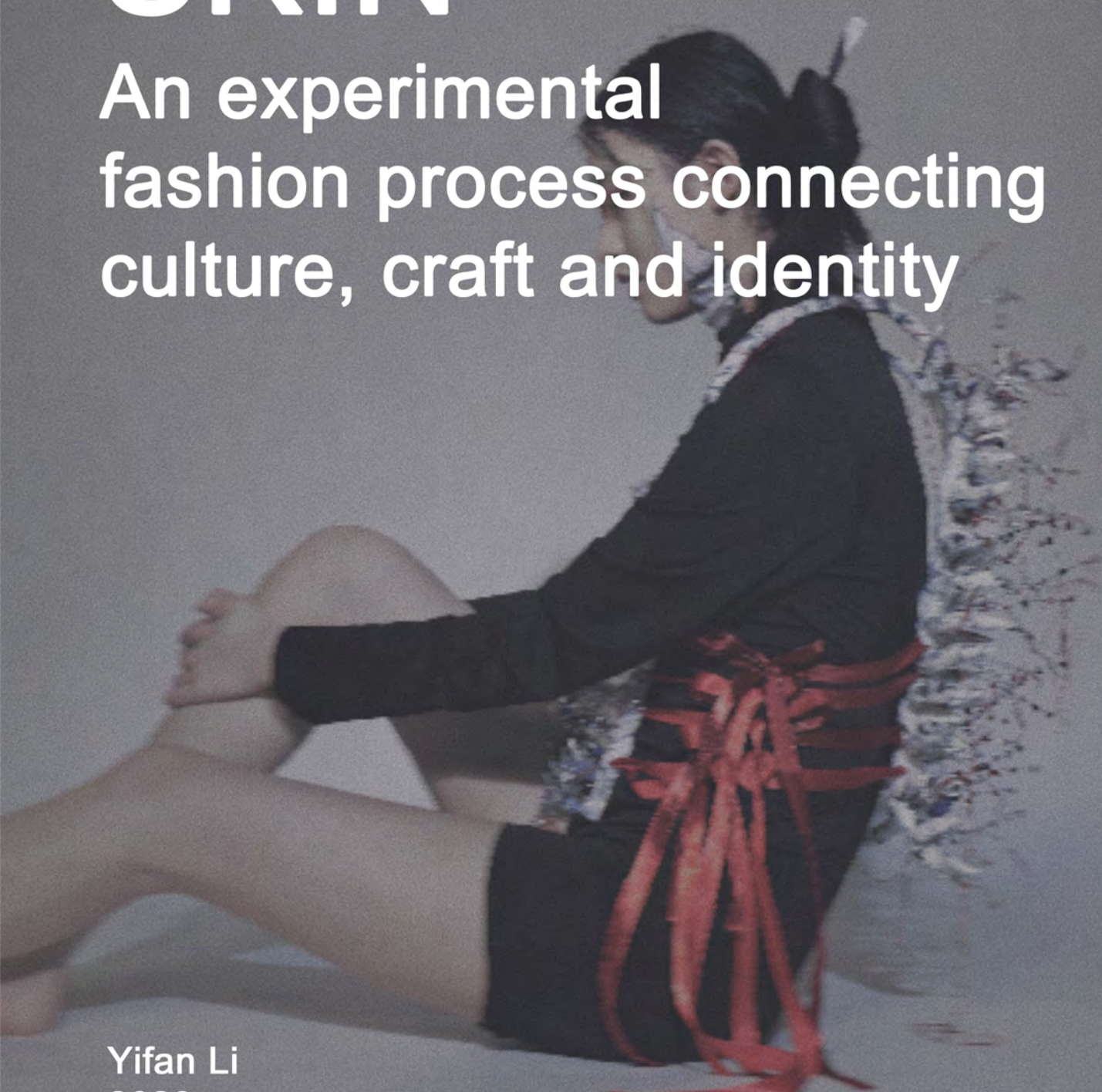


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BONE BLOOD SKIN

An experimental
fashion process connecting
culture, craft and identity

Yifan Li
2023



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

Master of Design

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Yifan Li
2023

Abstract

Cultural and personal identity is an everchanging negotiation of values and learned social patterns. In this practice-led research my focus is to explore how culture and thinking impact, and expand my identity as a Chinese fashion designer. This reflective fashion design process explores traditional Chinese crafts to create experimental pieces, evaluating how traditional culture and identity can evolve creative thinking and responses. This exploratory design process is led by metaphorical translations of bone, blood and skin as a framework. A reflective method can help inform a greater understanding of self-identity and cultural impact. Identifying a changing identity, highlights that everything has two sides, even the culture through fashion design.

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Introduction

0.1 Project Background

An emerging Chinese fashion designer, I was born and grew up in China, before studying in New Zealand. My design thinking has come a long way as I have navigated these cultures. In this practice-led thesis I explore my own practice as a ‘rebellious’ Chinese and also a fashion designer. I explore how my cultures and new learning with another culture impacted my identity with root-finding, exploration and transformation of these ideas through fashion design practice.

My previous 4th year Bachelor project explored anxiety, vulnerability and constraint, which I felt deeply at the time when developing this contemporary fashion collection. These emotions stemmed from conflicting cultural obligations and desire for increased freedom in a personal sense as well as creative experimentation in design. I want to explore further to understand these as opportunities for me as a young creative designer with a deeper understanding and knowledge of my background culture and my identity. Personal identity is an everchanging negotiation of values and learned social patterns. It is important to understand this when positioning myself as a future Chinese fashion designer who will be working in a global industry. The designs below show my 4th year project - a commercial collection with metaphorical representation (fig.1). It served as a good foundation for exploring in an advanced research study the deeper reasons behind my responses.



Fig.1 My Fragile Nerves, Year 4 project, 2021, Yifan Li

For this Masters research, I explore the possibilities of traditional craft within my creative pieces. Not only do I enjoy using my hands in the creation of experimental design, I am interested in the use of craft and cultural heritage to gain greater insight into my own practice. Alongside aspects of cultural identity reflection, this research explores the potential of traditional craft and material, how they can survive, how they can be used or applied in different industries, and the practice of traditional craft within fashion design.

Many contemporary Chinese fashion and art industries express the positive aspects of traditional culture (He, 2022) by incorporating or recontextualizing elements together with varied techniques, as will be discussed in chapter 2. This project is about finding identity through self-reflection of cultural impact. It will show that everything has two sides - both pride and constraint.

My primary research question is:

By exploring the relationship between culture, traditional craft and self-identity in my fashion practice, how can I gain insight into identity growth?

This exegesis has a Context Review, which is divided into three main headings: Bone-core of culture; Blood-craft; and Skin-identity. The essence of this framework is threaded through my reflective Design process and outcome. I used 'Bone Blood Skin' to name my project, as this represents my relationship between my culture, craft and identity.

In traditional Chinese medicine, bone is considered the basic component of the human body. Therefore, bone produces blood, then blood produces flesh and skin. This is how our human body is made (Huangdi's Inner Classic). The underlying theory is similar to one of the famous quotes from Taoism, which is Tao produces one, one produces two, two produces three, three produces all things (Tao Te Ching). This ancient theory is highly relevant to fundamentals of my cultural thinking and at the same time allows progressive revelation.

0.2 Bone Blood Skin Framework inspired by Taoism

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are three of the main philosophies in Chinese traditional culture. All educated Chinese people were taught on the basis of these three philosophies. However, the philosophy which has influenced Chinese art the most is Taoism (Zhao, 2022).

One of the greatest classics in Chinese history, and the core text of Taoism, ‘Tao Te Ching’ was written by Laozi (571BC). It has had a profound impact and influence on traditional philosophy, science, politics, religion, art and medicine.

The core concepts of Tao Te Ching are ‘Tao’ and ‘Te’. ‘Tao’ is understood as the fundamental principle and force of the universe, a universal law beyond human understanding. ‘Te’ has a similar meaning to Virtue; it refers to the moral code and code of conduct that people should follow. Laozi emphasizes the harmony between man and nature, and advocates giving up persistence and pursuing the principle of ruling without doing anything to achieve inner peace and freedom.

“道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。”

《道德经》

Tao produces one, one produces two, two produces three, three produces all things.

《Tao Te Ching》

This sentence is one of the most well-known in the Tao Te Ching; it expresses the process of the creation of the universe and the principle of change. It implies an evolutionary process from monoculture to diversity, and the interdependence of things.

The numbers of one, two and three, are not simply regarded as specific quantities. They represent the process by which ‘Tao’ produces all things from less to more, from simple to complex.

In this description, Tao is considered to be the origin and root of the universe, which created the existence of One. ‘One’ presents the space, then the ‘One’ further evolved into ‘two’, representing Yin and Yang, which can be understood as positive and negative, two opposites but balancing forces, such as sky and earth, darkness and light. The ‘two’ further evolved into ‘three’, representing Yin Yang balanced and harmony, the ‘three’ continues to evolve into countless things and phenomena, which are ‘all things’.

This statement emphasizes the continuity and interconnectedness of the entire universe, as well as the interdependence and interaction of things. It expresses a view of the universe and change in Taoist philosophy, emphasizing the principles of balance, harmony, and nature. It has had a great influence on traditional Chinese medicine from the ancient times. The earliest existing Chinese medical classic in China is《黄帝内经》¹(Huangdi's Inner Classic), emphasises that the human body itself and nature are a whole, while the human body structure and each part are related to each other. The bone is the core of the human body Only when the bone is strong can it produce the blood which carries energy to all of the body. Then the body has internal and external harmony and balance, and therefore can live a long and healthy life.

The Taoism One Two Three theory and Taoism inspired Chinese traditional medicine ideas, as both start with the most central point and gradually move outward to the surface representation. This ideology is core to my culture and inspired me to use a Bone Blood Skin framework. This progressive system reflects that everything can be interpreted in accordance with these three steps. Each single stage is self-contained, but they are strongly connected with each other. This can be understood as a kind of why-how-what system and can be applied to any discipline or response. Bone reflects the nature of things, the most basic reason and cause. Blood is equal to how - the method, the process. Then the Skin is the representation and also the consequence of the basic reason and process. It uses a metaphor to explore how the human body and experience are permeated by these philosophies and values.

The progressive thinking of the bone blood skin system can be applied in fashion design. The idea that the designer wants to express - the inner cultural core - is the bone. This is the foundation where everything starts; the idea is a combination of inspiration and individual cultural background. The design process, transforming the idea into the work, the materials and techniques used, is the blood connecting and supporting the ideas, as a medium. Then everything else makes the skin- the design itself, the 3D product.

¹ [1] Huangdi's Inner Classic is one of the earliest Chinese classics of traditional Chinese medicine. According to legend, it was made by the Yellow Emperor. However, it is generally recognised that the book was finally formed in the Western Han Dynasty, and that the author was not a single person. Rather, the work was inherited and developed by the Huang family of Chinese doctors.

This Bone Blood Skin system can be reflected upon, as when people look at the product, look at the skin, everything becomes transparent at this stage. Through looking at the skin, knowing how it appears, we then look into the blood, seeing the materials, techniques, and production used, then finally the bone—understanding the artist’s identity and what they are trying to express (fig.2).

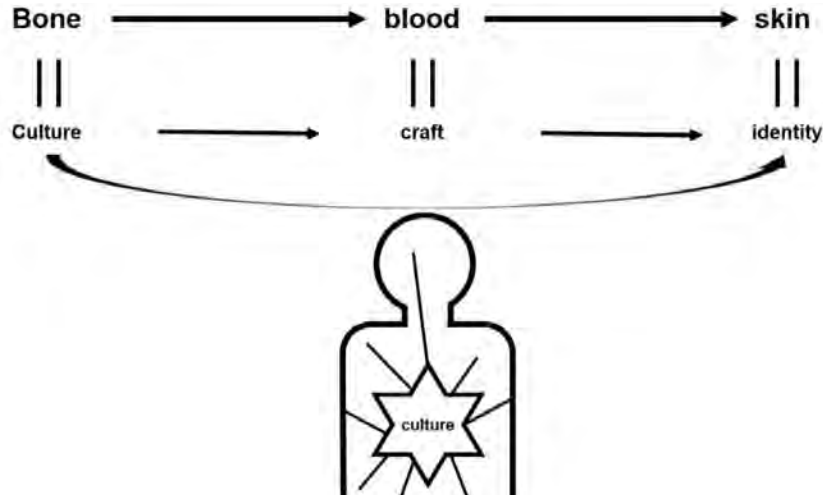


Fig.2 diagram by Yifan Li, 2023

As the research process continued, it was discovered that the Bone Blood Skin system could also be applied to individuals, related to the formation of my identity. The Bone is my culture, my background. The Blood is the connection between the invisible culture and my identity, the craft, the physical touch, the invisible thread that binds me with my culture. Then the Skin is the shell, the ideology and the shape of myself.

