A Tribute to No Name Woman

Imaginary Photographs of my Great-Grandmother

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Prelude

One of the things that bothered me about the whole multicultural/post-colonial discussion in art is that it became a discussion only about politics and political positions, particularly during the last decade of the last century. The visual side of things was too often neglected. Images (and as an artist I consider myself an image-maker), their role, their importance, their ambiguities seemed to play too minor a role.[1]

- Fiona Tan, Dutch-Indonesian artist

As a Eurasian artist and printmaker, born to a Norwegian father and a Chinese-Singaporean mother, this sentence by Fiona Tan resonates strongly with me. Growing up in a multicultural household was a visual experience more than anything, with imageries from my parents' different cultures being constantly juggled, juxtaposed and merged - both physically and mentally. Being raised in Norway, my exposure to Chinese culture was limited to Chinese costume dramas, dreamlike landscape paintings and souvenir objects, and subsequently, my understanding of my maternal ancestors' homeland became a synergy of myths and imagery, in which I could never quite tell reality from fantasy. It was only later in life that I began to question and analyse the cultural space in which I was navigating, realising that alongside the unaffected and spontaneous imaginings of childhood, there also existed a series underlying socio-political questions. How did I, a European descendant of a Chinese Diaspora, interpret and *misinterpret* my mother and grandmother's narratives of their homeland? How was I replacing the gaps in my cultural understanding with stereotypes from Chinese books and movies?

Inspired by contemporary artists such as Fiona Tan and Yinka Shonibare, who both explore multicultural and post-colonial questions from a point of departure that is strongly visual, I decided to turn the mental images of my childhood into physical objects through printmaking. My intent was to explore whether or not they could be more effectively processed, understood and discussed when rendered through an object-based and critical artistic practice.

[1] Saskia Bos, "Other Facets of the Same Globe: A conversation between Fiona Tan and Saskia Bos," *www.fionatan.nl*, accessed 14 April 2019. https://fionatan.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/TanSaskiaBos_OtherFacets.pdf.

No Name Woman*

Li Gong as Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern*, directed by Zhang Yimou, 1991

All my life I have wished to recreate the face of my Chinese great-grandmother. We have no documents or photos pertaining to her. We do not even remember her name. All I know is that she was born in China around 1905, and that she moved to Singapore where she lived as my great-grandfather's concubine before dying in poverty at a young age. Over the years, she has become an increasingly mythological figure to me. As a child, I always imagined her to look like the elegant ladies from Chinese vintage commercial posters. I made up stories of her life based on stories of Chinese concubines from movies and books. Perhaps my great-grandmother was like Li Gong's character in Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), a young concubine who descended into madness? Or maybe she was like An-Mei's mother in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), a concubine who decided to end her life with opium in order to pass her spirit on to her daughter?

I started merging photos of myself, my mother and my grandmother – layering images of our faces digitally and blending our features in an attempt to work my way backwards through the generations, "invert" our genetic

heritage and reconstruct my great-grandmother's forever lost face. It was the only way I could go about trying to manifest her and make her real. I always tried to make her beautiful, merging the best photographs I could get my hands on, so that she would always resemble the many Chinese actresses I had seen on film. I named the project *No Name Woman*, after the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoirs *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), in which the American narrator invents tales of an unknown aunt in her family's native China.

By creating my great-grandmother's portrait, I wanted to honour her, to give her a voice and a place in history which had been erased. What I did not realise, was that by trying to restore her image, I was also embarking on a quest in which I would be forced to scrutinise myself. I could not make her image without also rendering visible, and confronting, my own role as a female artist in contemporary Europe, my childhood fantasies about China and my adult prejudices of traditional Chinese female roles. I was not conscious of these things when I first started. Franz Kafka is claimed to have once said "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds."[2] To me, this was my chance to drive my lifelong obsession with my great-grandmother out of my mind once and for all, and pin down her ghost that had haunted my imagination.

I decided that I would give my great-grandmother a proper commemorative portrait. The problem was that I knew nothing of her.

Vivian Wu as An-Mei's mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang, 1993

*Please refer to the complete list of title references at the end

[2] Cited in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 53.

No Name Woman I,II,III, photogravure, 50 x 40 cm (printed surface 35 x 27 cm), 2017

No Name Woman (Family Composite I, II), photogravure, 40 x 30 cm
(printed surface 23 x 18 cm), 2017 (printed in 2019)

Chinese ancestor portrait, paper edged with silk, 137 x 79 cm, early 20th century

Ancestor portraits

How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit?

