

Perpetual Shuttling:

An Investigation into Design
for Chinese Diasporic
Identities in Negotiation

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Abstract

In a global context, the conventional markers of identity are challenged and problematized. Although the dominant narrative in Western culture is Anglo-Saxon, the increasingly multicultural nature of Canadian society gives rise to a continual mapping of diverse cultures and identities. Historically, the Chinese Canadian diaspora was essentialized and constrained in its development and problems of alienation, invalidation and marginalization persist to this day. Furthermore, this community is no longer as monolithic as it once was and there are challenges in even defining it. This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining postmodernist and post-colonial cultural theories with visual artifacts in an effort to embrace the cultural identities of the Chinese Canadian diaspora. “Perpetual Shuttling” is a subjective visual narrative of the Chinese Canadian community of which I am a part. The artifact uses images from my personal archive, which embodies the de-territorializing of “Chinese-ness.” “Perpetual Shuttling” expresses the temporary, fragmentary, and ambiguous qualities of diaspora lives, while also asserting a self-proclaiming stance in the discourse of Chinese Canadian diaspora identity and culture.

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Introduction

Identity politics has become the subject of fierce controversy. Critics of identity politics are roughly divided into two streams. One group claims that highlighting distinct identity neglects common humanity, and strengthens the differences between groups of people. The second opinion advocates the claiming of identity as a way to form a political alliance that can confront oppression, victimization, and marginalization (Little & Broome, 2010). Both views contain an element of truth, illustrating the complexity and elusive nature of identity politics, which is simultaneously personal, social and political. As far back as 1807, the German philosopher Hegel provided an influential perspective on identity politics, which he suggests will inherently lead to conflict. He describes the process of identity development as a “life-and-death struggle” between dominant and subordinate groups (Hegel, 1977, p. 114). Furthermore, diasporic population often experience an identity crisis. The question today lies in the meaning of “identity.” In a world where going abroad, crossing borders, and interconnecting with people can be easily accomplished both physically and virtually, how does one define an identity?

The insights of cultural theorist Stuart Hall are especially appropriate in this context. In the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall writes:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, ‘cultural identity,’ lays claim. We seek, here, to open a dialogue, an investigation, on the subject of cultural identity and representation (Hall, 1990, p. 222).

This thesis examines the construction of “Chinese-ness” and the fluidity of Chinese diasporic identities. It also interrogates the practice of graphic design in the representation of culture and identity. This thesis seeks to explore the following questions: How can we use design to illuminate issues in Chinese diasporic discourse? How can we help artists and audiences negotiate diasporic identities? And, how do we use design to resist marginalization and validate these identities? This thesis aims to validate the cultural identity of the Chinese diaspora and encourage a positive and productive attitude towards the in-between space of cultural encounters.

History and Connotations of Chinese Diaspora

The term diaspora has been a recognized concept in social sciences since the 1960s. Though initially used to describe Jewish communities throughout the world, the meaning of the term is now used more broadly to include any ethnic group who are dispersed from their original homeland.

The Chinese diaspora is one of the largest immigrant communities in Canada and it has faced numerous incidents of discrimination throughout the nation's history. The first Chinese immigrants encountered unrelenting hostility, beginning with abusive treatment and exploitation during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1881–1885). This was followed by a head tax on Chinese immigration (1885–1923) and finally the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, which halted virtually all immigration from China until its repeal in 1947. Chinese immigrants were often stereotyped as “sojourners,” using Canada simply as a place to earn money temporarily while preparing to return to a homeland. Furthermore, the Chinese lifestyle, language and culture differed greatly from Canada's mainstream ways of life, reinforcing xenophobic fears that the Chinese posed a threat to Canadian society (Chan, 2019).

The Chinese word for “sojourner” (huaqiao) does imply that the sojourner is still attached to the homeland. During the early years of Chinese settlement in Canada, the diaspora's attachment to China is shown by its support of Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, in subverting the Qing dynasty. In the 1930s, prominent Chinese diaspora figures such as Tan Kah Kee mobilized overseas opposition to the Japanese invasion of China (Than, 2012). Some in the Chinese-Canadian community,

especially more recent arrivals, would describe themselves as “overseas Chinese” that owe allegiance to the motherland. Throughout history, for many Chinese the concept of diaspora has included feelings of deep attachment to the homeland, which may be intertwined with the political concept of “Greater China” (McKeown, 2005).

William Safran has attempted to categorize diasporas. He bases his categorization on ten characteristics exemplified by individuals and the community as a whole (Safran, 1991)¹. While delineating essential characteristics can be a good starting point to understand diasporas, examining diasporas through established paradigms can be quite limiting. Since diaspora models categorize people into homogenous groups without taking into account the many differences that exist among them, the models used might not reflect the true conditions of a diaspora. Clifford criticizes Safran’s model for diasporas. He indicates that when comparing the discrepancies between various diasporas, whether historical or contemporary, none perfectly conforms to an “ideal” category. Thus, classifying diasporas further invalidates those that do not fit into set categories. Instead, Clifford encourages a “more polythetic definition” for the term diaspora (Clifford, 1997, pp. 248–249). In other words, the notion of the diaspora can be considered to embody many characteristics, yet these characteristics should not be the essential criteria to recognize a diaspora and its community (Clifford, 1994, pp. 306–307).

1. The full list is reproduced in the Appendix.

Diaspora: Difficulties and Opportunities

Space, Nation, Culture, and Identity

The general understanding of diasporic individuals often begins with their ethnicity and their country of origin. People are trained to understand culture through their connections with geographic spaces. Anthropologists, Gupta and Ferguson (1992, p. 7) question and problematize the naturalized perception of space and culture: “Conventional accounts of ethnicity, even when used to describe cultural differences in settings where people from different regions live side by side, rely on an unproblematic link between identity and place.” Gupta and Ferguson argue that the view of mapping culture, where each culture occupies its own discrete space, neglects, first, the mobility of people crossing borders, and second, the plurality of cultures within the space of a locality. For people that have resettled, migrated, or were born into a family of different cultures, the conventional notion of culture is inapplicable. While the mobile, unstable, and hybrid factors of life can cultivate spaces for transnationality, they also contribute to the complexity of the construction of identity — the variability and hybridity of people demonstrating that space has not, and cannot, bind cultures.

Akin to habitually associating geographic space with culture, people tend to categorize the identities of others into groups based on their “natural” and “essential” characteristics. As mentioned above, to perceive culture according to space would be inaccurate. Similarly, categorizing people based on their ethnicity is also flawed.

