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# **Between Shores: Transnational Subjects and Visual & Material Culture**

## **Selected Case Studies**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy** in

**Visual and Material Culture Studies**

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**Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores relationships between material culture and transnational individuals. It discusses how visual and material objects function in the lives of transnational students in helping them adapt to their adopted country and new environment. It highlights what objects can tell us about the impact of the physical process of migration, how they represent people who move across different cultures, and how they relate to the construction of identity and memory. Chapter One 'Transnationalism and Diaspora' explicates different transnational typologies, and the different aspects and challenges transnational individuals experience. The following chapter, 'Material Culture and Transnational Subjects', represents the study of material culture, how social meaning in objects change across cultures, and the acculturation experience. Finally, three case studies are presented to illustrate how transnational individuals use objects as symbols, memories, and channels to reflect their personal experiences. These case studies demonstrate how objects affect individual psychology. In the summary, I conclude that objects play a particularly important role in the shaping of transnational lives and that interactions between the transnational subject and everyday objects—efforts to sustain previous interactions by continuing to use, make and treasure objects from another place—shape experience across cultural places.

## **Acknowledgement**

I am heartily thankful to my supervisor, Marcus Moore, whose encouragement, guidance and support from the initial to the final level enabled me to develop an understanding of the subject. Also, this thesis would not have been possible without the help of several interviewees who in one way or another contributed and extended their valuable assistance in the preparation and completion of this research.

Lastly, I offer my regards and blessings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of this project.

Vivian Shao

## Illustration List



Fig 1. Diasporic experience and creative arts  
Description: photographic work "The Third Me", Auckland, New Zealand, 2012  
Photo taken by: Jack Xie,

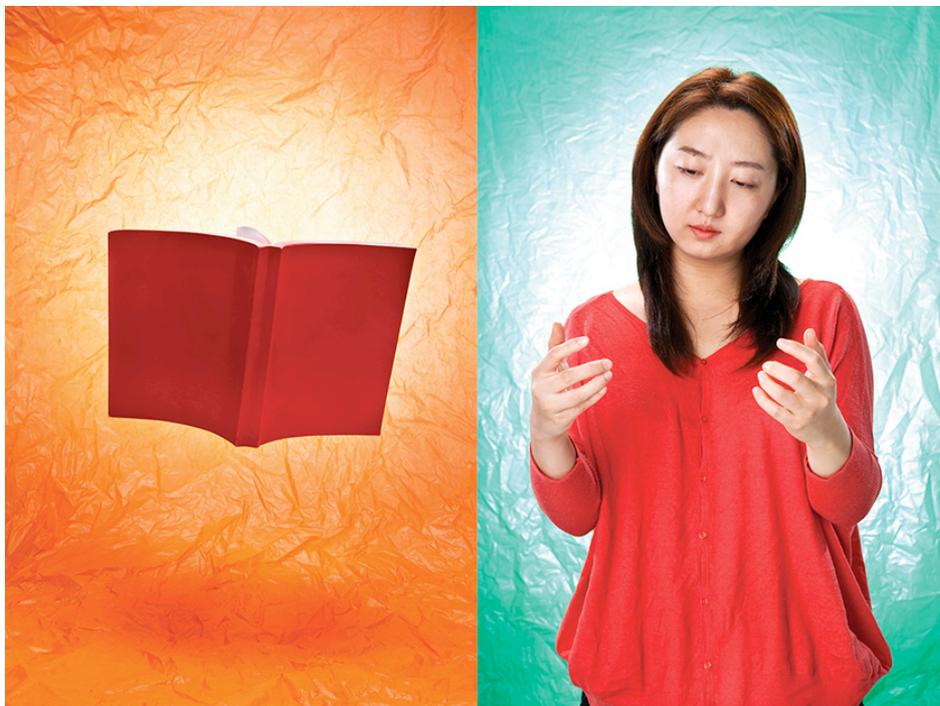


Fig 2. Case Study One: Diasporic experience - Zoe Zhang "Belonging"  
Description: photographic work "The Belonging" Auckland, New Zealand, 2012  
Photo taken by: Zoe Zhang



Fig 3. Case Study One: Diasporic experience - Zoe Zhang "Belonging"  
Description: photographic work " The Belonging" Auckland, New Zealand, 2012  
Photo taken by: Zoe Zhang

