

# Island



留学有时候像一场漫长的冬天。  
语言听不懂，食物吃不惯，  
人际全靠重新建立。

刚来的时候谁都笑得很温柔，

可没人真正靠近你。

你不知道怎么才能“融入”  
也不想完全“变成他们”。

就卡在中间像个

尴尬的异乡人。

但很奇妙

也就是在这个夹缝中

你开始明白自己是谁，

喜欢什么，不喜欢什么。

你开始不再讨好别人，

也不再苛责自己。

等你走出这个冬天你会发现，

你不是变得更像别人了，

而是终于更像自己了。

## COLOPHON

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# The Neo-Solitary Island

A visual inquiry into 文化错位(cultural dislocation) using 梦核 (dreamcore) collage

This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design (MDes).

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## Abstract

This practice-based research investigates how the visual strategy of Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) aesthetics can be applied through collage video to express the identity crisis and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) experienced by Chinese international students. It asks:

How might Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) aesthetics be used in collage video to express the identity crisis and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) experienced by a Chinese international student in a foreign cultural context?

Rooted in my personal experiences as a Chinese student living abroad, the project consists of a series of short experimental videos constructed through collage-based methods. These works draw upon symbolic objects, fragmented memories, and observations from everyday life. In creating the work, I employ a distinctly subjective visual language.

Rejecting traditional narrative structures, the work embraces symbolic metaphors to evoke emotional resonance and visual intensity. The merging of personal memory, cultural imagery and aesthetic codes speaks to states of consciousness through edited video composition, where familiar yet uncanny places and people are juxtaposed to elicit feelings of nostalgia, *anemoia*<sup>1</sup> or confusion. In so doing, the project critically examines the psychological and cultural tension inherent in dislocated identity.

This research contributes to the field of moving image practice by offering a non-linear, symbol-driven mode of expression of diasporic experience, while expanding the conceptual and aesthetic potential of collage video through a uniquely Chinese lens.

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<sup>1</sup> Feelings of nostalgia for a time that one has never experienced (Koenig, 2021).

## Acknowledgements

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## Table of Images

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/>

## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

7th May 2026

## Intellectual Property Declaration

I retain copyright in all images and creative work produced and presented as part of this thesis apart from the following images that are the intellectual property of others listed below in the order they appear in this exegesis:

Figure 3.1. A streetscape from artist Huang Heshan's (@黄河山 hhs) 3D work "Too Late City" (秃力城) (2022)

Figure 3.2. A scene of a deserted Chinese street from the independent game 0 (2024)

7th May 2026

## **Ethics Approval and Consents**

This research was an artistic inquiry that did not involve using animal or human participants, personal information, clinical trials, or a solicited response from an audience. Accordingly, it did not require ethical approval.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

In an era where digital aesthetics increasingly serve as a medium for personal storytelling and cultural reflection, this study turns to the phenomenon of Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) as a lens to explore identity and belonging.

Accordingly, the study asks,

How might Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) aesthetics be used in collage video to express the identity crisis and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) experienced by a Chinese international student in a foreign cultural context?

### Rationale

In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese students have chosen to study abroad, and relevant studies indicate that they commonly face pressures related to cultural adaptation, language communication, forging new social connections, and mental health (Ching et al., 2017; Guy, 2018; Yu et al., 2023). In cross-cultural environments, individuals often experience 文化错位 (cultural dislocation), identity conflicts, and feelings of isolation, experiences that are frequently overlooked in public narratives and mainstream media (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Moreover, Generation Z (as a highly digitalised demographic growing up in a globalised and internet-mediated environment) exhibit aesthetic preferences, narrative styles, and emotional expressions that differ markedly from previous generations. These reveal significant tendencies toward the expression of collective nostalgia and fragmented modes of perception (Eijssker, 2021; Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Cross-national surveys indicate that Chinese students seek professional mental-health support at significantly lower rates than other international cohorts (Forbes-Mewett, 2022; Wu et al., 2021). Rather than a lack of resources, the core barrier lies in the inability of existing discursive frameworks to translate their "in-between" emotional experiences. Liu-Farrer (2020) note that these are neither fully captured by the homeland's nostalgic narratives nor seamlessly absorbed into the host society's multicultural rhetoric. Current scholarship predominantly centres on language adjustment or academic performance, leaving under-examined how fragmented memories, surreal dreams, and internet memes have become the tacit vocabulary of self-narration among these students (Hjorth & Lim, 2021). This project, therefore, employs dreamcore aesthetics and multi-layered collage video to register and articulate these otherwise ineffable affects. The approach gives voice to experiences of certain Chinese students studying abroad.

### Significance

The research proposes two significant contributions.

***Cross-Cultural Identity and 文化错位 (Cultural Dislocation)***

First, it artistically considers identity challenges faced by Chinese students living in cross-cultural contexts. In so doing, it presents experiences of disorientation, fragmentation, and self-reconstruction as contributors to a state of 文化错位 (cultural dislocation). Significantly, the study emphasises a micro-level emotional dimension, connecting individual experiences with Generation Z's collective nostalgic tendencies. By employing collage video and Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) visual strategies, the study provides a visual avenue for expressing overlooked aspects of international students' identity struggles.

### ***Chinese Dreamcore and Collage Video***

The study also positions Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) as a central aesthetic strategy, using collage video to explore the multi-layered and symbolic form of visual expression. It investigates how, within the context of this approach, old objects, memory fragments, and surreal visual elements can be recombined to generate new expressive possibilities. On a technical level, the research also examines the integration of handmade and digital collage techniques, and methods for transitioning from static images to dynamic video. Approaches include interactive video design, stream-of-consciousness collage, and the combination of manual and digital techniques, that are employed to enhance visual depth, symbolic expressiveness, and nuanced expression.

### **Key terms in the study**

Given the distinctive use of Chinese concepts and technical/stylistic approaches employed in the thesis, it is useful to define five key terms that permeate discussions in this exegesis.

#### ***Affective Coloniality***

情感殖民性 (*Affective coloniality*) refers to embedded and eventually normalised ways that feelings and emotional responses are shaped by colonial power structures and legacies. In reference to media, the term refers to the manner in which individuals and groups are culturally reshaped to experience, express, and understand feelings by dominant cultures. Shome (2016) and Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that mainstream Western platforms quietly implant “desire frameworks” via aesthetic conventions, rhythmic templates, and algorithmic curation, prompting non-Western users to internalise alter-affective scripts under the illusion of free choice. The approach reinforces neo-imperial norms through what Hardt and Negri describe as “biopower” - a form of rule that “regulates social life from its interior” (2000, p. 24). The collage video method employed in the project converts affective coloniality into audiovisual expression that exposes rather than smooths out its operative processes (Manovich, 2001; Marks, 2002; Steyerl, 2009).

#### ***Chinese Dreamcore***

中式梦核 (*Chinese dreamcore*) is a localised visual style derived from the Western dreamcore aesthetic, which began circulating on the Chinese internet platforms around 2020 (Huang & Liu, 2024; Yao, 2024). The seemingly naïve aesthetic integrates urban memories, hybrid urban-rural spaces, childhood objects, and digital media textures from the post-millennium period (circa 1995–2010). Characterised by low fidelity, retro colour tones, blurred visuals, and nostalgic atmospheres, it constructs a “psychic liminal space” between reality and dream, projecting the emotional experiences of Generation Z amidst identity flux and social anxiety (Huang & Liu, 2024; Yao, 2024). The style functions as a contemporary visual expression and

emotional language that symbolises collective nostalgia and psychological compensation in the digital era (Huang & Liu, 2024).

### **文化错位 (*Cultural Dislocation*)**

文化错位 (*Cultural dislocation*) refers to the sense of estrangement and identity conflict experienced by individuals in cross-cultural environments. The term refers to the dynamic negotiation of identity and belonging that occurs when individuals move from one culturally organised environment to another that has markedly different practices. This can often be a transition that disrupts and reshapes self-functioning (Dajani, 2018, p. 14; Nayar, 2016, p. 24).

### **Collage Video**

*Video collage* describes a non-linear video editing approach that recombines multi-source images, text, and objects (Agarwala et al., 2004). It emphasises a sense of "sewing" and fragmentation (Huang et al., 2011, p. 1). The technique breaks the constraints of traditional linear narratives, enabling one to construct a more flexible and nuanced form of visual expression.

### **新寻根 (*Neo-Root-Seeking*)**

新寻根 *Neo-Root-Seeking* continues and reinterprets the Chinese "root-seeking literature" that was regarded as a pivotal component of the mid-1980s Culture Fever. The movement employed a contemporary perspective to re-evaluate the radically severed values of traditional Chinese culture (Wang, 2008). Root-seeking is characterised in the digital era, by self-reflection, cultural fragmentation, and emotional dislocation. The concept emphasises the process through which individuals explore and reconstruct their cultural identity via digital media within a globalised context.

### **新孤岛 (*Neo-Solitary Island*)**

新孤岛 *Neo-Solitary Island* is a neologism I have constructed that alludes to 孤岛文学 (Chinese Solitary Island literature) of the 1930s. The movement emerged in Shanghai's foreign concessions during the Second World War and was distinguished by its reflections on cultural isolation and resilience (Huang, 1994; Lee, 1999). *Neo-Solitary Island* addresses the fragmented identity and spiritual dislocation experienced in an age of globalisation, digitalisation, and cultural mobility. I use the term *Neo* to describe a contemporary revisiting of the movement's concerns with loneliness and estrangement but in this thesis *solitary island* is also associated with how individuals may feel alienated in highly digitalised societies, amidst information overload and social networks.

Although 新寻根 (*Neo-Root-Seeking*) and 新孤岛 (*Neo-Solitary Island*) arose as literary forms in different times and contexts, the core themes they address (identity, cultural disjunction, and spiritual displacement) resonate strongly with the ethos and concerns of the thesis project.

## **The nature of the research practice**

The practical component of the research consists of three animated dreamcore collage videos, each accompanied by a poetic text and short piece of explanatory prose. Together, these elements form an interconnected body of work that explores the fragmented and unstable nature of identity in cross-cultural contexts.

The three animated collages are:

- *Smile* (2025), (1:06 minutes)
- *Skin* (2026), (1:02 minutes)
- *Alone Together*, (0:32 minutes)

Each video is constructed using found footage, personal archival material, and digitally manipulated imagery. The visual language draws on the aesthetics of Chinese dreamcore that is characterised by temporal disjunction, low-resolution textures, and emotionally ambiguous imagery. Rather than presenting a linear narrative, the works employ fragmentation, repetition, and visual dislocation to evoke a sense of estrangement and instability.

In the exhibition, the videos are presented on discrete screens. The animations loop continuously, allowing viewers to enter and exit the work at any point in time. Associated poems and prose are positioned beside the relevant screen.