When applying this framework and connecting with design and identity, the original Tao one-way relationship became somewhat reversible and cyclic. The diagram below attempts to visually represent the complexities of this project.

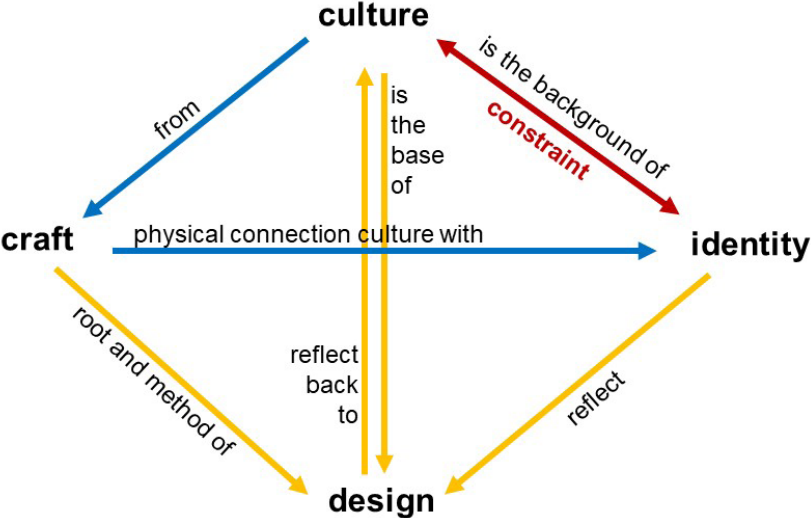


Fig.3 diagram by Yifan Li, 2023

Chapter 1

Bone - Culture

Bone, as a metaphor for the core of culture, is fundamental to the creation of art. The land on which an artist grows and the culture that is nurtured influence the artist's thinking and therefore their creativity. The core of a human is bone; the core of art is culture. Art as a form of expression can be seen as the creator's self-reflection, the fundamental core of which cannot be separated from their original culture. If an artwork is likened to a building, the cultural core is the foundation of the building. It is likewise in clothing design that adorns the body.

1.1 Definitions of Culture

The definition of 'culture' is very broad. English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1871) defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as 'the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively; and the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society.' A cultural core is a system of ideas that a nation has created, summarised and passed down throughout its history (Cao, 2011).

Culture is everywhere. People live in the culture and produce culture. Culture is not static, it evolves over time through interactions with other cultures, historical events and societal changes. Culture is passed down through history across generations. It is more likely the highly concentrated life (Li, 2020).

1.2 Culture and Design

When humans began creating and experimenting with tools, they embarked on their own design journey, initiating a lengthy process of creating their own civilisation and culture (Zheng, 2020). The relationship between culture and design is complex. Art and design are a part of culture broadly defined, but if viewed separately and in opposition, culture is the core of art and design (Li, 2020). On one hand, design itself is a form of culture, and culture provides the foundation for design to thrive and the environment for its growth. Design not only fulfills human needs for objects but also reflects the purpose of culture. On the other hand, culture evolves alongside the progress of design, and design itself acts as a cultural force that drives the development of both material and non-material culture. Derrick de Kerckhove uses 'skin of culture' (1998) as a metaphor for design. It can be said that cultural design inherits culture, expresses culture and creates culture.

Design originates from life, serves life, acts upon life, and in turn influences culture (Li, 2020). This emphasises the symbiotic relationship between design and life, as well as their interplay with culture. This is a dynamic process that not only draws from life but also impacts it, shaping and being shaped by the cultural context in which design exists. Design begins with an understanding of local culture and aims to deepen its influence or create new cultural values. Design not only deepens culture's influence, but deepens culture itself. This

doesn't necessarily involve new cultural values. It may involve a deeper understanding or expression of existing cultural values. Being dependent on culture, design also reifies and embodies culture, sometimes even giving rise to new cultural phenomena. Artistic design is a product of culture, serving as a pathway for humans to achieve spiritual enjoyment through material forms (Zhang, 2020). It is also a form of expression that embodies cultural characteristics (Zhang, 2020). Culture forms the bedrock of design, and design concepts and creative expressions are closely intertwined with cultural influences. Design itself serves as a tangible manifestation of culture, with design elements consistently reflecting cultural nuances. Thus, culture determines the level and significance of design. In turn, design influences or contributes to the prevailing culture of the time.

Aesthetic works of art and design always signify and are interpreted in relation to culture. Cultural significance is derived from social, historical and aesthetic characteristics that have been passed down from generation to generation, and cultural significance is constantly changing and innovative (Evans et al, 2018.) Design needs to be supported by a cultural core. This means that design is not just a combination of function and aesthetics, but requires a deep understanding and integration of the values, beliefs, traditions and historical context of a particular culture.

In addition to the form, design reflects cultural spirit, which is the emotional symbolism behind it (Zhang, 2020). Cultural spirit is the foundation and soul of design, and the cultural core injects deep cultural implication into design and endows it with meaning and identity, making it resonate with specific social groups or cultural backgrounds. This allows design to emotionally connect with people, while conveying unique cultural messages and values. Traditional aesthetics exist objectively and accumulate over the course of history, providing impetus and nourishment for the progress of human civilisation. As the crystallisation of spiritual and material civilisation, art and design promote social development (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, they undeniably exert significant influence on the future of the individual and society.

While modern art and design require continuous innovation and development, Chinese designers cannot deny traditional culture in the pursuit of novelty. Learning culture and finding inspiration is both a process of creation and a process of inheritance and learning. (Fang, 2020). If the connection between traditional culture and modern art and design is lost, modern artistic expression and design will suffer. The interplay between culture and design is a dynamic, transformative and evolutionary process. Design both draws from and

contributes to culture - a reciprocal relationship. It becomes highly evident that Chinese design needs to be combined with modern and western design, but based on China's own culture (Li, 2020). Cultural design is rooted in tradition, while also embracing innovation and contemporary perspectives.

In relation to my practice-based project it is necessary to deconstruct my own culture through learning and acceptance and then reconstruct it in design. Reconstruction is not the splicing of fragmented cultural elements or the accumulation of refined cultural symbols, but a series of thinking activities (Yu, 2020). For experimentation and innovation, the richness of culture brings imagination, which can be understood as the product of freedom. Design can be considered as a process of creating a balance or an ordered state. Culture has been contributing and stimulating new creation (Xu, 2020). Therefore, there are lots of Chinese designers have revitalized traditional culture in their designs and also innovated with contemporary cultural forms.

Culture is the foundation of this project. It constantly evolves in a recurring cycle. It has become important for my design practice to highlight that culture constitutes a significant part of our individual and group identity, and reciprocally we actively contribute to its shaping. We are an inseparable component of culture. From defining culture to exploring the intricate relationship between design and culture, it is evident that the core of design lies within culture. Simultaneously, design supports culture in society, and my individual design practice reflects this support and impact.

Chapter 2

Blood - Craft

Blood is a constantly circulating fluid providing the body with nutrition. Blood as a metaphor for craft can be considered as the connecting flow. Craft is the combination of wisdom and art through history (Lin, 2023). It is the bridging between art and people, the link for people to understand, touch and learn their culture (Li & Jiang, 2019).

In China, any kind of craft, in whatever form, contains the spiritual core of Chinese culture. This can be regarded as an extension of traditional cultures, such as traditional music, costumes, graphics, utensils, paintings, carvings, theatre and so on. These are all treasures of traditional culture, valuable treasures formed by China's forefathers after thousands of years of development. These artifacts and crafts are the materialised form of traditional culture and spirit (Wang, 2019)

They are an inseparable and important part of China's traditional culture. These provide a source of inspiration and creativity - rich resources with great creative value - to today's native artists and designers. This chapter selects a few of these crafts most relevant to this project to discuss origins and methods as inspiration and as examples of the significance of Chinese culture.

2.1 Traditional craft as cultural artefacts

2.1.1 introduction of Xuan paper

Xuan paper, also known as Xuan Zhou paper, is one of the four great inventions of ancient China. Xuan paper is a traditional handmade paper with more than 1900 years history and a unique production process (Zhao et al, 2018). Notable for its soft and smooth texture, bright whiteness, and excellent ink absorption, Xuan paper is an indispensable medium in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting. It was also a milestone in the development of Chinese culture (Leng, 2022).

The origins of Xuan paper can be traced back to the Eastern Han Dynasty. It was first produced in the present-day Xuan Zhou region of Anhui Province (Guo& Pang, 2023). Xuan paper is primarily made from the bark of the Chinese blue sandalwood tree (*Pteroceltis tatarinowii*) through a series of intricate manual processes. First, the bark is soaked in water and boiled to remove impurities. Then it is immersed in water and repeatedly agitated, squeezed and kneaded to disperse the fibers and form paper pulp. After that, the pulp is evenly poured onto a paper mold, which is hand-shaken to distribute the pulp evenly, followed by gentle pressing with a wet cloth to achieve a smooth surface. Finally, the paper is air-dried, torn off the rough edges and trimmed to the desired dimensions, completing the production of a sheet of Xuan paper. The traditional production of Xuan paper needs more than a hundred processes, from the selection of materials to the formation of a piece of paper. The whole process needs at least one year (Guo& Pang, 2023).

One of the distinguishing features of Xuan paper is its even and natural fiber structure. It possesses a flexible and resilient texture, enabling it to withstand a large amount of ink without tearing. Also, the surface of Xuan paper is smooth and delicate, allowing the vivid display of brushstrokes and the smooth flow of lines. Xuan paper exhibits excellent ink absorption, allowing ink to quickly penetrate the paper fibers, preserving the vibrancy of colours, and the clarity of ink strokes.

Due to its exceptional quality and artistic value, Xuan paper is widely used in Chinese traditional calligraphy and painting. Whether for brush calligraphy or ink painting, Xuan paper is an ideal medium to carry and present the artistic intentions of creators through traditional culture (Zhao, 2022). Additionally, Xuan paper is utilised in the creation of traditional stationery and cultural items such as scrolls, hand-copied manuscripts and fan paintings.

As an artefact, Xuan paper is an integral part of Chinese traditional culture. Its unique production process, distinct features and outstanding quality make it indispensable for traditional artistic creation. In my design work for this project, I use this traditional paper, honouring the material and preserving the techniques, but also experimenting with innovative use and placement on the body to reflect my own ambivalent cultural and personal identity.



Fig. 4 Xuan paper, Yifan Li, 2023

2.1.2 - Traditional framing techniques

Chinese traditional framing technique has a history of more than two thousand years. Metaphorically and physically, it provides structure for the medium or material. Its appearance marked the development of Chinese calligraphy and painting from low level to high level art. It has a history of more than 1700 years, framed historical calligraphy and painting treasures show the importance of framing for preservation and the continuous evolution of the craft (Sun, 2016).

Chinese traditional framing can be summarised simply as ‘pasting the paper on a strong material’. It usually uses the silk fabric as base support and decoration. This aims to make the artwork last longer and create a more ornamental result. The framed work is flat and wrinkle-free, with a smooth feel and moderate thickness.

Traditional framing starts with making glue. This comprises making wheat flour into dough, washing it in water until the dough becomes gluten and the starch is absorbed. The starch water precipitates and changes the upper water every day until it is clear. The water is separated out and the starch is left to completely dry. The resulting starch powder is mixed with water and heated in the pot and stirred at a low temperature until it gets thicker. When using this for stick paper, it is diluted with a small amount of water according to the thickness of the paper (Chen, 2018).

After the glue is made, the sticking is started. There are approximately fifteen steps summarised simply as: wetting the artwork, sticking the back on another piece of thicker and larger paper (the back usually holds together three to five layers of paper), choosing the matching silk fabric for the frame, cutting to the frame shape, sticking the frame on the top of the artwork, and finally using a larger piece of paper to reinforce the back to make it flat.

