

## Proposal

The presence which someone's identity holds over all other aspects of their life is quite significant – having the ability to influence all other areas of your life. Your beliefs, values, friends. All factors which are heavily influenced by how you perceive and express yourself.

What if the community belonging to one aspect of your identity seemed vehemently opposed to the other community you belong to which, by extension, rejects a crucial part of what makes up your sense of self?

I am hoping to convey the experience of identifying as LGBTQIA+ whilst being raised in a Chinese household outside of China (in New Zealand), and the push and pull which occurs between the different factors of identity as they establish their prominence in someone's life.

To explore this theme, I will be investigating ideas such as Deconstruction/Destruction, Repression, Traditional Values and Expectations, Gender Roles, and Displacement/Disconnect with Culture.

I am aware that my experience isn't rare or unique in anyway as a queer person or as a child of first-generation immigrants, however I never really grew up hearing stories about people like me, which can probably be attributed to the heavy suppression of such a topic in Chinese households and communities.

Initially, I went into this project with the desire to prove something – to try and draw links between two sides of my identity (despite how vastly different they seemed) as a way of justifying who I was as a person. However, as the theme evolved from a more comparative approach to expressing how both sides interact in my own life, the intention also shifted, formed by my desire for an outlet to explore and work out my own experiences and emotions.

## Why Sculpture?

As the theme of these boards became more refined and my intention shifted, it became apparent that sculpture was a fitting vessel for the meaning and experiences which I wanted to convey through the work. At the surface level, my perfectionistic nature over the art which I produce meant that the possibility that I could complete three boards of painting work was incredibly low. Regardless, my decision to utilise sculpture runs deeper than just feasibility.

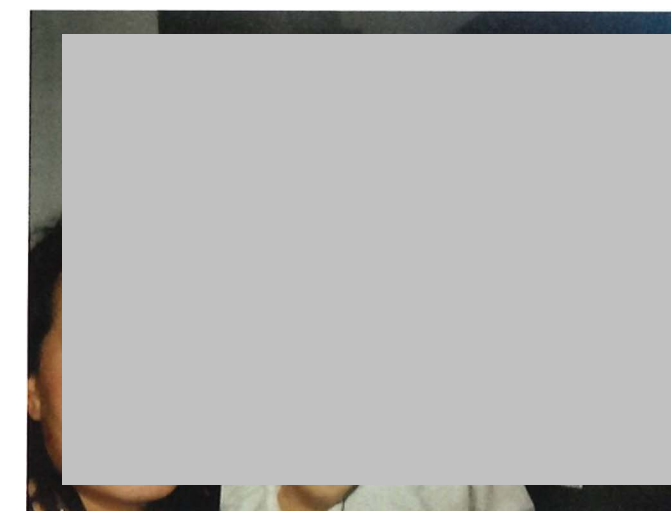
Schantl (2008) makes a case for sculpture in *Die Liebe zu den Objekten*, where they express that its ability to be more in touch with reality is accredited to the fact that it occupies space similarly to humans and objects in everyday life, with painting, where the concept of space is left entirely up to the artists' discretion, falls short of this ability. I believe that painting has the capacity to express the experiences and emotions which I have incorporated in my work just as effectively as I have done through sculpture, however I feel that these messages can hold more weight thanks to the context which sculpture can provide.

My parents' view of sculpture being 'unconventional' or 'lesser' is also what makes it an appropriate discipline to utilise. I think that sculpture, particularly the more contemporary form of it, is an art form which my parents will never be able to fully appreciate as it lacks the display of 'skill' and aestheticism which more 'traditional' mediums of art like painting possess. Their current mindset of art means that an art form which "only involves taking photos of something" (in reference to disciplines such as photography and contemporary sculpture) isn't considered as "real art" because of the lack of skill it may show at a surface level.

From a more cynical standpoint, choosing to explore my idea through sculpture is the literal embodiment of failing to meet the expectations of my parents.