### **The structure of the exegesis**

This exegesis comprises six chapters. Chapter One outlines the research question, the rationale for the study and significance of its contribution. It also defines specific terms in the thesis and describes the practical work and structure of the exegesis. Chapter Two subjectively positions the researcher, establishing the emotional and cultural basis of the inquiry. Chapter Three reviews relevant knowledge relating to 梦核 (Chinese dreamcore aesthetics), collage video and identity theory. Chapter Four discusses the thesis' research methods, creative workflow, and material strategies. Chapter Five critically reflects on the three animated videos, focusing on concept, content and each work's accompanying poem. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the study and discusses possible future directions for practice and theory.

\*\*\*

The research project did not begin as an academic problem. It grew from a personal necessity and expressive impulse. Because of this, in the next chapter I position myself as the researcher and address the question, "From what trajectory did the study surface?" In so doing, I describe how my personal history, familial background, media environment, and cultural identity have shaped the project.



## CHAPTER TWO: POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

### A Dreamcore Childhood

I grew up in a small county called Fanchang where my mother ran a bookstore and a DVD shop. Its spaces were filled with discs, images, and stories that shaped my earliest experiences with media. During this time, my older sister brought home the *Goosebumps* series. In one narrative there is a scene where worms crawl out of a book. This gave me my first sense of a “surreal shock”. In that moment, I realised that storytelling could break the boundaries of reality, producing both unsettling and fantastic feelings. Later, when my mother's bookstore transitioned to a DVD shop, discs and tapes became my main childhood entertainment and I often watched, and listened to them in the store (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). One of my most vivid memories is watching *Kill Bill* on DVD at a very young age. The cross-media expression, blending comic-style imagery and live-action footage, amazed me and although I couldn't fully grasp the story at the time, the hybrid form and playful deviations left a lasting impression.

Today, those discs and tapes have lost their practical function, yet as “old objects” they crystallise my childhood memories. Dreamcore aesthetics place “old objects” in new contexts, and the approach enables contemporary artists to creatively address a nostalgic sense of 文化错位 (cultural dislocation).

In retrospect I can see that my memories of my mother's DVD shop mark the starting point for my engagement with dreamcore.



Figure 2.1. Two vintage wooden chests containing DVDs and cassette tapes (circa. 1950). These chests originally served as dowry items from my grandmother to my mother. Despite numerous relocations, my mother has consistently preserved them along with their contents.



Figure 2.2. Open chests revealing the collection of DVDs and cassette tapes. The contents include popular film, television, and music titles that once enjoyed widespread commercial success.

### A “Solitary Island”

My first time leaving China was to study in New Zealand. In the first few months, I experienced high levels of cultural shock: familiar languages, skills, and daily routines suddenly “failed” in this new environment. Although there was a certain sense of community among international students, differences were equally apparent, and everyone seemed like a floating individual. This feeling of isolation deepened over time. Communication with friends back home was disrupted by time zones and distance and, gradually, we lost the shared routines we once had.

Over time, our original group ties loosened and while trying to find my place in the new environment, I felt like an old DVD, unable to be read in a new player.

This experience gradually caused me to realise that the situation of international students may be likened to a “solitary island”; seemingly connected to the world but internally mired in separation. I experience profound levels of 文化错位 (cultural dislocation). My “state of being” resonates with the ethos of 中式梦核 (Chinese dreamcore aesthetics). Here, periods of societal tension inspire nostalgia for a not-so-distant past, and the approach provides a kind of “cyber refuge” for present anxieties. Using 梦核 (dreamcore) as a stylistic and conceptual orientation, I am able to form emotional communities through nostalgic connection. I use the aesthetic as a way of resisting (or escaping) the hardships that accompany my insularity as an international student who lives a life isolated and disconnected from the world in which she grew up.

## Digital Native

Being a digital native has shaped my sensitivity to, and interest in, non-traditional forms of expression. From childhood, I grew up in digital environments, using computers and smartphones for daily life, entertainment, and learning. The internet has always been part of my life. This experience has inclined me toward surreal and collage-like expression because my early experiences watching horror films or stylised videos on MP4 players and computers drew me to cross-media, cross-reality narratives. In a similar way, online novels and short videos that featured unusual temporal-spatial shifts and collage-style visuals fascinated me. My world was ornamented and resourced by hybridities. These digital experiences shaped my aesthetic preferences, providing experimental ground for later creative expressions of identity.

Being a digital native also allowed me to treat cyberspace as a “digital nostalgia field” for recombining old experiences. In this space, childhood memories and cultural experiences that have no immediate presence in reality are able to be reconstructed online through videos, images, texts, and other multimodal forms. Virtual space provides a platform for expressing the dislocation and cultural estrangement I have experienced as an international student.

## Media Trajectory

The evolution of media profoundly shaped my world. From childhood, discs, tapes, radios, television, computer games, and smartphones shaped my participation in daily life and family interaction. As children, my sister and I would sneakily watch horror films downloaded on MP4 players under the covers. While the rest of the family would gather in front of the television to watch dramas, we took turns playing *Plants vs. Zombies*. My parents' involvement with media is intricately woven into my memories, to the extent that I realise that media not only influences entertainment but also shapes my shared family and social experiences.

The rapid turnover of media has also made me aware of how quickly “old objects” become obsolete, and this rapid change echoes the sense of 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) I feel as an insular student.

As media has expanded, my skills and perceptual abilities have accumulated. The radio (Figure 2.3) was part of my sister's daily routine, listening to music in the morning and audiobooks at night. Through this device I experienced a strong sense of immersion when listening to stories like *The Ghost Blows Out the Light*. The DVDs and MP4 players that were once my access to

ideas and entertainment were gradually replaced by new media. They became the jettison of technological progress. But when they appear as symbols, they still evoke memory.



Figure 2.3. A vintage radio used by my family (circa 2005).

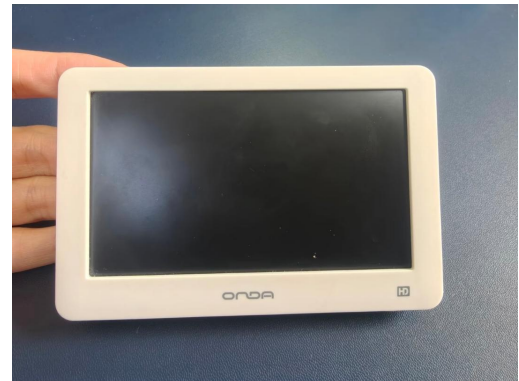


Figure 2.4. An MP4 player used by the family (circa 2008).

They have a presence that is also the past.

Moving from a passive media consumer to an active creator has been a natural process. While studying broadcasting and television directing at Shanghai University, I moved from traditional film courses and gravitated towards new media creation, live streaming, and short video practice. Part-time work and post-graduation experience in information-flow advertising further deepened my understanding and practice of digital media. These experiences caused me to reconsider childhood object memories and their potential within new media experimentation.

This trajectory has provided the foundation for the research.

## CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED KNOWLEDGE

This review considers three realms of knowledge that contextualise the thesis project:

- Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) aesthetics
- Neo-Root-Seeking and
- The concept of the Neo-Solitary Island

### Chinese 梦核 (Dreamcore) Aesthetics

#### *Defining 梦核 (dreamcore)*

Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) is a localised, online-native, nostalgic aesthetic that blends dreamlike imagery with cultural elements to evoke feelings of nostalgia and unease. Cooper (2023, para. 1) describes dreamcore as "an internet aesthetic community [whose] global popularity and evolution [was] triggered by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns." He associates its technological nostalgia with the earlier (1990s) Webcore movement (sometimes called Old Web). However, dreamcore's use of surreal vacant spaces he associates with a Generation Z experience of "the initial lockdown, when places bustling with activity like schools and shopping centres, were suddenly lacking any human presence" (para. 30).

The dreamcore aesthetic is distinguished by low-fidelity, compressed images and videos from the past that are used to create a sense of familiarity mixed with strangeness. 梦核 (dreamcore) often features motifs like abandoned amusement parks, deserted suburban settings, and liminal spaces (Song et al., 2025). As a localised adaptation and reinterpretation of its Western counterpart, Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore) has been shaped by the distinctive interplay of internet culture. This is characterised by its vast reach, interactivity, immediacy, and cross-regional nature. It is also distinguished by its use of collective childhood memories and the socio-cultural context of the post-pandemic era (Huang & Liu, 2024). Emerging around 2020, the artform remains a relatively "young" aesthetic with a developing yet defined visual lexicon and scope (Huang & Liu, 2024; Yao, 2024). In the last five years, its stitched-together imagery and characters have gained considerable presence on TikTok videos and online communities like Reddit (Song, et al., 2025). The aesthetic currently serves as a form of "self-exploration" and "self-conversation," for Chinese Gen Z, reflecting their spiritual and emotional needs within a contemporary digital context.

Huang (2024, p. 23) highlights its strategy of transforming "the old media itself into the object of memory." Inside the aesthetic, elements like CRT scan lines and Windows 98 dialog boxes are repurposed as symbols of "technostalgia," that evoke a collective sentiment for the digital childhood of the millennium era. Huang and Liu (2024, p. 31) describe dreamcore's "de-humanisation of liminal spaces." Here, traditional settings like empty computer labs and deserted shopping mall corridors are stripped of human presence to create a dreamlike tension, that is simultaneously familiar and strange. The strange worlds immerse the viewer in a simultaneous experience of return and alienation (Huang & Liu, 2024).

Zhou (2024) suggests that 梦核 (dreamcore) invokes nostalgia and fear by drawing on collective memories and cultural artifacts, thereby creating a sense of connection to the past while simultaneously inducing alienation. Brown et al. (2024), and Song et al. (2025) note dreamcore's orchestration of elements from the past, like children's play centres, "dead malls,"

long-lost toys, or vacant classrooms and corridors, which are employed to cultivate a nostalgic ambiance.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in his discussion of Chinese dreamcore, Huang (2024, p. 28) observes a "localization of nostalgic objects," where abstract forms common in Western dreamcore are replaced by instantly recognisable Chinese childhood items like a grandmother's enamel mug. This practice he frames as a form of cultural translation and strengthening of intergenerational identity. Yao (2024, p. 29) discusses Chinese dreamcore's "nostalgia for an unexperienced era," noting that many post-00s creators collage visual fragments from the 1990s (e.g. PHS boot screens) that they never experienced while growing up. This, she suggests, generates a form of "therapeutic nostalgia" (p. 70) that functions as an intergenerational "imagined nostalgia" (p. 40) that compensates for ruptures caused by rapid urbanisation.

