

# **SHE SINGS FOR THE WORLD**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

July 2023

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## ABSTRACT

*She Sings for The World* is a 19-minute hybrid realism film about a Chinese Canadian son that sets out to make a film about his mother, who was formerly known as the first ever Chinese opera singer to have sung and translated Pingju Opera into English in late 1980's China. Through an integrated examination of Pingju Opera mythology and autoethnography: *She Sings for the World* explores cultural identity translation between a mother and son through an intersectional lens of hybrid realism, fossil archives, and ambivalence.

The film grew out of an original story I conceived called "The Forgotten", which was a surrealist chamber film narrative centered on a 28-year-old son struggling with the decision to leave or stay with his elder Chinese mother. However, my own questions on cinematic authenticity and filmic representations of Chinese Canadian identity inspired me to approach the film in a more process-oriented way, inevitably leading to the integration of myself and my real-life mother into the film as actors and co-collaborators in the final version of the film.

Combining my mother's real life story as a former Pingju Opera singer to the real-time process of me filming a fictional film about a son setting out to make a film about their mother: *She Sings for the World* inevitably serves as an endpoint of my thesis journey in attempting to find an authentic third space that may lie within the (im)possibility of cross-cultural translation, and a starting point in embracing intergenerational collaboration, cultural plurality, and the application of cinematic ambivalence as a method for examining film and cultural identity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the immense influence that many people have had on this project. To my amazing supervisory committee—Manfred Becker, Sharon Hayashi, and Suzie Young—I am eternally grateful for the kindness, guidance, and support you provided throughout the making of this film, and for encouraging me to embrace new ways of seeing and exploring cross-cultural identity. My eternal regard goes out to Manfred Becker for encouraging me to release my voice as an artist, Sharon Hayashi for encouraging me to embrace the beauty of interdisciplinary production and translation, and Suzie Young for suggesting new ways of examining Chinese cultural identity, filial piety, and cross-cultural representation through cinematic means.

For the early exploratory process, I thank artists Robert Kitsos, Shervin Zarkalam, and Jullianna Oke for their unconditional support in the making of *Habitus Fragments*, and the immense influence it had on the formation of *She Sings for the World*. Thank you also to Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts for their generosity in providing a space to conduct these creative explorations in May 2022.

I would also like to acknowledge the immense support of my colleagues: Don Bapst, for sharing your stories and wisdom on filmmaking; Ryan Steel and Jack O'Dwyer, for being my best friends and roommates; Emily Pasternak and Yash Kini, for inspiring me to embrace my authentic self; Jenny Laiwint, Anson Nater, and Christina Dovolis, for reminding me to never lose my inner child silliness; Shirley "Xinli" She, for your help in the research phase and inspiring energy; Maya Vukov, for your passion for Canadian Cinema and social spirit; Caillieah Scott-Grimes, for your generous perspectives on cross-cultural representation and the beauties of

cinema. Thank you also to Sofia Bohdanowicz, Michael Miroshnik, Kunsang Kyirong, Braden Brickner, Tavis Putnam, and Jharol Mendoza who also contributed to my journey.

I also give a special thanks to Kuowei Lee, who is one of the greatest human beings I have ever met, and a guiding light for many students in the film graduate program. His generosity to always be there and engage in film with me has helped ground me and give me the courage to stay true to my diverse passions and creative dreams, no matter how silly they may be. I send a million thanks to Kuowei Lee.

Finally, I would like to give my biggest thanks to my family—to my loving mother Han Rui Jie, loving father Michael Peter Bridge, loving sister Boyi (Bea) Han Bridge, and loving brother-in-law Andrew Hauser, who have given me unconditional love, inspiration, and support throughout my life, and to whom I owe all my life.

I am very lucky to have been born, and I dedicate this film to you all.



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## INTRODUCTION: The Very First Image of My Life

*None of us ever knows the world of our parents. (Hirsch 661)*



Image 1. Still from *She Sings for the World*. Still Portrait of Han Ruijie.

Throughout my childhood, I recall this one specific image always around the house. The image consists of a figure dressed in traditional Chinese theatre attire, and dons thick pink and white makeup, staring off to the left. The figure holds their right hand high up in a hooked shape over their left shoulder and their left-hand sways across their stomach towards the right. The image has been enlarged to the size of a big movie poster and is framed delicately within a gold-rimmed frame. This image is a portrait of my mother (Image 1).

I have several specific memories of seeing this portrait of my mother throughout my life. The very first memory I recall is when I was about eight years old, and my mother and father were raising me in the mid-90's sunshine of Delta Tsawwassen. The portrait was hanging behind a television set in the living room of a nice, modern-style duplex. Every Saturday morning, I

would wake up early to catch Pokémon on YTV. During the weekly episode, my mother would walk in with a plate of two Pillsbury mini pizzas she made for me in a small conventional oven, before turning and disappearing into the kitchen. As I ate, I sat alone and occasionally glanced at the Pingju Opera singer in the portrait, above the horizon of the television screen.

“Your mom used to be famous opera singer in China.” My father says to me at some point in my memories.

My first interaction with the fine arts was the annual musical theatre production at South Delta Secondary School, where I spent many days after school partaking in various one act plays and theatre productions. My parents were proud of these activities and came out to support them, but the fine arts were never discussed as something serious to commit to, so inevitably, after I graduated, I focused on pursuing a university bachelor’s degree in social science, which could promise me a more secure future in accordance with my parents’ advice. Back then, my childhood dream was to become a police officer, so I specialized in Criminology and Psychology, but upon graduating, I found myself no longer interested in it.

It was around this time where I started to do creative writing, read plays, and watch films, when I wasn’t working a part-time job. One day I realized that I could borrow DVD’s for free from the library, so I started to visit the library regularly, reading books and watching movies, enhancing my love and desire in films. I gradually found myself fully invested in the art of storytelling through film and theatre, and my longing for the old days of high school theatre with friends convinced me that I had to learn how to create more of these opportunities myself. I learned about theatre production through library books, with an aim to create my own theatre group and create plays again. I recall borrowing John Cassavetes’ *A Women Under the Influence* (1975) and being drawn to the close-ups in that film. I reflected on these feelings in ten pages on

Microsoft word afterwards and decided that I should try filming these feelings up close to see if I could recreate that same feeling on camera. This inevitably would be my first short film:

*Capitalism Runs on Coffee* (2017).

As the film was my first ever film, I had no knowledge of what it meant to secure a production crew for a film, so I performed every single production role myself. I remember labelling the coffee cup, placing the camera, and acting as the sole character. I had no tripod, so I placed the camera on the carpet floor of the apartment with a notebook under the lens to perch it's angle up a bit, before proceeding to press the record button, then walk back in front of the camera. I would watch playback on these takes and inevitably edit the 10-minute short on iMovie. I still don't know why I made it, but the first time I watched the film back as a complete piece, I felt a sense of discovery in myself which I never experienced before. The discovery would remain indescribable other than the fact that this character—a subject who sat in a separate universe of space and time onscreen—was also me in real life (Image 2).

I wasn't aware of this at the time, but as I think back to this first film now, I think of what Barthes says in *A Lover's Discourse* (2010):

*“For me as an amorous subject, it is quite the contrary: it is becoming a subject, being unable to keep myself from doing so, which drives me mad. I am not someone else: that is what I realise with horror.”* (121).

The feeling of difference I felt upon witnessing that very first image of myself on film, would inevitably serve as a mirror of myself in the everyday to which I strived to comprehend.



Image 2. Still from *Capitalism Runs on Coffee*. Beau sits in an apartment in a city.

## Chinese Canadian: Film & Cultural Identity

Two years later, I found myself drawn to the introspective reflexivity of filmmaking and decided to pursue a formal education in it at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. I found myself as one of the older students this time and started attending by my own savings, which were heavily supplemented by student loans. In the first two years, I was incredibly engaged in the film school world, of which my mother and father were aware and supportive, even though they never openly discussed or asked why I was doing it.

I created several shorts that explored various styles and collaborations before the pandemic hit and the world went online. By this time, I recall watching Chen Kaige's film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and feeling quite moved by it in a way that was both familiar and alienating to me. I felt there was a significance to it as a singular work of Chinese cinema of which I had a lack of knowledge, but more importantly, it was the Chinese Opera performances in the film that brought me back to that portrait of my mother in that opera costume. A severe lack in savings and a fear of COVID affecting the ability to see my family inevitably inspired me to move back in with my mom and dad, who by now had settled in a house in the BC interior. They were more than happy to have their son back home, so upon moving out of the city, I settled in with my parents and worked part-time, occasionally helping around the house while I continued film school remotely.

As I had to remain registered full-time for my student loans to continue, I sought out a summer course. I discovered the option of Directed Readings, and set up a remote directed readings course on "Mainland Chinese Cinema" with Professor Noe Rodriguez (York University MFA Alumnus) as my supervisor, and it was here that I was introduced to the works of notable Chinese directors such as Xie Jin, Zhang Yimou, Jia Zhangke, Tian Zhuang Zhuang, Lou Yu,



and Zhang Yuan, with accompanied journal readings I curated out of my own academic research interests. This led me to the work of Rey Chow, whose quote from a chapter “Film and Cultural Identity” in *The Rey Chow Reader* (2010) stood out to me:

*“It is worth remembering that film has been, since its inception, a transcultural phenomenon, having as it does the capacity to transcend “culture”—to create modes of fascination which are readily accessible, and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities.”(91)*

The idea of finding a space between two cultures that transcends linguistic and cultural specificities led me to Laura U. Mark’s seminal book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), in which she described the specific phenomena of intercultural cinema:

*“Intercultural cinema, by definition, operates at the intersections of two or more cultural regimes of knowledge. These films and videos must deal with the issue of where meaningful knowledge is located, in the awareness that it is between cultures and so can never be fully verified in the terms of one regime or the other. (24)*

These ideas of film serving as a tool that could both bridge cultures together and find a space that transcends cultural difference stuck with me as the notable rise of media coverage on racism towards Chinese persons became a prominent subject that intruded my thoughts daily. I recall two cases that occurred in 2020 of a woman getting punched in the face at a downtown Vancouver bus stop in May (Young, 2020), and a Chinese senior getting pushed off a sidewalk outside a convenience store in April (Chiu 2020). These incidents motivated me to think critically about the negative perceptions of China in relation to my own cultural roots of being half-Chinese. I found myself questioning whether I could address and help this conflict through the use of film, but I nevertheless still was uncertain if I could be considered authentically

Chinese enough to speak on Chinese culture and such a complicated issue since I had very little professional knowledge on the politics and collective-cultural differences between China and Canada at the time. Besides notable differences in cultural history, traditions, and language practices, this attention to understand Mainland China as a uniquely different home(land) from Canada was difficult to grasp on an objective level, so I started thinking back to what aspects of myself embodied China, and all I could think of was my mother.