Understandably, categorization is an essential process that facilitates one's understanding of society. However, it is unreliable and can be harmful to people so labelled. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996) has dissected the conceptions of cultural identity. According to Hall, the most commonly adopted idea was the essentialized conception of cultural identity. Essentialized conception perceives cultural identity as a "collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall, 1996, pp. 110–111). The shared traits of ancestry, history, cultural codes, and experience form the image of "a people," which is stable, inherent, and unchanging (Hall, 1996, pp. 111–112).

Under a Western lens, the homogeneity of this "oneness" unifies a group of people within their differences, which as a result detaches them from their direct past and history. The essentialized conception presumes a position of authenticity and authority. From an essentialist perspective, cultural identity is something that is in need of discovery or rediscovery, and the buried "pure" form of culture is brought to light by media and other representation. However, cultural identity is not impartially grounded in archaeology or history studies, but in the interpretation and narration of the past (Hall, 1996, pp. 223–224). Narratives and archeological remains become evidence in conflicting claims of ownership by competing nations. The claims are relevant to the narratives of cultural identity because they reinforce images of present-day identity. The claims are authoritative in exhibiting "who we are" depends on "who we were." In addition, a shared historical destiny is closely linked to the ethnic group's mythic common origin. From the perspective of nationalists, the soil of one's ancestors belongs only to the members of the nation, and are the only place to fulfill one's historical destiny. Having authority

over history signifies access to an exclusive right of control over an area and its people. Consequently, nationalism has become the equivalent of national territoriality, which has transformed into a sentiment of exclusiveness (Agnew, Mitchell & Toal, 2007, pp. 261–267).

As the global migration of people decenters national cultures and identities, patriotic hegemony gradually diminishes. Diasporas, in essence, challenge the prevalent perception that cultures within a nation-state are unified and congruent. Using space to map culture and identity ignores complexity within spaces.

China: A Land Imagined

In *Imagined Communities* (1983), historian Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community” that is “both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). He reasons that the ideologies of nationalism are fabricated, constructed, and eventually naturalized throughout historical changes. He recognizes the emergence of national identities as a concept that is enabled through language and circulated through technology. This imagination creates a “natural” commonality and affinity between a people and unites them to willingly contribute or sacrifice toward the prosperity of this created imagining (Anderson, 1983, p. 18). The Andersonian perspective recognizes Chinese national identity as a social-political construction. Cultural symbols such as the dragon totem originated from historical records and were re-introduced into mainstream culture. A prominent example would be “The Descendants of the Dragon,” a song written by Hou, Dejian² in 1978, which popularized mythical concepts of dragons in ancient China, and the supposed ancestral connection of Chinese people with dragons. This popular song has become a symbol of Chinese “national identity,” and is frequently promoted on government controlled media. Akin to the dragon, peonies of prosperity, the calligraphy of Chinese characters (hanzi), and numerous other cultural symbols were recognized and together constitute the imagination of China (Xinjian, 2011).

In Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, the idea of the “orient” exists as an anchor that helps to define the “occident.” The process of comparing the contrasting images, ideas,

2. Name cited according to Eastern naming order: surname, given name.

personalities, traditions, and experiences reflects the context of Western civilization. Said (1979, p. 9) describes the East as “the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other.” In other words, the concept of the East was constructed and existed in the Western context, and because of that, the idea lacks correspondence with the reality of the East. As well, the act of differentiation crystallizes and essentializes the “orient.” To orientalize is to over-generalize and reduce places and people to over-simplified symbols that eventually become recurring images of the other. The image of the other is constrained from being a “free subject of thought or action” (Said, 1979, pp. 9–13). Orientalism is harmful to Chinese diasporas because the notion is not limited to a Western context, but is also ingrained in the social-political discourse of the East among the so-called “orientals,” as well.

To New Leftist scholars in China, such as Gan Yang and Wang Hui, cultural representations are the basis of Chinese “creative imaginary” (Gan, 2007, pp. 56–60). They propose that feelings of pride and reverence for an imagined China and its symbols would help rebuild the confidence of the Chinese people to counter the cultural dominance of the West (Gan, 2007, pp. 56–60). Although the New Left’s concept can be used to promote solidarity among Chinese individuals overseas regardless of their diverse backgrounds, the impact of this strategy risks essentializing and self-orientalizing Chinese culture. According to Ip Iam-chong (2015), elites and intellectuals in China have deliberately self-orientalized the image of China. Iam-chong (2015, pp. 243–244) argues that the New Left’s conception of nationhood is exclusive to Han Chinese culture and

discourse, which imperialized internal ethnic minorities and cultures.

The fixed idea of “Chinese-ness” promoted by the New Leftist excludes the Chinese diaspora as well. Cultural studies scholar, Ien Ang, shines a light on the particular predicament of the Chinese diaspora. She notes that besides private family practices, her familiarization with China and the notion of homeland was through media and popular culture. In Western media, China was presented as a cultural and geographical other in relation to the West. Ang faces the issue of an orientalized China and Chinese identity in both China and Australia. Individuals in the Chinese diaspora may experience that their “Chinese-ness” is called into question when their values and practices are compared with those of the “authentic,” “ideal,” Chinese or even stereotyped versions outlined by the New Left and Western essentialization (Ang, 2001, p. 32).

Due to an “imagined China,” Chinese identity in the eyes of some has become a fixed image which Chinese individuals are expected to conform to. This reductionist representation of China not only builds a fantasy, but generates presumptions about Chinese identities that affects how these identities are perceived by others and themselves.

Examining Multiculturalism and its Limitations

The concept of multicultural society and diversity is recognized and celebrated as one of the most distinguished aspects of Canadian culture and national identity. Canada's "mosaic" expression of ethnicity and culture consists of four constituent cultural groupings; the two prevailing Anglo-Saxon and French cultures, the cultures of the Indigenous peoples, and lastly, cultural groups comprising all the other "ethnic" groups that have immigrated to Canada since the 19th century (Rocher, 2017). In Canada, multiculturalism is both a sociological fact and a federal public policy. Multiculturalism is seen by the majority of Canadians as an integral aspect of the Canadian state. Canadians continue to respect and celebrate shared values and the maintenance of cultural traditions (Soroka & Robertson, 2010). While many see multiculturalism in a positive light, scholars raise several possible negative implications that multiculturalism might have in society. Rather than accepting the idea as an entirety, the concept could be examined more critically.