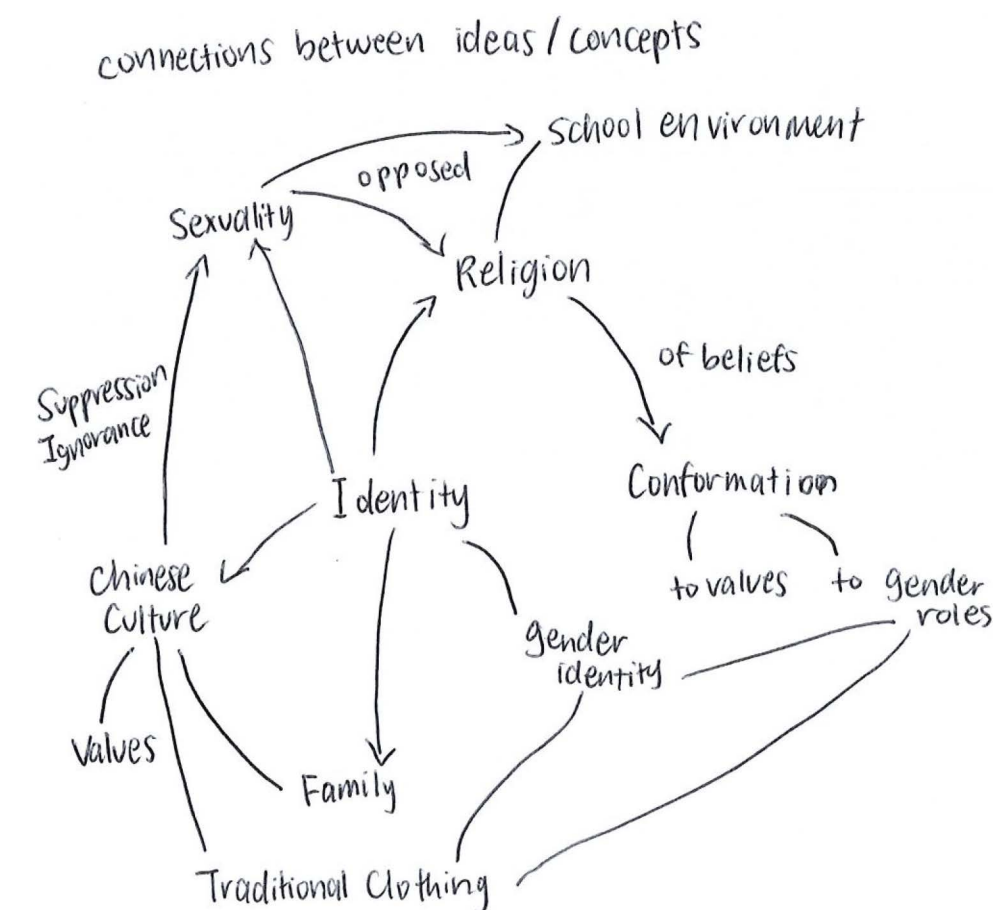
By exploring my theme through sculpture, it reinforces the shifting of my desire and attitudes which I had going into this project. I am no longer trying to prove anything to anyone, with these boards becoming one of the first pieces of art which I am creating for myself. This contrasts my past utilisation of art to seek parental approval or as justification of my worth as a person which, in hindsight, made me hold art at a very low regard, even despising it to a certain extent as I was always under some sort of pressure when creating art. In a way, taking on this project has 'reawakened' my desire to make art, which has led me to pursue the possibility of studying art as a degree in future studies.

Schantl, A. (2008). *Die Liebe zu den Objekten/The Love of Objects*. Springer.



A photo of my parents and I (circa. 2006)

## Brainstorm



## Background Context and Research

### Gender Roles

The presence of gender roles throughout my upbringing was complicated. The dynamic of my parents differed from the stereotypical European belief of men being the absolute dominant head of the house (whilst my dad was the main breadwinner, my mother was considered the major decision maker). However, the idea of “acting like a proper girl” and beauty standards was very much enforced on me, and there was a visible difference in the rules enforced between my brother and I (e.g., the “keep your daughter at home” belief), which could be attributed to difference in age, but my parents have explicitly explained that some of these rules only apply to me because of my gender.

### ‘Filial Piety’

This is a value which was conceived from Confucianism, and stresses the need for respect to one’s elders, parents, and ancestors. It can be exemplified through obedience to one’s parents, which in a way reinforces the idea that a parent’s word is infallible.

### Values and Expectations

The values which I have chosen to put on my board have been intentional. They are values which have been emphasised in my childhood, and ones which I may potentially be breaking (in my parents’ eyes) by identifying as LGBTQ. These are values such as honesty, obedience, righteousness, harmony, etc.

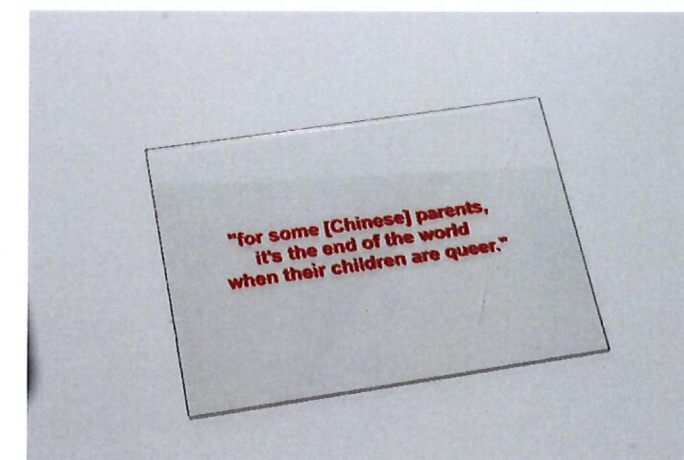
China is home to the world’s largest LGBT community, an achievement which Wang et al. (2020) sees as a direct result of China’s status as the country with the largest population. However, the LGBT community in Chinese society remains ‘largely invisible’ (Wang et al., 2020), which is why the aforementioned ‘large LGBT community’ existing in China comes to the surprise of many. This is due to a wide range of factors, including political decisions, societal pressure, historical influence, etc. Significant influence of Confucianism and collectivist culture in Chinese communities, along with the subsequent pressure which queer Chinese people experience from their family and society which LGBT communities in Western countries may not see as a defining issue in their situations. Emphasis on family honour, dignity, value, and the need to maintain reputation in social circles further suppresses the presence of rainbow individuals, as identifying as LGBTQIA+ is still a considered form of ‘losing face’ (shame) for the individual and their family. Further suggestions from Hildebrant (2017) highlights the stigma which the infamous ‘one-child policy’ had contributed towards the community, pointing out the exacerbation of existing family pressures to conform on children born under the policy, drawing on research from Strommen (1989) and Mallon (2000), who theorised that the presence of siblings can improve one’s ‘coming out process’ as well as the likelihood of familial support. Wang et al. (2020) also draws attention to the historical influence of *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), considered a central doctrine of Confucianism, which stresses the need to obey ‘the rules of nature’, worsening the pressure on LGBTQ+ individuals to conform. Although these concepts and sources of influence did not have an explicit prevalence in my upbringing, the beliefs and stigma which they helped cultivate have played a significant role in my exploration of gender and sexual identity. In my experience, the attitude of the Chinese community which I grew up in toward the topic of the LGBTQIA+ community, combined with the traditional expectations which were placed on me, had led me to believe that the idea of queer Chinese people did not exist; the two identities were supposedly ‘mutually exclusive’.