The combination of these happenings—living back home with my mom and dad, the prevalence of anti-Asian racism reported in the news, and my mother embodying mainland Chinese culture—drove me towards the idea of creating an intercultural film that could bridge these subjects and, hopefully, address them in some comprehensible way. Furthermore, I felt that the prominence of Anti-Asian racism reported in the local news made me wonder if Canada's racist past towards Chinese people in the past with the 1903 Chinese Head Tax was forgotten, so I thought of calling this film “The Forgotten” and that this film would explore a son and mother attempting to deal with this racial past in Canadian history re-emerging in the present day.

## Pingju Opera

Before I get into the production aspects of my thesis film, I would like to give a short overview of Pingju Opera to clarify its significance in my mother's life in China. Pingju Opera is a subgenre of Beijing (Peking or Ping) Chinese Opera, and one of the more traditional opera styles of the mainland Han nationality sourced to the vast rural areas of Hebei Province, which is where my mother's hometown Tianjin was. Tianjin is considered the primary city in which Pingju Opera became popular from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, (Liu 4-5).

Three distinct qualities of Pingju Opera are its emphasis on character impersonations, its foundational role-category system of the three "little" roles (Female, Male, Clown) instead of the four role-category system practised normally in Peking Opera (Gentlemen, Woman, Rough Men, Clown) (Liu 5), and its innovation of musical instruments giving to the orchestra to play instead of to the actors, thus freeing the actors' hands for their performances (Liu 5). A notable quality of Pingju Opera is its emphasis on folk content and its specific appeal to the lower-class with regards to storytelling, characters, and themes, which included female actresses playing female roles instead of the traditional form of having male performers perform all roles (Liu 5).

Since the style of Pingju opera was quite expansive in its inclusion of different performance styles and spoken word dramas, the Pingju Opera form was adopted as a primary form of theatre by the new Chinese Communist Government for educational missions after 1949, since the folk roots of Pingju paralleled the government's identification with lower class ideals and policies of the people (Liu 15). The adoption of these plays also included the guidance of senior mentors who would serve as supervisors to pingju opera singers and point them towards traditional pingju plays and performances for study, before setting them off to expand and innovate the style further on their own (Liu 16).

To this day, Pingju Opera is practised frequently in China as a traditional art form, with integrations of new styles and adaptations of traditional plays; it remains a subtype of Peking Opera which most audience members—if they were to listen to it—would be able to decipher its specific nuances compared to other Chinese opera subtypes. However, it should be noted that Pingju Opera as an opera derived from folk roots and containing an essence of unfixed fluidity in adapting other forms in turn inspired singers like my mother to expand upon it in new ways. In relation to my mother, her way of expanding the art of Pingju Opera was through choosing to translate Pingju Opera specifically into English, which, although had been done before for other subgenres of Ping Opera, had never been done for the subgenre of Pingju Opera specifically by a Chinese woman (Image 3).



Image 3. Still from *She Sings for the World*. Han Ruijie performs Pingju Opera on stage.

## Recollections: Punctuations & Ambivalence

In September, I moved out of my parent's place and started the MFA program at York University in Toronto. My original plan for the thesis film was to explore how cultural identity translation could be manifested in the story of "The Forgotten", and I decided to apply my theatre influences by using filmed-theatre aesthetics and the chamber cinema model as my research method foundation. The benefits to the chamber cinema model, which stems from the 1920's German film movement *Kammerspielfilm* (Bryant 42), was how it could be used as an interdisciplinary framework of synthesizing two different artistic sensibilities (which in this case would be film and theater) in experimental ways. Since I was quite unknowledgeable of Asian diaspora studies at the time, I figured that having a hybrid or interdisciplinary style that integrated two artistic sensibilities could serve as a representative basis for exploring the transcultural space that potentially lied between Chinese and Canadian identity.

For Prof. Manfred Becker's production class, we were asked to film a scene that explored our thesis interests, so I chose to explore the direction of actors in a constructed studio space that embodied aesthetics of the chamber cinema model. I set up a one-day shoot and filmed *Recollections*, a 13-minute short film consisting of two scenes: a one-hander scene with a mother character reciting an interior monologue to herself in an apartment (played by actress Joannette Connell), and a two-hander scene of a boy and a girl (played by actors Raymond Chan and Jenna Phoa) discussing their future together. I had set aside three honorariums of \$100 for each actor and posted a casting call on two Toronto Actor Facebook groups, laying out the general gist of the scenes and sending lines to the actors for taping.

Once I had my actors, I recruited a small crew consisting of my cohort friends to assist in the film. I secured Ryan Steel, a Winnipeg Filmmaker who was interested in collaborating on

production design, and Don Bapst, a Toronto-based filmmaker and novelist who was interested in my exploration of artificial stage construction. Xinli She, a Chinese undergraduate film student, reached out to me for general experience, so I got her onboard as my fellow assistant director and grip for the tracking shots, as well as Jennifer Laiwint, Jharol Mendoza and Christina Dovolis—three interdisciplinary film artists—to help with practical effects. Altogether, we spent the whole day filming the two scenes of *Recollections* (Image 4).



Image 4. Behind-the-scenes. *Recollections*. From left to right: Ryan, me (Beau), Jharol, and Xinli.

Reception to *Recollections* was enlightening. In relation to the mother scene, it seemed that viewers did not have much reaction to the mother scene due to an ambivalence I created by making it one wide shot and having the camera choreography consist of only one single tracking shot towards the mother at an incredibly slow pace, when then fades into a frozen still of the

mother sitting at the table (image 5). By keeping the distance far and opaque, a sense of detachment was created between the film and viewer. A stillness of the mother walking around the table alone and repeating her monologue out loud also proved too theatrical and durationally long for the viewers to get emotionally immersed in.



Image 5. Still from *Recollections*. Joannette Connell reminisces as 'the mother.'

On the other hand, viewers preferred the second scene consisting of the boy and girl in the feedback sessions. The presence of two actors talking to each other in a naturalistic style and the meticulous camera choreography that paralleled the actors' movements created a comprehension of the scene that I believe evoked a virtuosity and intentionality that guided the viewers. This was not surprising, as I had purposefully choreographed the camera and movement to serve the narrative beats of the script very deliberately: we started on a wide as the boy and girl walked into the apartment, then panned with the girl as she sat down at the table first,



followed by a gradual turn into a tracking shot that hovers along before landing on a two-shot of the boy sitting down next to her (Image 6).



Image 6. Still from *Recollections*. The boy sits with the girl at the table.

Furthermore, I integrated punctuations of time in between the camera movements that deliberately lingered on the boy to help conjugate opportunities of open space for the viewer to stay with the boy, even though there were no narrative reasons to do so. Punctuating the scene with these brief moments of ambivalence convinced me that, if I wanted viewers to engage in moments of ambiguity, it would be better to precede these moments with some sequence that evoked a deliberately intentional.

It is in these punctuations of time that I learned my first lesson on the possibilities of absence and ambivalence opening a collaboration between the film and the viewer. If I wished to address the complicated themes of “The Forgotten” to a viewer, I would have to construct a



narrative curation that was simultaneously guided by the omnipotent presence of a voice (i.e., through dialogue, virtuosity, or intentional camera movement), all the while letting my hand go and suspending the viewer to their own devices in deliberate punctuations of ambivalence that were less zealous. This suspension that teetered in between presence and ambivalence of meaning—a positivity and ambiguity—perhaps could create a third space that transcended the linguistic and cultural specificities of the film and reach a transcultural space. I then thought about that short film *The House is Black* (1961) by Feroz Farrokhzad. A radically humanistic and poetical coverage of a Leper Colony in Iran, the famous Iranian film is known for embodying a distinctly hybrid style that encompasses both positivistic and ambiguous characteristics, which I read was due to Farrokhzad's struggle in trying to find her personal voice in the film, all the while balancing the voice of the social documentary subject which was made for the Society for Assistance to Lepers (Naficy 82).

The second lesson I learned in the *Recollections* exercise is the importance of naturalism and youth when it comes to thematic subject matter. The dialogue in the boy and girl scene evoked a more naturalistic style than the first scene and a contemporarily emotional world that was more modern. Perhaps this could be biased to the age demographic of the viewers in my feedback session, but I did note a heightened engagement with the boy and girl scene and the cinematic qualities it contained, which were more upbeat, awkward, and centered on subjects of love, future, and the everyday. This notable difference in reception made me consider the significance of 'promise' as a thematic subject to the viewer, and what promise meant in relation to Chinese and Canadian ideologies.

This discovery of 'promise' linked me back to Sarah Ahmed's book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). In a sense, the two scenes of *Recollections* expressed two chapters in the book

called the “melancholic migrant” and “happy futures”. The mother scene embodied aspects of the ‘melancholic migrant’ by focusing on the challenges and persistence of histories that cannot be washed away after a happiness has been achieved through a successful assimilation into a new homeland, while the boy and the girl scene embodied the idealistic elements of ‘happy futures’ by choosing to direct their feelings towards actions in the present that welcome homogenization and security, such as the act of going to graduate school, getting married, and moving out (169).

This idea of resisting homogenization of one’s roots by refusing to move out of one’s parents’ apartment made me feel a close kinship to the boy character, but I felt that something was wrong in regards to how I was portraying the mother, who I felt was more exaggerated and artificial. The subtle evocation of the idea that moving out is a thing to strive for by the son was also a very assimilationist notion of “independence” which I felt was contradictory not only to my own values about cultural roots, but also to the values of filial piety with which I greatly sympathized. It was at this point that I realized that, regardless of how positivist and intentional the film could be through my curation of image, the film would be inauthentic in the mother character as a diasporic subject if I were to continue representing her as the ‘melancholic migrant’. I decided to cut the idea of a liminal-studio space out of the project and set the mother’s home in a modern-house that was in the present day.

## Symphonies

One week prior to the shooting of *Recollections*, I chose to fly home for a weekend. It would be my first time seeing my family after living in Toronto for two months, and it felt like a warm welcome as I very much did not feel settled in Toronto yet. I was in dialogue with my mother upon returning home and decided to use the chance to talk to her about Chinese history. At the time, I was determined on the narrative fiction of “The Forgotten”, so I had no plans of integrating this experience into the thesis project beyond research inspiration. I also figured that since I would be recording the conversation on my phone anyway, I might as well film the talk with my DSLR Nikon D7000, so in case *Recollections* fell through, I could just show this “interview” of my mother, which I titled *Symphonies*.