### *Examples of Chinese dreamcore*

Indicative of the aesthetic are works like *Too Late City* (秃力城) by artist '@黄河山 hhs', (Figure 3.1). Created by collaging photographs of postmodern Chinese architecture (1980s-2000s) with 3D modeling, the gently shifting urban landscape pulsates with animated life. Despite its virtual nature, *Too Late City* evokes a powerful sense of nostalgia, offering solace in its retrieved "lost imagery" of home for Generation Z (Yao, 2024).



Figure 3.1. A streetscape from artist Huang Heshan's (@黄河山 hhs) 3D work "*Too Late City*" (秃力城) [2022]

This detailed view showcases the dense architectural landscape characteristic of China's urban-rural fringe from the turn of the millennium. Here, buildings of varied regional styles are haphazardly assembled alongside bold, vernacular signage. Two giant elephant slides are absurdly nestled between high-rises. Their dated texture, combined with the overall environment, constructs a nostalgic yet surreal aesthetic of digital folk art.

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<sup>3</sup> By extension, Cooper (2023, para. 30) notes that dreamcore's aesthetics "often employ fonts evocative of the early days of the internet [...] word art and low-quality images" to create enigmatic, nostalgic, unrefined imagery reminiscent of the late 90s and early 2000s [often associated with Windows 95].





Figure 3.2. A scene of a deserted Chinese street from the independent game '0' (2024). The screenshot captures quintessential architectural elements of Chinese urban areas from the late 1990s to early 2000s, featuring tiled walls, security grilles, a clutter of shop signs, and tangled wires.

### *The nature of nostalgia within dreamcore*

The experience of nostalgia in dreamcore is influenced by cultural background. While Song et al. (2025) provide a framework for its visual analysis, linking features like high saturation and childhood objects to an individual's "trait nostalgia," Zhou and Kawabata (in press) highlight a critical cultural divergence. Their research contrasts the "creepy-fear" dominant in Western responses to liminal spaces with the "warmth-loss"<sup>4</sup> mix identified by Chinese participants. It is this differentiation that they claim explains something of the "temperature-difference aesthetics" unique to Chinese dreamcore.

Nostalgia theory provides a useful framework for analysing the nature of dreamcore aesthetics. Boym (2001) distinguishes between "restorative nostalgia" (aiming to rebuild the lost home) and "reflective nostalgia" (dwelling on the irretrievability of the past). However, the Chinese scholar Zhao Jingrong (2015, 2019) suggests a third type that she defines as "identity-oriented nostalgia." Here, the past is selectively reconstructed in the present to reaffirm self-collective identity and ensure future self-continuity. Chinese scholar Zheng Ke (2024) maintains that Zhao's proposed identity-oriented nostalgia effectively interprets the "warm liminality" of the Chinese dreamcore (2024) because visuals initially restore a past scene (operate restoratively), and subtle disruptions like paradoxical titles or distorted sounds then challenge this wholeness (operating reflectively). Finally, collective recognition posted in the comment section of postings (e.g. "So we all grew up like this") enables a form of identity-oriented connectivity across the viewing community.

<sup>4</sup> By "warmth-loss," I refer to a mixed emotional response specific to Chinese participants when engaging with dreamcore aesthetics. Here, nostalgic warmth (a positive affect associated with childhood memories) is mixed with a sense of loss (negative affect stemming from the recognition that these memories are irretrievable and the present reality is misaligned with the past).

Although current research has begun to explore the visual and nostalgic mechanics of Chinese dreamcore, its link to identity negotiation, especially across cultural boundaries, remains under considered. My study begins to address this gap by creating Chinese dreamcore-style collage videos that narrate the identity and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) experienced by Chinese students in New Zealand. The work operates on three levels, drawing upon Boym's (2001) seminal typology of restorative and reflective nostalgia, and Zhao's (2020) framework of identity-oriented nostalgia:

- It is “restorative,” through its reconstruction of idealised past imagery;
- It is “reflective” because it introduces uncanny anomalies that question the authenticity of the presented past; and
- It is “identity-oriented,” because it uses this reconstructed past as a means to negotiate personal and cultural identity in the present, facilitated by audience interaction inside an exhibition and later online postings, to foster collective identification.

### 新寻根 (Neo-Root-Seeking)

Neo-Root-Seeking extends and reinterprets the Chinese root-seeking literature movement that emerged during the mid-1980s “Culture Fever.”<sup>5</sup> The original root-seeking discourse sought to reassess disrupted traditional values and restore cultural continuity after decades of ideological rupture (Wang, 2008). In contrast, Neo-Root-Seeking operates within the structural conditions of globalisation and digital modernity. It is characterised by three features:

- Self-reflexive identity reconstruction;
- Cultural fragmentation under globalisation; and
- Emotional dislocation in digital space.

Neo-Root-Seeking foregrounds self-reflexive identity reconstruction. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity does not have a fixed origin. Instead, it is an ongoing production shaped by representation and difference. This perspective challenges essentialist notions of “roots” and reframes identity as processual and positional, constantly made and remade through social context. Similarly, Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 32) conceptualises modern selfhood as a “reflexive project,” in which individuals continuously narrate and revise their life stories under conditions of late modernity. Complementing this, Zygmunt Bauman (2000, pp. 109-110) describes contemporary society as “liquid modernity,” where identities are unstable and perpetually reconstructed. Together, these theories suggest that Neo-Root-Seeking is less about recovering an original cultural essence and more about managing fluid selfhood within transnational and mediated environments.

Neo-Root-Seeking reflects cultural fragmentation and hybrid belonging under globalisation. Arjun Appadurai (1996) proposes that global cultural flows, moving through ethnoscapen (landscapes of people), mediascapes (landscapes of images), and technoscapes (landscapes of technology), destabilise traditional boundaries and produce discontinuous subjectivities. Within this context, “roots” cannot be singular or tied to one place. Homi Bhabha (1994) further develops the concepts of hybridity and the “third space” as sites where identity is

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<sup>5</sup> Culture Fever (wenhua re, 文化热) refers to an intellectual movement in China during the 1980s (particularly around 1984–1988). During this time, many young scholars and writers debated the value of traditional Chinese culture and its role in the country’s modernisation.

negotiated between cultural systems rather than passed down unchanged. Complementing this, Ien Ang (2001) emphasises diasporic belonging as fundamentally ambivalent, marked by simultaneous attachment and estrangement. These perspectives collectively reposition root-seeking as a negotiation within fragmentation rather than a return to purity.

Neo-Root-Seeking involves emotional dislocation within digital and networked environments. Manuel Castells (2009) argues that the network society restructures social interaction through digital connectivity, producing individualised yet interconnected experiences. Sherry Turkle (2011, pp. 12-19) observes that digital communication creates paradoxical conditions of being "alone together." These conditions, she suggests, intensify feelings of isolation despite constant connection. Meanwhile, Sara Ahmed (2004, pp. 117-139) argues that emotions move through society like a currency, flowing between people and attaching to images, words, and physical presence. As these emotions circulate, they leave marks and create shared feelings that orient how groups of people relate to the world. If we consider these views, Neo-Root-Seeking may be understood as an affective practice that attempts to rebuild emotional anchorage inside a state of digitally mediated displacement.

The *new* in Neo-Root-Seeking relates to Root-seeking's shift from collective cultural revival to individualised, digitally mediated identity negotiation; from reconstructing a unified tradition to acknowledging fragmentation and mobility as structural conditions of contemporary life. Here, Root-seeking becomes an ongoing process of symbolic reconstruction within transnational and algorithmic environments.

### 新孤岛 (Neo-Solitary Island)

Neo-Solitary Island is a new term that reinterprets the Chinese "Solitary Island Literature" (Gudao Wenxue) of 1930s Shanghai. The original literary phenomenon emerged within the foreign concessions during wartime occupation and was marked by reflections on cultural isolation, historical rupture, and urban resilience (Lee, 1999; Shih, 2001). Thus, "Solitary Island" referred to a geographically and politically enclosed cultural space. In contrast, Neo-Solitary Island shifts the metaphor from territorial isolation to structural isolation in digital modernity. *Neo-Solitary Island* refers to a sense of fragmented identity and spiritual dislocation within globalised and intensely mediated societies. This contemporary condition may be understood through three interrelated dimensions:

- Digital alienation;
- Hyper-connective isolation; and
- Spiritual dislocation amid information excess.

#### *Digital alienation*

Extending Guy Debord's (1967) theory of the spectacle, where social relations are mediated through images, contemporary digital platforms turn identity into performative self-representation. Individuals do not merely use technology, they become exhibits within computer-controlled systems, constantly curating selves for invisible audiences. Byung-Chul Han (2015a, 2015b) proposes that extreme visibility and performance culture generate exhaustion and isolation rather than community (thus, digital alienation). In Han's "digital panopticon," (2015b, pp. 45-50), everyone is simultaneously watcher and watched, producer and product. This forced exposure strips away the protective distance that genuine sociality requires, replacing authentic encounters with planned self-display. Thus, he argues that the



“island” is no longer physical but algorithmic; a self-enclosed circuit of curated visibility and emotional withdrawal.

#### *Hyper-connective isolation*

Neo-Solitary Island reflects the paradox of hyper-connectivity. Manuel Castells (1996, 2009) describes the network society as structurally interconnected yet individually segmented, producing what he terms “the culture of real virtuality” (1996, p. 403). He argues that physical co-presence and digital connectivity have become separated. Here, one can be constantly in touch without ever being together. Sherry Turkle (2011, p. 11) observes that digital communication creates conditions of being “alone together,” physically in the same place yet mentally elsewhere, always pulled away by people who are not there. Mark Granovetter's (1973, pp. 1360-1380) theory of “the strength of weak ties” suggests that digital connectivity may expand networks while making close relationships weaker. Wide but shallow connections take over from deep ones. Thus, hyper-connective isolation refers to hundreds of surface-level connections that crowd out the few relationships capable of sustaining emotional weight. In this sense, individuals inhabit crowded yet empty social landscapes.

#### *Spiritual dislocation amid information excess*

Neo-Solitary Island also refers to a state of spiritual dislocation that can occur amid information overload. Hartmut Rosa (2013, p. 16) argues that social acceleration produces alienation through “squeezed time”. Here, although everything is available instantly, nothing lasts; when all options are visible, none can be deeply inhabited. As a result, we lose the time needed for genuine connection, with the world, with others, and with ourselves. Rosa (2013, pp. 131-134) describes this as the erosion of “resonance” - the capacity to be truly moved by our surroundings and to respond to them in meaningful ways. This may be compared to Jean Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreal condition where representation replaces lived reality. Here, the map becomes indistinguishable from the territory, experiences are shaped in advance by ready-made formats for posting. Eva Illouz (2007) discusses the commodification of emotional life in mediated capitalism. Feelings become tools used for advantage deployed for personal branding. She argues that here, intimacy is “cold,” calculated, performative, and optimised for a return on investment. Within such conditions, she suggests that spiritual orientation becomes unstable, the self drifts within excessive information flows without a secure sense of being.