Multiculturalism relies on affirming the places diaspora occupy. Locating diasporic peoples relative to an "authentic" origin, is virtually mostly impossible as the recognition of diaspora requires the "negotiation of a dangerous indeterminacy" according to Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1996, p. 56). In addition, this concept of multiculturalism fails to address the "disjunctive, 'borderline' temporalities of partial minority cultures (partial meaning the cultures of the past)." The word *multiculturalism*, then, becomes "a floating signifier" (Bhabha, 1996, p. 55). Although the emphasis on value sharing in multicultural equality is believed to be rooted in genuine intentions that strived to constitute a non-discriminatory society for minority identities, the notion of

an uncontaminated culture is absurd. A diaspora's disjunctive and displaced existence "interrupts and interrogates the homogeneous, horizontal claim of the democratic liberal society" (Bhabha, 1996, p. 57). The supposed self-containedness of distinctive diaspora communities in multicultural states is a deception which actually homogenizes differences by reducing the multiple temporalities of different cultures to an essentialized one.

Historian Arif Dirlik also denounces the fact that multiculturalist policies have a tendency to orientalize and exotify ethnic groups. The promotion of a cultural "mosaic" defines and refies ethnicities and cultures, which pins races and cultures developed through complexity and nuance down to their origins (Dirlik, 1996). Historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki expresses the same attitude as Dirlik. She believes multiculturalism insinuates Western domination and superiority over the other ethnicities. The reification of cultures consolidates the imposition of ethnic minorities as being the subjects of tolerance. Without sufficient understanding of the complexity of ethnic minorities and their daily culture, they are rendered into exotic beings, silenced and marginalized, which further segregates people under multicultural policies (Morris-Suzuki, 2000).

In essence, multiculturalism is understood to maintain the boundaries between the diverse cultures it encompasses. The concept of a multicultural society can be harmful to the diaspora as it ignores the complexity of nationalism. Multiculturalism attempts to secure national boundaries in an increasingly borderless world. It conveniently projects a national image of living in difference that does not take into account the complexity of postmodern society.

Negotiating the In-Between Identities

When discussing identity issues of the Chinese diaspora, it is important to look past the prevailing notion of how diasporas are delineated. A more effective way of looking at the definition of a diaspora is to incorporate a perspective that considers modern migration as a phenomenon involving cross-cultural and cross-linguistic elements in the process of re-settlement (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001, p. 14).

One significant factor to take into account when examining the role that migration plays today is the fluid social space inherent to modern societies. The fluidity occurs as society adjusts to new cultures, ideas and values. Hall and Du Gay (1996) propose that there is a distinction to be made between “irredentist forms of diasporic identity...and progressive forms, which favour a hybrid over an essentialist conception of both culture and identity” (p. 114). Hall and Du Gay (1996, p. 116) also endorse the idea that diasporic individuals will usually navigate life living between two cultures and two ways of thinking. For example, Chinese Canadian filmmaker Mina Shum narrates her own experience through the film *Double Happiness*. The film portrays the struggle of a Chinese-Canadian woman torn between the expectations of her family and her dreams of being an actor. In an interview, Shum recalls, “I had this epiphany that if I was to pursue a creative life, that I had to turn my back on my obligations to my family” (Grundy, 2016).

Homi Bhabha (2004) argues that trans-cultural migration can create hybrid cultural situations. As a migrant adjusts to the new culture of the host country, his or her identity may be transformed into a hybrid identity. The process by which this takes place

can be described as a “performative interplay” during which the differences between the host and home nations are negotiated within the migrant’s consciousness (Bhabha, 2004, p. 123). Hybridity becomes a “third space” that situates itself beyond the dominant and marginal discourses that usually guide the conversation between the host and home cultures (Bhabha, 2004, p. 126).

Clifford (1997, p. 101) incorporates another interesting perspective, proposing that what we understand as “culture” should not be conceived in static terms. Clifford states that since modern societies (and global culture) are in a permanent state of flux, it is better to understand the notion of culture “in terms of travel.” There are good grounds for supporting this view of culture since the age of globalization has created an unprecedented level of approximation between different cultures. The globalizing context indicates that cultural trend themselves transform according to a process of interaction between different cultural elements. Clifford adds that to appreciate the nuances involved in the configuration of cultural elements one needs “to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones.” Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston’s (2006) approach to diasporic identity coincides with Clifford’s view. According to her, “Chinese is a foreign culture ... it is my heritage, but I am always trying to figure it out and then bring it back with what relevance it has to our American life” (Kingston, 2006). Clifford also states that to understand the full anthropological implications of modern migration one needs to use a “comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and travelling: travelling-in-dwelling and dwelling-in-travelling” (Clifford, 1992, p. 108).

Of course, there are challenges involved in widening the notion of culture. Bhabha

(1996, p. 59) argues that the idea of being “in-between” cultures requires the existence of “disparate ‘interest groups’ or social movements...Affiliation may be antagonistic and ambivalent; solidarity may be only situational and strategic: commonality is often negotiated through the ‘contingency’ of social interests and political claims.” Ang states the importance of “Chinese-ness” as an element can be used “as a strategy to illuminate the precariousness of diasporic identity, highlighting the very difficulty of constructing a position from which one can speak as Chinese” (Ang, 1992, pp. 5–19). Ang also argues that cultural renegotiation opens interesting avenues to overcome the blanket generalizations that are often part of identity politics. Ang adds that “the politics of self-(re)presentation ... resides not in the establishment of an identity per se, full-fledged and definitive, but in its use as a strategy to open up avenues for new speaking trajectories” (Ang, 2001, p. 24). Therefore, the study of the cross-cultural phenomena that occur because of migration should incorporate an individual-centric perspective.

In conclusion, the in-between space does not only refer to “the bipolar dichotomy of ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’” (Ang, 2001, p. 35), but also the possibility of creating bridges between cultures that enrich lives in a global society. Ang adopts Bhabha’s theory of “third space,” and recognizes “new forms of culture” that fill the in-between space. These “hybrid cultural forms [are] born out of a productive, creative syncretism” (Ang, 2001, p. 35).

Designing in Diversified Cultural Vision

A Diasporic Discourse

As the global economy becomes increasingly interdependent and migration and immigration increase, the effects of globalization on culture and identity amplify as well. Diasporas interrogate the dynamics and interrelations between disparate cultural domains, processes, and identities. They also have the potential to negotiate or mediate cultural differences. However, because diasporas challenge the established models of stable culture, diasporic communities risk being alienated and marginalized in mainstream society. Generating discourses of diaspora by members of the diasporic community is crucial to counter the adverse conditions they diasporas in their peripheral position in society.