### Personal Experience

During research, I found a quote from Chinese filmmaker Fan Popo, who said,

**“for some [Chinese] parents, it’s the end of the world when their children are queer.”**

I have asked my parents their opinion on this topic through a hypothetical “How would you feel if I was gay?”. My mother’s response was similar to Fan’s comment on the attitude of Chinese parents, saying that while she wouldn’t kick me out, she would be “very disappointed”.



### Emotional Vulnerability

Something which made it difficult for me to investigate this theme was my inability to fully express my feelings about these topics. This is both because I got used to repressing my own feelings, but also because it’s not really in a Chinese family’s nature to openly discuss feelings. We’re not very expressive people.

### Post-Research Reflection

I was very surprised at the visibility and amount of research about the topic of queer people in China, considering what I thought was very heavy suppression of these people and their experiences. It validated how I felt about my own family and situation, as I previously felt guilty for holding them in a slightly negative light over this disagreement.

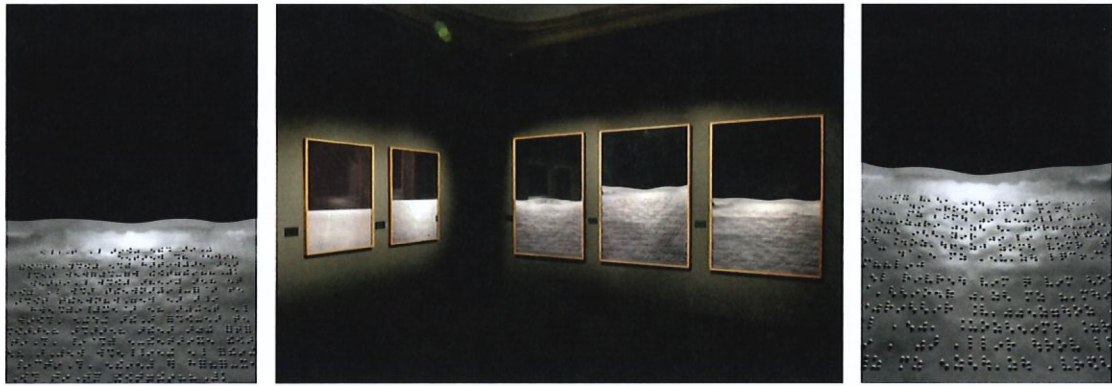
Hildebrant, T. (2017). The one-child policy, eldercare, and LGB Chinese: A social policy explanation for family pressure.

Wang, Y., Hu, Z., Peng, K., Rechdan, J., Yang, Y., Wu, L., Xin, Y., Lin, J., Duan, Z., Zhu, X., Feng, Y., Chen, S., Ou, J., Chen, R. (2020). Mapping out a spectrum of the Chinese public's discrimination toward the LGBT community: results from a national survey. *BMC Public Health* 20(1), 669. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08834-y>

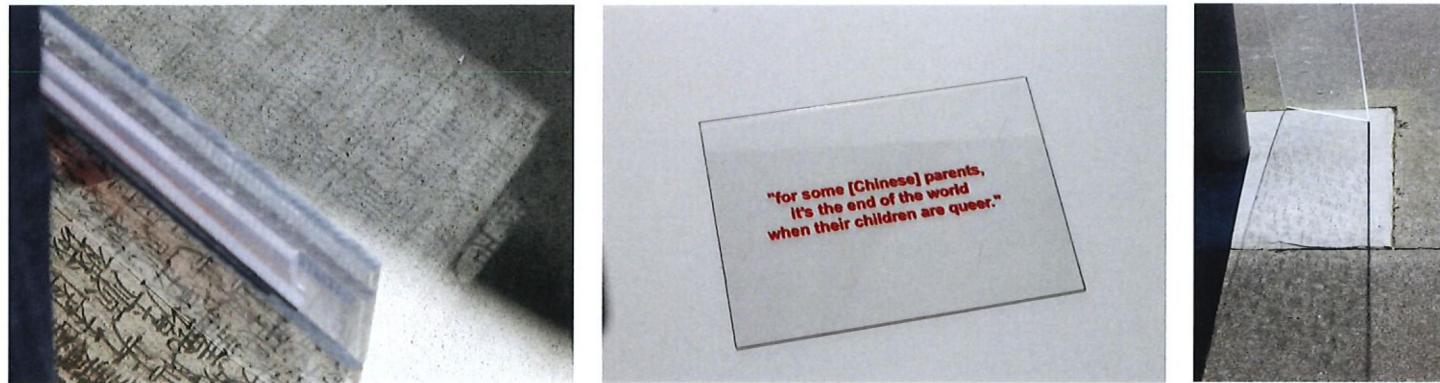
Williams, S. (2020). *Why China's LGBT hide their identities at Lunar New Year*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51199309>

## Language Barriers

Many of the works on my boards utilise Chinese characters as a way of representing the values and expectations present in a Chinese household during a child's upbringing. This also means that only a small percentage of people viewing the board are able to piece together the meaning behind some of the works, especially when the meaning of the characters plays a big part in providing context. People viewing it without the help of the Chinese definitions would therefore feel more detached to the work itself, which could be seen as a replication of the detachment that children raised overseas (away from their home countries) may feel towards their respective cultures. The feeling of exclusion felt by someone who does not speak Chinese is also in reference to the experience that many immigrants feel when coming from a country where a certain language (predominantly English) they do not know is the dominant language.



