



# WANDERER

KEXIN SHAN

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An aisthetic inquiry into the experience  
of exile

Exegesis design by Kexin Shan / Proofread by Dr Jan Hamon / Typeset in Garamond  
Premier Pro 12pt (Headings) / Garamond Premier Pro 10.5pt (Body text) / Garamond  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the generations of students who have navigated their educational journeys in exile.

This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology  
in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Design.

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7<sup>th</sup> MAY, 2024

## ABSTRACT

This practice-led artistic research draws on the historical, literary convention of the 羁旅 (exile), to consider the potential of a fictional 旅行皮箱 (portmanteau) to speak to the experience of loss and disorientation experienced by a Chinese student studying overseas.

The study employs close reading, iterative poetic practice and iterative experimentation to design artefacts that communicate intimate experiences that one might experience as a foreigner studying and living abroad. At the centre of the study is the creation of a fictional portmanteau that belongs to an imaginary student who is emotionally, culturally and physically stranded (in exile) in a country far away from her homeland. The portmanteau constitutes a repository of ephemera but also a form of narrative portrait.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Welby Ings and Fiona Grieve, who provided me with constructive suggestions and supported my creative thinking. I have valued their infinite patience and careful guidance.

I would also like to thank all those who provided technical support for my project including Linda Wang, Alice Liu, Fleur Williams and Cornelius Geraets.

In addition, I would like to express my special thanks to my partner Huiming Lu, who provided substantial support for my project and encouraged me as I progressed the inquiry.

I also want to express my appreciation to my parents for their ongoing care and commitment both before and during my thesis study.

Finally, I would like to thank the School of Art and Design at Auckland University of Technology for providing research funding and facilities that enabled me to heighten the resolution of the project.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/>

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## 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 mentioned) 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.

KEXIN SHAN

7<sup>th</sup> May, 2024

## 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 another party.

Figure 1.2. Promotional poster for *Fallen Angels* (1995). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai.

Figure 2.1. Liu Hung. *Resident Alien* (1988). San Jose Museum of Art, Gift of the Lipman Family Foundation.



KEXIN SHAN

7<sup>th</sup> May, 2024

## **ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENTS**

This project did not require ethics approval because the study did not involve external participants. The thesis project developed a fictional character and artefacts associated with her exile.

Chapter One

## **Introduction**

## RESEARCH QUESTION

This practice-led, artistic research project asks:

If a sensory designer draws on a historical literary convention of the 羁旅 (exile), how might she create a fictional 旅行皮箱 (portmanteau) to speak to the experience of loss and disorientation experienced by a Chinese student studying overseas?

## RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

### RATIONALE

In recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese students have chosen to study abroad (Yu et al., 2023) and research indicates that they inevitably face challenges when studying away from home (Ching et al., 2017; Guy, 2018; O'Malley, 2020; Shuai, 2004; Yu et al., 2023). Notable issues such students encounter include a sense of shock at experiencing 'cultural distance', language barriers, a lack of social life, experience, connections and support, and experiencing homesickness from being away from home (Guy, 2018). Many Chinese international students also wrestle with substantial expectations from their parents, and consequently they carry anxieties relating to failure. Behind this fear is the principle of filial piety towards parents (Guy, 2018). In combination, these factors mean that Chinese international students can face significant pressure and alienating experiences that can lead to unhealthy psychological problems (University of Auckland, Faculty of Education and Social work, 2018).

This thesis examines such phenomena using a fictional, first-person account, that seeks to humanise current research and commentary, in the pursuit of eliciting enhanced levels of insight and empathy.

### SIGNIFICANCE

The thesis contributes to three bodies of knowledge.

First, it extends contemporary discourses related to Chinese international student experiences (Ching et al., 2017; Guy, 2018; University of Auckland, Faculty of Education and Social work, 2018; O'Malley,

2020; Shuai, 2004; Yu et al., 2023), and the nature of cultural longing and nostalgia (Shuai, 2004). The study offers an autobiographically resourced perspective constituted as a first-person fictionalised narrative that may provide insight into the sense of loneliness, loss and isolation that a Chinese international student can experience. Accordingly, the project may enable people who are not Chinese international students to gain insight into the pressures that the group may encounter.