After making my images of *No Name Woman*, I came across a book about Chinese ancestor portraits. These large and beautifully coloured images had always attracted me as a child, but it was only during my research that I discovered that ancestor paintings were created posthumously - just like my own portraits. In many cases, the descendants could pick and choose from a standardised reference book of facial features. Another recourse would be to invite the painter to study living relatives in order to reconstruct the appearance of the deceased – much in the same manner as I had done.[3]

Ancestor veneration has been a cornerstone of Chinese culture for thousands of years, and it is believed that the forebears never cease to influence the world of the living. Through honouring them, they will bestow blessings of health and prosperity upon their kin; if ignored or dishonoured, they will cause unrest. As ritual objects onto which prayers and food offerings were directed, Chinese ancestor portraits followed strict visual codes which seemed to remove them from worldly concerns. Painted on paper or silk in a large hanging scroll format, they depict the forebear rigidly posed in a seated frontal position, shown full-length while maintaining a sombre, impassive gaze. The clothing is highly ornamental, and often the figure is situated upon an elaborately patterned floor featuring motifs of flowers and dragons.

I decided to use the long-established visual traditions of the ancestor portrait as a point of departure when reconstructing the image of my great-grandmother. Not only did I find it a fitting way to honour her memory and "house" her ever elusive spirit, but I also found that this portrait tradition provided the necessary room and leeway for fabrication which I required. Like thousands of other descendants throughout history, I too would have to assemble all the little fragments of information I possessed about my forebear, and fill in the rest with guesswork.

[3] See Jan Stuart and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001)

Seizing a new identity

You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother,
and her mother before her

Despite referring to a painterly tradition, I was determined that photography was to be the medium of my choice when creating the image of my great-grandmother. When inventing a past and a history, the photograph was the most likely to make me fall for my own story and my own deception. No painted portrait could ever trick me into believing that the person depicted had really existed in the way a photograph could, simply because the photograph cannot be distinguished from its referent – what is in front of the lens. No matter the degree to which a photograph may be manipulated, whether by digital means or by the old-fashioned montaging of negatives, the rays of light from the components in the image have at some point been captured by the camera. If not necessarily reflecting truth or reality, they at least confirm a presence – an indexical trace of something, like a footprint or a death mask.

In his photographic treatise, *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes attempts to define the essence of photography. He describes the photograph as contingent and invisible without a clear character of its own, because it merely captures the light which emanates from someone or something, turning the subject before it into a photographic object. It is in this transformation however, that Barthes identifies the essence of photography as an *Agent of Death*. The photograph is something which will always belong to the past. From the moment the shutter goes off and the photograph is conceived, it will always be "that-has-been", if not necessarily yet "that which is no longer." By turning the living subject before it into an object, the camera always seems to conjure up Death whenever it is trying to preserve life.

Barthes described the sensation he felt when finding himself in front of the camera, and how the photograph became the advent of himself as another:

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice […].[4]

Later on, he continues:

[4] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 10.

[…] the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.[5]

With my great-grandmother no longer present to sit in front of the camera, could I, facilitated by the photo apparatus as an Agent of Death, transform myself from a contemporary subject into a historical one? In her photographic series *Album* (2003), British artist Gillian Wearing "seized" the identities of her mother, brother and sister by photographing herself shrouded in silicone masks which took on the appearance them. She said, "I was interested in the idea of being genetically connected to someone but being very different. There is something of me, literally, in all those people – we are connected, but we are each very different."[6]

Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory*,
gelatin silver print, 134.9 × 115.9 cm, 2003

Through my body and the transformative power of the camera, I decided that I too could "seize" my relative's identity. Genetically, there was still something of my great-grandmother in me, and I was determined to bring it out. I began dressing up in Chinese clothing, and sat upright facing the camera in a direct attempt at copying the pose of traditional ancestor portraits. In lieu of silicone masks, I pasted the digitally assembled faces of *No Name Woman* onto the photographs of my own figure, creating a completely different, but realistic looking person - someone who was partly myself, partly someone else.

[5] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13.
[6] "Gillian Wearing: Trauma and the Uncanny," *Guggenheim Museum*, accessed 9 September 2017, https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/gillian-wearing.