This particular work was inspired by **Joan Fontcuberta's** work titled **Semiópolis**, which features close-up photos of relevant texts in literature such as the Bible or the Odyssey scripted in Braille. I remember being impressed with the paradox which Fontcuberta had created with his work – where the people who can decipher braille cannot see the text, and those who can physically see the text are unable to decipher it. I tried to incorporate this idea into my own art, where only a small percentage of viewers can fully understand the meaning behind the work.



The acrylic panel with the clear vinyl stuck to it represents how sometimes the cause/reason of someone's problems can't always be visibly seen – just as the clear vinyl is very barely visible. The shadow which the clear vinyl casts onto the concrete behind it is the effect/consequences of the pressure, in the way where it is more visible than the vinyl. This is also in reference to the practice of 'saving face' in Chinese culture, in which families will hide any form of imperfection in the presence of outsiders.

## Embarrassment

Personally, this set of work (vinyl on acrylic) was one of the hardest for me to work through, as I felt a lot of hesitation with putting the work out and on my board. While I did intentionally use Chinese characters to conceal a part of what I was thinking and feeling, I felt that I was unable to claim my Chinese heritage, being born and raised in a country overseas. These beliefs have been reinforced by my parents, saying that my brother and I aren't "real Chinese people". I became extremely cautious about working about people who could potentially read and understand the words I was putting on my work, such as the Chinese international students, and would be generally uncomfortable to explain the meanings to people who ask me about it. This also applied to whenever I used English on one of the acrylic panels, I was very resistant to the idea at first, and still felt unsure about it afterwards because of how hyperaware I was about everyone having what seemed like a close up view of my emotions.

## Reconstruction



These pieces were loosely inspired by the work of **Bouke de Vries**, specifically his collection of works titled **'Memory Vessels'**, where the found 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery, porcelain, and earthenware pieces of various (Asian, European, Delft) origins are kept in their deconstructed form, but in a glass replica of its former shape. Through this, the artist celebrates the beauty in destruction, whilst commenting on the 'condition' of the object and how something valuable can decrease in value to almost worthless solely on the presence of an imperfection.

I liked the idea of restoring a broken object back into a resemblance of its original form and found that the easiest way to do that was through simply taping the plates back up. However, the difference between the work that I have produced when compared to the work of the artist model is also quite significant. 'Memory Vessels' does not attempt to reconstruct the object back into its exact original form whilst I have attempted to 'fix' the plates again, almost as an attempt to hide the fact that they were broken in the first place.

I also attempted to incorporate symbolism in my use of plates. The first plate is evidently more 'Chinese' in appearance, despite the lack of Chinese characters which I used in the fixing of it. Symbolism existing on the plate is a clear of what Chinese people value: good luck, strength, and good health. The second plate, on the other hand, is a blank, more 'Western' plate, and required the use of tape with the Chinese characters on it, which could symbolise the dissonance felt between immigrant children and their culture. It could also be interpreted as either 'cracking under the pressure of expectations' or 'being held together by expectations', both interpretations having their own positive and negative connotations.



## Feeling Lost Amongst an Identity



This work is what I consider to be the first development in my process leading up to the Hanfu work. I have inked the same values present across my board thus far on a big sheet of newsprint, which acts as a cover or a mask to the model, as it obscures their face and majority of their body.

While I technically had no choice when it came to taking photos in the school environment, the context and meaning which it provided to the work. To me, school is a place where all aspects of my identity feel most at balance, and it was where I felt most like myself and felt comfortable expressing these aspects, despite the looming ideas of Catholicism. It also reinforces the idea that I go through a 'change' when I transition from my home life to my school life, through the idea of putting on mask or a 'second skin' when I am in different contexts.



The meaning of this is comparable to the works **Family Tree** 家谱 and **Shanghai Family Tree** by **Zhang Huan** 張洵. He comments on his interpretation on the work, saying that "My features disappeared entirely, nobody could tell the colour of my skin. It was as if I no longer had an identity. I disappeared." This theme is something which carries onto other pieces of work, such as the acrylic panels and the word projections, where part of a person or the whole person is concealed/obscured by something else, usually with the Chinese characters representing my family's expectations incorporated on them.

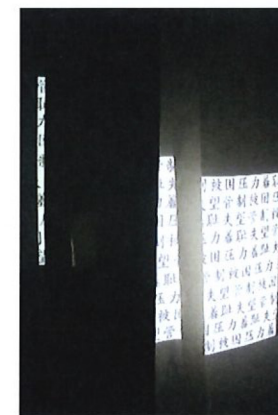


## Destruction/Deconstruction

The theme of Destruction or Deconstruction is very prevalent throughout my work, with most of the objects I create or work with being destroyed in some way.



An artist which I had looked to for inspiration was **Ai Weiwei**, and his response to the criticism of the piece, **'Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn'**. His counter involved a quote from Chairman Mao Zedong, and his idea that the only way to build a new world is to destroy the old one. I think that this response fits the direction of my work, as the destruction which is involved symbolises a 'breaking out' from past expectations or burdens put onto me in order to become more comfortable with who I am. It could also represent my inability to meet the expectations set for me and the negative consequences which it has brought to my life and my relationship with my parents.