Second, given the role of poetic thinking (both as a research method and outcome), the project contributes to emerging discourses related to poetic inquiry as a methodological and communicative construct (Gannon, 2022; Prendergast, 2009). This poetic thinking is extended to Visual Communication design where the concept of exile is explored through a range of designed, fictional, print-media artefacts.

Finally, the study contributes to practices and discourses in the field of aesthetic design where multi-sensory composites are employed to enhance a design experience (Garg, 2019). Thus, the project demonstrates how the use of sensory design in visual communication can enhance perceptual meaning that increases the communicative quality of a work (Garg, 2019; Spence & Gallace, 2011; Wang & Li, 2014).

## KEY TERMS IN THE STUDY

Since this project involves particular Chinese concepts, it is useful to briefly discuss the definition and use of two terms used in the study.

### 羈旅 (EXILE)

The term 羈旅 is generally translated as exile. The word in Chinese consists of two parts. The first word, 羈 means bondage or restraint. In this exegesis, I extended this to mean the constraints that one might experience when isolated from one's home and culture. The second word, 旅 means road, tour, travel or traveller. Therefore, in composite, 羈旅 may mean travelling to or living in a foreign country for an extended period of time. The word may also be applied to a person who resides in a constrained manner in a foreign country.

In Chinese literature, the concept of the exile has a long history. It became a significant theme in the work of poets during Tang and Song Dynasties, where reflections on isolation and longing were considered in the context of separation from one's homeland.

### 旅行皮箱 (PORTMANTEAU)

In this exegesis, the word portmanteau draws on the Chinese concept of 旅行皮箱 that refers to a particular type of portmanteau that constitutes a conceptual and physical repository in the project.<sup>2</sup> Technically, 旅行 refers to travel or travelling, and 皮箱 describes a type of suitcase. So, 旅行皮箱 may refer to a 'travel suitcase'. However, in English a portmanteau can also refer to a storage facility comprising a combination of individual components. In combining these ideas, a portmanteau in

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<sup>2</sup> The idea may also be related to the Chinese construct of the 多宝格 (Kunstkammer).

this thesis describes a travelling suitcase made up of multiple sections that contains artefacts that accompany one while one is in exile.

In addition to these Chinese words, it is also useful to define five other terms used in the study.

## AISTHESIS

Aisthesis is a relatively obscure word derived from the Greek *αἴσθησις*. It refers to sensation, perception or sensory experience and their relationship to perception. In philosophical contexts, aisthesis encompasses the ways in which individuals interpret the world around them through their sensory experiences. However, in aesthetic theory, aisthesis reaches beyond simple physical sensation to include emotional and intellectual responses that we might have to artefacts, nature and beauty. Thus, an aesthetic encounter involves subjective experience that evokes a sensory or emotional reaction (Voigts-Virchow, 2001).

## CLOSE READING

In literary analysis, close reading relates to careful, sustained interpretation of a brief passage of a text where focus is applied to the single and the particular over the general (BCCC, 2019). However, in this thesis I extend the term to the study of print artefacts. Thus, existing ephemera like passports, visas and labels are 'closely read' in relation to their design, stock and the nature of fatigue. This process resources the creation of fictional equivalents that seek heightened levels of 'authenticity'.

## SENSORY DESIGN

On a physical level, sensory relates to the physical senses, touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. In this study, sensory design is a form of conscious, aesthetic undertaking that involves the integration of visual and non-visual solutions that, experienced physically, stimulate emotions on material and psychological levels (Garg, 2019; Wang & Li, 2014).

## THE NATURE OF THE RESEARCH PRACTICE

At the heart of this project is an old portmanteau. This artefact has accompanied a fictional student in exile called Jiang Xiazheng<sup>3</sup> as she navigates study in an allegorical country called Newcloudland. The portmanteau is compartmentalised and populated with ephemera. As such, its contents constitute a fictional character who we encounter through print media (passport, money, stamps, official documentation) and correspondence artefacts (postcards and travel journal). The portmanteau constitutes a form of fictional social portrait that expresses the inner spirit of an experience of exile.

The portmanteau is accompanied by a short, fictional narrative of the character's experiences in a fictional, foreign country. This discrete booklet contextualises artefacts contained in the suitcase.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Jiang Xiazheng's name (江遐征) is a construct. The original meaning of “江” was 'lakes and seas', but later it was extended to mean wandering. 遐 refers to distance, 征 refers to conquest, but a later meaning of the word was to 'travel far'.