In terms of the ornamental value of a piece of traditional Chinese painting, there is a saying that it is seven-tenths for the painting and three-tenths for the mounting (Chen, 2018). This emphasises that framing is not only a technique but a form of art, and also an integral part of traditional culture and art.

Framing requires the person doing the framing to show exquisite technique and also a strong aesthetic in choosing the fabric, texture and colour to complement the content of the picture.

I was fortunate to talk with an expert of this traditional craft to understand the techniques involved (Li, personal communication, 16 February, 2023). According to Li (personal communication, 16 February, 2023), the key to successfully gluing paper together, or paper to fabric, is to use a fine brush with watery paste, gently brushing the surface fibre to create a texture to allow bonding. The framing process usually takes one to two months, and the material requirements are exact and the cost is high. Each single step requires the craftsman to be patient and careful, and requires decades of experience and practice. However, in current times low-cost and quicker industrial framing has gradually replaced this traditional framing.

The framing technique itself is a type of artwork, and the precision and attention to detail take much time. As an art form, it is not only the continuation of Chinese traditional philosophy, but also the embodiment of an aesthetic pursuit since ancient times (Wang al et, 2022). Within my own explorations I carried out this process, but was challenged by the some of the requirements like temperature and time control. New adhesives can allow a more successful outcome to bond the paper. I considered this change was a practical technique, while still valuing the craft method and expertise within traditional framing.

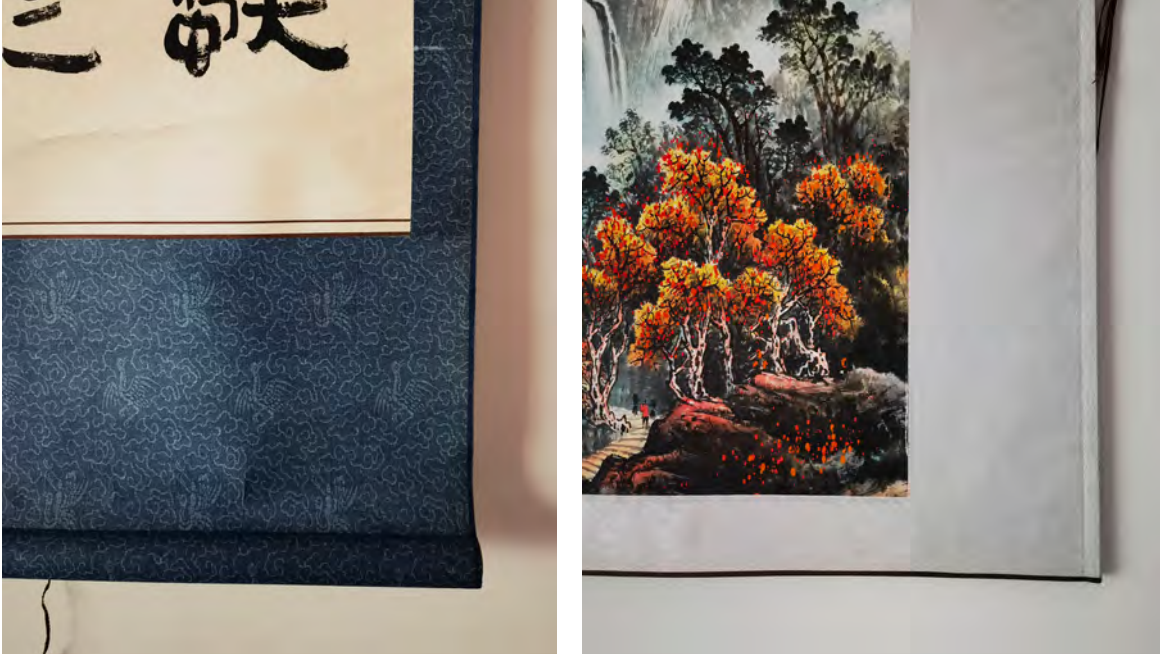


Fig. 5 Huanyao Li’s personal collection of framed calligraphy and painting, Huanyao Li, 2023

2.1.3- Traditional oil-paper umbrella

The Chinese oil-paper umbrella is a traditional artefact with a rich history in China. It is known for exquisite craftsmanship and unique artistic value.

The prototype structure of the umbrella was invented from 770BC to 476BC and it was firstly made with fabrics. The craft of making oil-paper umbrellas can be traced back more than two thousand years to the Han Dynasty (202BC-110AD), after paper was invented. In that period oil-paper umbrellas were fully developed (Mo, 2022). The oil-paper umbrella is the earliest umbrella in the world, made by hand and natural materials, a symbol of ancient Chinese wisdom (He, 2020). This artefact exemplifies a traditional Chinese form of three-dimensional product integrating natural paper material and structural elements providing framing for function and beauty.

The traditional oil-paper umbrella manufacturing-process is very complicated, as everything relies on manual completion. There are 72 steps to make a traditional handicraft oil-paper umbrella (Zhao & Yang, 2022). However, it can be summarised into five broad steps:

- 1) The first step is choosing the right bamboo for flexibility, strength, and lightweight properties. The bamboo then receives a mildew and mothproof treatment.
- 2) Next, the umbrella ribs are carved and undergo necessary technical treatments such as water immersion and sun drying. Then, holes are drilled, frames are assembled, threads are inserted and the umbrella handle and umbrella top are connected to form the framework.
- 3) A special type of paper made from mixed plant fibers such as mulberry, ramie and jute are cut into shape, and a special type of persimmon glue is used to adhere it to the umbrella rib. The paper is trimmed, shaped and exposed under the sun to dry.
- 4) After the paper is attached to the frame, the umbrella is adorned with intricate hand-painted designs. These designs often depict traditional Chinese motifs such as flowers, birds, landscapes or cultural symbols. Skilled artisans use a variety of vibrant colours and detailed brushwork techniques to bring the designs to life.
- 5) The final step is brushing the surface with Tung oil, made from the seed of *Vernicia fordii*, native to South-East Asia. The Tung oil has strong resistance to water, high temperature corrosion and aging (He,2020).

The impact of modern technology, and mechanised production of modern umbrellas has resulted in the gradual decline and loss of the traditional craft of oil-paper umbrella making (Tang & Wang, 2022).

I selected and researched these three traditional crafts because they are inspiring exemplars of Chinese traditions highly relevant to my project in material and structural reference. As cultural artefacts they hold much value in their inherent traditional meaning and contribute to the design process in my project and its physical and metaphorical framework. As discussed in the next section, there are shifts seen in most crafts for practical and technical advancements and within changing contexts of social and cultural transition.



Fig.6 秦风汉月 Qinfenghanyue oil-paper umbrella, 2018

2.2- Craft and Cultural Shifts

“知者创物，巧者述之，守之世，谓之工。”

《考工记》

The wise man creates, the skillful man records, and they uphold them throughout generations, the world called it 'crafts'.

《Kao Gong Ji》¹

In the development of ancient Chinese craftsmanship culture, almost all crafts were derived and created with practical applications in mind (Wang, 2015). Utility was the central characteristic. They were meticulously handmade, and while the purpose of crafting was to serve humanity, the process itself required significant labor and time investment. Although the means and methods employed varied, the ultimate objective remained the same - to cater to the practical needs of human life. Therefore, at their origin, crafts were not created for the sake of aesthetics or appreciation.

Following the industrialization in China, mechanical products gradually supplanted traditional handicrafts in the everyday lives of people, resulting in a rapid decline in the prominence of utilitarian crafts (Wang, 2015). Simultaneously, the nobility began seeking exquisitely crafted traditional works as decorative items and collectibles. Craftsmanship surpassed mere functionality and entered the realm of artistry. This transformation has persisted over time, giving rise to a continuum of crafts that place artistic expression at their core, extending their influence to the present day.

Current science and technology challenges traditional crafts. In today's materialistic society, there is limited demand for the physical products of handicrafts to fulfill utilitarian needs. However, traditional craftsmanship, as a culmination of ancient wisdom, has endured the test of time (Ding, 2013). The cultural significance and inherent traits they embody exert a subtle yet profound influence on people's daily lives. Handicrafts serve as tangible physical links, connecting China's traditional culture with its people.

¹《Kao Gong Ji 'The Record of Crafts' is an ancient Chinese text from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770BC-221BC). It is the earliest document about handicraft technology in China. It serves as a valuable record of various manual techniques, manufacturing methods, and the skills possessed by skilled craftsmen of the time.

Despite the challenges faced in the modern world, traditional crafts retain their significance as cultural treasures, bridging the gap between the past and the present. They continue to resonate with people, embodying the values, aesthetics and philosophy of the Chinese people (Li & Jiang, 2019). As we navigate the complexities of the contemporary world, the preservation and appreciation of traditional crafts become even more vital in upholding China's rich cultural heritage. They serve as a tangible link to the past, enabling people to understand and celebrate the essence of Chinese traditions in the present.

In the context of contemporary society, the intrinsic significance of traditional handicrafts is characterised by two dimensions. Firstly, they constitute a confluence of human sagacity underscored by cultural, artistic, historical and artisanal investigatory value. Secondly, these crafts emblemise the zeitgeist of post-modern individuals in their pursuit of autonomy from mass society and distinctive cultural ethos (Lin, 2023). The Japanese art critic Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961) emphasized the importance of valuing and preserving traditional craft techniques and aesthetics in the face of modernisation and industrialisation in his book 'The Beauty of Everything' (1931).

'Inheritance is an organic life chain, and a necessary process for the existence, continuation and development of a nation's culture and cultural heritage.' (Cui, 2013) Traditional crafts in China represent a unique cultural asset. It is essential for Chinese designers to reevaluate and reframe our understanding of traditional crafts in order to merge them with contemporary design. Currently, Chinese modern design is still influenced by Western design concepts. From establishing a national cultural identity to breaking free from a global perspective on modern design, Chinese design should incorporate the synthesis of traditional crafts, creative transformation, modern technology and aesthetic principles (Zeng, 2020). By integrating traditional elements with modern design, we can rejuvenate the vitality of traditional craftsmanship and pave a path for the advancement of Chinese design.

Chinese traditional crafts not only embody cultural heritage but also offer vast potential for innovation and adaptation. By reinterpreting and reinventing traditional crafts, designers can infuse contemporary design with a distinct Chinese essence. This fusion of tradition and modernity not only revitalises traditional crafts, but also propels Chinese design by embracing its cultural roots.

Moreover, combining traditional crafts with modern technology unlocks new possibilities for Chinese design. Embracing more tools, advanced manufacturing-techniques and sustainable practices enhances the efficiency, precision and ecological sustainability of traditional crafts, ensuring their relevance in the modern world. (Chen, 2019).

By embracing traditional crafts and infusing them into contemporary design, Chinese designers can establish a unique design-language that reflects their cultural heritage and captivates a global audience. This not only preserves the richness of Chinese traditional craftsmanship but also propels Chinese design towards growth and development. Through this harmonious synergy of tradition and innovation, Chinese design can flourish amidst contemporary challenges and make a significant impact in the global design landscape (Yao, 2010).

2.3 Relevant Design Precedents

2.31- Kan Tai Keung study

‘Design needs to pursue originality, cannot be similar, cannot copy, needs to do what others have not done. Good design is influential, is advancing, ahead of time and influence the future generations, this type of design is classic design’
- Kan Tai Keung (from a video talk)

Hong Kong based graphic designer, Kan Tai Keung was born in Guangdong, China, in 1942, and moved to Hong Kong in 1952. Kan Tai Keung is considered one of the most influential designers in Asia and China. He combines the essence of traditional Chinese culture into the concepts of modern western design, based on a deep understanding of Chinese culture.



Fig.7 diagram of Bank of China and design elements, Yifan Li, 2023

In China, not everyone knows Kan Tai Keung, but almost everyone knows his design. He designed the logo for Bank of China in 1980. This simple symmetric logo at the left of the picture above contains the Chinese philosophy of Heaven and Earth (天方地圓). The whole shape is an abstract figure of an ancient coin, and in the center space is 中, which is the character “China”, also representing the Bank of China. Combining the character 中 with the ancient coin, the vertical line in the center, which is reminiscent of how red rope strung together the coins in ancient times, represents ‘connection’ (Fig.7).