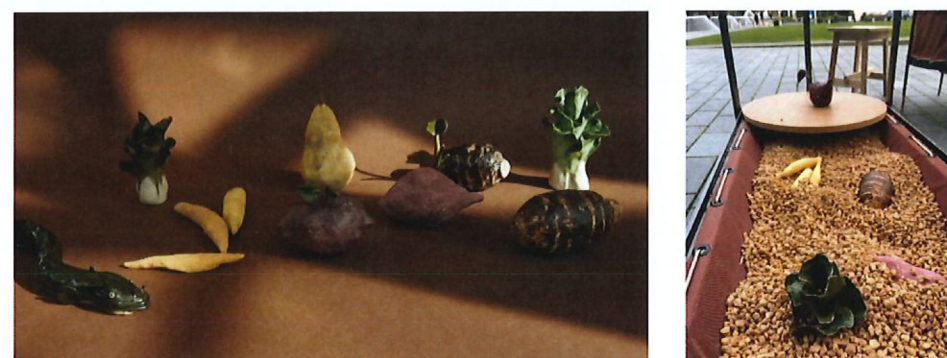
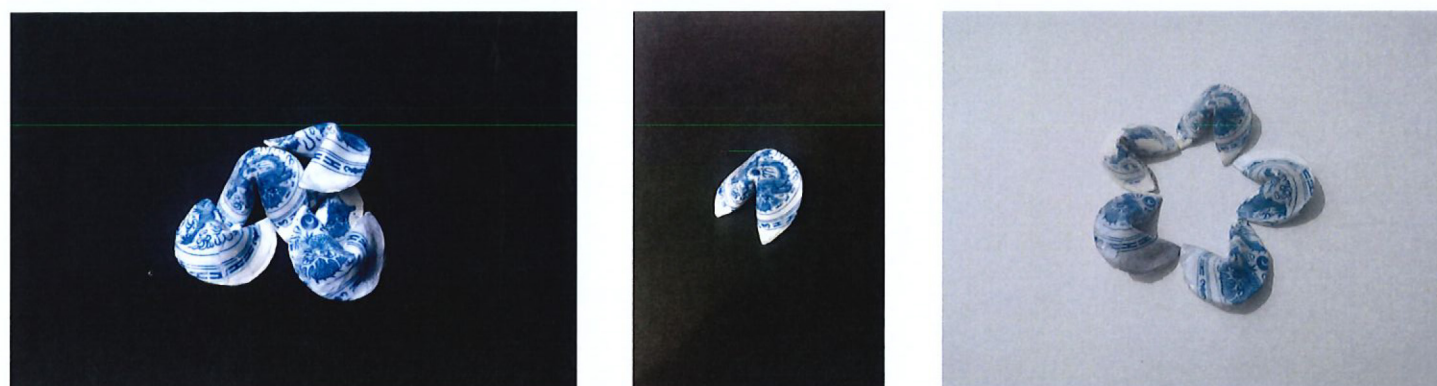


## Projection Work

Influence for this set of work is inspired by the projections done by Pipilotti Rist. I played around with the idea of having a large area of space with the Chinese values projected onto it which overwhelms the viewer, simulating the overwhelming feeling of being trapped under expectations. If I were to have disposable income and more access to resources, I would have liked to try and fill an entire room up with the projections.

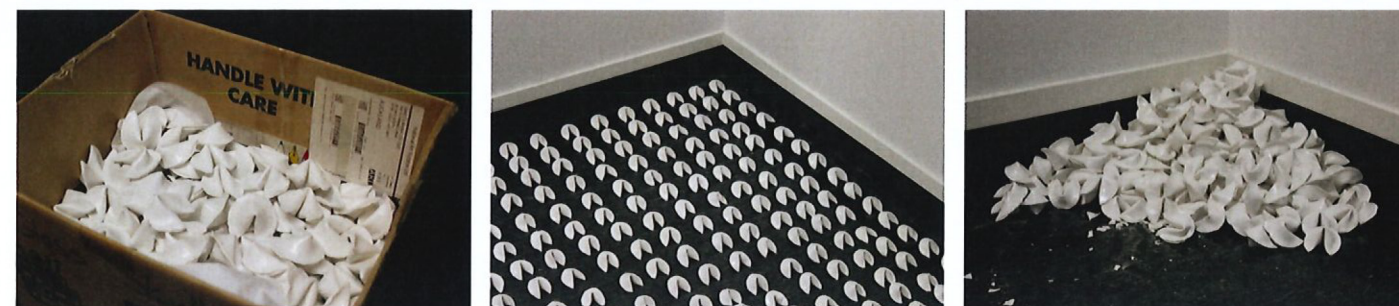


## Fortune Cookies



I was inspired by a recent work of **Cindy Huang**, titled **Twin Cultivation**. Creating art of these common foods in a way elevates them into a slightly higher position – what was once a commodity is seen as something which people admire or want to own. By transferring the same pattern as the patterned plate on Board 1, it is mimicking the way that people can only be elevated if they are willing to use their culture as representation, bringing the topic of tokenism into question. The five fortune cookies which I chose to transfer the pattern on also happened to be the ones with the most obvious imperfections which, like the work of Bouke de Vries, calls into question the value of an object in relation to its condition as well as the act of covering up the imperfections or anomalies for the sake of conformity.