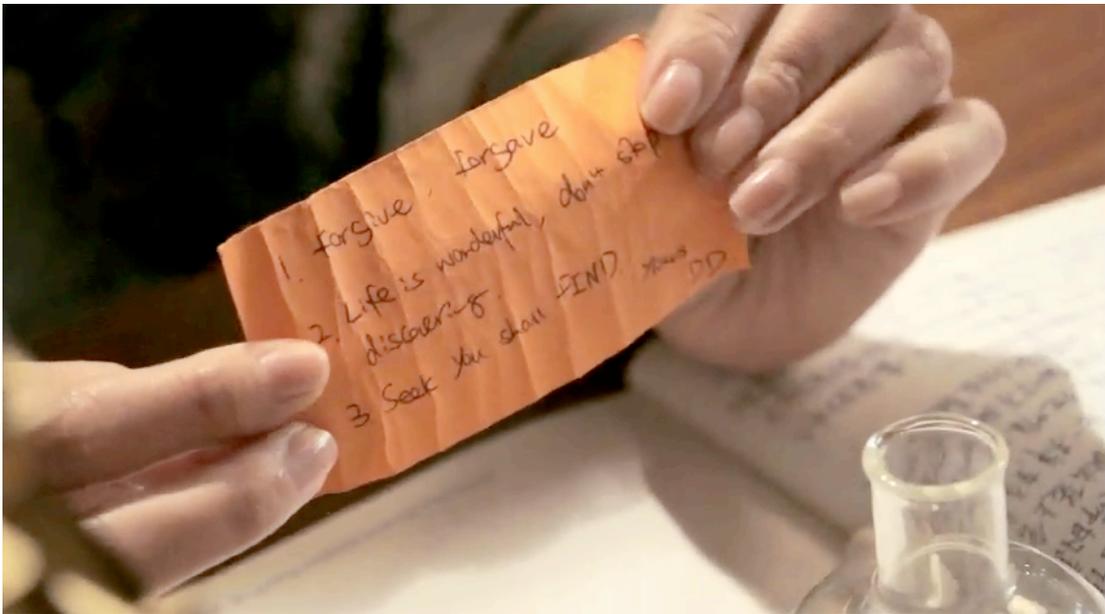


Fig 4. Case Study Two: Beverly in the house  
Description: Beverly holding the notes from her drift bottle, Wellington, New Zealand, 2012.  
Photo taken by: Screenshot from video. Video shot by Ctrl N Studio



Fig 5. Case Study Two: Beverly in the house  
Description: Beverly wearing her jade bracelet, Wellington, New Zealand, 2012.  
Photo taken by: Screenshot from video. Video shot by Ctrl N Studio

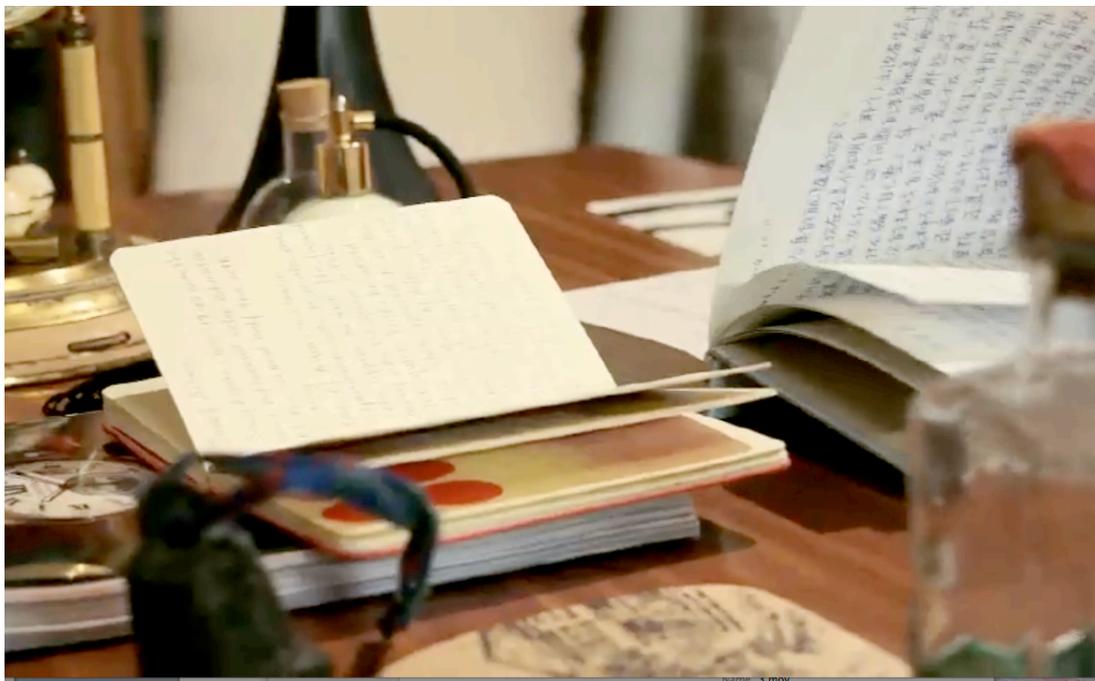


Fig 6. Case Study Two: Beverly in the house  
Description: Beverly's diaries, Wellington, New Zealand, 2012.  
Photo taken by: Screenshot from video. Video shot by Ctrl N Studio



Fig 7. Case Study Three: Annabel's vintage dress  
Description: Annabel's grandmother wearing the vintage dress, Hong Kong, China, 1956.  
Photo taken by: Unknown.



Fig 8. Case Study Three: Annabel's vintage dress  
Description: Annabel's mother wearing the vintage dress, Guang Zhou, China, 1989.  
Photo taken by: Unknown.



Fig 9. Case Study Three: Annabel's vintage dress  
Description: Annabel wearing the vintage dress, Auckland, New Zealand, 2012.  
Photo taken by: Vivian Shao.

## Preface

*[Some people] are strangers in their birthplace, and the leafy lanes they have known from childhood or the populous streets in which they have played, remain but a place of passage. They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves” (1942) William Somerset Maugham*

On 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2004 I boarded an Air China flight and travelled to New Zealand to commence study as an international student. Little did I know then that this departure would implicate me in future research projects including the writing of this thesis. Since that initial flight I have flown back and forth from New Zealand to six other countries on no less than 21 flights. I have traveled a total distance of 260,191 kilometers and have spent 329 hours in the skies. This is the equivalent of 15 days of my life on airplanes. These statistics entail an important distinction I make for this study: that I am no longer an “international” student but rather a “transnational” subject. The single transition of moving to a foreign country has changed to an oscillating process of moving back and forth, to and from different countries. There is no longer a single transition of separation from my home country to settling down in a foreign country, but instead I have encountered a constant process of dislocation and adaptation to a foreign environment. This has had a discernible effect on the manner I understand my memories of a home and *new* place to which I also call a home. This notion has prompted me to turn the investigation onto other transnational subjects.