French philosopher Michel Foucault believes that *discourse* is a set of ideas and practices that are produced and legitimized from the top of the political and social hierarchy. These ideas and practices have been naturalized and accepted as social fact or epistemic reality. The knowledge that comes from a discourse of domination is often accepted as social and political “truth.” This way, discourse becomes a technique of control to eliminate differences and ward off change to the position of those in power (Foucault, 1971, pp. 7–10). Michael Warner’s essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” (2002) addresses the relation of public and discourse. Warner states, “A public can produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse...it is the self-created and self-organized property that gives a public its power” (p. 414). In other

words, to generate discourse from a position on the periphery is an act to destabilize the power of the centre. Although, as Warner indicates, “the idea of a public, is text-based... visual and audio are also texts that brings into being a public of discourse” (Warner, p. 415). An example of the impact of visual discourse can be found in Stuart Hall’s (1990) discussion of Black-British identity. From the photography of British-Jamaican visual artist Armet Francis,³ Hall posits that the photos of black people with diverse identity reconstruct a unification through visual language. Under a dominant regime of Western cinematic and visual representations, black experience was portrayed as “fragmented and pathological,” and separated from British identity. The photographs are able to reveal the connections between different black identities across time and space, and restore fullness to black experience. Also, the artist’s rearticulation of a British identity that is non-white and hybrid shatters the hegemonic representation of British identity as exclusively white (Hall, 1990, pp. 224–225).

3. Armet Francis photographys black experiences in Africa, Caribbean, USA and UK. Began in 1969 Francis documented over 40 years of the African diaspora.

Culture's Circulation and Representations

Many designers have moved away from a utilitarian approach to design, towards examining the role of design objects in the process of fostering human relationships and self-identity. Guy Julier (2006, p. 67) argues, “culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative, where visual culture conveys messages. Instead, culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains, and retrieves information.” In *The Culture of Design* (2002), Julier explained that the circulation of culture occurs in three domains: *production*, the *designer*, and *consumption*. *Designers* in the domains are responsible for shaping the form and content of visual and material artifacts that are produced and consumed; *Production* includes much more than manufacture, such as execution, distribution, and circulation of goods and services; and *Consumption* includes the gathering of information, the use of products, the experience of the senses, location and moments. For example, shopping provides the experience of modern spectacle. Also, museums and exhibitions offer the organization and classification of material culture for the public view. Julier proposes that these domains never exist in isolation, and are always inter-informing and exchanging. The nature of consumption is interpretive, because objects of production are texts. The reading of the text feeds into living culture, which informs the articulation of daily life and personal action. Design production can promote social or ideological values, and through consumption, these values and systems are reproduced, articulated or rearticulated (Julier, 2002, pp. 48–60). Based on a youth subculture study by Dick Hebdige in 1979, Julier points out an example of rearticulation in punk and street culture. The working-class youth of postwar Britain appropriate mass produced

materials in music, fashion and cosmetics and alter these materials to produce “ironic, playful or confrontational” artistic expressions. These expressions form a particular subculture style which act as a symbolic form of resistance against social normalization (Julier, 2002, p. 53; Hebdige, 1979).

Designers are always in the loop of cultural circulation, using their understanding and interpretation of the world to create works which impact the viewing audience. The actions of the audience—based on their own interpretations of the work in turn, feeds into society. In relation to the Chinese diaspora, the circulation of culture affects the representation of diasporic individuals. It is a continuous loop: How diaspora communities are portrayed influences how they are perceived by others and how they perceive their own identity. Therefore, how Chinese culture and Chinese Canadian culture are represented in mainstream cultural institutions is significant to the diaspora’s self-identification.

Art historian Chang Tan (2015, p. 307) notes that during most of the twentieth century, museum curation for Asian art has prioritized “poetics over politics, ‘tradition’ over modernity, homogeneity over heterogeneity.” It was not until recently that contemporary art from Asia began to enter the landscape of mainstream North American museums. However, Tan (2015, pp. 307–8) notes that these exhibitions may still reflect “traditional” versus modern, East versus West stereotypical tropes. Tan references several exhibitions, including *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (Fig. 1) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, December 2013 to April 2014).

4. Name cited according to Eastern naming order: surname, given name.

In this exhibition, the incompatible juxtaposition of an ancient Buddhist mural with groundbreaking exploratory works by Yang, Jiechang and Qiu, Zhijie⁴ leads one to believe that both the traditional and modern works have been decontextualized and presented as stereotypes (Tan, 2015, pp. 309–311). Other exhibits such as *Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past* (Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 2012), and *Journey through Mountains and Rivers: Chinese Landscape Ancient and Modern* (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, February to April 2013), curated themes around “Asian Cosmologies” and “Myth, Ritual, and Meditation.” The chosen themes echo stereotypical Orientalist tropes. Even though the galleries have provided extensive



Fig. 1 Exhibition view of *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*. Gallery 206, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 2014.

supplementary materials about the items on display, the juxtaposition of “traditional” and contemporary artifacts are insufficiently contextualized (Tan, 2015, p. 312).

Tan points out, “the transition from the past to the present in Asia is full of disjoints and displacements, and the search for ‘traditions’ was often ... nationalistic in spirit.” The notion of “Asian tradition” was largely invented “as a reaction to the radical and sometimes traumatic process of Westernization” (Tan, 2015, p. 311). Furthermore, as China promotes its classical cultural heritage in international cultural exchanges, official government sanctioned choices reflect a monolithic, outdated approach that does not accurately reflect China’s diverse creative culture (The Central Plain Literature Art Academy, 2016)⁵, (Foreign Ministry Website, 2012)⁶.

Tan also analyzes exhibitions centering diasporic art and artists, such as *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America* (Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, February to July 2014). This unusual juxtaposition of artifacts showcasing Hispanic and Chinese diasporic experiences was organized to emphasize commonalities between the two communities. The conflation of artworks of widely divergent concerns and strategies weakens the curator’s aim of countering homogenization within the Chinese or Hispanic diaspora identity. An example of this conflation is the juxtaposition

5. On April 24, 2016, the executive chairman of Central Plain Literature Art Academy Huang Changyou gifted his calligraphy “China influences the world” as a national gift to Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau.