The form of *Symphonies* was like Wang Bing’s seminal documentary *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007), which consists of a three-hour one-shot recording of a story being told by an old Chinese lady named Fengming on her couch in her apartment. The contents of *Symphonies* formally echo Wang’s film in that it primarily centers on my mother talking to me about the formal aesthetics of the eight model plays (i.e., *The Red Detachment of Women*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, etc.) and her own childhood memories in Tianjin during the late-cultural revolution years in the 1970’s. This knowledge of how the Chinese Communist Party utilized these film-theatre plays as cultural catalysts for their ideologies served as a good launching point for how I could potentially frame the interdisciplinary shooting style of “The Forgotten”.

However, I noticed something new which I wasn’t expecting nor had ever encountered before, which was my mother’s surprising engagement and openness to discussing these subjects with me. She told me how even though the works served as iconic symbols of mainland China at

the time, she felt that they achieved their propagandistic influence and storytelling strength by combining the two styles of Russian ballet and Chinese traditional theatre. This idea that these heavily specific and propagandistic works of art were created out of a hybridity of two styles greatly interested me. These films acquired a third space of authenticity that transcended their linguistic and cultural specificities. Beyond that, I found that through this interview experience, I realized that I enjoyed talking with my mother. (Image 7).



Image 7: Still of *Symphonies*. I interview my mom for fun for the first time.

I kept this *Symphonies* documentary in my archives from then on. Although I forgot forgetting about it over the months, the experience of interviewing my mom continued to stick with me, especially the good feelings I felt after talking to her about Chinese and Canadian politics.

## **Asian Diaspora Studies: Myth and Autoethnography**

In Spring 2022, I took an Asian studies course that taught me how to think critically about the construction and representation of Asian culture in film. The course was taught in a collaborative style that I found very insightful, and which introduced me not only to different ways of examining Asian diaspora studies through a critical lens, but also to other classmates research interests as well. Through these engaging presentations, I was introduced to the works of Ian Ang, Homi Bhabha, and Walter Benjamin, whose works such as the essay “The Task of the Translator” encompassed what I think I was striving to achieve in regards to translating identity through film.

A notable thing from this course that changed my thesis approach was Ian Ang’s (2001) notion of self-reading as an objective cultural act, which greatly convinced me that there could be a strength in using one’s own lived experience and perception-of-self as a foundation for examining cultural representation through film. The idea of choosing to “reflexively position oneself in history and culture and see the self as a construction, or a deliberately fabricated performance for public purposes” (Ang 24) helped me embrace the idea that the mother and son in “The Forgotten” could be parallel models to my own mother and myself. The intangibility between my mother’s former life in China and my upbringing in Canada also made me think of how these imagined ideas of my mother's former life worked in a similar fashion to ideas of myth, which several scholars have discussed in connection to this sense of loss or yearning for one’s homeland that had existed in one’s past but no longer exists in one’s present (Ang 25; Hirsch 664; Chow 70).

In a way, my mother’s former life as an opera singer was a myth to me. Besides the portrait of her theatre garments, I had no sense, or evidence that could validate the type of life

she lived back then other than my imagination and the portrait. However, feeling the weight of this former life on my mother, and my own sense of self-worth, I decided that the idea of mythmaking and creation of story through art could serve in a substantial way to concretize my mother's past life and her embodiment of Chinese cultural identity. In a sense, my thesis film could embody both 1) the "forgotten" myth which time and life itself diminish in diasporic subject, and 2) the mother and son themselves who, out of their decision to isolate themselves away in this liminal space, are forgotten by a global society that wilfully moves along without them. The history of the diasporic subject, without evidence, could still become a story that is authenticated through the very act of creating and concretizing this myth, which to me can be accomplished by the very act of filmmaking. I felt that a film was the most appropriate way to embody this story of "The Forgotten", because the very act of creating the film was a translation of my private emotional reality into a reality which others could witness and experience.

However, something changed drastically in regards to my learning, which was that no matter what I did, I had to embrace the underlying reality of myself in the work and integrate aspects of that actuality into the myth if I were to ironically strive for authenticity, because the film in the end was still being driven through my sole perspective. I was always weary and uncommitted to embracing "the Forgotten" as an autoethnographic piece, considering the heavy subject matter and the arguments that occur between the characters, but after the Asian Diaspora Studies class, I realized that the more I tried to keep my lived experience out of the story of "the Forgotten", the more I risked it coming off as artificial or myopic, which is what happened to the characters in *Recollections*. I was not sure why nor how it happened, but I deep down had a gut feeling that my writing and story, in its current state, was not enlightened enough to transcend its surface-level representations of cultural identity that others already perceived.

My learnings in the class showed me there was no way this film could transcend pre-existing constructs of cultural identity caricatures, stereotypes, or hegemonic perspectives that existed in my own pre-learned perspectives, whether that be about mother-son relationships, or Chinese Canadian identity. The film risked essentializing its subject by limiting its perspective to my own psychological worldview, which I knew was heavily biased and naïve at the time. I decided to challenge myself, to open up my thesis film beyond my own comprehension and perspectives, to destroy its foundation and build it again. It was here that I decided to abandon the chamber cinema model.

## *Habitus Fragments*

In early May, after my coursework was complete, I decided to head back to Vancouver for the summer to film the thesis. Constructing a studio setting was still in my mind, but I decided that I had to conduct another exercise before I fully committed to the thesis production itself. I thought back to *Recollections* and realized that constructing an apartment room in a studio would not give as much of a difference compared to shooting in a real apartment, but I still liked the idea of embodying images onto surfaces with projection, so I set out to experiment with projection work one more time, and a studio space was better in controlling this experiment.

I chose to rent a small studio apartment located at the border of Vancouver's Historic Chinatown and Gastown area (image 8) and arranged a collaborative-residency between York University and Simon Fraser University's School for the Creative Arts for my exercise called *Habitus Fragments*. I was able to secure fellow dance artist Robert Kitsos as a site supervisor during my stay, and in exchange for helping assist his summer interdisciplinary studios course as a teacher assistant, I was given access to some of the studio spaces that were not being used by students during the time.





Image 8. Photo. *Summer Apartment*. The edge of Gastown and Vancouver Historic Chinatown.

Inadvertently, the months of May and June became a residency for me where I fully submerged myself in interdisciplinary studio exploration. During this time, I filmed various spaces of Vancouver's Historic Chinatown in the early mornings and projected them in a studio setting. I was inspired by the Lao Zi saying, "the wind shows its body through the blowing leaves", so to manifest a sense of embodiment and movement into the images, I used curtains as surface walls instead of solid walls so that the images could have a body that was permeable to natural elements outside my control, such as wind and temperature (Image 9).



Image 9. Behind-the-Scenes of *Habitus Fragments*. Setting up the “wall” in the studio.

After the curtain was set up, I tested various forms of stillness, gesture, and dreamscape with artists Shervin Zarkalam and Jullianna Oke (Image 10), to see if a third space could be created between physical bodies and image.



Image 10. Still from *Habitus Fragments*. Artists Jullianna and Shervin stand in stillness.

We created three 20-minute segments, which I then conjoined into a mid-length film entitled *Habitus Fragments*, which was exhibited as an installation at the end of June. As I was finishing this piece, I was in dialogue with my mom, who was very interested in the piece. I brought her over and she gave me a one-hour critical response to the work, which was very insightful and engaging (Image 11).



Image 11. Photo of *Habitus Fragments* Installation. My mom watches the work.

I was surprised to see her enjoy the work, which inspired me to delve more into the idea of consulting with my mother on the actual thesis film. At the time of this residency, I was quite lost in relation to how to approach my thesis film. My allegiance to authentic cultural representation and translation made me condemn my previous notion of the chamber cinema model as too essentializing and artificial, and I had no new basis on which to find that transcultural third space through film.

*“The power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.”*  
*(Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1982, p. 89)*

Amidst my crisis, I knew that—no matter the form—I had to make sure that there was an explicit striving for authenticity. I took this idea to mind when I was given the chance to present

my thesis interests to the undergraduate students of the interdisciplinary studios class, which consisted of film students and theatre students. I discussed my challenges of exploring cultural identity translation through a Chinese Canadian film lens, as well as my struggles in integrating artforms, before proceeding to show clips of *Habitus Fragments* for feedback.

In the feedback session, one student's observation really helped me and enlightened my process. This student mentioned two good points: 1) that I had a pronounced tendency towards ambivalence, subtlety, and quietude as expressed through my inclusions of several shots in *Habitus Fragments* containing non-anthropocentric subjects and the everyday, and 2) that I had a good grasp of embodying emotion through still life composition and punctuated pacing, referencing my all-time favorite films *Whisper of the Heart* (1995) and *A Silent Voice* (2016) as similar films that evoke similar techniques of punctuated ambivalence and still life. These two films then brought my mind back to the works of Ozu and his seminal mother and son film *The Only Son* (1936), which my thesis committee highly recommended to me at our first committee meeting. I rewatched the film and noted that, even though the plot was highly scripted, and the shots were evocatively deliberate, there was a loud emotional aura that surfed beneath its currents which felt incredibly intractable. I felt that this aura was perhaps the transcultural third space that Ozu achieved often through rigid duty towards his technical style, but also through his subtle mix of modern and classic film techniques for his film narratives and beyond them into primitive essences of the human condition. Creating a transcultural third space, therefore, suddenly seemed possible again. Instead of aiming to display two artistic sensibilities to visually express concepts of Chinese and Canadian cultural identities, I looked beyond cultural difference and investigated the realities of the mother and son through the technical production process of

the film itself. Maybe an authenticity could be found, even if it is intractable and indescribable within my own single perspective, and difficult to recognize as I filmed. Barthes (1982) said:

*“The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront it in the awakening of intractable reality” (119).*

I decided to bring two collaborators into the project—I chose to bring my mother and me directly into the film by casting her as the ‘mother’, and myself as the ‘son’.