Fig.8 Chinese letter - 山, Kan Tai Keung’s poster design for Taiwan Image

In his Chinese Letter series, he draws inspiration from Chinese calligraphy, traditional art forms, and philosophical concepts. This breaks the boundary between traditional calligraphy and painting. Calligraphy needs many years to study and practice to achieve the requirements for perfection, making the traditional art form unattainable for most people.

This poster contains a calligraphy brush pen, a penholder, and the visualised character 山 (mountain). In this poster, the letter 山 is drawn as a picture, but still with the shape of 山, combining calligraphy and painting. This makes the character easier for non-Chinese people to understand, and to learn about Chinese culture. This is an important purpose of design: to communicate and increase understanding of a culture to others (fig.8).

Traditionally, calligraphy and painting are separate. Calligraphy can be understood as a craft that needs to follow specific rules and regulations. Broadly speaking, calligraphy is a form of art still created on the basis of tradition. However, from ancient times to today, traditional painting does not have to follow any specific rules. Therefore, traditional paintings belong to artistic creation, while calligraphy does not belong to this category of artistic creation in the traditional definition.

From this point of view, Kan as a contemporary designer is courageous to break the boundary between paint and calligraphy and combine them within graphic design. This exemplifies breaking constraints and stereotypes, and brings a level of inspiration to future generations. This Chinese Letter series is forward-thinking but not offensive to tradition, as it still conveys and presents the essence of Chinese traditional culture, fusing with a modern approach. His designs open a door for Chinese culture and enable new Chinese designs to be presented to the world.

Cultural significance adds depth and meaning to his artwork, resonating with a broader audience (both Chinese and non-Chinese), which provides a good reference for the organic integration of traditional culture and artistic creation.

2.32 - Zhang Lei Study

'If the designer's design is rooted and stands on the shoulder of the culture, his design can learn from any material in the world; if the design is rootless, a creation that occurs from a blank sheet of paper, when the design needs to borrow from past work, it is considered plagiarism. Therefore, for a designer, finding the roots is the source of innovation.' -Zhang Lei



Fig.9 Piao-the paper chair by Zhang Lei

Zhang Lei a Chinese industrial designer, who created Piao, the paper chair (fig.9) inspired from the traditional oil-paper making process. In this chair, layers of Chinese traditional paper are glued together on top of a mold, and shaped into a chair. The smooth and tough texture of the paper layered together provided strong support and firmness required for the functional product aspects. Piao won the prize at the Salone Satellite at Salone del mobile Milano 2011. Inspired by this, Zhang Lei also started a series called 'Future Tradition', which aimed to bring Chinese traditional crafts into contemporary design . This work inspired my project by the development of 3D shaping from traditional paper to create an innovative design pieces with cultural meaning, to communicate with others, and to gain more insight into individual and Chinese cultural identity in the creative sphere.

2.33 - Qi Yu Study

'Only by separating ceramics from the characteristics of the maternal text and jumping out of the language frame of traditional ceramic modeling, we grasp the true spiritual essence of ceramics.' -Qi Yu

Qi Yu is a contemporary Chinese Visual Communication designer. His father was a National Master of ceramic art, and under his guidance Qi Yu delved into experimental ceramic art pieces.



Fig.10 FUTU 02, 2016, Ceramic on canvas, mounted on board, 39 1/4 × 39 1/4 × 3 in | 99.7 × 99.7 × 7.6 cm, Qi Yu.

Qi Yu's artwork comprises ceramic finger painting on flat canvas. Qi Yu invented this new method when he was creating ceramic pieces, while using his hand to wipe the left-over colour on top of the ceramic. This unique visual effect triggered a creative response. After repeated refining, and re-creating, he gradually developed and improved this unique ceramic painting technique.

Qi Yu describes the process of making those ceramic painting is a way for him to find himself. When the picture is sent into the kiln, the ceramics shrink and split into little pieces, changing the original form. 'Those single incomplete pieces don't have any meaning themselves, but need to be considered as a whole piece, deconstructed but peaceful as one'. (Qi, 2015)

The development of ceramics from practical vessels to works of art has rid ceramics of their functional form as practical objects. They become the carrier of artistic spirit (Wang, 2020). In his art, Qi Yu separated the meaning of ceramics from certain forms, making the ceramics transform from 3D form into 2D flat art. His art is not presenting a specific scene of a picture, but aims to express spiritual meaning through the structure of the picture .

In my own design process, I wish to communicate more than the conventional fashion design methods learnt in my fashion education. Instead, I want to use a mix of methods to reflect changing identity through traditional material and new shape formation.

2.34 - Xiong Ying Study

Fashion must be rooted in culture. On the basis of the essence of Chinese culture, I integrate elements, colors, materials, creative design and fashion together, and strive to achieve a delicate balance, instead of immutable traditional clothing. Only in this way can we carry forward rather than just inherit. -Xiong Ying

Xiong Ying, the originator, and the designer of haute couture brand Heaven Gaia delves deep into Chinese culture and combines this understanding with western style cutting. Ying aims to bring Chinese fashion design to the world.



Fig.11 Heaven Gaia, 2017SS, Xiong Ying

This earlier collection is inspired by the Old Summer Palace in Beijing (fig.11). The Palace includes ruins of a famous imperial garden, which was once the residence of the Qing Dynasty emperors, and was destroyed by British and French forces in the 1850s. This garden, which has special significance for the Chinese nation, exposes the painful past and also represents a bright symbol of Chinese culture. In this collection, Xiong Ying divided these meanings into three characters, which are the Now, the Past and the Reappear. This is a good example of how fashion can represent a changing identity over time. These four pieces combine ceramic pieces with fabrics, which also display traditional embroidery. She deconstructed ceramic materials originally used as utensils into thin, flat 2D pieces, and attached them to silk fabric shaped to the feminine figure. By attaching the ceramic pieces, she also represented armour (a traditional garment to protect the body) in Chinese history, passing on national pride by combining a traditional garment with fashion display.

This design exemplifies the growing number of Chinese fashion designers looking to traditional clothing and elements for new global markets. Xiong Ying was one of the earliest designers combining Chinese traditional culture and craft in fashion design, highlighting specific events in Chinese culture or aspects of heritage for each collection. Xiong Ying's design tells Chinese traditional stories through contemporary modern fashion styling.

These designers, discussed from varied disciplines, have all deconstructed and combined traditional crafts in different ways. They show deep understanding of traditional crafts and how their usage can be transformed into contemporary art and design with cultural meaning, asserting a strong identity.

Traditional crafts can be media for the designer to reflect back to their culture and identity. To move forward, inheritance should not keep to traditions blindly, but continue to learn, and to explore more possibilities of representation and identity in contemporary art and design pursuits.

Chapter 3

Skin - Identity

Skin, or surface representation, refers to the external image, appearance or surface phenomenon of things or people. In this framework, Skin is the metaphor for identity as it is what people visibly present, the surface revealing the inner.

Charles Tilly (1995) characterizes identity as “blurred but indispensable”. It is a complex and evolving concept that can be influenced by multiple factors, it is used to describe the characteristics, beliefs, qualities, experiences, affiliations and individuality that make a person or a group distinct and recognisable. It encompasses a sense of self-awareness and belonging, shaping how individuals or communities perceive and define themselves. It also plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's behaviors, choices, and interactions with others.

3.1 Identity and Design

Identity is a dynamic process and the result of self-understanding, it can change over time: it is not a fixed or static concept, but rather an evolving aspect of an individual's life. It can be understood as a perishable product of multiple and competing discourses, is used to emphasize the unstable, pluralistic, fluctuating and fragmented nature of the contemporary 'self' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Identity is a complex and fluid concept that results from a continuous process of self-understanding and exploration. It is influenced by various internal and external factors and can change and evolve over time as individuals navigate the journey of self-discovery and personal growth. This can focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest, and also the process of self-understanding in the collective, which can result in a fragmented nature of the self (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). People's identity is influenced by people's environment, background, culture and education. The free choices people think they make and the pursuit of self are not in reality completely free, but are limited by our social and cultural context.

言，心声也；书，心画也。声画形，君子小人见矣，声画者，君子小人之所以动乎情。

— 汉·扬雄《法言·问神》

Language is the voice of ideology; writing is the picture of ideology. When the language and picture are shown, the person can be judged whether he is a gentleman or a villain. Language and pictures are where the feelings of the gentleman and the villain are revealed.

—Han Dynasty, Yang Xiong 《Fa Yan–Wen Shen》¹

The main idea that this Taoist philosophy is expressing is that the language, the words and the way a person speaks reflect the person's inner thoughts, feelings and character; similarly, the calligraphy and painting the person did can reflect the person's spiritual outlook and mind, so that people's language and works are the expression of their thoughts and emotions, from which people can see a person's inner world and spiritual outlook. It is a relatively early statement in Chinese history about the relationship between design and identity, expressing that all external appearances are manifestations of identity. This philosophy is still influencing Chinese people today in the way of 'the character is reflected in the person'. This phrase implies that one's handwriting can reveal certain aspects

¹ Yang Xiong is an ideologist and essayist in the Han Dynasty (53BC~18AD), inheritor and developer of Taoism. He has great significance to later generations. 《Fa Yan》is a collection of his personal philosophical thoughts on Taoism written after the Analects of Confucius.

of their character, temperament or personality traits. In a broader sense, it suggests that the way a person expresses themselves, whether through writing or other means, can provide insights into their nature. It emphasizes the idea that there is a connection between a person's inner self and the way they present themselves externally.

A design reflects the designer's identity, as designers think deeply about concepts and experiences through interpretation, evaluation, and revision. This reflective practice is a natural avenue for identity development (Tracey & Hutchinson, 2013). In design, whether it's graphic design, product design or any other creative discipline, the choices and elements incorporated into the design unavoidably reflect the designer's personality, preferences, values and influences. Designers infuse a part of themselves into their work, making their creations a reflection of their identity and unique perspective. A design work contains a designer's own strong personal feelings and full expression of themselves (Li, 2020). This personal touch can bring authenticity and individuality to the design.

The construction of design thinking is lengthy and complex, requiring not only broad knowledge, but also self-awareness and interpretation of that knowledge, and the ability to perceive and understand external things. Both internal and external aspects are indispensable. (Song & Geng, 2019) The process of interpreting knowledge into design combines and reveals the designer's identity through the work. Therefore, when the audience is looking at the design work, the identity of the designer can be seen.

However, as well as acknowledging the traditional roots of culture and identity, it is also important to pay attention to newer ideas (Kidd & Teagle, 2012). As design is a process of combining material elements and ideas together, the variety of thoughts that combine many unrelated objects is precisely the thinking pattern required for innovative design. It involves breaking away from all experiential and traditional notions, irrationally combining vastly different materials together to form something new (Song & Geng, 2019).



Fig.12 Untitled (Red masks), Te Papa collection, Yu King Tan

Yu King Tan is an ethnically-Chinese New Zealander born in Australia. YuKing referred to herself as a Chinese import, she described her identity as ‘not quite, not sure.’ (Te Papa, 2018). Untitled (Red Masks) is a group of eleven masks wrapped in plush red thread that trails down to pool on the floor. These eleven masks represent symbolic animals from the Chinese calendar, an 'alien' mask, and a wax mask of the artist's face (fig.12).

Red, as a representative colour of China, holds various cultural and ethnic significances. On the other hand, masks, in essence, symbolise the concealment or revelation of the self. Yuking Tan’s works express her own uncertainty, as an immigrant, wearing the mask of conformity to adapt to the culture, and the ambiguous yet balanced understanding of the changes in her identity through the experience in the cultural collision.

Art and design products, as well as artifacts and symbolic content, can be seen through culture, representing the intellectual achievements of a certain group (Julier 2013). As discussed by Levinson (2006), clothing is more than just a means of covering the body; it serves as a significant cultural artifact. It holds the power to convey messages about a society’s identity, its history, and its values, making it a valuable source for understanding the dynamics and evolution of that particular culture.