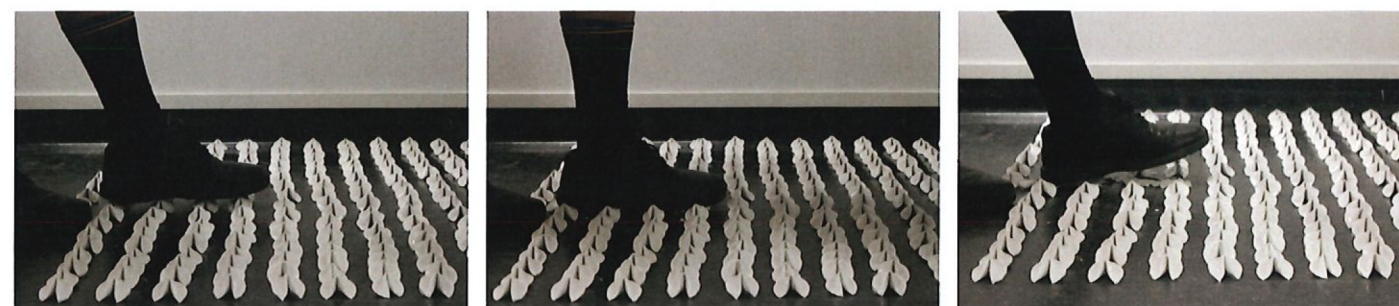
Fortune cookies may not be Chinese – there are many theories as to where they originated from, with one of the most acknowledged theories pointing to Japan as the origin of the cookie. It was said that Japanese bakeries in America at the time were making cookies called *senbei*, and the Chinese takeaway restaurants started producing their own versions to compensate for the lack of desserts on their menu. It has since become closely associated with Chinese takeaway, but also seen as an attempt to create something catering toward the American society, especially when things like cookies for desserts rarely appear on the menus of Chinese cuisine. I have incorporated these rumoured origins into my own work, and the fortune cookies represent an assimilation into Western culture. They also represent a sort of uncertainty in identity which I have felt, especially with the conflict that arises between identifying as LGBT and being raised Chinese.



The process of making these fortune cookies was very repetitive and mindless, resembling that of the mass production attitude – as long as they all turned out the same way I would just continue making the next few ones without too much thought into what I was doing. This mirrors the similarities in standard that many Chinese families set for their children, which contributes to this process of creating many copies of what they consider to be “The Perfect Child”. On a more cheerful note, the process of creating these cookies reminded me of Chinese (Lunar) New Year, and the tradition my (and possibly many other) family have of making dumplings.



The extreme number of fortune cookies was influenced by **Sunflower Seeds** by **Ai Weiwei**. Due to the way they are laid out, it is very apparent when something has been broken or stepped on, referencing the apparent consequences which come with failing to conform



## Hanfu 汉服 ('Straitjacket')

This work's initial inspiration came from a project I found online from university student **Brett Park**, where he had cardboard puffer jacket in the style of a Korean hanbok, responding to the prompt, "make armour out of cardboard", where his initial idea took the form of a shield. Park's idea then developed from his experience with body image insecurities and how he used oversized clothing to 'shield' and cope with that insecurity. Themes of masculinity and femininity were later incorporated, as he reflected on the traditional masculine expectations enforced by both his Korean culture and American society which he lives in. Self-identifying as a "pretty feminine person", Park expressed his inability to fulfil those expectations, recounting the 'more masculine' front which he put up to family members and friends. The Korean hanbok is a symbol of the masculinity enforced from his Korean heritage, with the oversized aspect mirroring how Park used to wear oversized clothes to "make my frame look larger". Through this piece, Park wanted to communicate "how the **formed culture of masculinity** in his life had **limited his freedom of self-expression.**"



brettpaint. (2021, October 14). *MIDTERMS IN ART SCHOOL* // making a puffer jacket out of cardboard [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/564mmQTcjl5>

## Background and History

'Hanfu' refers to the traditional style of clothing worn by the Han Chinese. While this style of dress has changed over time, it can still be identified at any stage in its evolution and typically consists of a skirt, an upper robe, and an outer jacket. Along with the Cheongsam/Qipao, it has been recognised as traditional cultural wear of the Han Chinese people, and is currently experiencing a fashion revival amongst young Chinese people, both within China and overseas.



## Material Symbolism

The title which I had given this piece was '**Straitjacket**'

Use of newsprint paper during the construction of the Hanfu garment portrays the stiff and restricting nature of the traditional expectations that I was raised upon, while also being able to show the feeling of fragility in one's identity. There is contradiction between the queer community and the traditional Chinese upbringing I had. Screen-printing of words representing Chinese values (which were prominent in my upbringing), further transforms this Hanfu into a portrayal of attempting to mould someone into what is 'expected' of them and the consequences that come with it to the detriment of the wearer – as the Hanfu tears and breaks the longer it is being worn.

## Relation to Gender

In terms of the Hanfu, there isn't too big of a difference between the male version and the female version, however I did base my one off of a picture of the female version. This is in reference to an attempt to conform to the traditional expectations which have been put on me as a biological female, which is reflected in the pose of the model in an attempt to portray modesty.