Unlike the 1930s Solitary Island Literature, which represented geographical enclosure and collective cultural endurance (Lee, 1999; Shih, 2001), Neo-Solitary Island describes a spread out but broken “inside subject.” The “island” is no longer spatial but based on lived experience, formed within computer-controlled systems and systems of emotional exchange (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011). The *neo* thus marks a shift from wartime cultural isolation to digitally structured solitude. Isolation is no longer imposed by physical blockade but emerges from hyper-mediation, acceleration, and being overwhelmed by information.

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This chapter has reviewed knowledge relating to the aesthetics of Chinese 梦核 (dreamcore), and the dual phenomena of Neo-Root-Seeking and the Neo-Solitary Island. Given that these ideas form the theoretical context of my practice, it is useful to now consider the methodological approach developed to progress the project.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

### PARADIGM

#### Affective Colonisation: An Artistic Paradigm

This thesis adopts an artistic paradigm. This is not a social scientific or collaborative model, but a scholar-artist framework (Klein, 2010), where inquiry proceeds through visual language, temporal montage and audiovisual reasoning.

Klein notes that, as a research paradigm, artistic inquiry is:

... reliant on sensory and emotional perception ... [realised through] artistic experience, from which it cannot be separated. Whether silent or verbal, declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit ... artistic knowledge is sensual and physical, 'embodied knowledge'. The knowledge that artistic research strives for, is a felt knowledge. (p. 6)

Within this research paradigm the study is shaped by the concept of affective colonisation (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Stoler, 2010). Although China was never fully territorialized, colonial power, as Bhabha (1994) reminds us, "always unsettles itself in the fissures of mimicry and difference" (p. 86). Today, these fissures have migrated into global media flows and platform capitalism performs a kind of "soft colonization" (Shome, 2016, p. 220) through algorithmic curation, affective storytelling, and visual consumption. Spivak (2012, p. 341) describes this process as "colonization without colonizers"; the semiotic violence of neo-imperialism, effective precisely because it is not felt as colonial. Hardt & Negri (2000, p. 347) note that when power morphs into a "network empire," domination operates not through visible force but through an "affective-economic-informational" grid that elicits voluntary compliance. Shome (2016, p. 228) similarly argues that the "gentle" face of contemporary media colonisation allows it to be "experienced not as power, but as choice," thereby deepening its impact.

Within an artistic paradigm, these theoretical claims are pursued not through statistical generalisation but through audiovisual materialisation. The study treats media images as colonial sites in themselves, foregrounds affect as the principal conduit of colonial efficacy, and mobilises artistic practice, fragmentation, slowness, and polyphony to counter-visualise such invisible colonisation so that viewers feel rather than read dislocation (Hall, 1996, p.250; Trinh, 1989, p. 82). Validity is measured not by explanatory force but by the capacity to expose the seams where explanation unravels (Mignolo, 2009, p.6; von Foerster, 1993, p. 242). Collage video therefore translates affective coloniality into rhythmic, stalled, and noisy perceptions, ushering the audience through the colonial gap and enabling them to recognise their own place within the media-colonial circuit. In this scholar-artist framework, the artwork functions simultaneously as method, evidence, and argument: its sensory gaps and noisy seams are not illustrations of theory but the very sites where theory is performed and tested.

### METHODOLOGY

Methodology describes the overarching approach used by the researcher within a particular research paradigm. Guba and Lincoln suggest that methodology asks the question: "How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?" (1994, p. 108)

In this thesis study I use an autoethnographic system of inquiry because it supplies first-person access to affective coloniality. Within this I embed a *Denkraum*<sup>6</sup> facility to prevent self-narrative from subsiding into solipsism.

Autoethnography, as a methodology combines self-narrative with cultural analysis, while highlighting the positionality of the researcher (Ellis et al., 2011). It rejects the illusion of the "objective observer" that is evident in traditional anthropology, and stresses that emotion, cultural background, and subjective experience are indispensable elements of knowledge production (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). Because the methodology embraces subjective experience, it is useful in revealing contradictions and tensions embedded in experiences of identity crisis and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) experienced by a Chinese international student. In the study, as a Chinese Generation Z international student, I turn the camera on myself, and an autoethnographic methodology legitimates emotion and positionality as knowledge sources (Ellis et al., 2011). Being autoethnographic, the study is not *about* international students but rather articulated *by* an international student who constitutes a subject of experience. (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011)

However, Coffey (1999), Holt (2003), Ings (2013), Krizek (2003), and Sparkes (2000), all note that relying solely on autoethnography risks sliding into excessive introspection, self-expression or solipsism. To counter this limitation, the study introduces the concept of *Denkraum* to preserve openness and critical distance. Wind (2012) note that *Denkraum* is not a site for definitive answers but a thinking – practice space that sustains distance (*Abstand*) and tension (*Spannung*). It requires the researcher to create gaps between experience and reflection, thereby preventing identity crisis and 文化错位 (cultural dislocation) from being reduced to a single narrative or over-interpreted. In practice, the facility of *Denkraum* is operationalised through three strategies:

1. The dislocation and reassembly of images: retaining visible cuts and pixel ruptures, ensuring viewers remain aware of the heterogeneous origins of materials;
2. Unfinishedness: open-ended conclusions, looped sequences or absent subtitles that resist emotional closure;
3. Double vision: after an initial rough cut, the researcher re-views the material after a temporal gap, revising with visible "traces" (annotations, parallel layers, or added voice-over), creating layered tensions.

To further reduce the risks of overly self-referential soliphism, the study also employs a text – image cross-validation approach. Using this approach, each memory is rendered twice: once as poetic prose and then again as a moving-image text. Juxtaposition reveals fissures where words speak but images stay silent or vice versa. These gaps are logged, then checked against external theoretical markers (Bhabha, 1994; Mercer, 1994). Rather than enforcing correspondence between the two forms, this process allows poetry and collage video to express what cannot be conveyed in the other. Poetry may capture emotional subtleties that resist visualisation, while moving images may reveal unconscious tensions beyond language. Their divergence thus becomes a generative space for reflexivity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Denkraum* (literally "thinking-space") is Aby Warburg's term for a critical distance enabling reflective analysis without subjective immersion (Warburg, 2000). In this study, it functions as a methodological device to prevent autoethnographic narrative from collapsing into solipsism whilst retaining affective authenticity.

## METHODS

The practical strategy for creating the animated collages followed a dual-track approach of electronic and manual assembly, inside which image, sound, space, and time were systematically reconfigured. Animation techniques such as parallax shifts and looping sequences were employed to transform affective coloniality into tangible audiovisual evidence. Here, visible seams were preserved, unfinishedness was encouraged, and version layering created ruptures that exposed rather than smoothed out the discordance of affective coloniality's operative processes (Manovich, 2001; Marks, 2002; Steyerl, 2009). Accordingly, the work resisted closure and instead, it staged its own incompleteness. The result was a methodological circuit in which creative practice functioned not only as artwork but also as examinable research material, where every fissure, delay, and residue became a site of inquiry into the instability of cross-cultural identity.

Inside this dynamic, four methods warrant discussion: digital collage, manual collage, parallax animation, and poetic writing.

### Digital Collage

Scholars acknowledge digital collage video as a significant experimental mode within contemporary visual culture, one that deconstructs and recombines found footage to reveal the fractured nature of digital media and the complexities of cross-cultural experience (Baldwin, 2014; Manovich, 2001; O'Neill, 2012; Pethő, 2010; Steyerl, 2009). In this research, digital collage is employed, not only as an aesthetic practice but also as a critical method. By deliberately retaining digital scars and technical ruptures, it constructs visible sites of fracture that resist the colonial demand for seamlessness and fluency in visual culture.

The three digital collages (*Smile*, *Skin* and *Alone Together*) were produced using Xingtu (醒图) and CapCut (剪映) software. Source materials included personal archives (childhood photographs, old objects, and remembered domestic spaces). These were juxtaposed with visual fragments sourced from online environments. In visual processing, the aesthetic followed the style of Chinese dreamcore, with collages being typified by low fidelity, subtle defocus, noise, CRT-like screen textures, soft overexposure in highlights, and a dominant use of blue or orange tones (Wang & Liu, 2024; Xiong, 2021; Hu, 2025). Guiding editing and compositing practices lay concerns with the experience of “glitches.” These disruptions to “smoothing out” (Steyerl, 2009), aligned with the postcolonial paradigm's attention to the residues, fissures, and untranslatability of colonial discourse (Hall, 1996), while resonating with *Denkraum* as a thinking-practice space that preserves distance (*Abstand*) and tension (*Spannung*) (Wind, 2012). The digital interface itself became part of the aesthetic; pixelation, compression artefacts, and overlapping window tabs were deliberately preserved rather than corrected. Layered tracks were often left misaligned by a few frames. This produced glitches or asynchronous playback that draws attention to the mediation of software.

### Manual Collage

Manual or handmade collage video is often understood as a counter-practice to the dominance of digital media, because it reintroduces material textures and manual operations to turn "errors" and "imperfections" into aesthetic evidence (Colman, 2009; Marks, 2002; Ross, 2013; Schneider, 2015; Steyerl, 2009). In this thesis project, manual collage operates not only as an artistic technique but also as a methodological experiment, providing a counterpoint to the "interface ruptures" of digital collage. Its emphasis lies in retaining residual traces of materiality through cutting, gluing, and recombining, which serve as sensorial evidence.

Handmade seams functioned as affective excess, exceeding the representational logic of digital smoothness. As Ahmed (2004, p. 90) argues, affect often "sticks" to surfaces; here, the rough textures and uneven cuts became sticky sites of memory and discomfort, materialising the colonial residue that clings to diasporic identities. By keeping the noise of scissors and glue audible within recordings, the method refuses self-exoticisation. It does not fetishise "Chineseness" as aesthetic decoration but situates it as a lived, fragile, and unresolved material condition.