4 See Appendix One for the written copy of this text.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE EXEGESIS

This exegesis contains six chapters. Its introduction describes the research question, discusses the rationale and significance of the project, and defines key terms used in the exegesis. It also provides a brief description of the designed artefact and the content and structure of this document.

The second chapter positions the researcher and research, describing my background and experiences that were significant in shaping the project.

The review of relevant knowledge in Chapter Three provides a contextual overview of literature relating to the Chinese experience of 羁旅 (exile), poetic inquiry, and sensory design.

The fourth chapter unpacks the project's research design. It begins with an explanation of the characteristics, role and significance of practice-led inquiry. It also discusses the application of the six methods employed for shaping the project. These are creative writing, close reading, tactile experimentation, prototyping, *denkraum* and sensitive feedback loops.

The fifth chapter provides a critical commentary on the project's artefacts. It begins by describing significant objects inside the portmanteau, then considers these in relation to the concepts of exile, the poetic, and aesthetic/sensory design.

Finally, the conclusion provides a summary of the thesis in relation to its research question. It also considers contributions made by the project and discusses potential future directions for the study.

Considering that this study drew heavily on personal experience, the next chapter discusses the genesis of the project and my position within it.

Chapter Two

**Positioning of the  
Researcher and the Research**

## THE AISTHETIC AND THE NOSTALGIC

I was born in Tianjin, the largest coastal city in northern China. As a child, I walked with my grandmother through the ancient streets, feeling the traces of six hundred years. We would pause at corners where history accumulated. She told me that she liked to feel the things of the past; the fusion of Chinese and Western styles and the quiet indolence of spaces far removed from the hustle and bustle of modern times. I was also attracted to the juxtapositions of culture, the explosions of Chinese modernity and the stolid stone of Christian missionary churches (Figure 2.1). I would follow my grandmother into the secondhand markets with their assortment of strange, old objects, each one a story, and a mystery.



FIGURE 2.1.  
All Saints' Church, Tianjin China. The church is located in the former British Lease of Tianjin. In the contemporary city, it represents a form of historical residue. Photograph ©Kexin Shan (2023).

Whenever I touched them, I imagined worlds from the past, secrets in their ancient surfaces and, sometimes, barely discernable scents. The jettison of older lives held emotion; they whispered and questioned. From these things grew my fascination with the sensory magic of nostalgia – and the wonder of overlooked aesthetics.

### THE FICTIONAL POTENTIALS OF OLD FILMS

The fascination with old things permeated my life. I still remember when I encountered an old movie poster (Figure 2.2) and was shocked by the colour and the power of a single image to pull me into a world. I think it was at this point that I fell in love with the atmosphere of old movies. I was attracted to the work of Christopher Doyle because his imagery was not dictated by the aesthetics of a period. His ARRI Camera and Kinoptik Lens work were bold, confident, grotesque and loosely constructed. Films that he shot, like Wong Kar-Wai's *Fallen Angels*, were so immersive that I would suspend disbelief inside the unique expressiveness of his visual language.

### BALANCING RISK

As a native Chinese student, deciding to leave the country of my childhood and study abroad was a momentous decision. At 16, given my pursuit of art, curiosity about the larger world, and passion for creating new things, I convinced my parents to enrol me in an international school in my city to prepare me for a foreign education. This decision was like boarding a dangerous airline from which there was no turning back. In China, once one decides to enter an international school, one cannot later change one's mind and hope to gain access into a national university. Carrying such pressure, I began to wrestle with anxiety while I was studying, and this affected my attendance. Eventually, my parents



FIGURE 2.2.  
Promotional poster for *Fallen Angels* (1995), directed by Wong Kar-Wai. (Christopher Doyle was the director of photography).

took me out of school for the sake of my mental health. This situation now made it impossible for me to apply to a university in New Zealand. However, my determination to go abroad remained unchanged, so I chose to study in a local foundation program in New Zealand. I knew if I could pass this programme, I would be able to enter university successfully. With this belief and risk, I embarked on a solo journey into a foreign country in 2017.