Ancestor Portraits, digital collage, 2018

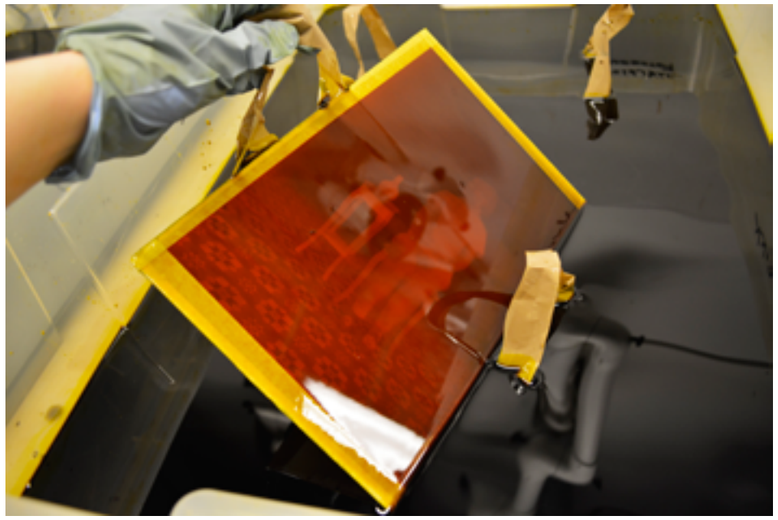
The photogravure process

Memory is not so much image as sensation

Instead of printing the images of my great-grandmother with a digital inkjet printer, I began editioning them by hand using photogravure, an analogue photomechanical process dating back to the 1820s and made popular by artist photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. Photogravure is an intaglio printmaking method in which a copper plate is grained, coated with light-sensitive gelatine, exposed to a film positive of the image, and then etched in ferric chloride. The resulting printing matrix is then inked and run through a press, the paper picking up ink from the etched grooves and producing a print which replicates the details and continuous tone of a photograph. The process is long and meticulous, demanding technical precision and patience. However, it lends something new to the image altogether – a mysterious, velvety softness, and a deep embossment from the plate in the thick, matte paper.

By rendering my digital collages through this analogue technique, and physically etching the figures of three generations together into a metal plate, I not only wished to impart the images with an illusion of aura and nostalgia, but also add to them a sense of permanence and truth. The photogravure process seemed to "slow" down the images, making them no longer simply remnants of instant exposure to light. The delicate traces of wiped ink and the embossment left in the paper provided a new haptic form of visuality, in which my eyes could almost feel the plate slowly running through the press. The portraits became less situated in a specific moment in time, and through this operation, I could almost convince myself that they were genuinely historical.

In addition to the prints, the copper matrixes also possessed a unique quality of their own. On the copper, the etched figures of my great-grandmother appeared like holograms that seemed to float on top of the metallic surface, manifesting themselves as positives or negatives depending on your angle of vision. They alluded to old collodion plates and daguerreotypes, but also to engraved memorial plaques. Three of these copper plates, entitled *Memorial Plaques*, were exhibited at the annual show for the first-year master's students in April 2018 at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.



Etching a photogravure plate in a bath of ferric chloride

Memorial Plaques, copper photogravure plates, 54.5 x 28 cm, 2018

Memorial Plaque III, copper photogravure plate, 54.5 x 28 cm, 2018

Ancestor Portrait II, photogravure, 30 x 20 cm (printed surface 20 x 10 cm), 2018

Staging the past

So, you don't have memories - you acquire memories?

In November 2018, during the second year of my master's degree studies, I journeyed to Singapore to visit my family. While on this trip, I unexpectedly learned from my aunt that my great-grandmother's name had sounded something like "Fong Lai Ching", and that she had come from humble dwellings in Nanhai, a district in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Here she had most likely been spotted by my great-grandfather, a wealthy businessman from Hong Kong who wished to take her for his concubine. Apparently, it was common to look for pretty young girls in the poorer districts outside the affluent British colony. A wife you took for her dowry and status – a concubine for her youth and beauty.

I concluded that Fong Lai Ching must have lived comfortably at some point, because my great-grandfather had owned a rubber plantation on the small South-East Asian island of Singapore, and could afford to take a wife and two concubines – Fong Lai Ching being the second of his three consorts. I am ashamed to say that I have often judged her, finding it incomprehensible that a woman, and my own relative at that, should stoop to what I deem to be such a degrading position. A second wife, or concubine, held a very inferior position to the first wife, to whom she and her children had to submit themselves at all times. Considering my great-grandmother's limited prospects however, it is perhaps not surprising that she should have made this move – whether by her own choice, or that of her family's. Polygamy was socially accepted under the pretext of needing to perpetuate the male line. Perhaps at this brief time in her life, she could drape herself in sumptuous fabrics and adorn herself with pearls and jade? Perhaps she was transported around town in a rickshaw while receiving admiring glances? Maybe she even went to a photographer to have her picture taken?