### **Parallax and looped animation**

The three exhibited works employed parallax animation to create the illusion of three-dimensional movement by shifting foreground and background layers at different speeds. Parallax is widely used in experimental and interactive media to manipulate spatial perception (Dove, 2016; Manovich, 2001; Reas & McWilliams, 2010; Rogowitz & Rushmeier, 2001). Parallax effects were implemented in CapCut by assigning differential movement speeds to layered image and texture tracks, simulating depth without conventional perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Looped animation involved repeating sequences to establish non-linear temporal patterns, that produced persistent or unresolved rhythms that foregrounded temporal tension (Cubitt, 2004; Dove, 2016; Manovich, 2001; Mitchell, 2005). Looped sequences were set between 5–10 seconds, with deliberate micro-offsets in layer positions and rotation angles between repetitions. These offsets created a sense of temporal friction and visual instability, emphasising the collage's materiality and resisting smooth, continuous motion.

In the project these techniques were applied to collage sequences to enhance both spatial and temporal instability, making perceptible the affective dissonance associated with postcolonial subjectivity.

### **Poetic writing**

Poetic writing preceded and accompanied collage video practice. Writing poems helped me to articulate ambiguous emotions and ideas at the early stages of research, yet it continued to evolve as the visual work progressed. Each poem existed in dialogue with a corresponding collage video, sometimes functioning as its conceptual origin, and at other times it was re-shaped by the visual process. This iterative exchange produced an evolving interplay between text and image, where each medium refracted and reinterpreted the other.

The poems I created were brief, free form, and fragmentary. They did not seek to explain but to evoke. Their juxtaposition with collage video foregrounds the instability between linguistic and

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<sup>7</sup> I experimented with foreground elements moving faster than midground or background layers.

visual meaning, exposing what cannot be seamlessly translated between the two. Thus, poetic writing became both a research method and a reflective apparatus, that traced the transformation of emotion, memory, and identity throughout the artistic process.

Poetic writing has emerged as a recognised form of artistic research that merges creative expression with critical reflection, allowing language itself to become a site of inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015; Prendergast, 2009). As Richardson (1997) argues, "Writing is a method of inquiry" (p. 92); poetic writing does not merely illustrate theory but enacts it through its own formal innovations. Within this study, poetic writing functions as a thinking-through-making method that parallels the logics of collage and autoethnography. It captures intuitive emotions, fragmented memories, and associative thoughts before they take visual form, enabling the research to unfold through affective resonance rather than analytical sequencing.

## Composing Disruption

In standard cinematic practice, image, sound, space, and time are typically organised into a coherent whole to ensure narrative immersion and a "seamless" viewing experience. In contrast, this research deliberately introduced dislocations between these elements, using visible ruptures, imbalances, and non-linear arrangements to reveal the tensions of affective coloniality.<sup>8</sup>

Composing ruptures and discordance involved sourcing imagery from personal archives (childhood photographs, old objects, and memory-laden spaces) and online stock material. In the image stylisation process, the characteristics of Chinese dreamcore were followed. Deliberate layering produced misalignment and glitches, generating visible seams. Each image layer was manipulated with frame-level adjustments to preserve "imperfections."<sup>9</sup>

Audio tracks were assembled from home recordings, environmental field recordings, and digital sound libraries. Sound processing employed textural simulations (e.g. telephone, vintage television, radio, gramophone, and echoing spaces), subtle pitch shifts, and noise manipulation to evoke unease within familiarity. Techniques such as repetition, stuttering, layering, and reverse playback were applied to simulate glitch-like effects. In early experiments, audio initially corresponded to visual sequences but in subsequent practice, sound was used to construct spacing and rupture effects.

Collage elements were arranged across 2D and pseudo-3D planes, with parallax displacement simulating depth rather than conventional perspective. Two methods of spatial juxtaposition were applied consistently to emphasise the core theme of cultural dislocation. This involved creating strong distinctions between two spaces in terms of image style, colour, or material, and deliberately producing misalignment at boundaries, overlaps, and transitions to prevent smooth spatial continuity.

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<sup>8</sup> This approach aligns with *denkraum's* emphasis on distance (*Abstand*) and tension (*Spannung*) (Wang & Yang, 2019; Wind, 2012), where unstitched gaps allow the subject matter to manifest within difference and instability.

<sup>9</sup> This approach made the interface itself a site where affective coloniality could be read, revealing tensions between familiarity and estrangement.

Temporal manipulation emphasised repetition and looping, with loops set between 5–10 seconds to generate non-linear, unresolved rhythms. Within these loops, deliberate variations and temporal ruptures were introduced. The differentiated repetition was designed to draw attention to missed synchronies and temporal friction. This reinforced affective discomfort associated with an artistic critique of affective coloniality. I tended to discard sequences that were overly fast or loops that became too regular because they flattened temporal tension and diminished perceptible rupture.

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Having now discussed the research design underpinning the project it is useful to turn to the four animations and their associated poetic texts.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This chapter provides a critical discussion of three creative works: *Smile*, *Skin*, and *Alone Together*. These dreamcore animations explore the experiences of cultural dislocation and identity negotiation through collaged video. Each animation is accompanied by a short poem. These express and extend meaning while revealing differences between verbal and visual forms of expression.

Each animation highlights a different aspect of the experience of studying abroad. *Smile* explores the social anxiety that emerges from language barriers and cultural differences. It reflects the experience of learning how to respond socially in situations where understanding is incomplete. *Skin* focuses on identity and the experience of being observed by others. It examines how identity shifts in different social contexts, particularly between family expectations and the pressures of adapting to a new cultural environment. *Alone Together* reflects on loneliness during digital communication with family during the Chinese Spring Festival. It shows how paradoxically technological connection can coexist with emotional distance.

The chapter draws on three conceptual frameworks: Chinese dreamcore aesthetics, Neo-Root-Seeking, and Neo-Solitary Island. These concepts help to explain how personal memories, cultural background, and digital communication shape the emotional experience of studying abroad.

***Smile*** (duration 1:06 minutes)

### Concept

*Smile* is a dreamcore animation that explores social interaction in the face of language barriers and cultural difference. The work is inspired by my early experience as a Chinese international student adapting to a new linguistic and cultural environment. In many social situations, I found myself unable to fully understand conversations, humour, or emotional cues. In these moments, smiling became the simplest and safest response. Over time, this smile gradually changed its meaning. It was no longer a spontaneous emotional reaction but a learned social behaviour. I began to observe how others smiled and attempted to imitate their expressions in order to appear socially comfortable.

This experience reflects the tension between participation and distance in cross-cultural communication. Scholars have noted that communication in a second language often involves a process of observation and adaptation rather than immediate understanding (Kramsch, 2009). Within this context, the smile becomes a strategy that enables social participation while concealing uncertainty.

### Content

#### *Imagery*

*Smile* traverses two environments: an old photograph of my primary school classroom in China and a classroom scene in an overseas secondary school. The work reflects on the feeling like infantilisation when entering a foreign education system; having to learn basic ways of communication from the beginning. The work employs Chinese dreamcore aesthetics including



default desktop backgrounds (from early-generation computers and retro computer pop-up windows), low-resolution image quality (with TV static noise and screen flicker effects simulating old CRT television screens), and spatial liminality (such as an empty Chinese primary school classroom from the early 2000s). All of these images evoke childhood memories from the turn of the millennium.

The imagery is textured and degraded by adding noise, increased exposure, and simulating an old television screen flicker. These treatments create a nostalgic and dreamlike atmosphere. The colour palette is saturated to emphasise the feeling of discordant nostalgia (Figure 5.1.1). The photograph is also separated into fragments and outlined with a torn paper effect, that suggests both anxiety and the fragmented nature of memory.



**Figure 5.1.1.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Smile* (2025), showing a Chinese Primary School Classroom [0:01].

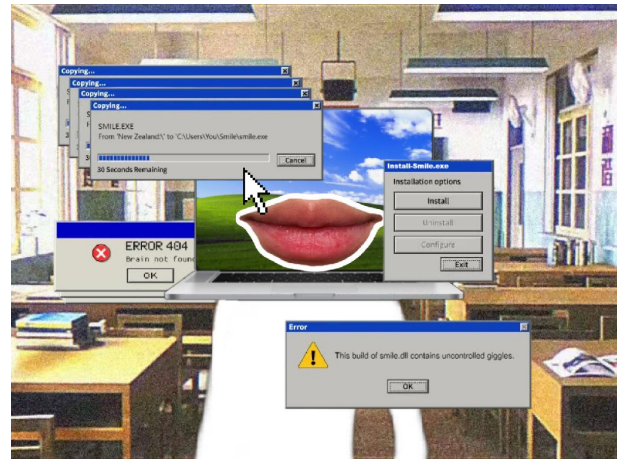


**Figure 5.1.2.** A screenshot from *Smile* (2025), showing a New Zealand High School Classroom [00:06].

The character representing "myself" is shown as a blank, white human body with a laptop computer replacing the head. The empty body suggests uncertain identity. The laptop symbolises the mind that makes internal thoughts visible. In Chinese, the word computer (电脑) can also be understood as "electronic brain." In this discordant dream world, overlapping, anachronistic computer pop-up windows appear on the screen. These represent mental processes such as downloading, loading progress, and error warnings (Figure 5.1.4). Their chaotic arrangement refers to the confusion and mental overload one experiences while trying to learn new social behaviours.



**Figure 5.1.3.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Smile* (2025): Self-Portrait [0:10]



**Figure 5.1.4.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Smile* (2025): Computer Pop-up Window Simulating Brain Activity [0:56]

The animation isolates the mouth as the main facial element. Other characters show standard bright smiles, reflecting a common Chinese impression of Western friendliness. In contrast, on close observation we see that the protagonist's mouth slowly changes from closed to an awkward smile (showing the process of imitation and learning).

### *Sound*

The sound design follows the visual shifts between the Chinese and overseas classroom scenes. Background ambience includes typical classroom noise from both contexts. This creates a familiar yet slightly disorienting atmosphere. The animation begins with the sound of a school bell, which immediately establishes the classroom setting. In the final moments, only the sound of laughter remains, drawing our focus to the central theme of the piece.

Different types of laughter are used to distinguish between characters. Non-foreign students are represented with open and confident laughter, while the protagonist's laughter is softer and more hesitant. During transitions between scenes, these sounds are slightly altered through changes in speed and pitch. This produces a subtle “glitch” effect. Additional electronic sounds, such as computer pop-ups, mouse clicks, error signals, and the sound of a television switching off, are used to reinforce the digital metaphor of the “electronic brain.”

### *Animation*

The animation combines parallax movement with stop motion techniques. Parallax animation is employed in the opening primary school classroom scene. This allows the viewer to move slowly through an immersive space. Later sequences use frame-extracted footage of smiling actions to simulate stop motion animation. This slightly fragmented movement reflects the awkward process of learning and the feeling of cognitive “malfunction.”

### **Poem**<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The poems presented here are in Chinese and English. The English versions are approximate translations of the original Chinese texts, as certain cultural nuances, rhythms, and poetic ambiguities are not directly translatable.