## **The Making of *She Sings for the World***

According to my production schedule, I had exactly one month for development and preproduction before filming in the last two weeks of August, so I concluded my *Habitus Fragments* project and started to work on the script of the thesis film, which I gave the new working title of “Good Son (好儿子)”. Since I decided to bring in the real as much as I could by casting myself and my mom, I decided to go against my work in *Habitus Fragments* and limit myself to filming in real life locations that I personally engaged with in my daily life at the time, which limited me to 1) the downtown studio apartment, 2) my mother and father’s place, and 3) a classroom in the SFU School for the Contemporary Arts campus building. Furthermore, since I had now casted my mom and myself as the characters, I discarded the original script of ‘The Forgotten’ in order to 1) embrace the truth that I - as a son - was *not* living with my mom, 2) instill a more spontaneous-contemporary story that reflected events around me that I was unaware of, and 3) suspend any preconceived notions of cultural representation which I may subconsciously had in relation to Chinese and Canadian identities.

Keeping these obstructions in mind, I conjured up a new 30-page narrative fiction script in the month of July, which centered on a son named David, a teaching assistant who, upon being inspired by one of his own students, sets out to make a documentary on his mother to get to know her better. The film was written in standard final draft style and, although was predominantly based in the house of the mother, took place in other locations as well, such as a university classroom, a cafe, and an apartment located in the Downtown urban core. Since I wanted to express a Chinese Canadian story that was identifiable in the present day, I convinced myself that a fake-studio setting was no longer desirable if I wanted to capture any spontaneous happenings or poetics of the everyday in my life, so I decided to throw away the single setting



obstruction to limit my controllability and further challenge myself in opening up the work. Thinking of natural locations, I chose several places to which I had easy access while writing, including the downtown studio apartment near SFU as the main apartment for the son, and a classroom at SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts for a potential student discussion scene.

Another big change to the thesis was the fact that my birthplace of Chinatown was becoming less of a central subject due to my alienation from the space while filming it for *Habitus Fragments*; I felt that Vancouver Chinatown had greatly changed since my early memories of it. I recognized that using Historic Chinatown as a simulacrum of Chinese identity could also perpetuate essentialist presumptions of a cultural identity about which I no longer felt I had a say in, as I no longer felt that I personally truly belonged in such a space since moving to Toronto. The deterioration of the buildings, the gentrification, and the visible presence of poverty started to seep into my reality and make me feel depressed and prone to nostalgia for early childhood years when the space seemed a lot bigger and brighter. However, it took coming to Chinatown to also realize that, like many other Chinese communities' members of a former generation who left the space for better living, that there was no essence of my mother there either.

This truth further strengthened my allegiance to making an authentic film about my mother and me, and so I oriented myself towards bringing the film to wherever my mother was in the present day, which was her house located in the BC interior. However, since *I* was now the "son", I had to cement the son's home as separate from the mom's, making this film not about choosing to leave one's former home but, rather choosing to come *back* to one's former home. I settled with the idea of the son being a young professional, so he had to have a job, which I decided would be a cinema studies teacher at a school. This would ensure that the practice of



filmmaking would be integrated into the story itself, so that the viewer could be open to a double interpretation of the act of filmmaking as both a metaphor of the story and characters, but also a literalization of the film outside of the story. The teaching job could also serve as a double identity which I felt was a reality for many aspiring artists who found themselves stuck between a stable job that was both devotional and contradictory to the life of an artist, and which could also serve as a source of internal conflict for the son in a similar way as the son in Ozu's *The Only Son* (1936), who I recall was a math teacher by necessity rather than passion in order make rent in an economically depressed Tokyo. For the plot, I kept it simple: the teacher, dealing with a crisis, finds himself a student again as he sets out to accomplish the same film project which he asked his students to conduct, which was to make a film about their parents to get closer to their own roots and cultural identity.

For the son to accomplish this task, he would have to travel to meet his mother; then, to give the short script a sense of an ending, the son would return to the city after he shot the film. A transformation could occur between those two moments, a cinematic journey for viewers who require a sense of structure to follow literally and tangibly. The main gist of the project would take place at my mother's house. That interval between going and coming back would be my chance to find that third space.

In essence, my thesis was adapting the "return to home" archetype, which authentically reflected the very process and journey of myself in choosing to fly back home to Vancouver to shoot this MFA thesis film with my mother. Because of this, I decided that the actual film production would have to parallel the shooting dates of the film so that I wouldn't have to worry about day and night continuity, and that would ensure a chronological order for whatever I chose to film since it was as if the film would be happening in real time. I also decided that to respect

the uncertainty of the shooting hours and my mother's privacy: I chose to handle every technical aspect by myself to give mom and me the most freedom to experiment, without any stress of production management or presence of people.

However, handling all these roles made me think of the very first film I shot, which would naturally lean me toward a personal and reflexive scope, something that I felt had the potential to exploit my mother and me as real human subjects, rather than as characters in the film. To counterbalance this, I decided to take a very depersonalized and journalistic approach to the actual camera work when it came to filming, and deliberately shot the film with a heavy Blackmagic Ursa Mini G2 cinema camera so that the weight of the camera would anchor us to less movement and handheld tendencies. I booked the Blackmagic Ursa Mini and a single prime lens for a span of 10-days for the week of August. Then, upon securing my mom's participation in the film, I sent her the script for her feedback.

### *Collaborating on the Script with Mom*

Mom was both excited and skeptical of the idea of being in a film with me, so I sent her the first draft of my thesis so that she could get a sense of what the final film would be. Although one could assume that a son making a film with their mother *about a son making a film about their mother* would be perceivably odd and personal, my mother never questioned nor confronted me directly about the reasons why I was making the film, nor whether the film was meant to be a mirror of us. To be frank, my mother had always seen films as works of construction and fiction, regardless of documentary or narrative, so in a sense, regardless of what the film scenes centered on or discussed, my mother saw the project as a work of art and representation, nothing more. Her preceding notes inevitably would reflect this personal truth of hers as I drove out to see her.

The most surprising note in the feedback sessions with mom was that she found both the son and the mother very poorly driven characters, and she was surprised that neither of them was motivated to deal with their personal problems with each other or by themselves. I wasn't surprised by her response to the son, as I had figured that the son's issue was insecurity and non-confidence in confronting his disappointment in himself and his inability to engage in honest dialogue with his mother about intimate questions. On the other hand, I found her reaction to the mother quite surprising.

She would go on to state that both the son and mother had nothing special in either of them as all they did was complain and blame each other for their own problems. I then asked her if she felt there was any relatability of the mother to herself, or the son to me. She replied with a confident no to the mother but stated that I was very much like the son. However, she didn't linger long on this thought and proceeded to say that if I simply wanted her to act as the mother, then I would have to be comfortable with letting her revise the mother's lines so that they reflected a more authentic role to which she could relate. I said yes without hesitation.

The next week, she sent me a revision of the script, with all the mother's lines re-written entirely. The biggest thing I noticed was that most of the mother's lines were now spoken in a lighter and happier tone, and that the mother spent most of her time chatting with the son about her own history of singing Pingju opera and her teachers. I was quite surprised to read these lines, especially with this one specific moment in the scene where the mother goes on a monologue explaining her system of translating Chinese opera phonetic syllables to English, which was something I had never heard her talk about before in my entire life (Image 12).

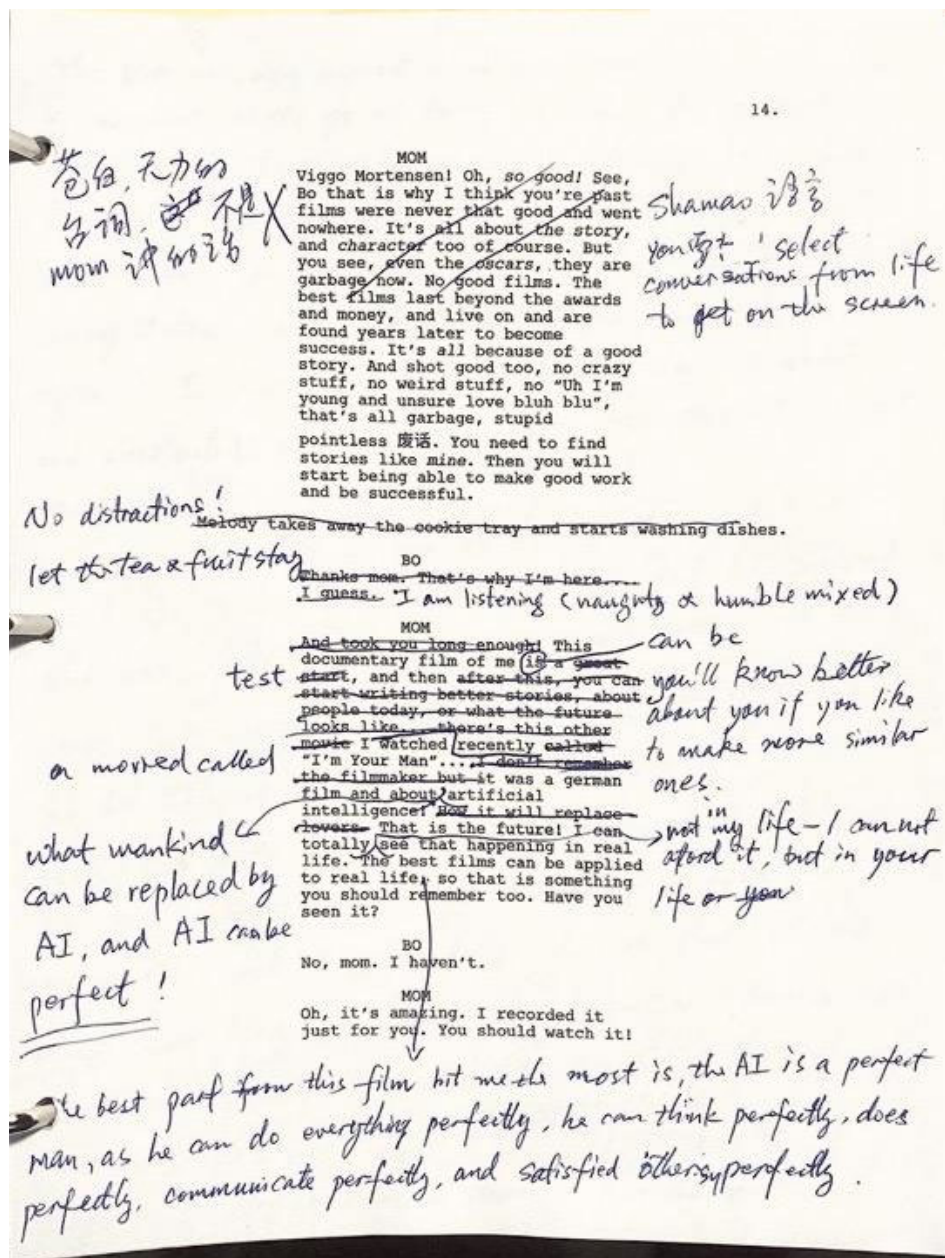
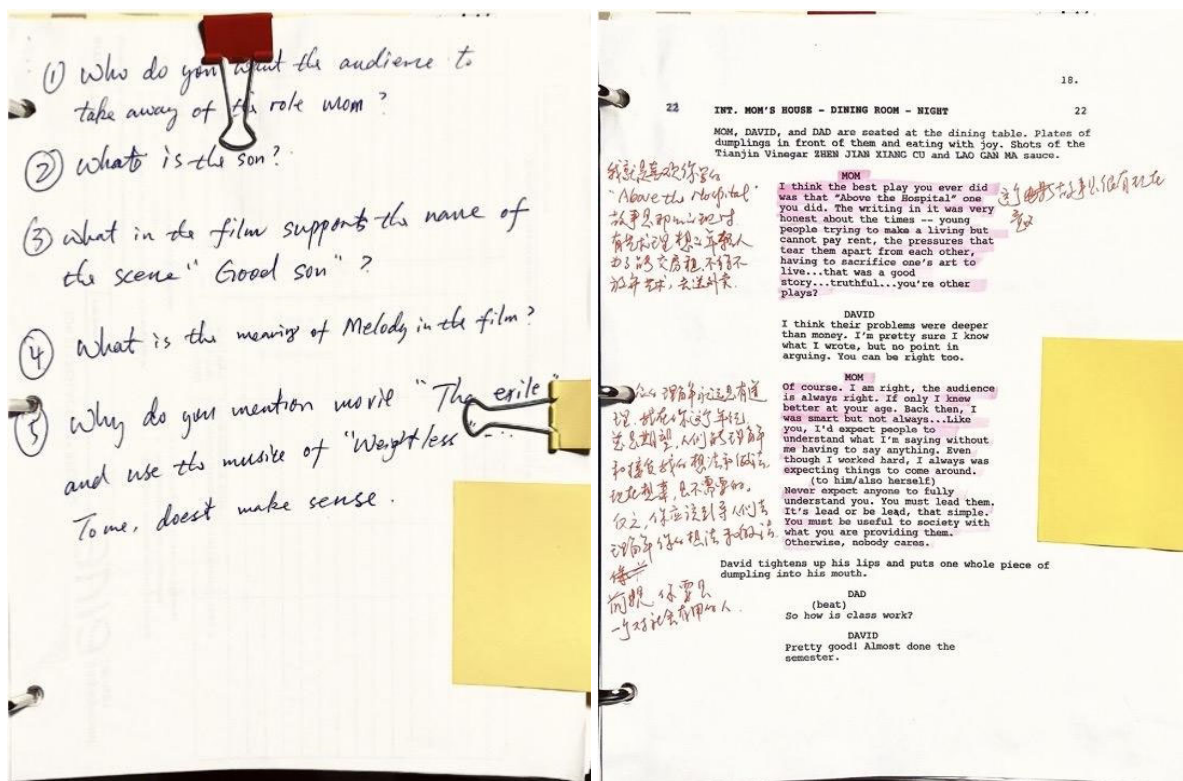