6. On July 1, 2012, the exhibition *Chinese Painting and Calligraphy World Tour: Exchange Exhibition* in Canada presented more than 60 pieces of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting. The exhibition aimed to show “the essence of Chinese culture through fine works of ink and painting.”

of Hung Liu's figurative painting (Fig. 2) with Tony de los Reyes's abstract expressionist work (Fig. 3). Liu's work commemorates past traumas of Chinese community in relatively conservative styles, while Tony de los Reyes's painting focuses on current issues of Hispanic community with a more conceptual and confrontational visual language. The contrast of old and new concerns and visual language implies to the audience that the issues Chinese immigrants face are in the past, while the Hispanic community still faces challenges today (Tan, 2015, pp. 317–319).

Tan considers the exhibition *Outside In: Chinese × American × Contemporary Art* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) to be more successful than the other. *Outside In* features six artists with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all of them engaging the complex history of Chinese art. The exhibit confronts preconceived identities with approaches that are “deconstructive and reconstructive.” Tan suggests, “an artist can choose to be ‘Chinese,’ no matter what her ethnicity or birthplace is, and such an identity is compatible with other identities she may also possess, such as American, Jewish or postmodern” (Tan, 2015, pp. 320–321).



Fig. 2 (left)
Liu, Hung.⁷ (2006) *China Mary* [Oil on canvas, 36×24 in] Wyoming.

Fig. 3 (below)
Tony de los Reyes (2012)
Border Compression #1.
[Dye and oil on linen, 7×10 ft.]



7. Name cited according to Eastern naming order: surname, given name.

Envisioning Visual Narratives of Chinese Diaspora

The visual artifact I created in response to the cultural theories examined above is a series of books (Figs. 4–6) that aims to investigate what it means to be part of a Chinese diaspora in Canada. This set of books embodies the thinking and reflection of Chinese diaspora with regards to culture, identity and community. This series used images from my private archive, documented over ten years in the quotidian life of a Chinese diaspora. The objective is to illustrate the plurality of diasporic individuals and their continual questioning, emerging, rupturing process in the development of personal experience and growth.



Fig. 4 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling*, 17×15 in, 2019



Fig. 5 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling*, 17x15 in, 2019



Fig. 6 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling—Book of Questions*, 14.5x10 in, 2019

Shuttling in Simultaneity

The title of the work “Perpetual Shuttling” references an interview with British-Chinese artist Susan Pui San Lok. Lok (2006) describes living between two cultures as creating a sense of suspicion, ambivalence, and pleasure, writing: “I’d prefer...to think of [living in between cultures] as a perpetual shuttling, also in the sense of weaving, with the idea of movement, but also suspension, that comes with travel—which may sound paradoxical, but I somehow connect this with Trinh’s notion of ‘still speed’ or ‘stillness in speed.’” She says that to envisage a position “in between” it is inevitable to speak about culture “monolithically, monumentally, or discretely.” While doing so, it is imperative not to “subsume the simultaneity, porosity, contradiction, and ‘pidgin’ nature of cultures” (Smith, 2006, p. 21). Singanapalli Balaram, in the book *Thinking Design* (2001), describes the essence of pluralistic society as a simultaneous existence. Balaram argues, “The past exists with the present. The rich exist with the poor. Tradition exists with modernity. Cottage or home production exists with high-tech mass production” (Balaram, 2011, pp. 15). A review of Balaram’s book adds, “It is said that within one hundred feet of a person in India you will find people living in 2001, 1001 and several centuries in between” (Kallish, 2002, p. 91). To a degree, Balaram’s observation is applicable to both China and Canada, where multiple dimensions of reality exist. To live as diaspora is to perpetually shuttle through different spatial, temporal, cultural, social and political realities that are interwoven and inextricable.

The Subjective Perspective

Artist and cultural critic Hito Steyerl dissects in depth the connotation of perspectives. Coming from an assumed natural, scientific, and objective laws of representation, the linear perspective is the most important paradigm that defines modernity and enables Western dominance. However, the foundation of linear perspective is an abstract horizon line which negates the earth curvature. The view calculates “a mathematical, flattened, infinite, continuous, and homogeneous space, and declares it to be reality” (Steyerl, 2011, p. 8). Linear perspective assumes an observer standing on a stable ground, which immobilizes and undermines the viewer’s subjective perception. Similarly, aerial perspectives (such as Google Maps and surveillance media) occupies a unified gaze, which projects illusions of stability and safety as well. Steyerl believes that in contemporary society, there is no stable ground to speak of (Steyerl, 2011, p. 8).

Fortunately, since the 20th century, the notion of perspective has gradually begun to incorporate the concept of “real time.” Coming from landscapes seen from a running train, the concept depicts the mobile and fragmentary that could not be represented by perspective of unified gaze (Cheagab, 2019). Painting, film, photography, and graphic design practices (such as Cubist painting, montages, and multi-screen projection) have emerged to create multifocal and nonlinear imagery that incorporate multiple perspectives. With heterogeneous and dynamic viewing space, these “new visualities” produce hyperreal representations that are free from prescribed focal dimensions. Along the stuttering of homogeneous perspectives, “the viewer is no longer unified by such a gaze, but is rather dissociated and overwhelmed, drafted into the production of content”

(Steyerl, 2011, p. 9).

Chinese perspectives, on the other hand, emphasize the subjectivity of the artist and viewer by depicting landscapes as lived and seen. Developed 400 years earlier than the West (Europe and North America), the schema of Chinese perspective possesses the key elements of “real time perspective” (Cheagab, 2019). According to Da-Wei (1990, p. 70), “[the] Chinese concept of perspective, unlike the scientific view of the West, is an idealistic or suprealistic approach, so that one can depict more than can be seen with the naked eye. The composition is in a ladder of planes, or two-dimensional or flat perspective.” This method enables the viewer to move back and forth while viewing a scroll. Art historian Michael Sullivan (1984, p. 176) believes that Chinese perspectives are able to break free of the linear restrictions by representing “what we know to be there.” This design incorporates this perspective of traditional Chinese paintings, in an effort to challenge the ideology behind linear perspective and mapped culture.

The mono-prints in the books (Figs. 7–15) incorporate images of significant places from my personal collection and are presented in the manner of interwoven landscapes. These landscapes were hand-printed on rice paper, then scanned and reproduced with a digital inkjet printer, a hybrid process combining traditional and modern techniques.

