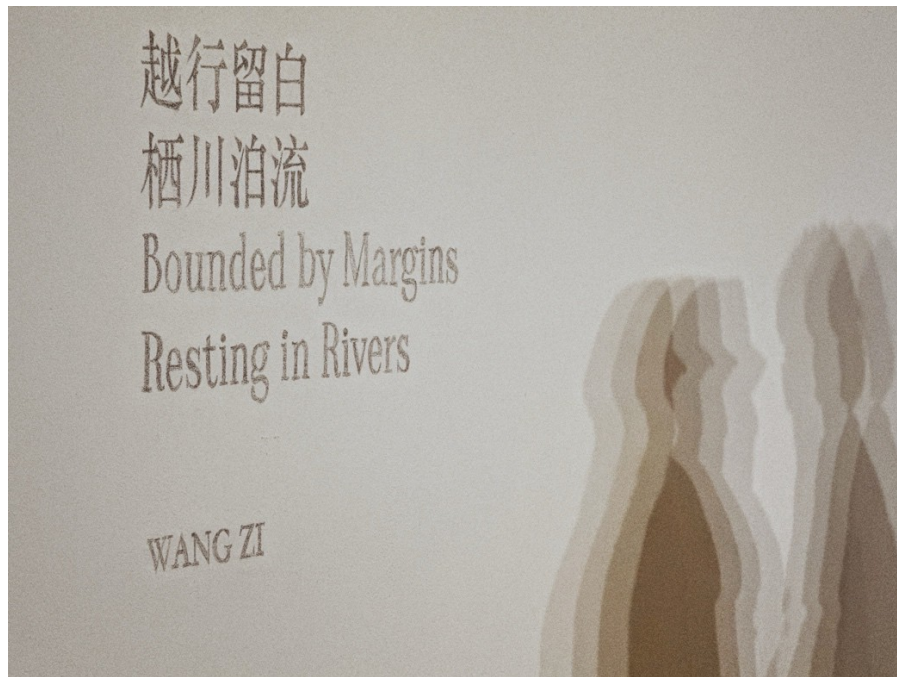
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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation Images

Bounded by Margins, Resting in Rivers, April 16th – 25th, 2025, at Gales Gallery, York University



Opening Performance, Zi and Kerr, Images by MT, 2025



Cancanvan prints drying rack, Image by Alex Haochuan Xu



Zi showing how the foldable drying rack can be detached, by Bianka Gill, 2025



Project Cocoon Artist Book 2025 detail shot and In-situ, Images by Yifan Wang, 2025



Workshop on Cancanvan on April 24th, Images by Yifan Wang



Cancanvan folded in-situ, Alex Haochuan Xu (below), 2025



Left to right: Inside Travel Land, Project Cocoon Artist Book, Tingting Listening Station



Grandma in North Korea, 1952, both images by Bianka Gill, 2025



Travel Land in situ, Images by Bianka Gill, 2025

Appendix B: Artist collaborator biography

Zhu Dandan

Artist, Writer

www.behance.net/zhudandanstudio

Instagram: @zhudandanstudio

Zhu Dandan 朱丹丹 is a celebrated children's book illustrator and an award-winning art director with over 100 published works across Asia. Some of her clients are the Ministry of Education Jiangsu; Phoenix Publishing & Media Group; and Hsin Yi publications. After she moved to Canada upon retirement in 2017, she has been enjoying gardening and learning English. She is currently working on her new book that details her family's migration story from Asia to Europe and North America.

Michael LoRe (Soy Tippi)

Producer, Musician

[Soy Tippi soytippi.bandcamp.com/](http://SoyTippi.soytippi.bandcamp.com/)

Michael LoRe (A.K.A Soy Tippi) is a beat producer and musician with over 10 years of experience. With a strong brand, he has released over 150 songs and instrumentals as a solo artist and as a producer for rappers and singers in Osaka, Japan and Atlanta, Georgia, USA. After studying art and design at OCAD U, graduating in design with a major in Advertising, Michael worked in film as a Production Assistant and Assistant Director. Then, as the pandemic struck and the film industry went on pause, he started working full-time for RX Music, within their programming department as a Music Programming Clerk.

Alex Haochuan Xu

Producer, Photographer, Videographer

haochuanxu.com/ Instagram: @ xuhaochuan

Alex Haochuan Xu is a cinematographer based in Toronto, Canada. He graduated from OCAD University in Photography. He has been the Brand influencer of Canon Canada from 2020 to 2021. His client includes Canon Canada, Travel Alberta, Buick, Porsche, New York Times, Northern Speed Canada, McCann, Jeep China, New York Fashion Week, Apple China.

Kyle Liankun Sun

Art director

<https://liankunsun2021.webflow.io/>

Kyle is an art director with over 10 years of experience in editorial and exhibition design. He holds a BFA in Printmaking and Publication from OCAD University, where he graduated as a medal winner. Some of his clients are CIBC, TELUS, to summer, aranya, aranya art center, Time Fengjun Entertainment, Disney, National Geographic.

Kerr Lee

Singer-songwriter

Performance: Soap Dish Lady Instagram: @ kerr_ig

Kerr attaches great importance to the immediacy of music and often uses a variety of instruments for diverse live performances, including guitar, bass, metallophone, looper Pedal, guitar bow, drum machine, vocal looper, etc., presenting the diverse auditory scenes of the one man orchestra. Find potential possibilities and balance points among songs, sounds, music and composition, and sing out the world perspective from Taiwan.

Anran Guo

Visual Artist, Curator

www.anranguo.com/ Instagram: @ anran.guo

Anran Guo (b. Dalian, China) is a queer female artist and art educator based in Hamilton and Toronto. She holds a Master of Visual Studies in Studio Art and an HBA in Art and Art History from the University of Toronto.

Working primarily in sculpture and installation, Guo creates counter-monuments and visual fables that offer layered critiques of social and political systems. Her work has been exhibited across Ontario and is held in the collections of Sheridan College and private collectors in North America. Her practice is supported by the Ontario Arts Council.