Image 12. Script revisions from mom (lines crossed & notes added).

Furthermore, she also added the activity of making dumplings together for the mother and son in the first talking scene. She stated that—besides her specific history to Pingju opera—the act of wrapping dumplings was one of most culturally specific things she could think of in relation to her Han Chinese heritage. I naturally agreed to this, feeling foolish to have not thought of the significant presence of dumplings in my life before, and how much they served as

a bond between my mother and me. With regards to the rest of the script, there was still the same narrative progression of events, which included a first talking scene (dumpling making – Act I), a second documentary interview (living room – Act II), and the mother giving the son leftovers to take home when he leaves (the garage – Act III). There was also no grand fight that occurs between the mother and son anymore in the third act. Instead, the mother lets the son leave and gives the son leftovers to take, telling him that he should come back more often.



Images 13 & 14. Scans of Script. Mom offers feedback questions & Chinese translation.

With regards to the major revisions she offered (Images 13 & 14), the biggest revelations I had were her suggestions to 1) replace the third character with my father and to have him involved in the making of dumplings for dinner, as well as 2) change the emotional vibe of the ending, which she felt was quite sad and pathetic in relation to having the son break down on the

floor. We did get slightly heated in regards to the ending scene of the son, but regardless of how self-centered I was in keeping this scene, she never tried to stop me or make me feel guilty about shooting it. I recall her saying that “films should encourage action and change and not be made just to spread hate and sadness” and that the tone change of the film would personally just be more interesting for others to see if I chose to give the son a different ending.

Incorporating these changes and suggestions, I could sense an energetic engagement from her that I had rarely seen before, and which I felt was very similar to my other collaborations with other artists and friends in past projects. In a sense, even though I wasn’t sure if my mother understood what the film was in my mind, her agreement to be in it was a sure sign that she saw some sort of value in it, which indirectly validated my own feelings about the script, because if it was bad, I know that she would definitely not agree to be a part of it in any capacity. I really felt I could trust my mother with this project and her ability to call me out on any mistakes if they were to arise, so we reached a consensus on a third script revision and decided to start shooting on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### *Filming with My Mother*

The filming took place for ten days, from August 10<sup>th</sup> to August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. For the first three days, I had the Blackmagic Ursa Mini camera all set up in my tiny apartment, along with a tripod, a H4N Zoom Recorder, and a single LED light. Since the apartment was so small, I had to constantly move the tripod and light stand into various doors when I set up shots, which were mostly all kept towards the wide-square window and desk set up. I imagined the desk and window as a stage area, so it felt right to set it up in composition as if it *was* a stage. This idea of framing the window frame with a camera served as a nice doubling effect where viewers could

have a sense of two worlds moving: the inside world of the apartment, and the outside world of the city. The camera framing brought these two worlds together into one, and with me in the frame as the son, a sense of control and lack thereof could be brought in as well.

I proceeded to shoot all these scenes of the son alone in this third space, with no chronological sense in narrative, but rather, in time of day. The first day, I filmed myself waking up and engaging in various everyday habitus routines (brushing my teeth, showering, changing, shaving, and cooking breakfast) as if they were real. Because of this, I would deliberately spend a while setting up the camera angle, press record, and then jump into the front and block myself for a second, before jumping back, stopping record, and watching the brief playback to get a sense of how my composition was. For the specific narrative moments that evoked the son's emotionality (i.e., looking out the window, on the phone, at photos of his younger mom), I would record about five to seven takes each time, readjusting mostly for bad focus or my disaffection with certain angles or my performance. Inevitably, I would spend about the whole day shooting until the evening, and then skip ahead to the final evening scene of the son breaking down on the floor. I segregated the chronology through the switching of costume outfits, so a narrative continuity could be placed between when I left the space and returned.

For the second day, I shot the morning scenes in the ending of the script, which consisted of the son watching Sofia Bohdanowicz's masterpiece *Never Eat Alone* (2016) on his laptop, while eating the leftovers his mom gave him after the film. Since I did not have any dumplings at this time, I chose to film myself heating up other stir-fry leftovers which my mom gave me a week before as a substitute. I did not think of the continuity with the dumplings as I did not plan any closeups of the food, but what *did* really matter to me was that the son was shadowed, eating alone in his apartment, and that he was eating the breakfast with chopsticks. The actual

significance of this shot with the chopsticks (Image 15) would hit me later in the feedback stages, but at the time I was mostly drawn to the ambience that I got from a shot I discovered in *Habitus Fragments*, which consisted of a performer eating with chopsticks in the darkness of an apartment (Image 16). The intent behind this shot is a sense of anonymity and loneliness in the idea of the son moving out to the city, and choosing to be grown up and independent from the mother.



Image 15. The “Son” and performer sit, eating leftovers alone as final shot of film.





Image 16. Original shot of performer eating alone in apartment in “Habitus Fragments”.

After the first three days, I arrived at my parents’ house in the BC Interior and filmed with my mom and dad for four days. For this entire shoot, I flipped my process and shot the scenes in chronological order as if I were the actual son in the film, setting out to film a movie with my mom. For each scene, I would set up the cinema camera on a tripod and frame the shots before blocking myself and my mom in front of them. For audio, I rented two lavalier mics and installed them both on my mom and myself, while also placing an H4N zoom recorder in various hidden corners when the shots rolled.

We started with a scene of the mom showing the garden to the son, which was a scene that she suggested (it was not in my original script) (Image 17). Afterwards, we went back inside and made real dumplings together as we went through our lines. I kept the camera mostly far away or to the side as I shot these scenes, prioritizing the attentive engagement with my mom through constant dialogue rather than silence between takes.



Image 17. Film still from *She Sings for the World*. The mother shows the garden to the son.

Throughout the shoot, my mom would ask me for critical thoughts on what I would like the mother character to be for each scene. I would always have a clear action-oriented answer to offer her (i.e., maybe she takes a beat of thought here, maybe she looks down here, etc.) to ensure that she thought I really knew what I was doing each time, even though deep down I had no idea at all. Although the film production was literally just me and her throughout the four days, we treated the shoot like a professional collaboration and always spoke about our characters in the third person (i.e., the son is feeling like ‘this’, the mother is perhaps feeling like “this”, etc.), to keep a mental distance from the idea that the film was a documentary about us. I think by keeping this ironic attitude with each other, we were able to record these scenes without any personal conflicts or anxieties that questioned our own relationship, which I feel was furthered by my own willingness to accept whatever my mom said about the takes or gave me in regards to her creative ideas and acting choices, which I was always supportive of in the end.

The next morning, my mom and I filmed a second interview scene in the living room. The energy of this interview was nothing strange as my mom and I were reminded of the previous interview we did last December with *Symphonies*. However, this time I mainly asked my mom questions about her formal Pingju opera singing knowledge, in reference to the lines she wrote down in the previous dumpling scene from yesterday. I started to ask her about the two teachers she mentioned in those previous lines, who were people I never heard of until she brought them up in her line revisions. As I asked, I placed a prop DSLR camera in between my mom and me, and the actual Blackmagic Ursa Mini camera to my right and just filmed her for 45 minutes, without ever turning to film myself at any moment. I deliberately did this because I knew that—if I were to use any of this interview in the film—I wanted the shot to *only* be this shot of the mother, because to me it both embodied the objective style of a documentary shot and compositionally embodied a slight-perspective of the son looking at the mother on the left of the viewer in the fictional story (Image 18).