With these meagre clues at hand, I began to delve into the history of Singapore and into the lives of its Chinese merchant families in the early 20th century, in order to rebuild a narrative around Fong Lai Ching and form an understanding of why her life progressed and ended the way it did. I visited the National Museum of Singapore, the National Gallery and the Peranakan Museum. Here I got to experience images and reconstructions of historical clothes, houses and street life scenes, tapping into a heritage which was otherwise hard to find in a cosmopolitan city-state which has shredded most material traces of its past.

Exhibits at the National Museum of Singapore

In this project I found myself becoming researcher, actor, director, photographer, makeup artist, costume designer, scenographer, digital post-producer and photogravure printmaker. I began purchasing a great variety of Chinese and Singaporean clothing which I had seen on museum mannequins, and which I could envision Fong Lai Ching wearing throughout the different stages of her life. I could feel her almost viscerally through putting on her imaginary wardrobe – from her simple cotton attire as a young girl in Nanhai, to her expensive silk cheongsams and sarong kebayas as a well-to-do concubine in Singapore.

Back in Norway, far away from any authentic historical sites in which to situate my great-grandmother, I turned my flat into a photo studio. The idea of the photo studio attracted me, having been a place for staging and fabricating narratives and identities ever since the inception of photography, exemplified by for example Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) and Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813-1875). I draped my walls with different backdrops; some which were plain, some which consisted of large printed sceneries from China. I covered my wooden floor with rolls of paper onto which I had printed a pattern of Peranakan floor tiles, which are ceramic tiles popular amongst Chinese communities in the Malay Archipelago. In the lack of authentic furnishings, I posed with Chinoiserie furniture found at a local home decor store. On the small table I placed a variety of Chinese and South-East Asian decorative items, some which I had purchased during my travels, and some which I had made myself – for example a series of cast porcelain vases decorated to resemble ancient blue-and-white china.

In her photographic study *Det Iscenesatte Fotografi* (The Staged Photograph) (1992), Mette Sandbye explored the tendency which arose in art photography from the 1970s, in which several artists began using staged photography to create fictional narratives and situations. This defied what had been a long-standing paradigm of photography, which had sought to capture reality and promote the beauty of the pure, unmanipulated image. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Duane Michals and Eileen Cowin rejected these modernist outlooks, and embraced the theatricality shunned by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried by moving into the realm of literature, sculpture, film and theatre. They recognised that photography can never be pure or truthful – but because photography is an illusion of reality, it can be used to depict an otherwise unphotographable truth, such as human experience, fantasy and dreams. They would "create" photos rather than "take" photos, using performers and artificial settings as tools for artistic and critical commentary.[7] Today, with the endless offerings of manipulation through digital photography and Photoshop, this arena has

[7] Mette Sandbye, *Det iscenesatte fotografi: fem amerikanske fotografer: Duane Michals, Les Krims, Joel-Peter Witkin, Cindy Sherman og Eileen Cowin* (København: Forlaget politisk revy, 1992)

further been extended. Within just a few square metres in my flat, I could stage a whole fiction of Fong Lai Ching.

Top: Chinoiserie Vases (Pear Vases), cast porcelain, 20 x 13 x 13 cm, 2018
Bottom: Chinoiserie Vase (Moon Flask), cast porcelain, 11 x 13 x 3.5 cm, 2018

Setting up a “photo studio” in my flat

Inventing China

In some ways, we're all looking for that old, cultural, historical, abstract China – the big dream of China that probably never existed

Milton Miller, *The 1st Wife of the Tartar General*,
albumen print, 33 x 25.4 cm, 1860s

In my research into photographic history, I was captivated and inspired by the studio photographs of American photographer Milton Miller (1830-1899). Miller had a brief, but prolific career in Hong Kong from 1856 to 1860, taking pictures of Chinese officials, businessmen, and women. When photography was introduced in China, and also Singapore, the

visual traditions of Chinese ancestor paintings were almost seamlessly transferred to photography. In his essay *Inventing a Chinese Portrait Style* (2011), Wu Hong describes how many Westerners remarked, and even mocked, the Chinese preference for frontal portraits in which they were seated and looking directly at the camera.[8] Often, they were accompanied by a backdrop of patterned floors and a table with Chinese objects, while also holding a favourite item, such as a fan or a pearl necklace. This presented a stark contrast to the Western preference, in which the sitters were often languidly posing in a three-quarter view, with heavy shadows accentuating their features. Hong explains that it is natural to suppose that these traits were a continuance of the prevailing traditions of Chinese ancestor paintings. However, many Western photographers, such as Milton Miller, consciously imitated these as a way of catering to Western buyers, who wanted photos fulfilling their idea of an essential and timeless Chinese portrait style. Although many of his sitters are identified as specific people, it is likely that Miller photographed "types" rather than people, as many of the same models feature in different family constellations under different identities. They are most likely staged costume portraits, aimed to cater to a Western audience who was procuring exotic images of China, while also perhaps confirming their idea of Western modernity and China's backwardness.