“Fashion is thought of as ephemeral and superficial, using soft, sometimes fragile, materials... [it] protects and shelters, while providing a means to express identity-whether personal, political, religious, or culture .” (Hodeg, 2006)

Fashion is a versatile and dynamic medium through which individuals can communicate and shape their identities. It allows people to express themselves, connect with others, and assert their uniqueness in a visually compelling and accessible way. As an intuitive cultural carrier, clothing is the expression of consumers' individual personality, as well as the carrier of the entire nation's cultural personality (Li, 2020) It highlights the dual role of clothing in representing both individual identity and broader cultural identity. It intertwines the individual and the collective, reflecting the richness and complexity of culture.

3.2 Identity of Rising Chinese fashion

In recent year the Chinese fashion market has been gradually changing. People are no longer choosing internationally-renowned brands; but are increasingly pursuing original designs or smaller brands with distinctive design elements and characteristics. Western aesthetics are no longer the absolute dominant theme for Chinese people. Chinese consumers now desire clothing that showcases Chinese aesthetics, and this is their inevitable choice (Li, 2020). Chinese local brands are gradually taking over the market due to Chinese people's altered aesthetics and the demand for local culture. As a consequence, ‘Designed in China’ is taking the place of ‘Made in China’ in the fashion industry. (Craik, 2020)

Chinese fashion designers are establishing their own identity in global fashion (Tsui, 2019). Given this, Chinese-styled fashion is rising. It initially emphasised the revival of Chinese history and culture, as well as the reinvention of Western design methods through fashion brand design and promotion methods (Wang, 2021). As Chinese-styled fashion kept rising, it became more complex, representing reinterpretations of traditional Chinese culture, as well as the young generation's passion for innovation and local culture. Chinese characters, traditional patterns, and elements of Chinese history are often incorporated into clothing, accessories and other fashion products. These designs not only show the charm of traditional Chinese style, but also give fashion products unique cultural symbols. Chinese-styled fashion also reflect the emerging assertion of

Chinese national culture. It constructs a clear national identity and endorses the persistence of China's culture, by raising the cultural self-confidence among the younger generations. It also sees the emergence of a rising Chinese cultural identity as fashion reconciles the East-West binary system (Wang, 2021).

By re-creating and modernising traditional Chinese culture in design, western-eastern cultural hybridization is an effective way to create an aesthetic revolution, addressing Chinese cultural identity in fashion visualisation (Wang, 2022). Chinese fashion designers are making efforts to reshape, redesign and modernise historical cultural symbols in their brand design approaches, as Chinese fashion brands and related industries expand. They are seeking national cultural identity and cultural discourse in the global fashion system. Chinese fashion designers are using traditional elements to resonate with both the identity of designers and audiences, and the traditional culture as well.

3.3 Chinese Fashion Design precedents

3.3.1 Lin Qi – Left to live



Fig.13 Left to Live 2121SS

Lin Qi is a Chinese fashion designer who established her fashion brand ‘Left to live’ in 2014. She has the design philosophy of "人随物安定，物随人长久" (meaning "people settle with things, and things endure with people"), it advocates the concept of ‘irreproducible handcrafts’. Her philosophy embraces a comfortable life that is attuned to the authenticity and vitality of all things. It emphasises the sincere joy and pleasure derived from experiencing craftsmanship and genuine creation.

The ready-to wear brand Left to live’s design is typical of the ‘light Chinese style’ in the contemporary Chinese fashion industry. Lin Qi maintains the essence of Chinese traditional clothing cuts, but places more emphasis on the modern by considering practicality, comfort and daily wear, while also representing Chinese identity. Her designs typically incorporate traditional natural fabrics such as cotton, linen, and silk, and she utilises plant-based dye craftsmanship. Through simple designs and clean colors, she conveys the atmosphere of artistic culture and lifestyle.

3.3.2 Zhao Huizhou – HUI



Fig.14 HUI2023AW

“Perhaps others may not evaluate whether this show is traditional or not, but they will personally experience the immense power of Chinese culture it conveys.”
--Zhao Huizhou

Zhao Huizhou was the first woman Chinese fashion designer in the Milan Fashion Week, in 2015 She now has the experience of showing twelve times in Milan Fashion Week. She established her fashion brand ‘HUI’ at 2009 in Europe.

HUI authentically combines Chinese culture and elements with a Western cut silhouette. The designer aims to convey her identity and experiences, transmitting cultural values, and modern culture. This classic "heavy Chinese style" reduces the heaviness of postmodern classic Chinese elements, while combined with Western tailoring, to convey a sense of powerful Chinese aesthetics.

3.3.3 Angel Chen



Fig.15 Angel Chen 2021AW Campaign

Angel Chen is a young Chinese fashion designer, who graduated from Central Saint Martins (London) in 2014 and established the brand Angel Chen the same year. Her philosophy is to design for the young generation to understand and represent their culture through their own identity.

Angel Chen is a fashion designer with a strong sense of her own identity. Chen's design style offers a unique perspective on Chinese culture, characterised by vibrant and daring approaches. She employs Chinese imagery and design techniques to create contemporary clothing. The Chinese dragon, as a cultural symbol or design element, is an integral part of traditional Chinese culture and frequently finds its modernised application in her design creations and events.

Her works tend to blend elements of Chinese ethnic culture and traditional craftsmanship with modern global products, appealing to audiences from both Eastern and Western cultures. This fusion of modern elements with traditional ethnic designs in global fashion and accessories goes beyond a mere mechanical addition of Chinese symbols to clothing designs. Instead, it involves a modernisation process that extracts cultural elements from traditional cultural

imagery or symbols. While preserving their original cultural information and essence, she deconstructs and magnifies them, applying aesthetic treatments to create a modernised interpretation.

Her approach to garment cuts is also daring, combining traditional straight cuts with Western silhouettes, successfully finding a comfortable balance amidst the clash of cultures. Through her own understanding and identity, she conveys this harmonious blend.

Chapter 4

Method and Process

4.1 Method

In this project, I primarily used the reflective method developed by Donald Schon (1987). This method emphasises learning through experience and continuous reflection. There are two main components to this method, carried out in the final stage.

Reflection-in-action is the process of thinking and learning while engaged in the project. Reflection-in-action allowed me to examine my experiences and relate to my feelings during my design and making processes. It helped me to embrace uncertainty, and it also built new understandings of the project guiding my actions while making, thus giving the designs more meaning.

Reflection-on-action is the reflection after the project has been completed. This allowed a deep analysis and consideration of the whole project from why and how, to what was learned. This has given me a developing capacity for ongoing self-assessment and growth as a designer.

There was significant exploration of materials and shape-forming for the body with iterative ideas stemming from personal reflection and secondary sources. For this project I wanted to express a range of integrated responses, ambivalent but presented as one - circular and connected - while considering the Bone/Blood /Skin framework.

This was a process of exploring fashion as craft and shape formation for the body in the broad definition. Creative pieces represented the ambiguous yet balanced understanding of changes in my identity, along with cultural recognition.

4.2 Personal Initial Reflection

The starting point of this project began with my reflection on my Fashion Honours design project. There was anxiety behind the work, which I wanted to express to my New Zealand friends. They did not understand why and where that came from, and felt puzzled by it. It is hard to explain the constraints imposed by Chinese culture and family to other people. Therefore, I want to express these aspects and influences on my evolving identity through communication of fashion practice.

信 逸则淫，淫则忘善，
 忘善而恶心生。
 夫民劳则思，思则善心生。
 孔融让梨 命，媒妁之言
 吃得苦中苦，既嫁从夫，
 未嫁从父，嫁从夫，
 五 齋 义 从 三
 俭 德 之 共 也 智
 娶妻生子，为三孝。
 修，恶之大也 忠
 二过家门而不入 父为子纲
 孝 疾将降大任于斯人也 君为臣纲
 必将见父母过错谏，是一孝 悌
 身体发肤，受之父母 忠 言 逆 耳
 忠 言 逆 耳 夫为妻纲
 谦 三从四德 孝 为 先
 不 贤 妻 良 母

Fig.16 typed feudal thought, Yifan Li, 2023

e.g.
 The body and skin are received from one's parents.
 Only through enduring the hardest of hardships can one become an exceptional person.
 Kong Rong yields the pear- save the best for others.
 The father is the guiding principle for the son.
 Extravagance is the greatest form of evil
 Living easy and comfortable leads to debauchery

This figure shows Chinese feudal thoughts that still have impact nowadays on my generation. It is this writing which I use on the Xuan paper in the final project work. This eventually became the underlying core, structure and surface, taking up varied forms. The older generation grew up with this kind of feudal thinking, and for them, these are ingrained codes of conduct. So many impose these on the younger generation. It is difficult for many of the older generation to realise that the times have changed, and the younger generation is influenced by various liberal ideas.

When I reflected on this project, I realised that in New Zealand I actually became more Chinese. I found I was more willing to learn about my culture when living in New Zealand than when I was in China. It was at this time that I started having a sense of cultural pride. I feel my identity has gradually formed through the collision of cultures, and experiencing the conflict of mind.

China is a collectivistic society; collectivism is a fundamental value based on the relationship between individuals and collectives. It is manifested as the pursuit of values and spiritual expressions centered around collectives and society in social activities (Liu, 2011) This moral principle that Chinese people believe in forms the fundamental guidelines that they adhere to. Individual interest is not encouraged. By replacing individual interests with collective interests, individual needs have been suppressed, thereby restraining people's pursuit of and enjoyment of legitimate material benefits (Liang 2008).

Especially after I came to New Zealand and under the Western cultural influence, which emphasises individualism in interpersonal relationships (Liang 2008). During my New Zealand experiences, rather than consider how others think of me, I began to pay more attention to my own thoughts and the importance of listening to myself. However, by asserting that, there was much conflict and pain during this period, as this was perceived as serving only myself.

Existentialism argues that people are free, and identity is formed through constant free choices (Barrett, 1947). However, the concept of freedom is only a pursuit, influenced by the current environment. Identity is constituted through narratives and forms in particular relational settings (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). The free choice I make and the pursuit of self are not completely free. It is like a circle, the strengths of my culture and experience have shaped me, offering opportunities and constraints with ambiguities of thought.