Image 18. Still from *She Sings for the World*. The son interviews the mother.

After the filming of this documentary section, a very radical thing happened during the shoot that was never planned or expected, which was her telling me about the newspaper archives and Huang Zong Jiang's book review of her past Pingju Opera experiences, which she kept hidden in her office. Ironically, the only pieces of archives I had that evoked fragments of my mom's former life in China were the old family photos she gave me and this one single 'Qin Xiang Lian' cassette tape of this English Pingju opera recording she examined once at her desk. After the documentary scene, my mom had a break from the shoot as I told her that I was going to simply go around and film various objects around the house, when she asked if I wanted to film any of her archives (I.e., her cassette tape, book). I gave her a dumbfounded look and asked, "what other archives?" to which she replied, "the newspaper articles and book profiles...I think they would be great to show!"

This idea of the son going through the mother's archives was never written in the script, but I felt silly that I never even bothered to think of the idea of asking my mother about any archives of her Pingju opera history beyond the old family photos she gave me and the one cassette tape she had. I immediately said yes and agreed to film her going through them tomorrow morning, telling her that I would see them in the moment on camera with her. She was then 'wrapped' for the day, and I spent the rest of the day filming by myself around the house. It was during this time that I filmed my mother's portrait of her as a Pingju opera singer (Image 1), myself in the mirror (Image 19), and my mom's cassette tape (Image 20).





Image 19. Film Still from *She Sings for the World*. The son captures himself in the mirror.

As I filmed, I didn't know what these shots contributed narrative wise as they were not written in the script, but perhaps they could serve as captured moments by the son—punctuations of time.



Image 20. Film Still from *She Sings for the World*. My mom's Qin Xiang Lian cassette tape.



Image 21. Still from *She Sings for the World*. Pan-fried leftover dumplings for breakfast.

The next morning, mom pan-fried the leftover dumplings from yesterday for a late brunch in the kitchen (Image 21); I casually set the camera and recorded without making a scene. After that, I filmed my mom going through her archives before I had to ‘head back’ to the city (in accordance with the fictional story of the film). I took the camera handheld and began to record as my mom brought out an old box in her office and started flipping through various old newspaper articles, concert scripts, and books containing information on her past Pingju opera activities.

The newspaper articles were incredibly old, but she had many white paper photocopies as well that she put aside. She went through all these articles as if she had not read them for a while either, speaking to herself intermittently while discussing the various archives to me and the camera. I noticed that the archive she was most interested in was the Huang Zong Jiang compilation book (Image 22) of various fine art reviews and essays (he was a well-known actor, playwright, and arts critic). There was a well-regarded review of her very first performance of translated Pingju opera, highly praiseworthy, and accurately addressed her ultimate desires of bringing together East and West cultures through art.



Image 22. Still from *She Sings for the World*. The Huang Zong Jiang Compilation book.

I was quite surprised by all of this and my mother's sudden openness to be vulnerable and present these items to me in her office. There was even a point where she just started reminiscing about her three teachers who helped her at the time, that I couldn't help but stay silent for most of the recording. I started to get nervous at the idea that I never took the time or heart to consider that my mother's work was quite significant and huge in history; I suddenly chimed in towards the end and told her that we had enough of this footage for now and that we could film more another time in the future. She said, "of course anytime!" as she opened another Chinese literature journal. I kept recording as she then opened the table of contents, which had a circular part marked towards the bottom of it. "Ah, here I am!" she said, as she pointed her finger down to her name. I looked close to see a subtitle of the chapter that her finger laid on: *She Sings for the World* (Image 23).



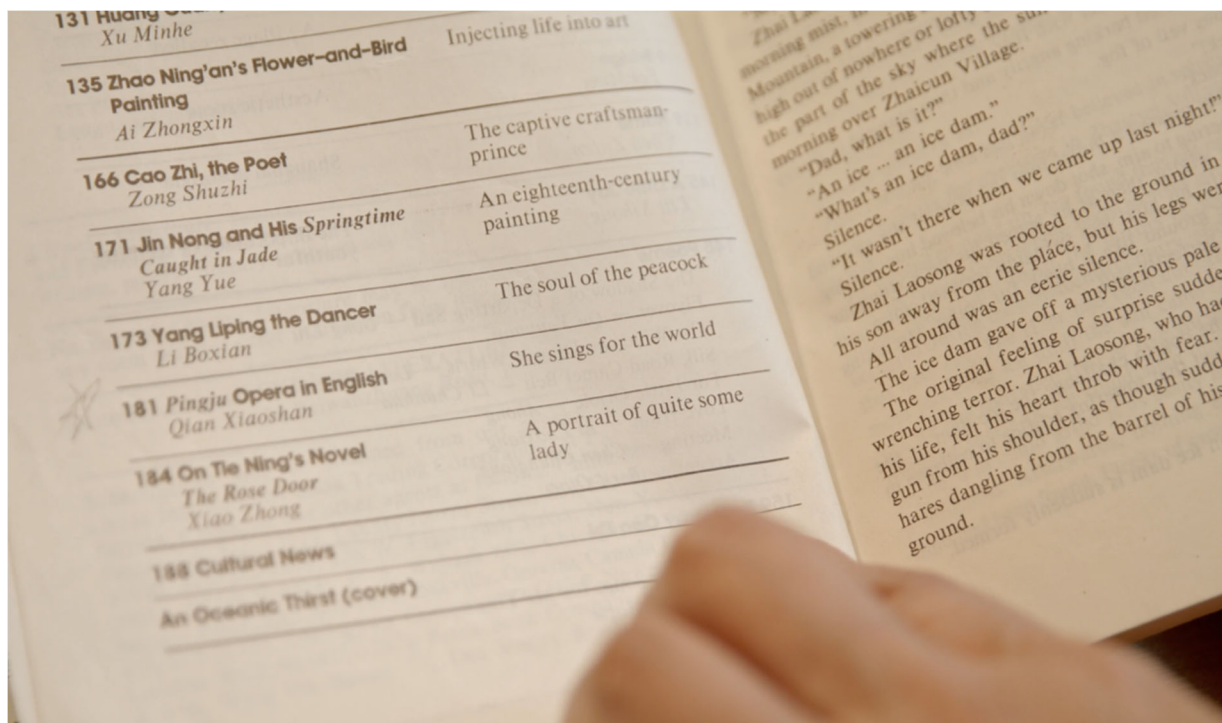


Image 23. Still of *She Sings for the World*. The discovery of the film title.

I stopped recording as I saw my mom in an entirely new light. I realized that this film wouldn't exist without her, so I changed the title of the film from "Good Son" to *She Sings for the World*. She proceeded to bring out two VHS tapes and stated that, even though she hasn't seen these for years, there should be old recordings of her performing onstage and that I could try to digitize them if I was able to. I wasn't sure how I could, but I agreed anyway and took the two VHS tapes downstairs, telling myself that I could maybe find a way to do so at York University after the shoot was over.

## The Radioactive Fossils

*Cinema has the power to bring those radioactive fossils to life.*

*- Laura Marks. The Skin of the Film. 2000. Pg. 247*

I came back to Toronto in September but would not get around to editing the film until late November due to a multitude of life events getting in the way. A struggle to find a rental place took away my entire September, and I was lucky enough to find myself a film-acting gig for CBC in October. I did take the chance through these early months to watch some dailies though and felt that the clips looked okay, but I had a bad feeling that the open process of filming did not work in favor for the thesis film overall as I could not tell what the final film would be. I also shot the entire film by myself, so even though I declared to my mom and dad that the shooting phase was done, there was no mental checkpoint that made it feel as if I was *really* done with the shoot and ready to move on to postproduction. This feeling of insecurity was then severely heightened when I finally got a chance to digitize the two VHS tapes that my mom gave me, which completely altered my film for better and worse.



Image 24. Photo in York U VHS Digitize Station. White Screen in empty VHS Tape.

When I first booked the VHS bay station in York University with Jon Hedley, I wasn't as curious as to what I would exactly find on the tapes other than grainy family camcorder videos, but rather whether the footage would be salvageable due to the tapes age, which was at least 22 years old. Since most VHS tapes tend to disintegrate after 15 years, he said to not hold my expectations too high. We then played the first VHS and found nothing but a white screen for the entire two-hour tape, proving that the tape was indeed gone (Image 24).

Jon apologized for my loss, and I told him that it was okay. He then left me to my devices as I sat and processed the fact that I would never know what was on that VHS tape we just played, how I was going to tell my mom that the VHS was empty.

However, a miracle then happened as six-minutes into the second VHS, a grey static appeared and suddenly a shot of a figure in the sunset, walking along a stone structural path (that looked like the great wall of China) appeared before me, with music playing in the background (Image 25). A title in Chinese then slowly faded in: “韩瑞杰用英语唱评剧 (Han Ruijie uses English to sing Pingju)”, followed by a shot of a young lady looking out into the valleys off the Great Wall of China (Image 26). This young lady was my mother, and this was one of two TV documentary shorts that were made about her Pingju opera singing activities in 1987 by the Tianjin Television Broadcast Bureau. The tape contained these two TV documentary shots, as well as an hour’s worth of two concerts performed by my mother on stage.

The discovery of this archive was shocking to me in the sense that not only did it contain many scenes of my mom at the young age of 24 roaming around Tianjin, Beijing, and singing on stage, but rather that these clips were made-for-tv broadcast documentary shorts that contained various elements of voiceover, interviews with her teachers and peers, and shots of my mother re-enacting certain scenes of her daily life around the actual Pingju opera work, including her listening to a cassette tape, writing, reading, and biking around Tianjin (Image 27).



Image 25. Film still from *She Sings for the World*. Mom walks along the Great Wall of China.



Image 26. Film still from *She Sings for the World*. Mom looks out from the Great Wall.



“What the absolute hell is this!” I thought to myself, as I suddenly realized that there was already not one film, but *two* films already made about my mom, and that this whole time my mom never took the liberty to tell me. Not only did this footage prove that she *was* a regarded singer back in China, but that her actions were literally documented as official history. Suddenly, the mythologies of my mother no longer felt like my own memories, but rather a cultural-collective memory that could be verified as part of a community in time which—like many other memories—had been forgotten and archived after she immigrated to Canada.



Image 27. Still from *She Sings for the World*. My mom riding a bicycle in Tianjin.