I understood, and partly embraced, that like Milton Miller, I too was that Westerner seeking an eternal Chinese portrait style - an essential "Chineseness" that would somehow connect me with my ancestor and a culture my family lost. However, looking at the images I had amassed, I had to ask myself whether or not I was becoming complicit in perpetuating Chinese stereotypes. In my desire to embody and honour Fong Lai Ching, was I instead subconsciously projecting stereotypical views of Asian women onto my own kin? As I donned her clothes, I could feel my body language changing. I was becoming poised, demure and self-conscious – behaving in a way that I would not behave had I been wearing my own clothes. Was I once again simply falling into an array of movie characters whose narratives were instantly recognisable – such as the archetypical "tragic concubine"? Was I putting my great-grandmother up for display, trying to tell a story which I in fact had no right to tell, and appropriating a culture I did not have any true understanding of?

[8] Wu Hong, "Inventing a Chinese Portrait Style: The Case of Milton Miller," in *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China*, ed. Jeffry W. Cody and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 69-89.

On concubinage

All these years I kept my true nature hidden,
running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me

The few memories of Fong Lai Ching that my grandmother could relate to me were harrowing. Fong Lai Ching had given birth to six children during her twenties. One baby died in a tragic accident, and a seventh was lost in miscarriage. Misfortune struck again when my great-grandfather lost all his money and his estates. With Chinese books and movies cementing my affection and sympathy for Fong Lai Ching and her situation as a concubine, they had simultaneously hardened me against my great-grandfather, whose literary counterparts had always been less than flattering. For years I blamed him for mismanaging his business, partly holding him responsible for my great-grandmother's untimely demise. I later learned from my mother that he had suffered a stroke which had rendered him paralysed. The consequence must have been dire poverty, as his third consort left him and my own great-grandmother, having nowhere to go with five children, died from malnutrition and sheer exhaustion at the young age of thirty-four. Her husband passed away shortly after. At his funeral, all of Fong Lai Ching´s children, including my grandmother, had to remain outside the temple, as they were only the offspring of a concubine. This is something my grandmother never forgot, and told me repeatedly throughout my childhood.

In her study of concubinage in early 20th century Hong Kong, Rubie S. Watson describes the status of a concubine as a complex one.[9] Unlike a common mistress, a concubine was a recognised sexual partner whose children were considered legitimate, and who lived in her master's household. However, as a man could only legally have one wife, any secondary consorts would hold a lower status to her – being neither endowed with property, nor receiving any dowry upon their union. Any children she may have were instructed to look upon the principle wife as their formal mother. Watson concludes that, "Without kin, with little or no public (extradomestic) recognition of her role, with no dowry or bridal gifts to secure her status, the concubine bordered on being a nonperson."[10]

While I had always known concubines to hold inferior positions, the fact that Fong Lai Ching's situation may have been as demeaning as this had

[9] Rubie S. Watson, "Wives, Concubines, and Maids: Servitude and Kinship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900-1940," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 231-255.
[10] Watson, "Wives, Concubines, and Maids," 244.

been beyond my reckoning. It seemed very unlikely that she would ever have been allowed to be transported around town in the family's finest rickshaw - let alone have her picture taken and be commemorated after death. All of the musings I had of my great-grandmother were crumbling, turning out to be my wishes for her rather than what would have been her reality, and I felt sad and angry on her behalf. I had purchased a beautiful traditional Chinese wedding dress and photographed myself in it as Fong Lai Ching on her wedding day, but now I grasped that she may never have had a wedding ceremony. Compared to the public and elaborate spectacle that was the union between a man and his first wife, Watson explains that the union with a concubine was often a private and sparse affair. Whatever the truth in the case of my great-grandmother, I stubbornly decided to keep the dress and the photo. If nothing else, they reflected my wishes for her, and what I felt she deserved.