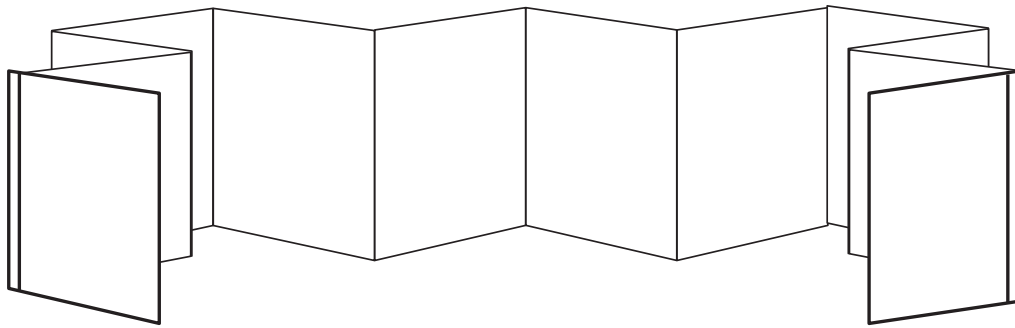


Fig. 7 Perpetual Shuttling—Book #1 layout



Fig. 8 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling—Book #1*, 17×15 in (book closed), 2019



Fig. 9 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling—Book #1 (folded pages)*, 17× 105 in, 2019

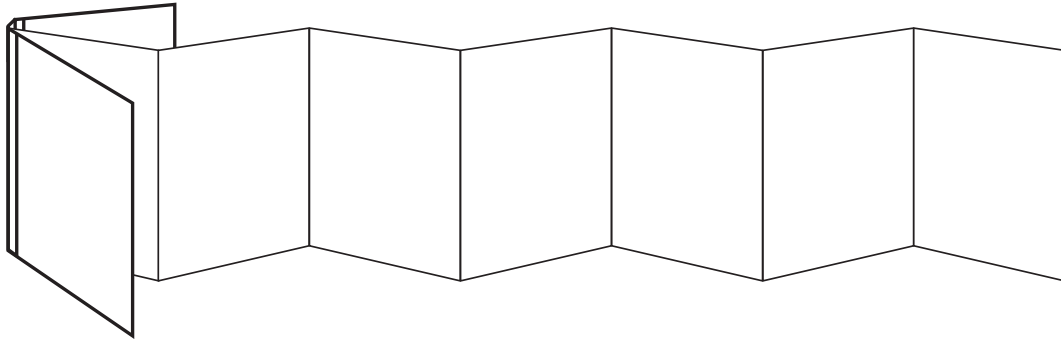


Fig. 10 Perpetual Shuttling —Book #2 layout, (view vertical)



Fig. 11 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling* —Book #2, 17×15 in (book closed, view vertical left to right), 2019



Fig. 9 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling—Book #1* (folded pages, view vertical left to right), 17× 105 in, 2019

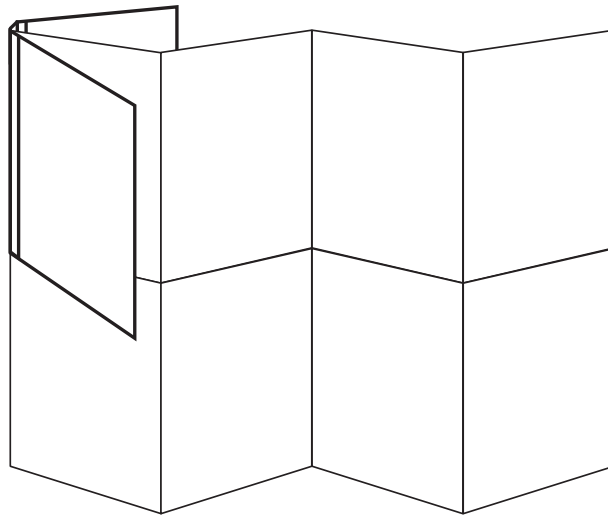


Fig. 13 *Perpetual Shuttling*—Book #3 layout



Fig. 14 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling*—Book #3, 17×15 in (book closed), 2019



Fig. 15 Shenghui Zou, *Perpetual Shuttling* —Book #3 (folded pages), 34×60 in, 2019

“Perpetual Shuttling” references the iconic landscape, “Along the River During the Qingming Festival” (Qing ming shang he tu) by North Song (early 12th century) painter Zhang Ze-duan (Fig. 16). Zhang’s work is deeply associated with Chinese identity and broadly recognized as an important component of Chinese culture. The panoramic painting offers a glimpse into the daily life of people in the capital, Bianjing, during the Song period. Out of great reverence, court artists of subsequent dynasties used the original painting as a template for updated versions (Figs. 17–19) reflecting the society and economic activities of their time. In China, this particular work by Zhang is widely publicized as an integral part of Chinese heritage, and is frequently used as a symbol when representing Chinese identity and culture. In comparison, the works by the artists of subsequent periods receives much less attention from the general public. My design does not wish to completely refuse the significance of Zhang’s work as part of Chinese heritage. However, I intend to diminish the notion which deems the monolithic part of culture are the only Chinese heritage worth accepting and validating. In turn, Zhang’s painting is used as a ladder to lead the life of Chinese diaspora into focus. My re-interpretation of this theme is a form of Chinese Canadian diasporic narrative. The theme from China’s past is reconstructed in a new context, mirroring the way diasporic identities rooted in values and customs from the past are often transformed in a new cultural context. Chang Tan believes that “the past can be taken as both the trigger and the point of departure for new creations” (Tan, 2015, p. 312).

Arising from a rather personal and subjective level, the intention of “Perpetual Shuttling” is by no means attempting to generalize diverse types of Chinese Diaspora, nor does it trying to exclude any experiences that are unidentified in this visual



Fig. 16
 Zhang, Ze-duan.⁸ (Early 12th century) *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*
 [24.8×528 cm, Handscroll, ink and colors on silk]. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

8, 9, 10. Name cited according to Eastern naming order: surname, given name.