In a way, the archive counterpointed my entire thesis because the documentaries had already authentically embodied my mother's former life into a visual cinematic form that was objective, official, and cinematically authentic. This emotional effect that the archive had on me upon its discovery alienated my entire thesis and conception of my mom, making me think back

to Laura Mark's examination of Deleuze's idea of the "fossilized archive" in her book *The Skin of the Film* (2000):

*By virtue of its indexical character, cinema allows unresolved pasts to surface in the present of the image. To Deleuze, fossils are not cold stone objects but rather live, dangerous things. Images are fossil beds, where the fossils are those strange and stubborn images that seem to arise from a reality that is at odds with its surroundings. (84)*

Furthermore, Laura Marks (2000) goes on to describe the significance of duty which I suddenly felt upon encountering these archives of my mother in relation to the film:

*"This burden of explanation is why people who are moving between cultures find that their luggage gets heavier and heavier. Their familiar objects are fossilising. What was taken for granted in one culture becomes incomprehensible in another, and it becomes the immigrant's responsibility to build up and excavate those layers of impossible translation." (91)*

In regards to this archive footage, I had no idea how I was going to integrate it into my film, but I knew that it was essential that I did so. When it came to finally getting around to editing a cut of the film in December and January, I applied a marble method to the live action footage I shot with my mom and simply threw every single piece of footage into the timeline and kept cutting intuitively through all of it, organizing loose assemblies of scenes written in the script, and cutting footage shorter through intuition. As I started to develop sequences of the film, I started to cut the documentary archive footage of my mom into the images that affected me emotionally, such as my mother looking through photo family albums with my grandma, whose passing had greatly affected my mother and me a decade ago (Image 28).



Image 28. Still from *She Sings for the World*. My mom and grandma look through family photos.

As I cut, I took out all the sound because most of this documentary footage contained a documentary commentator's voiceover in between interviews, which I felt greatly conflicted with the live action footage of the fiction scenes we shot. I then realized that since I did not choose to film this moment of me discovering the archive *into* the original film scenes, I was limited to using the documentary archive footage as visual flashbacks that could both serve as authentic scenes of my mom's actual history in real life *and* virtual cinematic reconstructions of the mom's past in the fiction. In a way, the ambivalence that is left simply through the presence and integration of the documentary archive created a very powerful impact to me that is both familiar and alienating because the actor who plays the mother in the fiction film can be literally identified as the young woman in the archive, even though there are gaps that are never addressed in the mom's interview with the son. I am grateful for the fact that I chose to follow my heart and cast my mom and myself in the film; otherwise the discovery of this archive with my real mom might have created an alternative experience to which I feel would not be as powerful with a visibly different actor. This choice of embracing my mother and me as actors for



this project was the key to creating that third space between the actual and the virtual in my opinion, but nevertheless, the film did not feel singular—it was still caught between two worlds.

### *Between Two Worlds*

The idea of binaries is something I deep down find essentialist and reductive, but I nevertheless must address it because my final thesis film lies in this third space of between-ness that has created some major discoveries and problems for me as a filmmaker. As I started to chisel down the film, I started to get feedback from many of my peers and supervisor and faced the most polarizing of responses I have ever received for any film I've made, to the point where I found myself in an existential crisis about why I got into filmmaking in the first place.

*She Sings for the World* had felt like the most selfless and carefree film I made without any self-interest or attention; yet I still received feedback of experiences that were oriented to just me as a filmmaker. I had thought that if I simply did not try to curate or express a thought deliberately in my film, then it would not be prejudged as “therapy onscreen” and would be welcomed in the world. I agree there is a sense of distance that is embodied in the film, an exilic effect that imagined communities of Chinese and Canadian cultural identity might expect. One of my colleagues experienced the film as very on-the-fence about everything; they suggested that if I wanted the film to have a stronger cinematic effect, I could either dive into its dramatic inclinations and fictional story of the son, or chisel down the film to a simple portrait of the mother. In other words, I would clarify it was a film about a son or a mother by instilling a totality of knowledge of the mother's diasporic experience or the son's alienation from his mother. But ambivalence in addressing such knowledge was not surprising in Laura Mark's discussions of intercultural cinema (2000):

*“Intercultural cinema seeks to represent sensory experiences that encode cultural memory. Yet it is ambivalent about the possibility, or even the desirability, of representing sense experience in its fullness. If they do manage to recover this precious knowledge, they may use screens and ruses to protect them from casual consumption. This ambivalence toward the representation of the homeland is more evident in the work of “second-generation” (or more) artists, whose sensuous geographies are a mix of the old culture and the new, whose sensoria are not completely at home in either place. (230)*

Nevertheless, as I still cared greatly about the reception of the film to others due to the subject matter of my mother, I questioned this very fact of the fence itself and wondered why I was so driven to staying on it (which I felt was that very transcultural third space that transcended linguistic sensibility between two cultures). I realized at that point that *She Sings for the World* would never stand as a film that was accessible to a worldwide community due to this approach I took, which was very open-ended and ambivalent towards any certain politics or characters in the end. I started to feel that it was true that the world was made up of imagined communities that were divided by fences, and that one would have to inevitably land somewhere to belong in the end. Like Huang Zong Jiang had stated in his review of my mother’s Pingju work: “Soaring between heaven and earth, sometimes to the east, and sometimes to the west...”: If *She Sings for the World* had achieved anything through its form, it was in choosing to stay in this very third space of translation, withholding the possibility of landing.

### *Her Life to Live*

It would take ages for me discuss the subjects that were raised through the rough cuts of *She Sings for the World* because as I edited, I realized that the integration of the documentary archive totally debased the foundation of the narrative fiction form, and the very foundation of who would have the last word in regards to what the film was “about” in the end. I originally set

out to make a film that simply captured the psychological world of my mother's former life as a Pingju opera singer, but as I filmed, I discovered that the primary absence in the film was not this aspect of the past, but rather this lack of discussion about how I came to be born after she came to Canada and met my dad, which I never realized had affected me so deeply. With regards to the lack of addressing such a subject in the interview with my mother, if I were to have known of the documentary archive prior to the shoot, I would of maybe asked such questions, but even then I think I would be as secretly afraid of the possibility of discovering that I was an accidental birth, or the very reason behind that she couldn't pursue her opera career any further. The idea of discovering whether my birth brought suffering and regret was something that I think deep down I wanted to explore in the film but, in the end, I lacked the confidence to pursue. The shock of the praiseworthy documentary archive that validates my mother's role in China and her early years as an artist with a beautiful and promising life, further instilled this insecurity in myself as a filmmaker.

Although I know that my mother truly loves me, to even discover that I could be a reason that contributed to a beautiful and promising life ending (or any suffering associated with immigration and building a new life in Canada) is something that I was not ready to process in the film without inevitably succumbing to a severe shame of existing. Therefore, as I cut this film shorter and shorter, I realized that I simply couldn't pose any questions at the start of this film, otherwise viewers would simply expect me to answer them in some way, and there are no answers that I feel can satisfy any viewer without exploiting potentially sensitive areas of both my mom's life and my own which I have yet to figure out how to respect cinematically.

Furthermore, to pose any of these questions that came up only *after* the shooting when I discovered the archive in Toronto would, in my opinion, counteract the real-time essence and

authenticity of the film that I built through the script, which is what the film was to me in the end: an authentic exploration of a son and mother making a film about a mother and son. The only way that I felt this film could exist authentically and stay true to this third space was to remain open to this aspect of mythmaking and include an opening scene of the son recollecting this film, in an esoteric and dream-like way, and to let the specific archive footage and everyday empty shots punctuate notions of meaning for the viewer in an evanescent fashion. I decided to end the film on a real shot of me eating my mother's leftovers in that apartment alone, as the opening music of my mother's 'Qin Xiang Lian' cassette tape sings into the space, signifying these questions that continue to affect me.

As I think back to the starting point of this thesis project and the original script of 'The Forgotten', I recall writing one short exchange of dialogue between the mother and son that still sticks with me today. In the scene, the mother sits in a chair knitting a sweater, as the son walks into her place. The mother questions why symphonies need to be numbered, then asks the son: "do you still hear symphonies?"

The son replies: "Whenever I'm awake?"

The mother: "With and without music."

The Son: "All the time."

The mother: "Do they have parts?"

The Son: "I normally cannot tell."

The mother then says: "See? That is why things are harder for you. You cannot tell your own thoughts at times."

The son turns and replies: "I'm quite tired, Mom."

As I look at this film, I am still stuck between two worlds, one where the film can only be a film about a son or a mother, and another where the film can only be about both or neither. The film embodies these four cardinal points and remains in the crossroads of my mother and me, but, in the end, it seems that I still cannot escape myself and how lost I feel as I grow up.

This film is an endpoint for my mother, but a starting point for me. It embodies the impossibility of making a film that accurately addresses what connects us, other than the frame of time and space that surrounded us in that August summer of 2022. As I realized that there is no way of altering this truth, I simply must embrace it and let it exist in its own plurality of languages, its own interlinear form. I must refuse the urge to colonize my mother's life any further, for it is her life to live and not mine in the end, and for what she gave me for my thesis I am too spoiled. I also realized that, in the end, any forms of imagination and myth can serve as an authentic representation of history, and authenticity could be found as much in fictional stories and myth as in documents and archives, and the real world—like my mother's house (in-studio or outside)—could inevitably serve as a stage to officiate these histories. I realized that my mother has built such an amazing stage in Canada, that it was time that I stop looking back and start building a stage for myself as an individual of the world, letting the past fade as my mother did (Image 29). The son is lost, but the mother was found. That is enough for now.