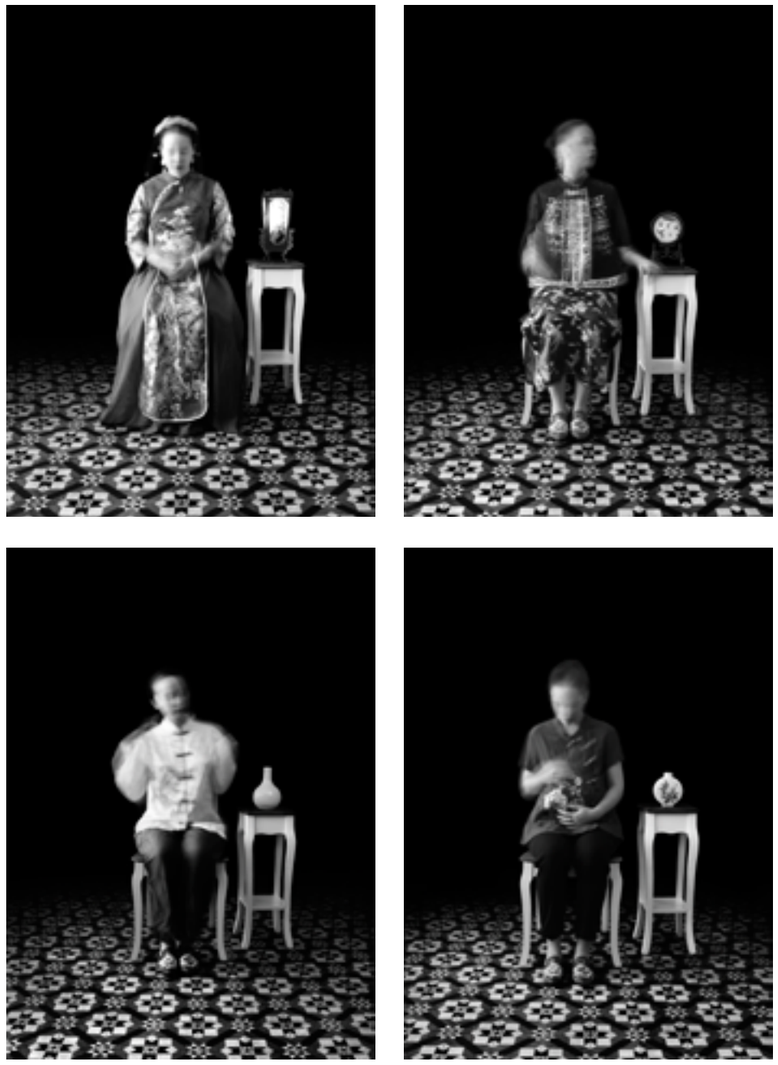
Although more and more facts from her life were slowly coming to light, this could never get me closer to whom Fong Lai Ching was as a person. Everyone who ever knew her were dead, and who would have known to what degree her voice had been silenced? Suddenly I even became unsure of her name. Upon entering her role as a concubine, she could have been renamed by her consort or his first wife, as was often the custom. Where did actually the name "Fong Lai Ching" come from? Perhaps I should just go back to calling her "No Name Woman".

Instead of producing sharp images of my great-grandmother in a rigid, fixed pose and pasting her imaginary face on top of my own, I began experimenting with slower shutter speeds, moving around on my chair as the image was being taken, turning myself (and my great-grandmother) into a blurry ghost. This incorporeal, cloudy shape alluded to early photography's long shutter times and early Victorian "spirit" photography. However, at the same time, I felt that No Name Woman was finally given some form of agency, because in the guise of a hazy revenant, she defied my categorisation and refused to be pinned down by me. It was a fight between myself and her – she was no longer a still, otherworldly relic or a petrified statue – she was actively resisting the camera. Through digital means, I blurred the transition between the floor and the backdrop, turning her surroundings into an almost infinite, dreamlike space that seemed to exist outside a specific time and place. My great-grandmother's ghost joined me in Norway – never as a fixed image, always in different apparitions.

The Sarong Kebaya, photogravure, 40 x 30 cm
(printed surface 25 x 18 cm), 2019

The Girl from Nanhai, photogravure, 40 x 30 cm
(printed surface 25 x 18 cm), 2019

The Descendant, photogravure, 40 x 30 cm
(printed surface 25 x 18 cm), 2019



Top left: *The Wedding,* Top right: *The Concubine*
Bottom left: *The Hard Times,* Bottom right: *The Pregnancy*,
digital photos, 2019

The Chinese Diaspora

Many cross the great ocean never to return

If nobody had been around to commemorate and honour my great-grandmother, then I would – but I had to accept that by default, I could neither do her, nor her culture the way she experienced it, true justice. Perhaps this was not something to be apologetic for. Maybe my version of Chinese culture was an inevitable consequence not only of my family's history, but of a global Chinese history of migration?