When I eventually stood on New Zealand soil as an international student, I felt overwhelmed. After six months, I was admitted to Auckland University of Technology to study Visual Arts. But in this world, there were very few Chinese people. I felt lonely and isolated; I was afraid to communicate, afraid of my broken English and my 'foreign' ways of thinking. In a realm of unknowns, I tried to construct a road map. I wanted to reduce the risk of failing, to live up to my parents' expectations, and to fulfil my desire to 'speak' in new visual languages. Eventually I changed my study trajectory from Visual Arts to Visual Communication Design because I was seeking greater cultural balance.<sup>5</sup> Privately, I wrote the poetry of my heart and from these texts I tried to create meaning of this strange world of the exile. I thought of the times in my hometown, the fragments of memory and potential in old objects and movies. I asked about the spaces between the real and the imagined, between fiction and design. Using the poetic, I emptied myself into designs that expressed my isolation and helplessness. I wrote through exile and inside this process, my thoughts and feelings were given tangible form.

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5 I had become aware of the wider diversity of students from different cultures studying in this degree.

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE THESIS

Today I still live in New Zealand, but things have changed. I see these years of foreignness as an indelible mark but also a kind of autobiography. From such a state I have designed richly poetic texts (Figure 2.3). I have explored the sensory as an internal and haptic state, appreciating the poetics of texture, the weight of light on a piece of paper, or the elegance of a binding.



FIGURE 2.3. Double page spreads from my publication *Forgotten* (2022). In this work I employed visual poetry and digital collage to create a project in the final year of my Bachelor of Visual Communication Design degree. Drawing on personal experience, this project explored the diminished sense of belonging often faced by a Chinese student in an unfamiliar culture and learning environment.

The journeys with my grandmother and the journeys across hemispheres I realise in retrospect, are connected by something unique; it is the wonder of small things, seemingly ordinary but also poetic in their essence. I understand design as more than styled publication; it is a kind of carefully composed resonance (an essence). It may be as paradoxical as an old church huddled in the shadows of city apartment buildings, or as harmonious as the exile poetry of a Chinese scholar from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, writing words into the heart of a contemporary design student. It can be a form of fiction that suspends disbelief. In such connections the thesis found its genesis, and it is from a desire to give voice to the experience of contemporary student exile that the project found its form and purpose.

Chapter Three

**Review of  
Related Knowledge**

## OVERVIEW

In this review I discuss three arenas of knowledge that have impacted on or serve to contextualise the inquiry. The first is the phenomenon of 羁旅 (the exile) in Chinese history (including its expression in artistic creation). The second realm considers poetic inquiry as a research method. The third discusses the nature and application of sensory design.

## LITERATURE RELATING TO THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE OF 羈旅 (EXILE)

The word 羈旅 (translated in this study as exile) has two parts. ‘羈’ means bondage and restraint, and it can also be extended to mean fetters. The word 旅 means road, tourism, travel and traveller. Therefore, 羈旅 can mean living in a foreign country for a long time, and it can refer specifically to a person who resides in a fettered manner in a foreign country. Said (2021) argues that the experience of exile usually produces indelible sadness, and it tends to induce a deep sense of remembrance, alienation, loneliness, loss, nostalgia, melancholy, and dislocation of the emotional spirit. He described this phenomenon as “the tragic fate of homelessness” (2021, p. 86) and “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (2021, p. 77).

Guillén, (1976), notes that Chinese archetypal poems of exile can be traced back to the *Ch’u Tz’u* anthology of songs from the Southern Kingdom that, although composed some five centuries earlier, were collected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. In this genre of writing known as *sao* poetry, the poet speaks in the first person, having most often left for an extended trip and “he reverts again and again to his grief and anguish, for before his journey he was wronged and embittered, and after [...] he is homesick and remorseful” (Hawkes, 1959, p. 8).<sup>6</sup> Much Chinese exile writing flourished during the T’ang dynasty (7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.), and a substantial body of this available work relates to exile of writers like Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan. Guillén (1976, p. 274) notes that at this time, exile “to outlying areas of the Middle Kingdom was viewed

as a most severe punishment” and Schafer observes that “Disgraced politicians were banished to a distance proportional to the degree of the disgrace—the more heinous the crime, the further south they were sent, even to the hot, infected lands of Hainan and Annam” (1976, p. 38). Metzger (1973) calls this kind of exile a “probationary ethic,” because it was understood that one might “renew oneself through morally blameless performance” (Metzger, 1973, p. 400).