The Rainbow Bridge in Various Versions of “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”



Fig. 17
Unknown court artist. (Ming dynasty 1368–1644) *Qingming in Ease and Simplicity* *Qingming in Brief*. [38×673.4 cm, handscroll, ink and color on silk]. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 18
Chen, Mei; Sun, Hu; Jin, Kun; Dai, Hong; Cheng, Zhidao.⁹ (1736) *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (Qing Court Version), [35.6×1152.8 cm, handscroll, ink and color on silk]. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 19
Shen, Yuan.¹⁰ (18th century) *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, [34.8×1185.9 cm, Handscroll, ink and light colors on paper]. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

investigation. This visual artifact aspires to assert a stance that validates the existence of Chinese diaspora identity. Various diaspora artists including Susan Pui San Lok, Jin-me Yoon and Kinga Araya have utilized their own experiences of displaced-ness, ungrounded-ness, and geographical estrangement as sources of inspiration and stimulus to their work. “What may appear to be personal narratives in fact implicate larger social and historical considerations” (Sojka, 2005, p. 525). “Perpetual Shuttling” aims to generate and dilate the discursive and potential opportunities for Chinese Diaspora.

Out of the Containment

Diaspora artist Jin-me Yoon's work in "Souvenirs of the Self" (1991), and "Group of Sixty-Seven" (1996–1997) (Figs. 20–21) confronts the issues lies within the traditional Canadian narrative. The notion of Canadian-ness has long been "connected with a geographic determinacy and Anglo-French heritage" (Sojka, 2005, p. 523). To someone belonging to the Asian diaspora, the landscapes portrayed in the works of the Canadian Group of Seven artists cannot provide a sense of belonging, but instead trigger feelings of dispossession and displacement. Yoon's work creates a conceptual link with the history of Canadian landscape painting and its role in the construction of Canadian identity (Sojka, 2005, p. 523).

Encouraged by Yoon's challenge of the conflation of identity, culture and land, segments of "Perpetual Shuttling" deliberately echo the landscapes of the Group of Seven. The panoramic scenes also include cultural signifiers and everyday objects taken out of their natural context. The scenes shift between natural environments and urban settings that are closer to the reality of diaspora life. The assemblage intentionally destroys viewer's assumptions to locate the origins of places. This approach desaturates and obscures labeled national and regional boundaries that often dissect the Chinese diaspora. The flow of people is not limited to certain regions. The trans-nationality of diaspora inter-influences and inter-develops within the regional culture and their own identity. The design encourages audiences to question, and to rethink about what constitutes culture (or cultures) within a space.

As Ang says, "one can never be completely free of one's ethnic origins: a residual



Fig. 20 (left)
Yoon, Jin-me.¹¹ (1991–2000) *Souvenirs of the Self*
(Lake Louise) [167.6×223.5 cm, chromogenic print
laminated to plexiglas]. Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver.

Fig. 21 (below)
Yoon, Jin-me. (1996–1997)
Group of Sixty-Seven [40×50 cm, Installation of
134 cibachrome prints]. Vancouver Art Gallery,
Vancouver.



11. Name cited according to Eastern naming order: surname, given name.

Chinese-ness is always part of me—for example, in the form of family memory or inherited cultural knowledge, however truncated” (Ang, 2013, p. 18). Rice paper is used as a medium because of its intrinsic resonance with my Chinese cultural heritage. Traditional Chinese paper is made using many raw natural fibres besides rice, such as hemp, rattan, bamboo, and mulberry. This tradition dates back to 2000 B.C.E (Luebering, 2013). The history of rice paper is closely interwoven with the development of Chinese art and culture.

Ien Ang suggests that “Diaspora was seen as an alternative site of belonging for those who felt excluded from the national imagined community invoked by the nation-state. It promised a virtual home for those ... marginalized by the divisive fallout of racial, ethnic, or cultural difference” (Ang, 2013, p. 21). As an alternative to the conventional notion of identity markers, the self-acknowledging, or self-proclaiming in identity politics enables the diaspora to make choices actively, and take the initiative. However, the process of empathizing, accepting, let alone actively claiming one’s own identity is more than often an ordeal. Asians have frequently been portrayed as “the problem-free and well-integrated minorities” in the North American context. The rhetoric of *model minority* (initially came from the U.S now a widely applied term) is a myth and a stereotype about Asians, which glorifies their success and makes invisible the difficulties in their experience (Hartlep, 2014). Through one of the cityscapes in “Perpetual Shuttling,” burn marks are applied violently across the scenes of diaspora. The marks are to make visible the shame, denial, refusal, conflict, and unfairness coming from society as well as diaspora themselves. The marks are deliberate and unignorable, reminding audiences that to acknowledge pain and struggle is the first step in breaking with an

imprisoning identity.

Overall, this series of books profiles distinct diasporic stances and positions. The books are also contiguous, bound as an inseparable entity that delineates the entirety of diasporic experience. A reproduction of a luggage label binds together the set of books, reminding the reader of the transitory and unsettled lives of many in the diaspora. The pages and books are not meant to be fixed, akin to the belongings of a person which can be discarded or added at will. In this regard, Ang offers her experience:

From my own personal point of view, this embrace of cosmopolitan hybridity provided important breathing space, opening up discursive wriggle room for modes of engagement, intellectual and cultural, that are not straitjacketed by the fraught legacy of past migration and diasporic heritage. It was a way for me to play down the significance of my Chinese “roots” and their continuing influence on my tense relationship to China, real and imagined, by keeping my identity ambiguous, indefinite, undecided (Ang, 2013, p. 19).

Conclusion

In the investigations of “Perpetual Shuttling,” the daily experiences and challenges of Chinese diaspora are addressed and explored in the final visual narrative. From using imageries that are recognizable and relatable to the Chinese diaspora experience, this design connects with audiences and encourages them to acknowledge, resonate and empathize with such struggles. Through representations of the Chinese diaspora in design, forms of identity unique to the Chinese diaspora emerge. The existence of this visual narrative articulates diasporic identity, which breaks away from the pre-defined, homogenous, and monolithic impressions of “Chinese” or “Canadian.” “Perpetual Shuttling” is designed for the members of the Chinese diasporic community, but also people with similar experiences. This design encourages these people to validate their differences, negotiate the conflict of their identities, and to rearticulate their own transforming identities persistently.

In a world of turbulence, where migration, exile, diaspora, displacement, spiritual homelessness, and estrangement has become a constant living condition, how would one understand their located-ness, and obtain a sense of belonging? This question is believed to have no certain answer, or to reflect a multitude of answers. After all, “to be lost, to be a stranger in a strange land is typical of the human condition” (Cohen, 1997, p. 133). Moreover “all identities are formed ‘on the move,’ at the unstable point where subjectivity meets the narrative of history. This journey is always ‘open and incomplete,’ involving a continual fabulation, invention and construction in which, finally, there is ‘no fixed identity or final destination’” (Cohen, 1997, p. 133).