In 1970, my grandmother and her children left Singapore for Europe, joining the millions of overseas Chinese who made up the vast Chinese Diaspora in the West. I actively use the term "diaspora", which derives from the Greek verb διασπείρω (diaspeirō), meaning "scattering". Unlike terms such as "migration" or "exile", which often concentrate on the one-directional flow from one country to another, "diaspora" offers a more multifaceted reading, encompassing how a sense of kinship is established across national borders amongst a people who have been dispersed from their original homeland. Like a great global network, they are bound together by a shared culture, but also through the collective myth of their birthplace, and the desire that one may one day return – whether literally or metaphorically. While the physical homeland might still exist, the homeland is something which first and foremost remains in the mind, locked in the time in which it was left behind. It is no longer a conventional, physical home, but one that is emotional and psychological, and which has not evolved like its physical equivalent. The desire to return is therefore not only a desire to return to a place, but to go back to a time in which you lived in this place.[11]

My cousins and I all grew up observing our parents and grandmother's longing for their native Singapore and their Chinese culture. As an adult, I came to realise that this longing had been unconsciously passed on to me, almost like part of my genetic code. We all inherit narratives of our ancestors which will change over time, because we interpret them through a contemporary lens. However, in this instance, there was also a geographical shift which further obscured memory and understanding. China and Singapore had become sites of mythology and wonder through my family's many fragmented stories and recollections – some true, some erroneous, nostalgic and idealised. It was clear to me that we, along with millions of others, had fallen victim to the power and fallacy of diasporic memory.

[11] See James Clifford, "Diasporas," in *Routes: Travel and Transculturation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and William Safrah, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 83-99.

Hybrid Cultures

It is not Chinese culture, but it is not "not" Chinese culture

Film still of Chow Yun-Fat and Zhang Ziyi in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed by Ang Lee, 2000

Shifting mentally and physically between the homeland and the new host land, a new and unique cultural space opens up within diasporic communities. An example is the famous wuxia-movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), in which American-Taiwanese director Ang Lee brings together a collective "dream" of China, casting a pan-Asian cast and placing it within a nostalgic, time-bound specificity. The film has been criticised by many, for example by Derek Elley for *Variety*, who dismissed it as "cleverly packaged chop suey…designed primarily to appeal to a general Western clientele" and who further describes Lee as a "cultural chameleon" who is in some ways corrupting Asian cinematic traditions.[12] Literature professor Christina Klein however, opts for a more "transnational critical perspective", arguing that the film needs to be discussed and analysed from Lee's situation as a member of the Chinese Diaspora, and that the film is a result of "diasporic filmmaking."[13] Lee was born in Taiwan to mainland Chinese parents, and later settled in the United States. Growing up in Taiwan, Lee never had a direct experience of mainland China, and his sense of connection was always mediated through second hand accounts. When travelling to the mainland to film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, he admitted that he knew nothing about the real China. "I had this image in my mind, from movies…so I projected these images as my China, the China in my head".[14]

[12] Derek Elley, "Asia to 'Tiger': Kung-Fooey," *Variety*, 7 February, 2001, accessed 2 April 2019, https://variety.com/2001/film/news/asia-to-tiger-kung-fooey-1117793240/.
[13] Christina Klein, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Diasporic Reading," *Cinema Journal 43*, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 18-42.
[14] Quoted in Rick Lyman, "Crouching Memory, Hidden Heart," *New York Times*, March 9, 2001, B27.

In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), writer, poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant employed the concept of a "rhizome" to explicate how diasporic cultures emerge. Although writing from a distinctly Caribbean context, it is Glissant's suggestion that all diasporic cultures are the product of a rhizome. A rhizome is a horizontal underground plant stem capable of producing the shoot and root system of a new plant, creating a network of roots so intertwined that they are inseparable. Glissant paints how Caribbean culture is comprised of such intertwined root elements, namely the roots of the African motherland, and the French roots, which have become part of the rhizome through force and brutality. With the passing of time however, these roots have become woven together to a point in which they can never be freed from each other. Rhizome roots may produce different growths depending on the soil in which they are planted. African roots for example, have grown differently in American soil then in the soil of Caribbean islands such as Martinique or Guadeloupe. Through Glissant's metaphors, we may begin to understand how cultures merge and evolve to a point of no return, and how there is no one single diasporic experience.[15]