Smile.exe

Download complete.  
Running...  
Error: context not found.

I laugh on cue.  
They laugh for real.  
Lost in translation.  
Found in imitation.

微笑.exe

下载完成。  
正在运行.....  
错误：语境缺失。

我按提示笑。  
他们真的在笑。  
在翻译里迷失。  
又在模仿中被认出。

### *Discussion*

This poem expresses my experience of trying to adapt to social norms in a foreign environment. The computer-like language, "download," "running," and "error," shows how learning to smile feels mechanical, almost like following a program. "Error: context not found" reflects moments when, as an international student, I was unable to understand what was expected of me. Smiling became a tool for connection, but one that I imitated rather than fully felt.

The imagery and language draw directly from Chinese dreamcore aesthetics. Fragmented images of classrooms, the white featureless figure, and the laptop head are mirrored in the poem's digital syntax. This captures the awkwardness and uncertainty of attempting to communicate across cultural boundaries. At the same time, "Lost in translation" hints at the isolation referred to in Neo-Solitary Island writing, where foreign spaces intensify feelings of disconnection. "Found in imitation" shows my way of navigating these spaces, using learned gestures to participate while negotiating my own sense of identity.

The poem and animation together reflect the tension between imitation and understanding, memory and immediacy, and my own cultural and emotional displacement.

***Skin*** (duration 1:02 minutes)

### **Concept**

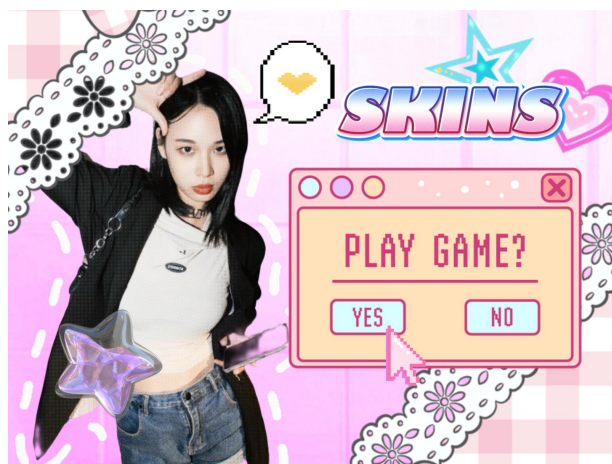
*Skin* is a dreamcore collage video that explores how identity shifts in response to different observers. The work emerges from my experience as a Chinese student navigating cultural and familial expectations abroad. I noticed that my behaviour changed depending on who was watching. In front of my parents, I performed obedience and traditional respect. In a university setting abroad, I adopted gestures of independence and maturity, blending Chinese and Western elements. When alone, I faced uncertainty about my authentic self.

Using dreamcore's seemingly naïve aesthetic, the work highlights the tension between adaptation and self-recognition, illustrating that identity is not fixed but performed and negotiated. Childhood dress-up games inspire the visual metaphor of the piece. Just as we tried on different outfits in play, we adjust our behaviours and appearances in social contexts. *Skin* seeks to convey the emotional complexity of managing multiple social identities, the instability of self-perception, and the subtle anxiety of aligning internal self with external expectations. The playful aesthetic contrasts with the seriousness of identity negotiation. Thus, the

animation constitutes a visual and emotional interplay between innocence, performance, and cultural negotiation.

## Content

### Imagery



**Figure 5.2.1.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Skin* (2026): Game Start Interface [0:04]



**Figure 5.2.2.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Skin* (2026): Putting on School Uniform Under Parental Supervision [0:12]

The visuals of *Skin* combine “candy-like” retro game aesthetics with real-life photographs to explore identity negotiation (Figures 5.2.1 and 5.1.2).<sup>11</sup> In the animation, two environments exist: the game “start” screen and the dress-up interface. The start screen features pixelated text, dialogue boxes, and Y2K-style stars and hearts.<sup>12</sup> These evoke nostalgia and playfulness. Real photographs of observers, including parents, overseas classmates, and myself, are integrated into the stylised environment, emphasising the interplay between imagined and real social spaces.

In the dress-up interface, my figure continues as the white, featureless body from *Smile*, (symbolising identity ambiguity and self-perception uncertainty). Clothing icons, score panels, life bars, and interactive buttons signify social evaluation and performance. Repetition of gameplay sequences for each observer highlights identity as relational and performative. The final self-evaluation score fluctuates, visualising inner confusion, self-doubt, and the instability of self-perception. The combination of retro digital graphics, photographic realism, and fragmented layout reflects Chinese dreamcore aesthetics where memory, play, and dreamlike imagery convey the tension between past experiences and present self-reflection.

### Sound

<sup>11</sup> The visual thematic draws its inspiration from Kawaii/Cute aesthetics that, although rooted in Japanese pop culture, became popularised in China during the 1990s. The aesthetic emphasises “baby-like” qualities, rounded shapes, and simplistic emotional comfort. More recent Chinese design revisits this aesthetic as xinchou (新丑), (the New Ugly) – (an expression of compromised nostalgia).

<sup>12</sup> Y2K style emerged around the millennium. It was characterised by neon colors, low-res graphics, metallic fonts, and a mix of retro-futuristic aesthetics. It often expressed optimism and anxiety about technology at the millennium.

The sound blends cheerful, rhythmic game music with electronic interaction audio. Clicks, buttons, and prompt tones enhance immersion and emphasise the performative nature of identity. Observer-specific sounds appear when parents or classmates are present, including parental voices and classroom chatter, while silence dominates during moments of aloneness. Subtle shifts and layering of these sounds reflect internal uncertainty and the tension of performing social roles. This echoes Neo-Solitary Island (Li, 2018), where identity is experienced as fragile and relational. Here, the self constantly adjusts under the gaze of others, and external evaluation directly shapes emotional and cognitive responses.

### *Structure*

The structure follows a repeated cycle, reflecting the negotiation of identity under observation. Each cycle includes scene dialogue, observer appearance, dress-up interaction, and scoring. The three cycles correspond to parents, overseas classmates, and self. Repetition foregrounds differences in self-presentation. Here, parental and peer judgement consistently evaluate learned competence in familiar social roles. The self-evaluation, however, fluctuates unpredictably, so we witness internal uncertainty, self-doubt, and the mutable nature of identity.

The cyclical arrangement mirrors relational identity theories where the self is continuously adjusted according to the presence and gaze of others (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). It also aligns with Neo-Root-Seeking, where identity is constructed through memory, reflection, and relational experience (Wang, 2020). By embedding evaluation and reflection within each cycle, the work highlights how performance, expectation, and introspection intertwine in identity formation.

### **Poem**

|                                           |                       |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Skin                                      | 皮肤                    |
| New skin. Old skin.<br>Whose skin?        | 一层新的。一层旧的。<br>这是谁的皮肤？ |
| I choose. I change.<br>I remain the same. | 我选择。我改变。<br>我依然如旧。    |
| They look.<br>I look                      | 他们在看。<br>我也在看。        |
| ... The mirror looks back.                | .....镜子在看我。           |

Unlike the playful and light-hearted visual packaging of the animation, the poem's words are bare and incisive. The piece distils the core tension of *Skin*, that identity is both mutable and persistent. The repetition of the word "skin" evokes the layering of social roles and culturally mediated behaviours. Choice and change signal active negotiation, while "I remain the same" suggests a resilient core, indicating that adaptation does not erase continuity of self. The final lines engage with observation and self-awareness: the gaze of others and reflective attention shape perception and emotional response.



This idea is often expressed in Neo-Solitary Island writing (Tam, 2022; Liu-Farrer, 2020), which emphasises how isolation and external scrutiny influence self-perception. The mirror acts as a metaphorical interface for reflection, resonating with Neo-Root-Seeking (Yang, 2020; Tam, 2022), where identity is reconstructed through memory, relational awareness, and introspection. Chinese dreamcore aesthetics (She, 2025; Zhou, 2024) are reflected in the symbolic layering, and the simple, repetitive language that evokes a dreamlike oscillation between the familiar and the alien (including childhood play and adult consciousness). The poem expresses the tension between performance, observation, and an enduring sense of self (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2004).

## ***Alone Together*** (duration 0:32 minutes)

### **Concept**

*Alone Together* is a dreamcore collage video that explores the emotional paradox of connection and isolation one can experience when studying abroad. The work is inspired by the contrast between traditional Chinese family gatherings and the everyday reality of living alone in a foreign country. During important festivals such as Chinese New Year, family reunion becomes a central cultural ritual. However, for many international students, participation in these moments often occurs through digital screens rather than in physical presence.

The animation reflects on how digital communication creates a form of presence that is both intimate and distant. Video calls allow participation in family rituals, yet they also highlight physical separation. The work explores how memory, cultural tradition, and mediated communication intersect in shaping the emotional experience of diaspora life. The title *Alone Together* emphasises this paradox; one can be connected to others while simultaneously experiencing solitude.

### **Content**

#### *Imagery*

The visual design centres on two structurally similar scenes. The first shows a large round dining table in my family home, filled with nine dishes prepared for Chinese New Year dinner. The second scene presents a small table in my overseas room, where a single round bowl contains an improvised "luxury" instant noodle meal. The shared circular form of the tableware creates a visual parallel between the two spaces, emphasising the emotional contrast between collective celebration and solitary routine.

The New Year dinner carries strong cultural symbolism. Each of the nine dishes represents wishes for prosperity and happiness in the coming year. Among them, the fish dish is especially significant. In many Chinese families, the fish is presented whole and often is not fully eaten. We see this in the phrase 年年有鱼 (having fish every year)<sup>13</sup> which symbolises abundance and continuity. This ritual element highlights the cultural weight of the family scene. Gestures further reinforce the contrast. In the family scene, multiple people raise glasses together in

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<sup>13</sup> “年年有鱼” is a traditional Chinese blessing literally meaning “every year has fish.” In Mandarin, “鱼 (yú, fish)” is a homophone of “余 (yú, surplus),” so the phrase symbolizes abundance, prosperity, and good fortune. It is commonly used during festivals, especially at the Lunar New Year dinner, to express hopes for a year filled with wealth, plenty, and ongoing blessings.

celebration (Figure 5.3.1). In the overseas scene, the protagonist performs the same gesture alone, toasting the empty space in front of the screen (Figure 5.3.2). The identical action under different circumstances intensifies the emotional difference between togetherness and solitude.