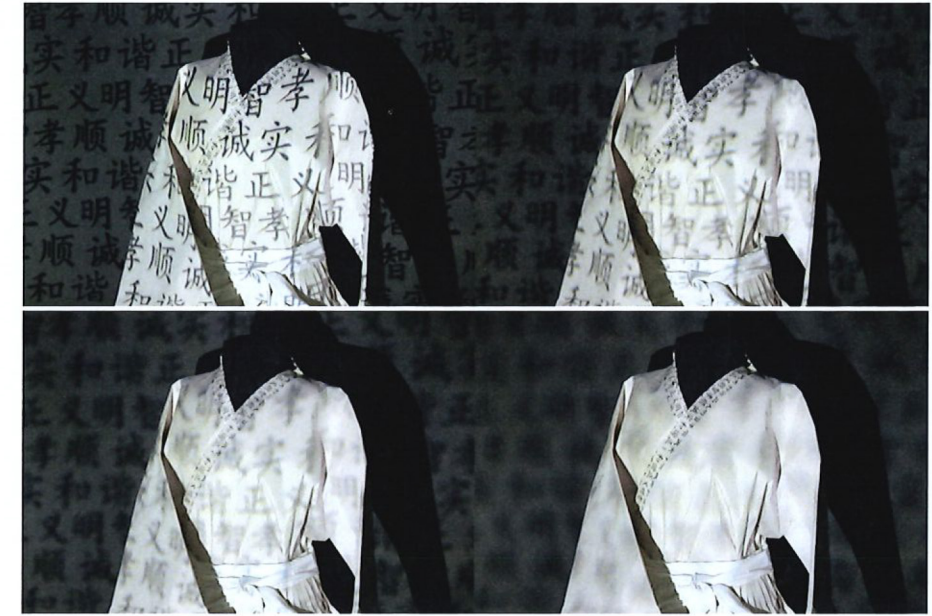
## Process

The process of planning, printing, and constructing this paper Hanfu took me just under a term to complete, part of this is due to my need to have everything perfect, however another reason was because the newsprint was a lot more fragile than I initially anticipated, and I spent a lot of time having to patch and fix up the Hanfu.

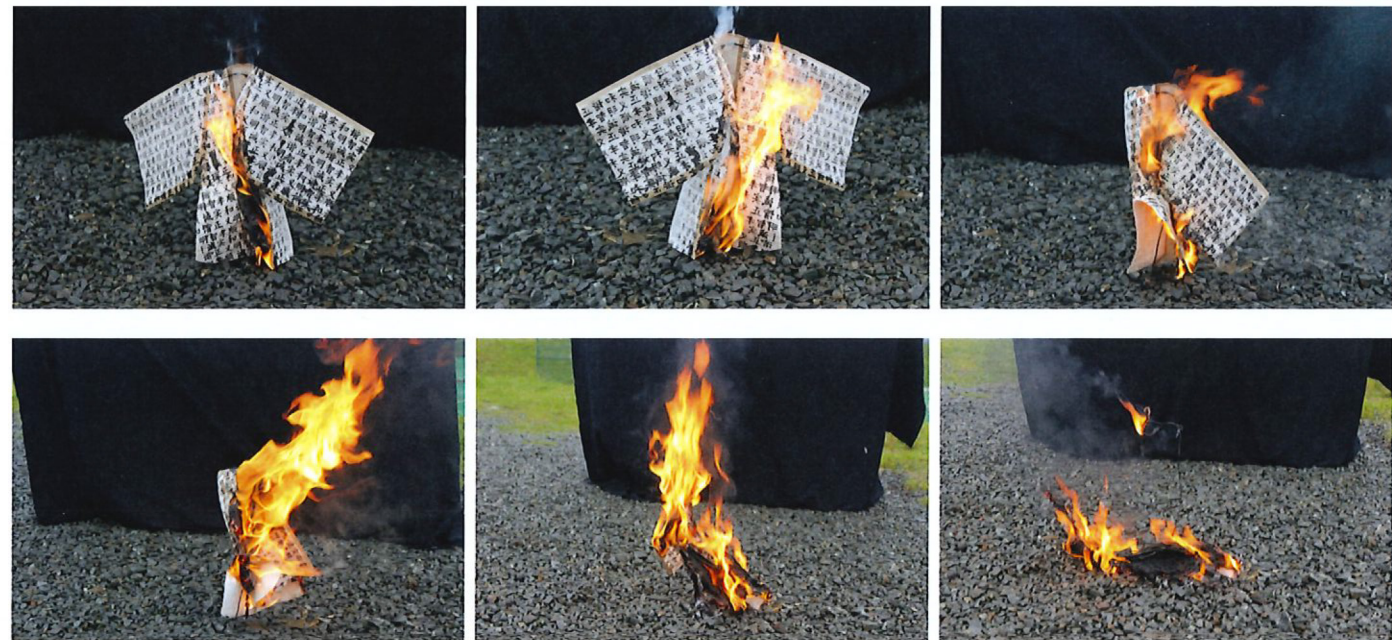


## Projection Work

This work is also takes inspiration from **Zhang Huan's Family Tree**. However, instead of increasing the influence or presence of a person's identity, the influence which the values has on the piece is slowly decreasing, which serves as a 'turning point' in the piece.



## Destruction



- References bible quote "For you are dust, And to dust you shall return" as the Hanfu burns down
- Key words, destruction, disintegration
- Burning almost symbolises rebirth

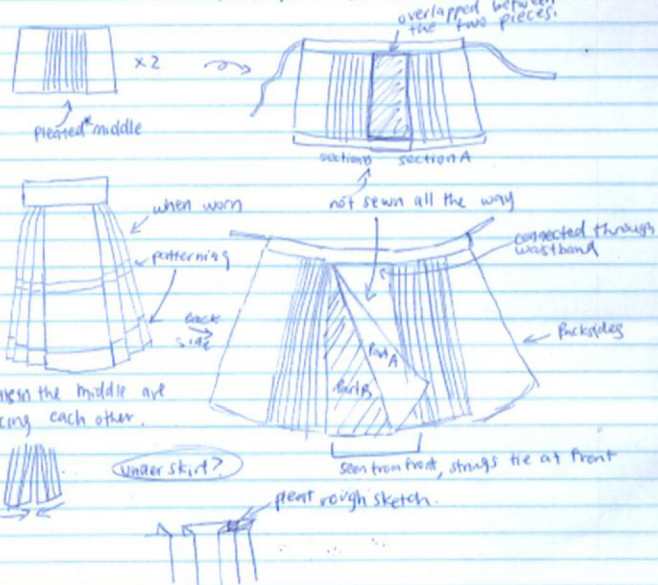
## ART SCULPTURE

### Hanfu Layout - Version 2

SKIRT: Horse Face (Pleated) Skirt '马面'  
↳ Similar to Box Pleat Method?