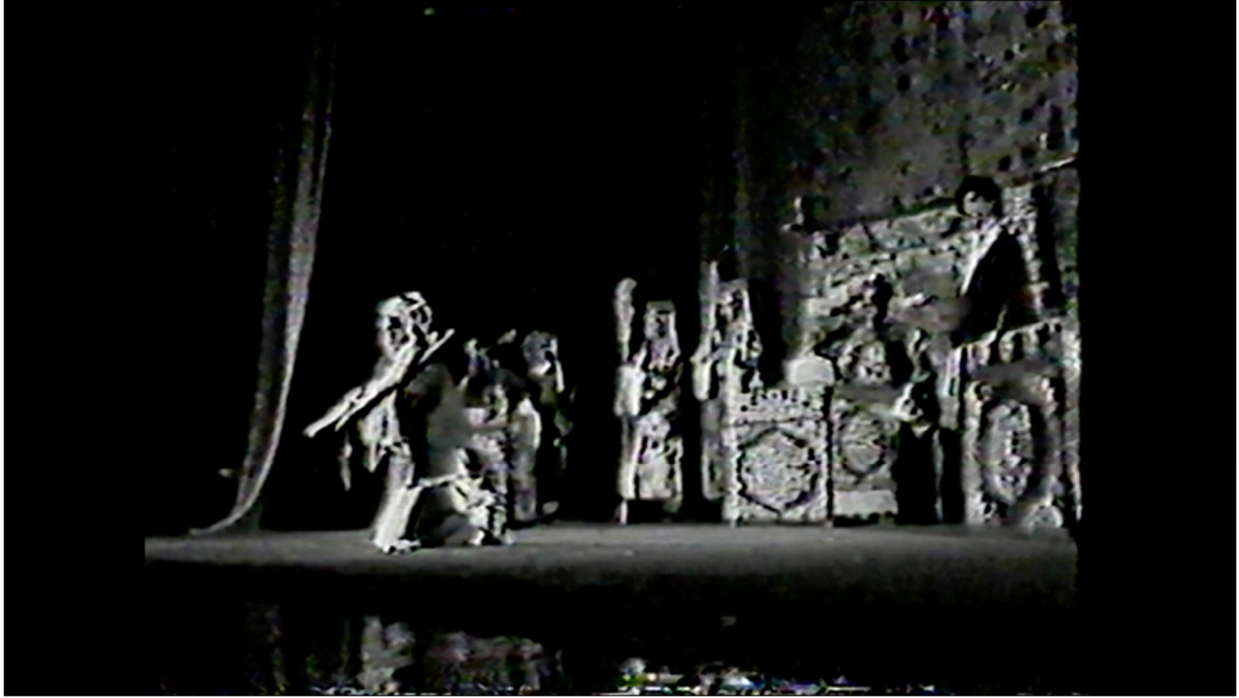


Image 29. Still of *She Sings for the World*. A final image of my mom singing on stage before it fades.

## A Brief Note On The (Im)possibility of Translation

*How to allow experience to retain its strangeness and untranslatability?*

- Laura Marks. *The Skin of the Film*. 2000. Pg. 199

In my opinion, the biggest challenge I faced in *She Sings for the World* centers around the (im)possibility of translating two cultures through film. One could claim the film embodies elements of the “autoethnography” since it integrates both the self (me/the filmmaker) and my subject (my mother) and examines us through an autobiographical being-looked-at-ness by placing both me and my mother on the stage of the film as a representative subject of cross-cultural representation (Chow, 2010, 153). However, I could argue that the film also contradicts the objective documentations of an autoethnography by its deliberate de-intellectualization of knowledge, which I did by juxtaposing the documentary archives with narrative fiction scenes that inadvertently destabilize the documentary objectivity of the film, intersecting the lines between what is actual and what is virtual. The application of present-day transition shots of non-anthropocentric subjects (i.e., the petal) and everyday objects around the house, I would argue, further complicates this translation and clarity by expanding the mother and son into a world at large that is visually and emotionally opposite to the world being discussed in the interview. Overall, the film constantly translates the subject into self and self into subject, struggling to land on one or the other, and inevitably ending as an unfixed (mixed) identity that simultaneously embodies the tradition of a specific identity, community, or form, all the while betraying it.

For the film, I deliberately applied this technique of “betrayal” as “act-dividers” when I stumbled upon the realization that my film had different components in the postproduction phase. I realized that the first betrayal occurs when I declare in my voice-over in the garden scene that the very scene itself was written and rehearsed by my mother and me (“My mother

insisted she show the garden to the son”), implying that the film could arguably serve as a re-creation, and therefore contain attributes of falsification within the narrative. The second betrayal that serves as act two then happens on the second day when I deliberately decide to leave out voice over, instead opening the film up to various shots of the morning (the petal, me ‘sleeping’) and offering to sit through another interview of my mom that is kept more naturalistic and evocatively phenomenal, which I emphasize by choosing to keep the shot only on her, and in long takes (McDougall, 1993, 42) . The final betrayal then occurs when I leave home and—in a new voiceover in Mandarin Chinese—choose to separate from the fiction film and enter the documentary archive, before coming back to a final ambivalent scene of the son eating breakfast.

In a way, I tried to apply Rey Chow’s (2010) notion of “translation as transmission” (p. 155) by transmitting myself and the subject through the film’s gradual translation of itself between fiction and realism, even though the overarching subject itself was still always focused on cultural knowledge and my mother’s discussions of her former life as an Pingju opera singer. The betrayals that were implemented were to challenge the viewer’s assumption that my film would provide a clear translation of my mother, and that this translation through film could have only gone through one direction of a beginning, middle, and end. As I gradually learned about Asian diaspora studies and imagined communities, I realized that this idea of going one direction was a hegemonic fabrication device to which I wanted to avoid because I did not want to emphasize one culture or language over the other, inadvertently colonising or exploiting one culture for another’s comprehension or understanding. I wanted to see if I could make a film that was equally “Chinese” and equally “Canadian”, and that lived within a singular nexus that could be categorized in and of itself as transcultural, and with which I felt I could identify. It is arguable that my film does this in the end.



In a way, the choice to fluctuate my film in between my mother and me serve as a counterpoint to the translation process that my mom originally implemented in her Pingju opera singing, which was mainly focused on translating original Chinese lyrics and music into the English language. The attainment of the English language was the end goal for my mom so that she could attain her sociopolitical/national goals of spreading Chinese culture further out into the world in order to *create* an imagined community of an integrated global culture of east and west that was envisioned in her mind, whereas my translation intentions in this film were in the end to *find* an authentic transcultural community which I thought had already existed primitively in the human condition. In a way, her system of translation echoed a time when the hegemonic language was still English, which inadvertently still represents the ultimate determinant of success in our modern global society. An endpoint to my mother's case would be an openly accessible bridge of English translated Pingju opera (which was prioritized as an ultimate validator), whereas in the case of my film, I could argue that - by choosing to apply ambivalence and abstraction between my mother (the subject) and myself (self) - I refused a priority of accessible comprehension through a single language, and went against the very ideas of translation that she practised in her former life.

The complication of infusing my narrative fiction with radioactive fossil archives further emphasizes this refusal and supports the proposed idea that a true translation is impossible unless I were to falsify an endpoint and prioritize the comprehension of one subject over another through film. I believe Naficy's quote about Farrokhzad's *the House is Black* (1962) expands on this difficulty I found in translation and summarizes what I hoped to achieve by combining my mom and myself in *She Sings for the World*:

*“The clash of two styles in a single film—one lyrical and ambiguous, the other social and positivist—characteristic of many institutional films and of the poetic realist style, testifies to the struggle of creative filmmakers to find a personal and truthful documentary voice in a society and a medium driven by an impersonal social style. It also testifies not only to the gendered and double voicing of the film but also to the double authorship of its narration, for Farrokhzad put the lyrical narration together, while Golestan wrote the text for the other parts (Hamid Naficy, 2011. Pg. 84)*

Although I set out to explore how cultural identity could be translated through film, I found that this task of explaining this transcultural third space as an authentic form of representation difficult, because the film itself consistently struggles to translate how my experience and identity correlates clearly from my mother’s former life as a Pingju opera singer. I tried explicitly to visualize this relationship between my mother and me, both intangibly through the integration of my mother and I into the fiction, and tangibly in the final kitchen scene where I parallel the back of my mother and myself before leaving (Images 30 & 31). Although there is voice-over later in the archive, I simply cannot find the words that would be able to accurately explain how my mother truly translates to me in the end, and how I truly translate to my mother. Perhaps in the end, cinematic translation can only get closest through its technical form, so I chose to simply frame us in succession of each other and leave it at that.



Images 30 & 31. Stills from *She Sings for the World*. Mother and Son stand back to camera.

## CONCLUSION: Reflection, Exile, Future.

To conclude, I would say that my thesis film has change me a lot in the most unexpected of ways. The biggest change I noticed is that, through the making of *She Sings for the World*, I have come closer to my real mother and feel that our relationship has gotten a lot better than prior to the making of this film. However, I cannot help but feel like an exile and further alienated towards not only myself as a mixed-raced individual but also my work as a filmmaker since, I have integrated my real life and my filmmaking life to a point where I can no longer distinguish between the two.

In a way, *She Sings for the World* is the most personal film I have ever made and likely ever will, as I am unsure if I will ever want to integrate myself into my own film at such a level again. I have also accepted the idea that history itself is simply comprised of the myths and stories that are passed down generation upon generation, and that it is not a matter of whether we can construct these stories in technically objective or subjective visual means, but rather whether we can conjure the emotional essence and truth of these stories in an authentic way that is intangibly recognizable and emotionally real. Through film, we feel the aspirations of my mother biking through Tianjin to meet up with Teacher Zhao and we feel the loneliness of a son eating leftovers that his mother provided for him. We feel the stress associated with the breaking down of a VHS tape through its static decay, and we feel the warmth of the sun upon a character's skin as they lay on a beach. Filmmaking can push our communities apart, bring them together, or stay away from either in the end. It's about where you feel you belong at the time.

For my MFA thesis project, I started out thinking that my mother was the one who was trapped in an apartment of guilt and regret, but I came out realizing that it was me – the son – who has been trapped, ever since I moved out of my parent's place back in 2016. My very first

film image was a foreshadow of this internal prison I placed upon myself when I began to think too deeply about my sense of worth in relation to my expectations as a descendant of amazing parents, and ironically, my last film image has brought me back to this very same image: an apartment in a big city.

I made this film about my mother, but in the end it's about my own sense of shame in myself for feeling as if I have not lived up to a supposed promise of happiness which I feel my mother had achieved back in her hometown prior to having me. I realized through this film that life moves on and that—our linguistic and cultural specificities aside—we should not feel ashamed for the sacrifices and failures that others have unconditionally made for us simply out of love, and that we should never doubt our capabilities to find a better life to live, and an imagined community to which we belong to. When I moved out, I don't think I ever got over the idea that maybe I betrayed my mom and dad by wilfully leaving the home for the sake of seeking a life of independence for myself. Although they express their desire for me to come home occasionally to be close to them, I realized that my mom and dad are deep down happier that I am finally out in the world, rather than stuck at home.

I thought my parents needed me, but in the end, it was I who still needed them. As I continue exploring the world in the hopes of finding that imagined community to which I belong, I hope to one day discover a love as true as that to which brought my mother and father together all these years and which brought them together in those years before I was born. Maybe I will make a film about this love story, and it will be imagined just as history was.

However, like cultural identity, love is also intangible. If I ever set out to make such a film, I will embrace the confidence and duty as a filmmaker to show it more clearly.

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