**Figure 5.3.1.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Alone Together* (2026). The image depicts a Chinese family's New Year's Eve Toast. [0:09]

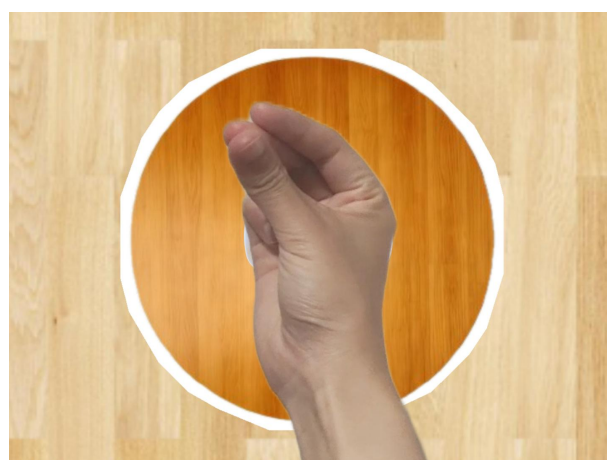


**Figure 5.3.2.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Alone Together* (2026). The screengrab depicts the solitary nature of a bowl of Instant Noodles eaten abroad. [0:23]

In the smartphone video call, the lively celebration appears behind the glass surface of the phone, creating a sense of distance and unreality. The protagonist appears in a small frame in the corner of the screen, interacting with the family image (Figure 5.3.3). However, this interaction is ultimately illusory; a toast made to empty air. When the call ends and the screen disappears, the quiet room returns, leaving the moment with a deeper sense of solitude.



**Figure 5.3.3.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Alone Together* (2026). Showing the Mobile Video Call Interface [0:14]



**Figure 5.3.4.** A screenshot from the collage animation *Alone Together* (2026). Showing a solitary hand gesture. [0:04]

Hand gesture stickers are also used within the collage composition. These follow the movement of objects on screen and simulate the manual process of assembling a collage. Their playful tone adds visual humour, creating contrast with the heavier emotional theme of loneliness.

### Sound

The sound design is built around a well-known Chinese New Year song (恭喜发财). This background music changes three times during the video. It begins in its original form - bright and festive. When the smartphone video call appears, the music subtly shifts into a simulated

phone speaker effect (with reduced volume and a narrower frequency). After the call ends, the music disappears completely. These changes reflect the emotional development of the scene and the changing sense of distance between the protagonist and her family's celebration. The transformation of the music echoes the central paradox of the title: being together while feeling alone.

The work's soundscape reinforces this contrast. The family gathering includes lively sounds of conversation, clinking glasses, and fireworks outside the window. In the solitary scene, the protagonist quietly says "cheers" to an empty room. The crisp sound of eating noodles becomes unusually clear in the silence. This emphasises the absence of other people.

Additional sound effects accompany the animation movements, including dragging sounds and finger snaps. In the later part of the video, some of these cartoon-like effects are replaced by human sounds such as a long sigh. This shift reduces the playful tone and strengthens the emotional atmosphere of loneliness.

## Poem

Alone Together

孤独相伴

They raise their cups.  
I raise mine.  
Same toast,  
... different time.

他们举杯。  
我也举杯。  
同一句祝词，  
却不在同一时刻。

Screen bright.  
Room dark.  
So close,  
so far.

屏幕很亮。  
房间很暗。  
仿佛咫尺，  
却在天涯。

The poem reflects a quiet moment of participation that is also marked by separation. Raising a cup is a familiar gesture of celebration in both Chinese and Western contexts. In the poem, however, the shared action does not produce a shared space. "Same toast, different time" suggests that the ritual continues, but its meaning changes when it is mediated through distance and technology. The contrast between "screen bright" and "room dark" expresses the emotional structure of the scene. The illuminated screen contains warmth, movement, and family presence, while the surrounding darkness emphasises physical solitude. The final line, "so close, so far", condenses the paradox at the centre of the work.

This tension can be understood through the concept of "alone together." It references Sherry Turkle's (2011) observation that digital communication creates conditions in which people are "alone together" (p. 11). Technology allows individuals to remain connected to others while still being physically and emotionally isolated. In this context, the video call does not fully bridge distance. Instead, it reveals the gap between participation and presence.



## CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Research Restatement

This research set out to investigate how Chinese dreamcore aesthetics (understood as a culturally situated and digitally mediated visual strategy) might be explored through collage-based moving image practices, to articulate the identity crisis and the sense of cultural dislocation often experienced by Chinese international students. By bringing together theoretical frameworks of Neo-Root-Seeking and Neo-Solitary Island with an artistic practice, the study has explored how fragmented visual forms can be used to express complex conditions of memory, belonging, and displacement in a globalized, networked world.

### Contributions

The study suggests that Chinese dreamcore should not be understood as a simple nostalgic aesthetic but rather, a complex affective structure shaped by memory, mediation, and cultural translation. Thus, the project extends current understandings of Chinese dreamcore by repositioning it as a culturally and theoretically significant framework. While existing studies often describe dreamcore in terms of visual motifs or emotional tone (Gu, 2025; Hu, 2025; Yao, 2024), this research demonstrates that significance may lie in its ability to stage a tension between familiarity and estrangement. The aesthetic operates through what Zhao (2015) terms “identity-oriented nostalgia,” where the past is not restored as it was, but selectively reconstructed in order to negotiate identity in the present.

The project proposes that rather than identity being stable or recoverable, it is continuously reconstructed through processes of fragmentation and mediation. The concept of 新寻根 (Neo-Root-Seeking) reveals that contemporary identity formation need not involve returning to a singular cultural origin, but instead one might negotiate multiple, shifting, and often contradictory points of belonging. This aligns with Hall’s (1990) view of identity as a process rather than a fixed essence, and with Bauman’s (2000) notion of fluid identity in late modernity.

At the same time, the concept of 新寻根 (Neo-Solitary Island) highlights the paradoxical condition of digital life. While individuals are more connected than ever, this connectivity often produces a sense of isolation rather than belonging. This study illustrates how digital environments do not simply mediate communication, they can be used to actively reshape emotional experience, leading to a “voicing” of what Turkle (2011, p. 12) describes as being “alone together.” This condition is further intensified by algorithmic structures and platform economies which organise attention, affect, and visibility.

Finally, the research demonstrates how collage-based moving images can be employed to express these conditions due to its inherent capacity for fragmentation, layering, and disruption. Rather than presenting a coherent narrative, I have employed collage to reveal the discontinuities and contradictions that structure contemporary identity.

### Limitations

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged.

The reliance on autoethnographic material provides depth and emotional insight but limits the broader applicability of the findings. As the research is grounded in personal experience, it reflects a specific positionality rather than a comprehensive representation of all Chinese international students. While this subjectivity is central to the methodology, it also means that the study should be understood as situated rather than universal.

Because the interpretation of Chinese dreamcore aesthetics remains inherently subjective, different viewers may interpret the same visual material in different ways, depending on their cultural background and personal experience. While this openness can be seen as a strength, it may also reduce the clarity or consistency of meaning across audiences.

## Future Research

Future work might explore the integration of emerging technologies. Tools such as AI-generated imagery, interactive media, or immersive installations may extend collage practices beyond the screen, creating more participatory and dynamic forms of engagement. This may also open up new ways of representing identity and memory in digital environments.

In addition, long-term self-archival practices may provide further insight into how identity evolves over time. By documenting and revisiting personal material across an extended period, future research could examine how memory, media, and cultural belonging shift in relation to changing life circumstances.

## Concluding Reflection

Arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand for the first time one year ago, I initially believed that language would be my greatest obstacle. Gradually, however, I came to realise that what felt unfamiliar was not only vocabulary, but an entire operating system beneath it. It was as if my internal system had been reset to factory settings, no pre-installed software, no default pathways, every action requiring conscious configuration. This condition became the conceptual impulse behind *Smile*, where the computer replaces the human mind. Moments that had previously required no thought in China became puzzles in New Zealand: “Why did everyone laugh in class at the same time?” “If I did not laugh, would I appear out of place?” “Even though I did not understand what exactly I was laughing at?”

In this sense, I found myself not only learning knowledge, but also acquiring a new emotional grammar and a different social timezone. This disjunction was not superficial; it was deeply embodied, like suddenly realising, in the middle of an ordinary afternoon, that I was an outsider who had just arrived on an unfamiliar planet. Everyday life became a continuous process of cultural decoding. Each subtle difference demanded attention, consuming invisible energy, as my mind performed an ongoing act of cross-cultural translation. Fatigue slowly extended into both mental and physical states, low moods, anxiety, insomnia ... signals that I was, in effect, relearning how to live.

Yet it is precisely through this “reset” that I began to see myself more clearly. Identity, as explored through *Skin*, is not something fixed, but something that can be dismantled and reassembled. What I once understood as a stable “Chinese system” revealed itself to be only one among many. Studying abroad, therefore, became less an act of acquiring knowledge than of being involuntarily reformatted, and then gradually rewriting a system that is neither a

replacement nor a replication. It was a negotiation. This process resonates with what I term Neo-Root-Seeking, not as a return to origins, but as an ongoing reconstruction of belonging within shifting cultural coordinates.

Homesickness, for me, emerged as a delayed and muted response. Only after returning briefly to China and then coming back again, did it arrive with force. When distance is mediated by a screen, geography collapses, yet emotional distance intensifies. When Turkle (2011) discusses aloneness, I am reminded of the Tang Dynasty poet and wanderer Li Bai who, hundreds of years ago, said, "举头望明月，低头思故乡" "I raise my head to look at the bright moon, then lower it, thinking of home" (Li Bai, c. 750/1996, p. 244). This separation, between body and place, presence and memory, persists across time, now refracted through digital space.

Within this context, Chinese dreamcore is not only a visual style, but also a way of understanding my own experience. It helps me to express feelings of fragmentation, nostalgia, and being out of sync with time and place. This connects with what I describe as the Neo-Solitary Island, a state where connection and isolation exist at the same time. The three moving image works do not try to solve these conditions. Instead, they speak to them, showing how these feelings appear in different forms.

If there is a conclusion, it is a simple one. Living between cultures and systems is often confusing and sometimes exhausting, but it has also helped me to see things more clearly. I am still in the process of understanding where I belong, and this may not have a fixed answer. However, it is through this ongoing process that I begin to find ways to express my experience, and to build a connection with the world around me.

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## APPENDIX : EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION

### Exhibition Overview

The exhibition presented *Fractured Identities* 中式梦核:身份的断裂与重构 as a three-channel moving image installation that explored cultural dislocation, fragmented identity, and dreamcore aesthetics through collage video.

The installation occupied a single exhibition wall measuring approximately 5 metres wide × 3 metres. The vinyl wall lettering was installed on the left-hand side of the wall, aligned horizontally with the three 43-inch monitors. Positioned approximately 120 cm in front of each monitor, three white plinths displayed printed poetic texts corresponding to the three video works.