As many significant cultural theorists emphasize, culture and identity is inevitably hybrid, and perpetually ongoing. This thesis is also merely a point of transit in the discourse of Chinese diaspora culture and identity, which reflects an understanding based on postmodern and postcolonial theories. Inquiry on the discussion of identity and culture are always ongoing. To participate actively in imminent cultural discourse, designers continue to investigate these questions: How can designers continually delve into the complexities of narratives that shape diasporic identities? How can design function as a trajectory in future cultural discourses?

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Appendix

Definition of Diaspora by William Safran

1. They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to one or more peripheral, or foreign, regions.
2. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements and, often enough, sufferings.
3. They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot be, fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate.
5. They believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity.
6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined in terms of the existence of such a relationship. The absence of such a relationship makes it difficult to speak of transnationalism.
7. They share a common notion of “peoplehood” not only with the homeland but with ethnic kin in other countries.
8. They are willing to survive as a minority by maintaining and transmitting a cultural

and/or religious heritage derived from their ancestral home.

9. In structuring their communities and adapting to their hostlands, diasporas become themselves independent centers of cultural creation; yet their creations continue to contain certain ethnosymbols, customs, and narratives of the homeland.

10. Their cultural, religious, economic, and/or political relationships with the homeland are reflected in a significant way in their communal institutions (Safran, 1991).

Transient Portrait

This series of mono-prints (Figs. 22–26) is a visual exploration expressing the hybridity of diasporic identities. “Transient Portrait” is the first experiment in the design process of this thesis to explore photographs taken throughout the life of a Chinese Canadian—myself. By overlaying photos of significant moments, this project aims to metaphorically demonstrate the conflict, erosion, and intergrowth of cultures and identities. This series has inspired the final artifact. Using the mono-print method, I could make deliberate marks, but also leaving uncontrolled and unconscious marks that could be seen as the conscious and unconscious influence of culture. The amorphous images are intended for the audience to imagine a more diverse culture. However, the design composition still consists of a centred, stable, and unified perspective that is located in a particular time and space. Although this project might not present the diasporic experience, these prints could signify the displacement, conflict and ambiguity intrinsic in all cultures.



Fig. 22 Shenghui Zou, *Transient Portrait #1*, 18×25in, 2018

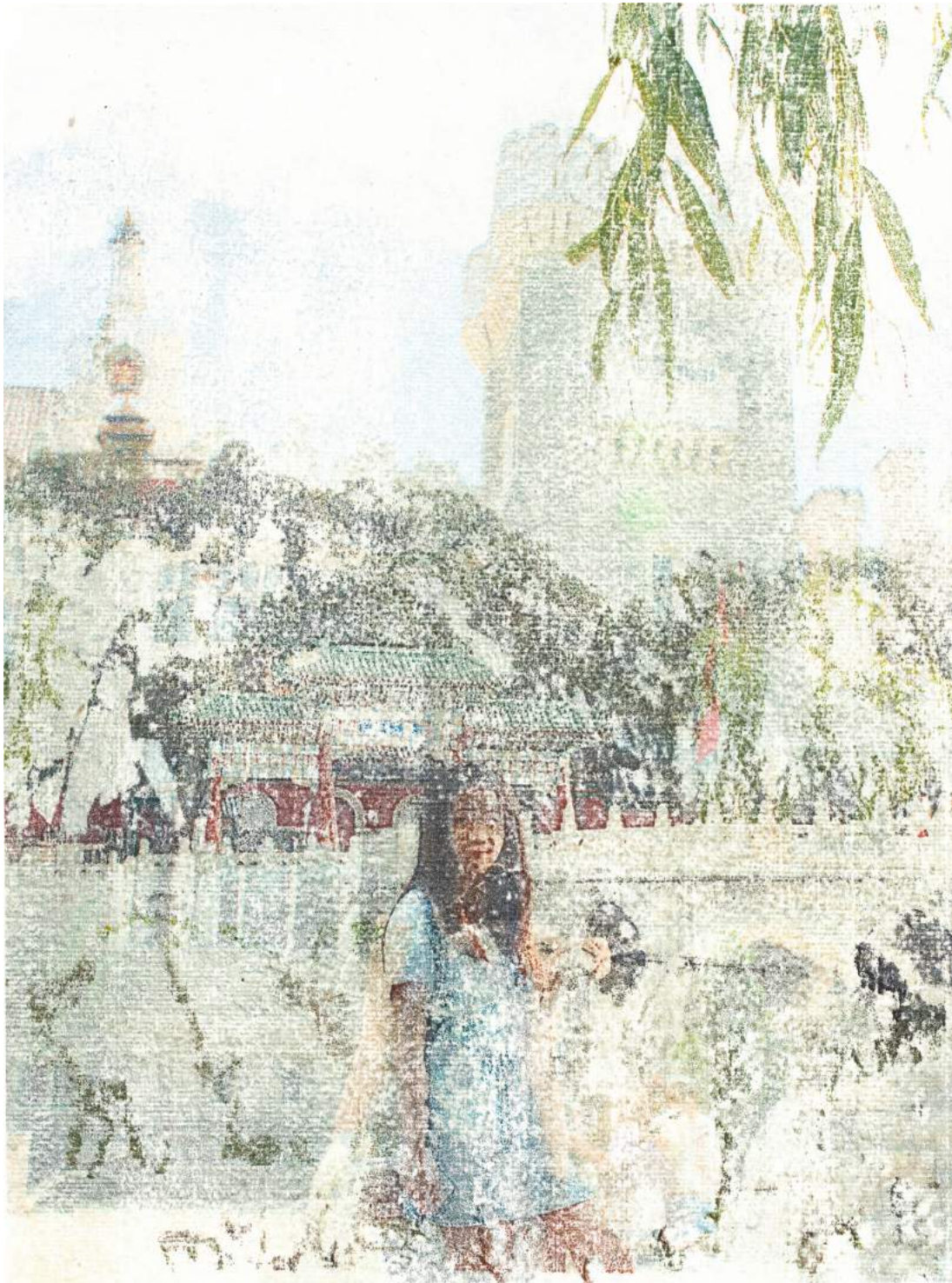


Fig. 23 Shenghui Zou, *Transient Portrait #2*, 18×25in, 2018



Fig. 24 Shenghui Zou, Transient Portrait #3, 18×25in, 2018



Fig. 25 Shenghui Zou, Transient Portrait #4, 18×25in, 2018



Fig. 26 Shenghui Zou, Transient Portrait #5, 18×25in, 2018