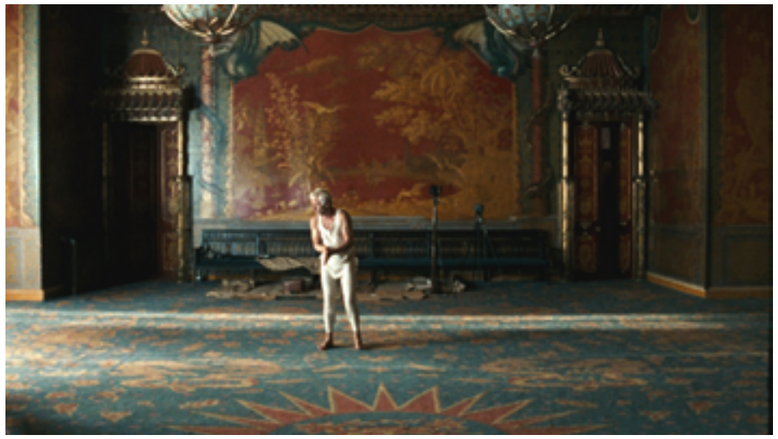
Instead of striving to create images of my great-grandmother which could pass as authentically Chinese, I decided that I had to begin embracing the fact that our Chinese rhizome roots had been planted in European soil. To begin with, I disliked the glaring inaccuracies and anachronisms of my ancestor portraits, such as the make-belief Chinese furniture and the modern touches to my Chinese clothes. However, I slowly began to appreciate what they added to the image. To me, all these more or less subtle elements signal that something is amiss – that something is not quite right with the image, but that a shift in time and place has occurred, and that I am creating something Chinese from a modern, European perspective. The images of my great-grandmother expose just as much of my own longings and needs as they do about her herself, becoming an attempt at placing myself in a genealogical, social and cultural context.

This version of Chinese culture, with its additions of European and Singaporean elements, may be dismissed as inauthentic or even "cleverly packaged chop suey". However, if read through a diasporic lens, I argue that it retains an accuracy and complexity of its own, because it is an inevitable physical and visual result of a global Chinese dispersal, which is now part of Chinese history and Chinese collective memory. I have accepted that my task cannot be to re-enact or understand a Chinese past, because in that I shall always be found wanting. Instead, my role is to be a contemporary commentator operating from a conscious and self-reflective diasporic mindset. Memory and forgetting are in the forefront in the construction of our cultural identity. Through my artistic practice, I am exploring the

[15] See Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) and Sanyu Ruth Mulira, "Edouard Glissant and the African Roots of Creolization," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 38:2 (Winter 2015): 115-128.

intense power, but also the fallacy, of diasporic memory. How has my family, and so many others, created a version of Chinese culture that is not Chinese culture, but at the same time is not *not* Chinese culture? To borrow Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *colonial mimicry* – we do not simply imitate, we reflect back to the main source a distorted image, one that appears the same, but is subtly and distinctively different. To the origin, this may seem unsettling and unhomely, and even subversive.[16]

Epilogue



Fiona Tan, still from *A Lapse of Memory*, HD video installation, 24 min. 35 sek., 2007

In her video work *A Lapse of Memory* (2007), Fiona Tan stages a tale of a Caucasian-looking elderly man who wanders around the Royal Pavilion in Brighton – a beautiful, but bizarre architectural concoction of the Orient and Occident. He is lost in memories, and his identity is as muddled as the building itself. The narrator refers to him as both Henry and "Eng Lee", which is the Chinese phonetic translation of the English name. While he conducts his daily activities such as practicing tai chi and pouring tea, we are told of his split identity, whereby he does not really know if he is from the East or the West. Instead, he is constantly fluctuating between times, places, cultures, stories and visual impressions.

[16] See Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October,* Volume 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984): 125-133.

I can re-stage the Brighton Pavilion. I can build the framework and the architectural structure for my great-grandmother's portrait. I can even make it believable and authentic. However, like Henry or Eng-Lee, the content within will always fluctuate. Fong Lai Ching will always be restless – she will always be wandering around aimlessly in whichever framework I set up for her.

She too, is a lapse of memory.

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TITLES

No Name Woman
Chapter from *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston

How can I leave this would without leaving her my spirit?
Quote from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her
Quote from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

Memory is not so much image as sensation
Quote from *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* by Geoffrey Batchen

So, you don’t have memories - you acquire memories?
Stephen, a teacher

In some ways, we’re all looking for that old, cultural, historical, abstract China – the big dream of China that probably never existed
Director Ang Lee, quoted in “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Diasporic Reading” by Christina Klein

All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me
Quote from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

Many cross the great ocean never to return
Quote from *When Half is Whole: Multiethnic Asian American Identities* by Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu

It is not Chinese culture, but it is not “not” Chinese culture
Stephen, a teacher

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