The exhibition formed an integrated viewing environment in which moving image, typography and spatial arrangement functioned together. Rather than encouraging a fixed viewing position, visitors were able to move freely between the screens, reading the texts while simultaneously experiencing the videos and sound.



## Layout Strategy

The exhibition was deliberately organised as a horizontal three-channel installation rather than a single-screen projection.

The three monitors represent different fragmented memories, multiple identities and disconnected cultural experiences. Each screen functioned as an autonomous visual narrative while simultaneously contributing to a larger conceptual system. The installation therefore avoided presenting identity as a unified whole, instead suggesting that identity is continuously assembled from incomplete and shifting fragments.

The decision to present three separate screens also implied that the work remains inherently expandable. The exhibition design suggested that the animations and poetry were not a closed composition. Rather, the three screens represented one temporary configuration within an open system. If the project continues to develop additional screens will be introduced indefinitely, gradually forming a larger "screen wall" composed of expanding memory fragments.



## Synchronized Playback

All three moving image works were programmed to begin simultaneously and to loop continuously throughout the exhibition.

The decision to synchronise the three videos reflects the complexity of everyday lived experience. Emotions, memories and cultural identities rarely occur in isolation; instead, they are experienced as overlapping and layered conditions that unfold simultaneously. Presenting the works at the same moment allowed these parallel states to coexist within the exhibition, mirroring the fragmented yet interconnected nature of contemporary life.

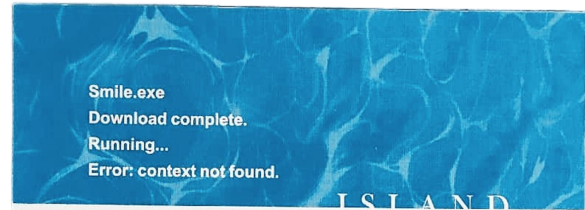
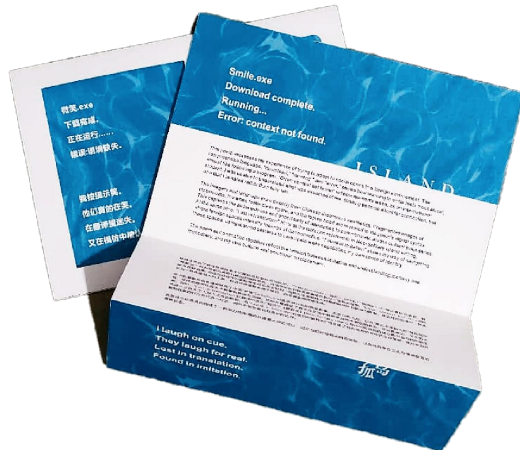
## Printed Texts

Each white plinth displayed a printed poetic text corresponding to each of the three moving image works. Rather than functioning as explanatory labels, these texts operated as parallel narrative fragments that extended the emotional atmosphere of each video.

The page layout incorporated two partially obscured sections marked as "hidden" text. These concealed passages invited viewers to consider the relationship between visibility and invisibility, memory and forgetting, and the limits of personal narration.







This poem expresses my experience of trying to adapt to social norms in a foreign environment. The computer-like language, "download," "running," and "error," shows how learning to smile feels mechanical, almost like following a program. "Error: context not found" reflects moments when, as an international student, I was unable to understand what was expected of me. Smiling became a tool for connection, but one that I imitated rather than fully felt.

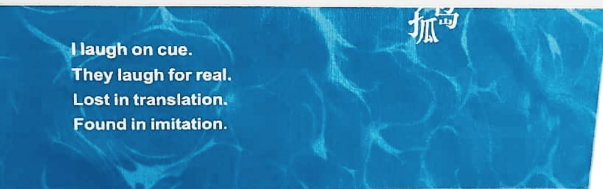
The imagery and language draw directly from Chinese dreamcore aesthetics. Fragmented images of classrooms, the white featureless figure, and the laptop head are mirrored in the poem's digital syntax. This captures the awkwardness and uncertainty of attempting to communicate across cultural boundaries. At the same time, "Lost in translation" hints at the isolation referred to in Neo-Solitary Island writing, where foreign spaces elicit feelings of disconnection. "Found in imitation" shows my way of navigating these spaces, using learned gestures to participate while negotiating my own sense of identity.

The poem and animation together reflect the lens on between imitation and understanding, memory and immediacy, and my own cultural and emotional displacement.

这首诗表达了我在异国环境中尝试适应社会规范的经历。"下载(download)" "运行(running)" "错误(error)"等计算机式语言，将"微笑"这一行为描述为机械化的操作过程，仿佛学习如何微笑更像是在执行一段预设程序。"Error: context not found"则描述了作为国际学生时，我常常无法理解他人对我期待的瞬间。微笑成为了一种连接他人的工具，但更多时候是模仿而非发自内心的感受。

诗中的意象与语言直接源自中国"梦核" (dreamcore) 审美风格。破碎的教室场景、无特征的人形，以及"笔记本电脑头"等视觉符号，在诗的数字化语法中得到了呼应。这捕捉了跨越文化边界尝试沟通时的尴尬与不确定。与此同时，"Lost in translation" (在翻译中迷失) 暗示了《新孤岛》 (Neo-Solitary Island) 中所探讨的孤立感，即在异国空间中感受到的疏离。而"Found in imitation" (在模仿中找到) 则展示了我在这些空间中的生存策略——通过学习和模仿他人的行为方式来融入，但同时也在探索自我身份认同。

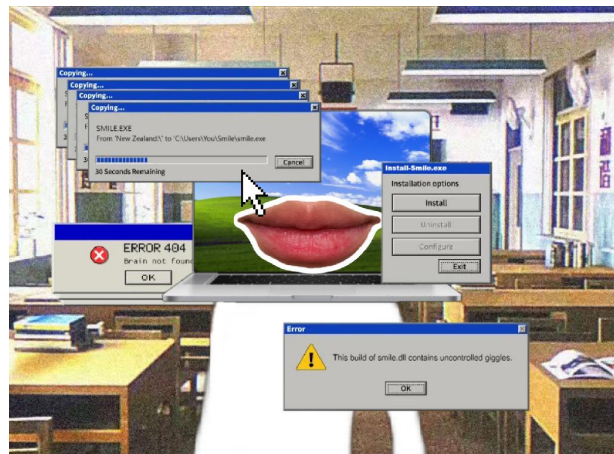
这首诗与动画共同构成了一种张力，探讨了模仿与理解、记忆与即时体验之间的张力，以及我自身在文化情感层面的位移状态。



## Links to Moving Image Works

The links below provide access to the three animations.

**Smile:** <https://youtu.be/5TXBmz3nGpo>



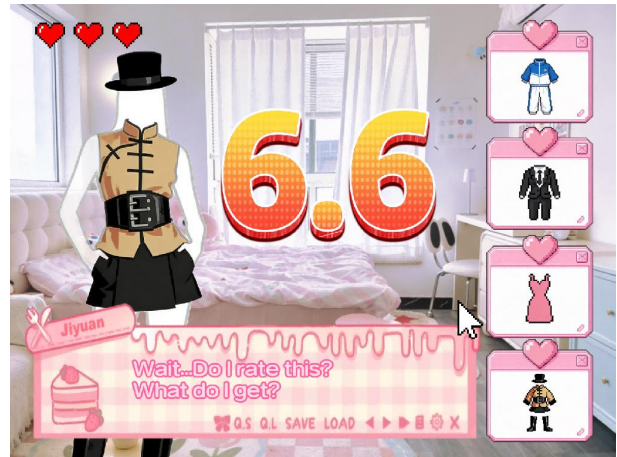
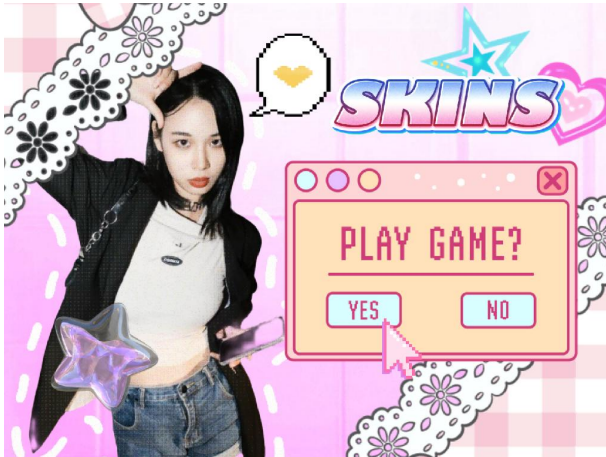
Duration: 1: 09

Year: 2026

Description: *Smile* is inspired by a classroom moment when everyone laughed at something I did not understand, yet I smiled along. The work explores smiling as a social strategy rather

than a spontaneous emotional response, reflecting subtle experiences of cultural difference and belonging.

**Skin:** <https://youtu.be/-jy5Q3pgK0o>

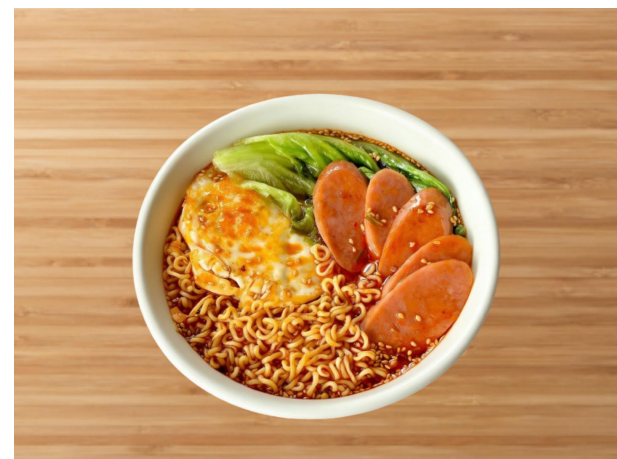


Duration: 1: 06

Year: 2026

Description: *Skin* draws on a childhood dress-up game as a metaphor for identity. It considers how different versions of the self are performed for different observers, while questioning what remains when facing oneself.

**Alone Together:** <https://youtu.be/oHYg1m7eYoE>



Duration: 0: 53

Year: 2026



Description: *Alone Together* is based on video calls with my family during Chinese New Year. While the screen creates a temporary sense of closeness, the feeling of loneliness becomes stronger after the call ends, reflecting the tension between connection and distance.

## Exterior Screen

During the exhibition and for four weeks after its conclusion, the three collage video works were screened by the gallery on the large digital billboard located on the exterior of WM Building. These projections ran from 8.00pm until 6.00am each evening. The animations were screened without sound, but they positioned dreamcore aesthetics inside the realm of artistic scholarship and promoted the thesis as an integrated illustration of the cultural dynamism of the master's programme.