Method:

Two pieces of cloth, overlapped, symmetrical.



Note: 'Pleated Panels' need to be bigger/wider than 'horse face' panels - they shrink/get thinner after pleating.

## Moving Forward

### Conceptualism

A historical art movement born out of the 1960s, conceptualism questioned the commercial nature of the art establishment at the time, where it was often seen as decoration for the wealthy. It sought to dematerialise art through placing emphasis on the idea or concept behind the art as “the art itself”, thus distancing artists from the notion of art being used merely as decoration. It is defined by certain characteristics, such as the seeing the artwork as an idea and not the execution, as well as freeing the artist from the traditional constraints of beauty, skill, and aestheticism. Marcel Duchamp’s work with ready-made objects is looked to as a foundation to the conceptual art tradition, along with the introduction of more obscure materials and processes which came with minimal art.

Going into this project, I was looking into a lot of conceptual art as I assumed that because I wanted my work to carry a lot of meaning, the only form of art I could turn to was conceptualism. However, I feel that I am unable to classify my end works under conceptualism because the process, execution and materials of the art themselves did matter, holding equal importance to the ideas of the art.

Contemporary Art Issue. (2022, January 24). *Conceptual Art: Definition, Characteristics & 25 Artists Who Defined Conceptual Art* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IGii1o3q98>

### Reflection and Personal Growth

Over the course of the year, I have made a lot of progress in becoming my own person, some of which can be attributed to the investigations which I have undertaken in the creation of my work.

I was able to formally come out to my close friends and some teachers at my school and have found that I have become more accepting of my own identity and more comfortable with myself.

I also started seeing a counsellor at the school, which could be seen as a big step, considering the stigma which mental health holds in Asian communities. This has also aided me in working through my emotions and improving my skills in emotional vulnerability.

Sculpture has also helped repair my relationship with art, as it was something which I saw with some element of distaste or dread prior to this year as I never did art just for myself or my enjoyment beforehand. This has led to my decision to pursue an art degree next year at university.

### Identity Art and the Issue of Rainbow Symbolism

An established rule which I had set for myself before pursuing this theme was the refusal to use symbols which were stereotypically employed to represent the LGBTQIA+ community. This included, most notably, any use of rainbows or flags in my art. There were many reasons as to why I set this rule, one being the general feeling that the rainbow symbolism was tacky and overused, especially after experiencing the rise of major companies “rainbow-washing” their products to benefit off events such as Pride month. Another issue with using very symbolism, such as the rainbow, which would point directly to the queer community was that I was not sure if I was ready to outright come out when I started this project. While I did feel ready to begin discussing it, I was still attending a Catholic school and was aware of the potential hostile environment that I may be subjected to, had I revealed those parts of myself. By not employing the use of easily recognisable symbolism, I was able to have an element of deniability to people I wasn’t ready to talk to yet, such as my parents or certain teachers.

In doing so, I ran the risk of exacerbating of the already apparent issues with investigating a theme that fell under the umbrella of identity art.

Identity Art is the umbrella term for art conceived out of the criticism that the existing ‘standard’ of art and its market was built off and benefitted the white, male, heteronormative experience. The term covers all forms of artistic practice which prioritises the question of an artist’s identity and seeks to address the imbalances caused by pre-existing biases, whilst uplifting the work of people systematically disadvantaged as a result of those biases.

### Unused Ideas/Scrapped Work

An idea which was explored briefly in the planning of works was to make a plastic pop-out and assemble figurine. The aim of the piece would have been to continue the exploration of the mass production concept – something previously touched upon in the fortune cookies work. It would have also been in reference to the idea of “building the perfect child”, signifying the sometimes-extreme practices which Chinese families have gone thru to make their child seem perfect. This ranges from practices such as forcing a left-handed child to become right-handed, all the way to the infamous foot-binding.



If I were to continue onto a fourth board, an artist that I would have drawn inspiration from would be Jamil Hellu, who created a piece titled “Be My Guest”, addressing the taboo which the topic of homosexuality usually carries. His work uses the Victorian-style furniture layout as a metaphor for repression, juxtaposing the explicit and unruly patterning of the cloth.



If I were to pursue this as inspiration, it would have probably meant the continued use of the repeated Chinese characters currently visible throughout my board, as well as the continued use of daily household commodities such as clothing, cutlery, furniture, etc. as a vessel for symbolism.

Another artist model whose work I would have looked at further would be Patty Carroll, which I feel could have been further continuation of the repression theme and use of the patterned cloth.



I think the idea of expressing being hidden or blending in under an aspect of your identity is something that has already been explored in some of my works, and this work would link in with Zhang Huan’s work, Family Tree.

In the initial planning stage of my board, I was very interested in the works of ceramic artists such as Livia Marín (Nomad Patterns), which was where I started incorporating the themes of deconstruction in my work. I was unable to actually do any ceramic work due to the pandemic making it hard to access, however as I went along, I found better ways to express my ideas, and found that I no longer had a desire to rely on ceramics to get my message across