4.3 Early Design Stage Drawings and Material Explorations

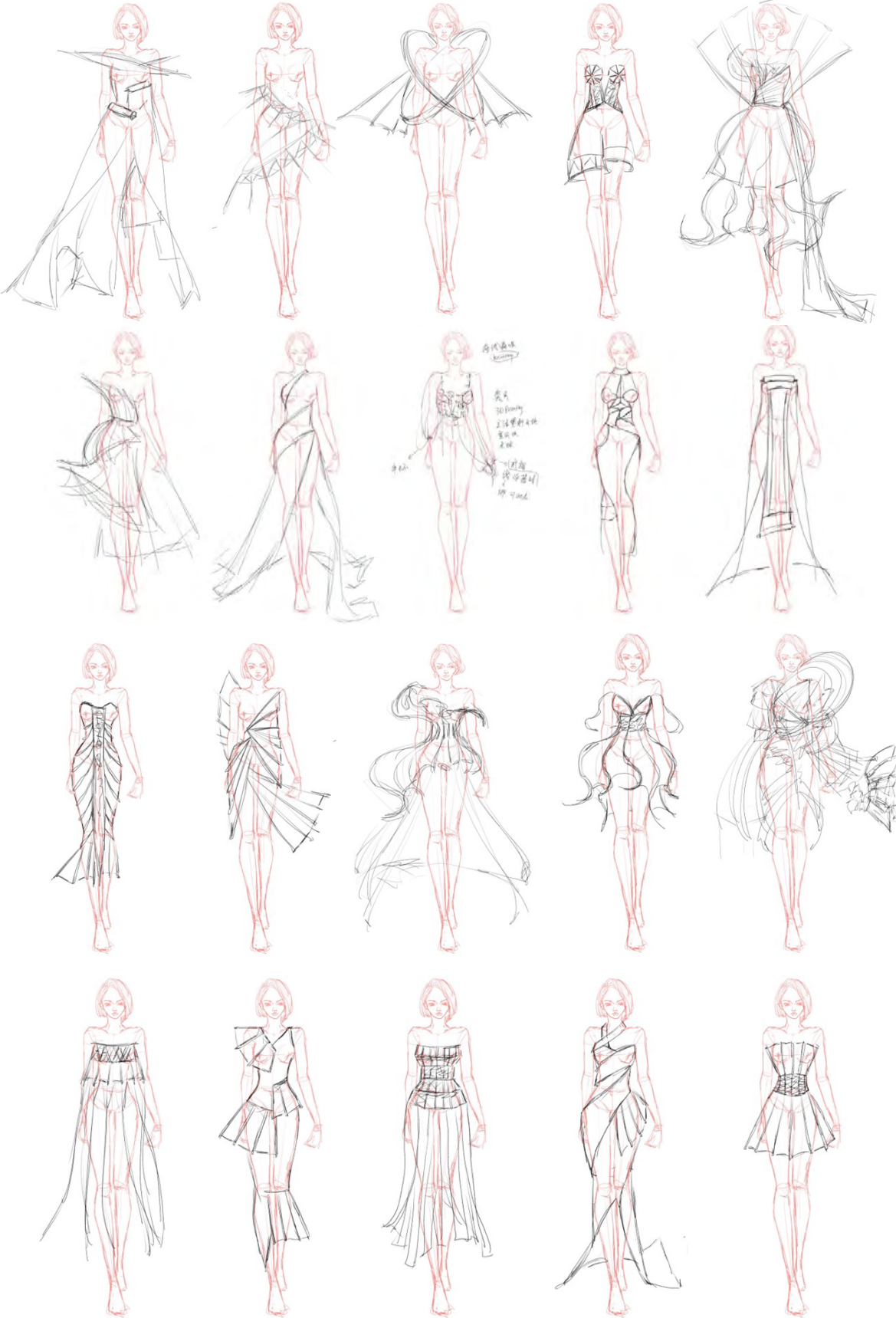


Fig.17 Initial drawings, Yifan Li, 2022



Fig.18 Initial drawings, Yifan Li, 2022

I learnt a design process which generated iterative drawings for idea generation. These ideas formed my initial response. They comprised sculptural or wearable structures with hard supports, connections, soft extensions, and wrapping of the body. At this design stage, I conceived the bone blood skin structure to frame the design developments. This was derived from initial contextual research and more explorative material responses, as outlined below (fig.19).

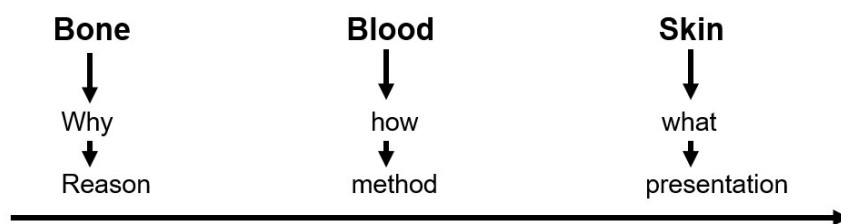


Fig.19 diagram by Yifan Li, 2023



Fig.20 First Xuan paper explorations to test strength and pliability, Fablab, Massey University, 2022

4.4 Active design reflection

Through further reflection and deeper interrogation of the impact of my Chinese culture and the significance to identity formation and design responses, the Bone Blood Skin framework became metaphorical for these three key aspects:

Bone: Culture- Reason- experience and cultural collision

Blood: Craft – process- revolt and struggle

Skin: Identity – presentation – surface and performance

The reflective process contributed to an expression of identity formation, which is an evolving interconnected process through to acceptance.

All three design pieces were created on the dress-forms. There were drawings that guided ideas, but the pieces were primarily made responding to found materials , by selecting, breaking, painting, shaping and molding, twisting, gluing, wrapping, attaching, threading, pattern-making, cutting, fusing, draping, hand and machine sewing.

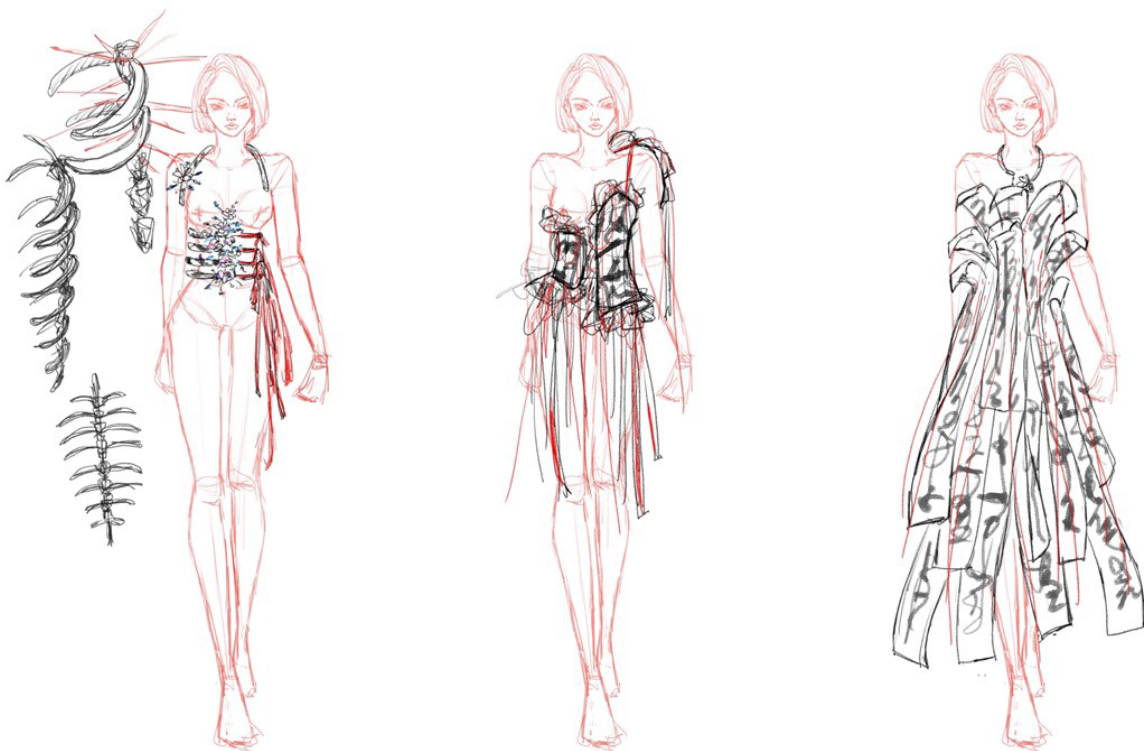


Fig.21 final design drawings. Yifan Li. 2023



1st piece: 反骨 (Fan Gu) Back Bone

Materials: Xuan paper, ink, glue, wire, found broken ceramics, red and black beads, jade, pearls, recycled plastic and red thread

反 (Fan) means reverse, against, anti, 骨 (gu) means bones. This Chinese word is describing that someone's bone is growing in the opposite way to what is usual, but the meaning of "反骨" can also be translated metaphorically as "rebellious" or "contrary". It refers to a strong rebellious attitude, in which a person refuses to accept other people's opinions or rules and likes to do things that are opposite to mainstream views or social expectations. I define myself as rebellious, demonstrating characteristics such as self-assertion, nonconformity, disobedience and resistance to tradition, authority and constraints. This attitude may stem from a lack of trust or disgust towards authority or social norms, or a desire for self-expression and self-realisation since I was young .

The spine is the central bone of the human body, the top connects to the head and the bottom connects to the hip. The spine is therefore supporting the whole body. Chinese medicine and traditional culture believe that the spine is the core structure of the human body.

This experimental handmade crafted piece is more like a sculpture. The whole piece is a bone exoskeleton, wire-based to create the protruding shapes (fig.22), and the surface is wrapped and glued with Xuan paper. I consider Xuan paper and associated traditional craft as treasured artefacts of my culture. This sentiment is something that runs in my blood and is something that I appreciated

more after being in New Zealand, when I became more Chinese than when I were in China. This reflection of personal significance instigated the use of this paper as the foundational material for this project.

I used black ink to draw calligraphy on the white Xuan paper. In traditional terms my practice is considered irreverent and disrespectful of the time-valued craft. I drew traditional thinking in words and phrases without calligraphy expertise. I placed the writing randomly across the paper, without proper alignment (fig.23).

My 'bad' calligraphy when glued to the protruding shapes give a stained, smudged and undefined appearance. The backbone is made into an irregular shape with erratic growing tentacles (fig.24), which represent the surface meaning of Fan Gu. The appearance of the bone protrusions with outward reaching spikes, support broken ceramics with sharp edges held in wire constructions that are held in a fragile manner suspended from the spine (fig.25). This contrasts to the designs of Xiong Ying in her collection (fig.11) inspired by the Old Summer Palace. She laid out the ceramics in an ordered and uniform manner, highlighting traditions of the craft. From the spine, I created fine wire twists that held droplets of blood red and black beading (fig.26). There are also twisted plastic spikes growing from the spine, these are stained using red nail polish (fig.27), usually associated with beauty, but instead giving the appearance of splashed blood, expressing the cultural challenges I have been through. They are symbolic of the antagonisms which I keep trying to rebel against and the hurt I inflicted on many others from my acts of independence.

The back spine is held close to the body moving over the shoulder to cling tentatively to the front. On one side of this experimental piece are red ribbons connecting the front and back, tied together on the side of the body. Some of the ribbons have "traditional thinking" of the words on them dyed or stained in black (fig.28). Red is the representative colour of China; it is also the colour of blood. In this piece it represents fresh blood running through the antagonisms to create a unique identity.

This design represents the beginning and the end as a revolving circle. The backbone spine represents the conceptual beginnings of this design practice, and the front body of the piece represents the resolve of the circular reflective process of all three design pieces. The numbers one, two and three represent the process by which 'Tao' produces all things from less to more, from simple to complex.

In contrast to the back spine, the front of this design piece is fully formed into round and smooth edges that are integral to the rib and body formation. The front is the formed identity. The splashing blood has crystallized into jade and pearl. The outgoing protrusions have softened to become transparent flowers (fig.29). These flowers each have a petal with colored traditional writings of significance (fig.23). The colors have expanded into soft pastels. The fully formed petals are made of wire and paper and are nestled beside transparent profusions of plastic. The twisted wire pieces now hold pearl and pale blue crystals. These compositions drawing from nature and cultural symbols on the front reflect that I am not just abandoning the culture that I have been through, but I have understood the strength and value they imbue and they have all become part of me beyond the antagonisms.

From the chaos and fractured back elements to the composed front, this piece symbolizes the process of how my identity is formed. The resulting front signifies a place of hopeful assertion of who I am as an individual, grounded both in Chinese and western culture. The collisions I have survived, the pains and joys, the discontent and satisfaction, the despair and hope – they have all become a part of me, blooming as flowers in my chest. Through the entire piece there are fine red threads connecting and disconnecting, moving between the beginning and my present identity.



Fig.22 wire-based structure of 1st piece. Yifan Li



Fig.23 random calligraphy writings of Chinese feudal thoughts on Xuan paper with ink, Yifan Li



Fig.24 outgrowing bones making processes. Yifan Li

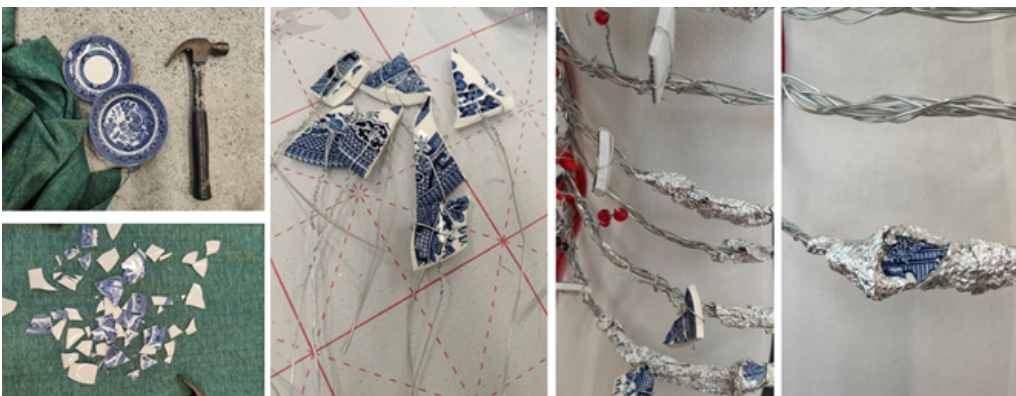


Fig.25 broken ceramics held in weir making processes. Yifan Li



Fig.26 red and black beading making processes. Yifan Li

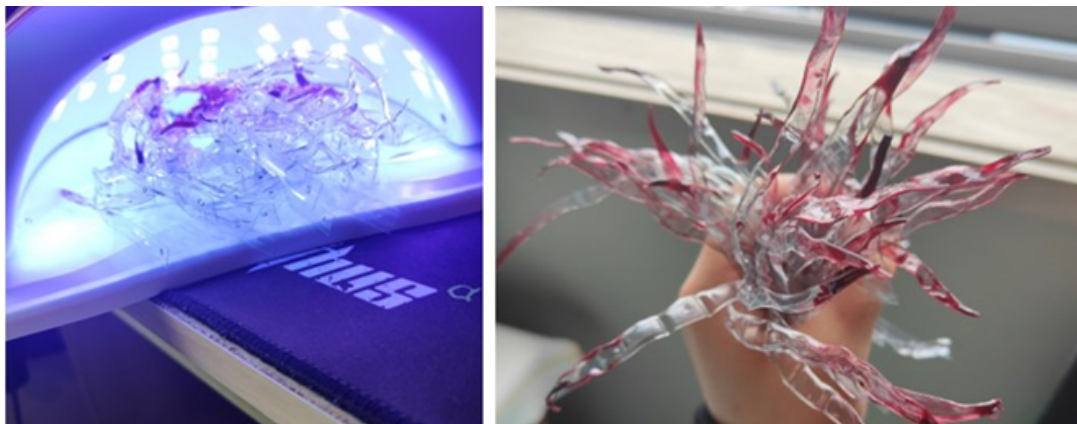


Fig.27 plastic spikes with nail polish on top. Yifan Li



Fig.28 ribbons dyed and with writing on. Yifan Li



Fig.29 processes of flower making from recycled bottoms. Yifan Li



Fig.30
structure try
on Yifan Li

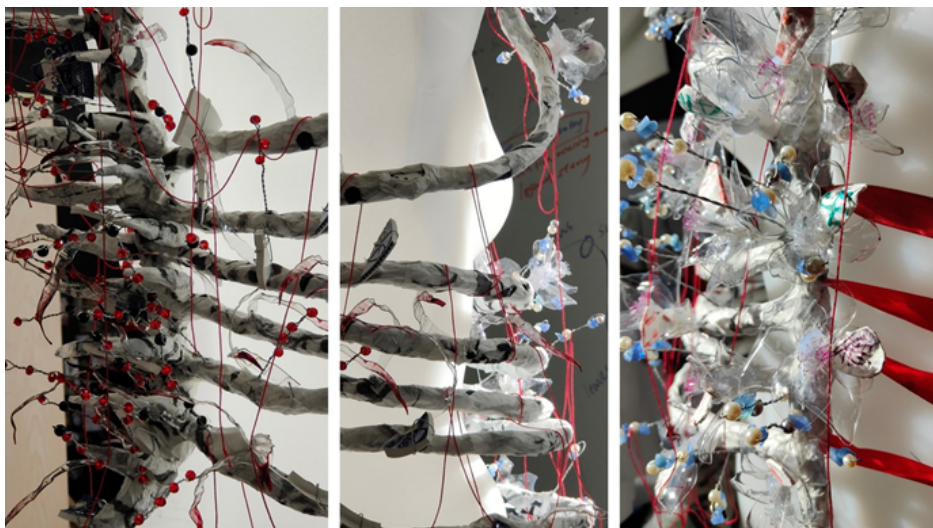


Fig.31 detail
photos of
finished piece
on mannequin.
Yifan Li



2nd piece: 挣扎 Struggle

Materials: Xuan paper, ink, glue, red thread, red ribbon

The process in the second piece (Struggle) was inspired by the contextual research into the traditional framing techniques and Zhang Lei's paper chair. The techniques represent the structural formation of my cultural identity. The primary material used in this piece is Xuan paper. As discussed in the section 2.1.1, Xuan paper, also known as Xuan Zhou paper, is a handmade paper with a long history and unique production process. With black ink, I again handwrote traditional phrases on the paper (fig.23). These were written from left to right with overlaid broken placement. I ripped the paper through random directions and into a variety of sizes. I used a paper mâché technique to glue random multiple layers of paper and red thread on the dress-form (fig.33), which created a body shape directly after drying. I first explored traditional glue used in framing but this was difficult due to temperature issues. After consulting a framing master, a key method of gluing paper together is brushing the surface of the paper until it has a texture such that the fibre combines together well after drying. Therefore, I followed this method and was more successful. I had no intentions of creating a perfect body shape; instead, I created an uneven and partial shell of the body.

The Xuan paper with my 'bad' calligraphy of Chinese traditional feudal thoughts, creates a hard shell similar to the established social patterns which cannot easily change. Evidence of the red thread survives in the gaps, broken by the paper.

This molded shell is asymmetric and irregular, comprising random and ripped pieces of paper. The shell exposed the body in unexpected ways. The shell edge is rough and exposed. In this piece the red ribbons and thread are meshed randomly together.

This represents my thoughts resonating and representing the contemporary Chinese young people like myself trying to find the gap and the balance between the old generation's traditional thoughts and the new era of individualism impacting on finding our own identity.

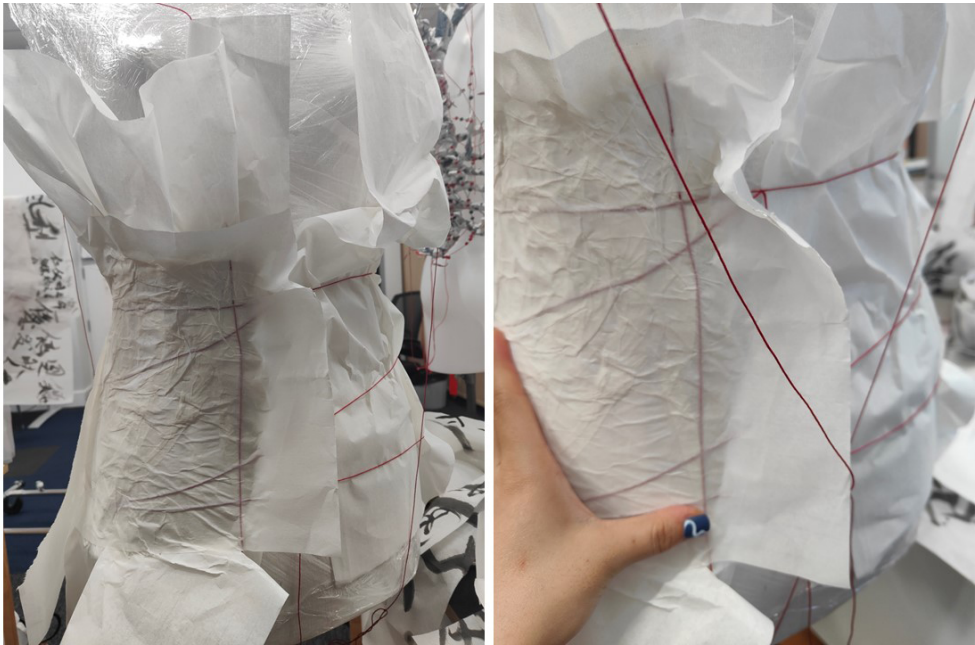


Fig.32 first layer of Xuan paper stuck on mannequin. Yifan Li

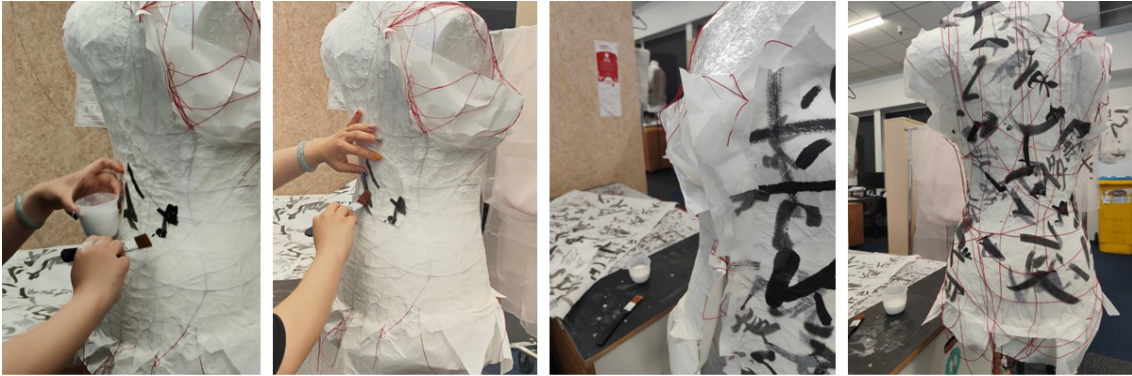


Fig.33 paper mâché processes with red thread going through. Yifan Li



Fig.34 finished second piece on mannequin, Yifan Li



3rd piece: 表演 Performance

Materials: Xuan paper, ink, white silk organza, Vilene, red and white thread, red ribbon

The third piece reflects on the strength gained from understanding my culture and my own personal identity. However, there is a certain level of performance to fit into the expectations of family and societal patterns. The design uses traditional crafting elements with fabric (silk organza) and expected methods of contemporary fashion construction.

I began again with the Xuan paper and applied the ink in the process of calligraphy similarly to pieces 1 and 2. However, this time the paper was purposely cut into 10cm wide rectangles of varied lengths. Silk organza strips were cut with wider measurement dimensions and the paper is inserted between two organza strips with double side fusing. I left the organza edge raw to create a lighter feeling to reduce the heaviness of the paper. The raw edges will gradually reduce in size and structure from time passing and people touching. These rectangular paper and fabric shapes are similar to the traditional Fulu, a term for Taoist symbols, written or painted as talisman (You &Li, 2022).

In order to form a dress foundation, I used the dress form with conventional balance lines to drape a foundation created to hold and support the design. The foundation comprised conventional fitted panels creating a dress with a back opening. This was made in Vilene, a non-woven fabric commonly used in

the fashion industry to add structure to material. This was lined to provide an accepted finish for fashion industry construction (fig.36). The rectangular paper and fabric shapes were draped onto the foundation.

The strips are machine sewed onto the top layer (fig.37,38). Consideration was given to placing each strip on a vertical orientation, only shifting the angle when needed for fit at the waist. This vertical placement and foundation are representative of the conventions and structures led by society. Each strip has been partially sewn with red stitch lines connecting the outer shell to the inner core. The red thread becomes a controlled and regular stitch line made by the industrial machine, and becomes inherent to the fabric. This is the connecting thread to all layers, the shift from the handmade to a time-efficient mechanism of construction. These controlled stitch lines are focused in one area - the waist – to allow the strips to hang freely from this point and independently of each other. The lengths vary, displaying movement and individuality.

These external strips experiment with notions of Chinese traditional clothing. This is a common cutting style and characteristic of ancient Chinese clothing. It adopts the straight line and right-angle cutting method in the design and sewing process, without excessive curves and folds. This tailoring style emphasizes simplicity, modesty and geometric beauty, also fitting the Chinese Taoism philosophy of harmony between man and nature. Chinese style traditionally shows implicit beauty in aesthetics - flat in shape and harmonious in spirit (Tsui, 2019). In traditional Chinese clothing there are no darts, and flat and wide pieces are held by laces tied together on the body. Over time due to the influence of Western culture, Chinese clothing changed from the traditional flat straight-line structure to the three-dimensional curve structure (Li, 2020).

The experimental cut strips are the outward skin. At the front upper body, the organza strips are peeling back to reveal more of the body as time progress. As these move towards the back, the organza strips open showing more freedom and exposure of self.

The open back is tied together by red ribbons (fig.39). With this piece there is a variation of treatment of ribbons, some ribbons are dyed with uneven black ink and random writings while others are left clean. This is representative of both the constraints of traditional culture and fresh directions of blood running inside me. The ribbons tie in an ordered manner down the center back spine, contrasting with the irregular distortions of the spine in the first piece.

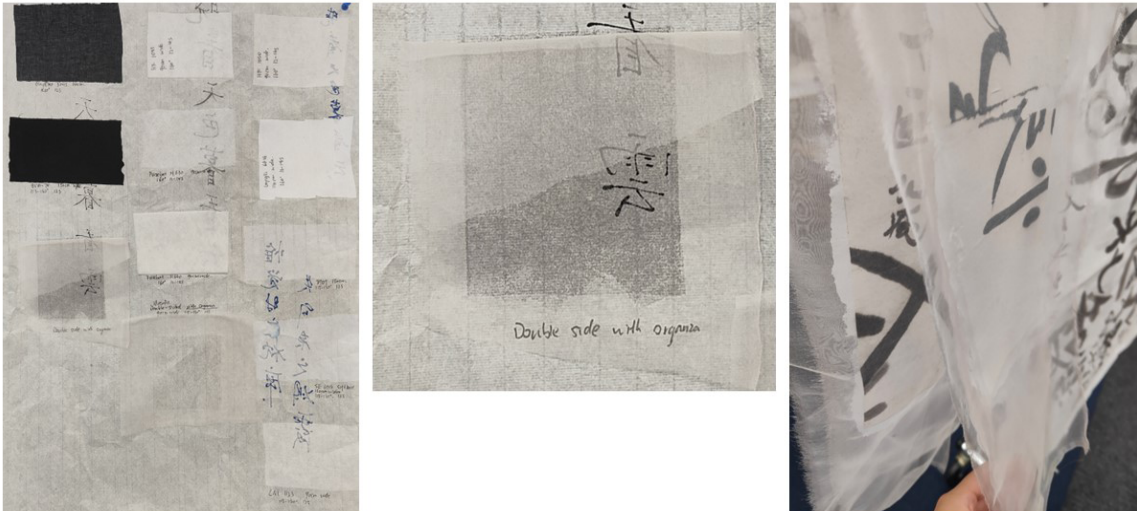


Fig.35 fusing test on Xuan paper. framing technique test with organza. Yifan Li



Fig.36 foundation making processes. Yifan Li.



Fig.37 processes of machine sewing the strips on the foundation. Yifan Li



Fig.38 processes of machine sewing the strips on the foundation. Yifan Li



Fig.39 back closed by ribbons, on mannequin and Yining. Yifan



Accessory- 骨莲 The Lotus

Materials: Xuan paper, ink, glue, wire, precious stones and pearl, recycled plastic

The necklace piece followed the method of the first piece, with wire creating the base structure, and wrapped layers of paper are glued on top to finish the surface. This asymmetrical shape opens at the front, one end with the transparent flower, and the other end with dropping stones and pearl (fig.42). This forms a moveable chain at the center back which connects the spine pieces.

The idea of the spine pieces is a combination of spine bones and the lotus flowers (fig.40). In Chinese culture, the lotus flower is representative of innocence, purity, virtue and elegance, due to its characteristic of growing from mud but is not contaminated by the mud. The ability of straight growth is similar to the straight spine, which is the expectation and requirement of Chinese people in traditional culture.

The spine accessory is another formed shape of Fan Gu, which is altered after experiencing all things and honing over time. The back of Fan Gu expresses the constant resistance but constant injury in all things experienced. This piece is more mature with a deeper self-understanding and gradual acceptance of those things that cannot be changed. No longer a form of rebellion, with sharp, aggressive shapes and edges, it has its own softer edges of red, representing the hidden cost of the shift from rebellion to accommodation while acquiring new values.



Fig.42 necklace making processes. Yifan Li

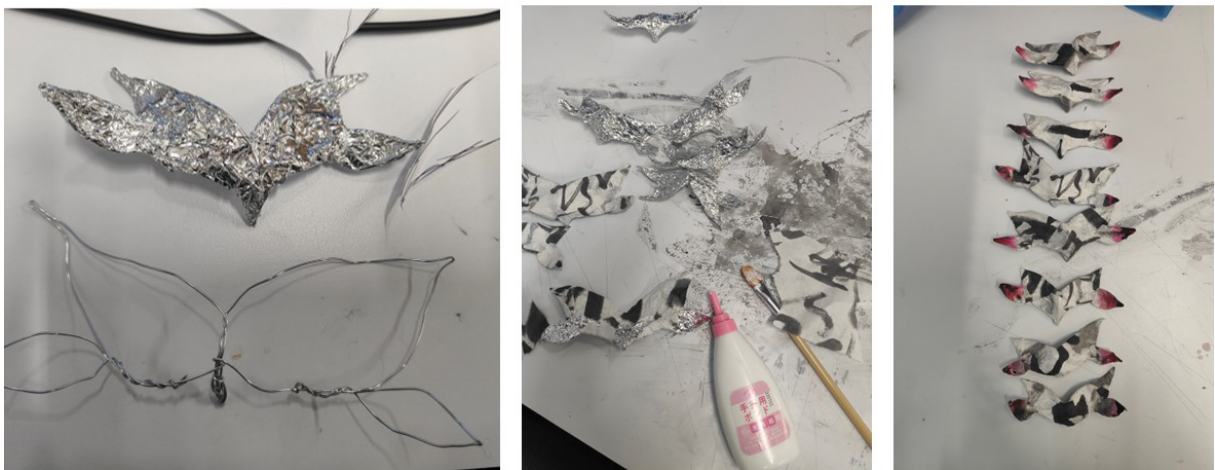


Fig.43 back pieces of necklace making processes. Yifan Li

Final Design Outcoms



Fig.44 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (Fan Gu) Back Bone, 2023, photograph.

Fig.45 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (*Fan Gu*) *Back Bone*, 2023, photograph.



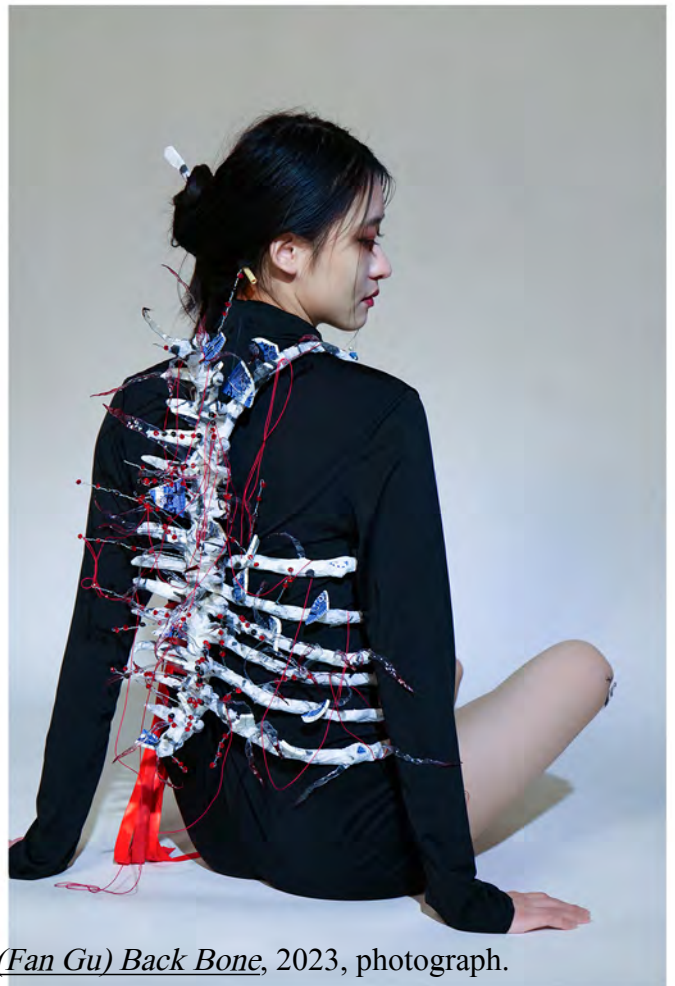


Fig.46 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (*Fan Gu*) *Back Bone*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.47 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (Fan Gu) Back Bone, 2023, photograph.



Fig.48 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (Fan Gu) Back Bone, 2023, photograph.



Fig.49 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (*Fan Gu*) *Back Bone*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.50 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (Revolt) (2023) photograph.



Fig.51 Yuting Cao, 反骨 (*Far From Back Bone*), 2023, photograph.



Fig.52 Yuting Cao, *Struggle*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.53 Yuting Cao, *Struggle*, 2023, photograph.

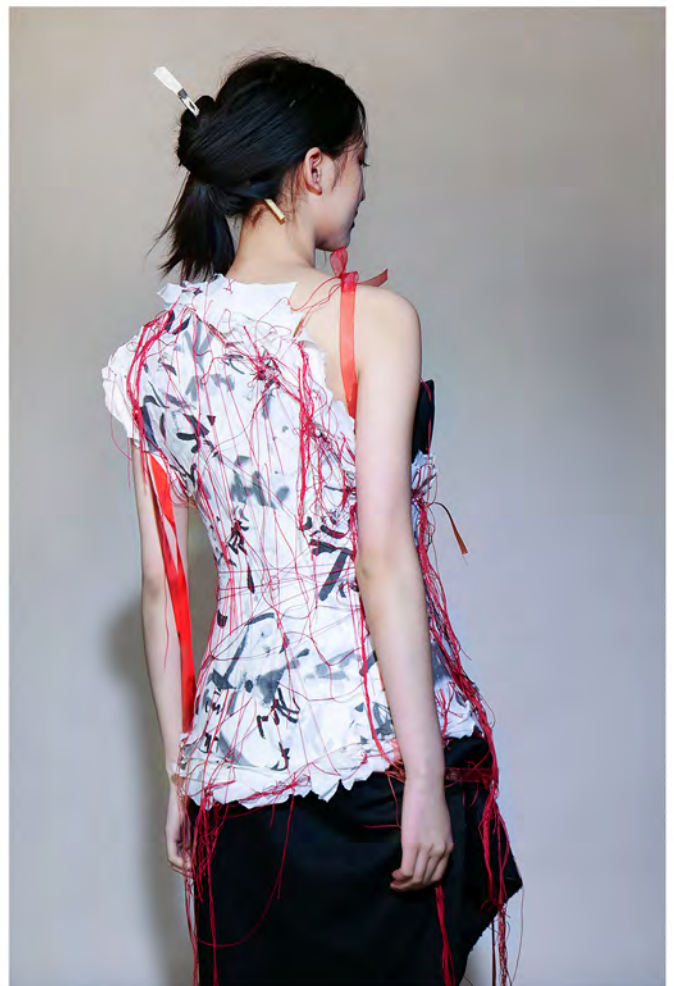


Fig.54 Yuting Cao Stage 2011 photograph.



Fig.55 Yuting Cao, *Struggle*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.56 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.57 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.58 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.59 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.60 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.



Fig.61 Yuting Cao, *Performance*, 2023, photograph.

Final Reflection

In this project, I explored how my culture informed my sense of identity as a Chinese fashion designer. By research into culture, craft and identity conceived as the Bone Blood Skin framework, I used a reflective method through experimental fashion practice. I feel deeply honoured to have gained a deeper understanding of both myself and my culture from this research practice.

By exploring the complex and connected relationships between culture, craft, and identity, culture can be regarded as a source, constantly stimulating and promoting the innovation process of design. Nourished by culture, designers are able to draw inspiration from diverse traditions, values and aesthetics, and incorporate them into their designs to create unique and expressive pieces. Culture and design form a mutually-reinforcing relationship. Culture provides the source of inspiration and creation for design, while design inherits and continues the essence of culture by integrating cultural elements and innovation while injecting new vitality.

Chinese fashion can assert its own creative strengths in conveying cultural and identity concepts, as evidenced by a young generation of designers. Only by preserving their cultural attributes can unique designs be created (Li, 2020).

All the pieces are made of leftover and recycled materials, re-composed and re-presented combining, craft and fashion processes. These three pieces show the circle of my own evolving identity. At the same time, I hope these self-reflective pieces resonate with other young creators.

Inheritance is not blindly keeping to traditions, but continuing to learn, in order to explore more possibilities in contemporary art and design. During this research my in-depth exploration of traditional crafts, and understanding of their historical and cultural significance while identifying their inherent qualities inspired a deeper recognition and understanding of my own design responses. By preserving the essence of traditional crafts and reimagining their forms, materials and techniques, designers can create innovative and meaningful designs that resonate with both local and global audiences .

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Fig.61 Yuting Cao, Performance, 2023, photograph.