Hsien-Yung (1976) notes that Chinese exiles have often sought personal expression and spiritual comfort through artistic creation, and this expression has often been related to nature and philosophy. Although the wandering conditions of Chinese exiles have differed, all forms have involved itinerancy and an experience of difficulty in leaving one’s homeland (Zhao, n.d.). Zhu (2015) defines such exile literature as a concrete expression of spirit, which not only contains the loneliness of being trapped in a foreign land, but also arouses a sense of nostalgia based on the connection to and love for one’s homeland.

Given this historical context, in this study I define an exile as one who encounters disorientating foreignness while grieving for home. In my project, Jiang Xiazheng (the student exile) speaks in the first person and reverts continually to grief (Hawkes, 1959). She is also a significant distance from home, and she bears a sense of disgrace (Schafer, 1976). During her exile she wrestles with Metzger’s (1973) “probationary ethic” as she tries to prove herself before she can return.

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6 Guillén, (1976) likens *sao* poetry to the ancient, anguished Arabic *qasidas* exile writing.

The artefacts in Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau are expressions of her anxiety, nostalgia and isolation. They express the idea of "the self-salvation of the exiles in the spiritual world" (Yang, 2016, p. 178), and underscore the student's "important need for emotional expression" (Yang, 2016, p. 176). Her artefacts capture both nostalgia and artistic courage, and their design constitutes a voice of emotional and physical experience.

Because of poetic work that permeates Jiang Xiazheng's response to her exile and isolation, the project is contextualised by the work of three Chinese poets who are noted for their expressions of exile: the Tang dynasty poet Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元), the contemporary poet Yang Lian (杨炼), and the artist Liu Hung (刘虹).

#### LIU ZONGYUAN (柳宗元)

Liu Zongyuan is significant among writers who have artistically explored the condition of exile.<sup>7</sup> He spent the last fifteen years of his life, hundreds of miles from home and the Chinese literary scholar Red Pine in describing Liu Zongyuan's exile says, "It wasn't prison, but it wasn't home" (Pine, 2019, p. 100).<sup>8</sup> Liu Zongyuan suffered from physical

7 Liu Zongyuan is ranked as one of the two greatest prose writers of the Tang dynasty (Pine, 2019), and he produced 146 *shih*-style poems. Born in 773 in the Chinese city of Chang'an (长安), he rose to prominence in the court of emperor Shunzong, where he became famous for "charging corrupt officials, reforming the tax code, and ending collusion between local officials and state monopolies" (Pine, 2019, p. 101). However, in the 8<sup>th</sup> month of 805, the emperor was forced to abdicate, and his son Li Chun became Emperor Xianzong (宪宗). The change in leadership resulted in Liu Zongyuan being exiled to Yongzhou. During this period, he wrote his exile poetry that was noted for its sense of loss, isolation and uncertainty.

8 It is useful to note that in ancient China, "the civil service exam required a high level of ability in both prose and poetry - prose for reports, memorials, inscriptions, and letters; poetry for meeting or saying goodbye, for offering congratulations or commiseration, for banquets or for sitting alone in the moonlight" (Pine, 2019, p. 101).

and mental desolation during his long exile. In this state, he created many poems that express his sorrow. Among them, his most widely circulated work is 江雪 (*River Snow*):

江雪  
千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭。  
孤舟蓑笠翁，独钓寒江雪。

River Snow  
A thousand mountains and not a bird flying  
Ten thousand paths and not a single footprint  
An old man in his raincoat in a solitary boat  
Fishes alone in the freezing river of snow. (Liu, 807).

In this poem, Liu Zongyuan describes an old man's environment as vast, but deserted. All we encounter is a solitary boat on the river. This kind of description reveals paradoxical fusion between coldness and tranquility that highlights Liu Zongyuan's loneliness and misery. Described by Cheng (2015, p. 9) as a "layer of sadness", the tone of the poem is both beautiful and isolating.

#### YANG LIAN (杨炼)

Yang Lian is a Chinese poet and essayist who was widely respected as a leading writer of the new, modernist-style of 'misty' poetry. He arrived in Auckland in 1989 and was in New Zealand at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Because he was unable to return to China, he began a life in exile, becoming a New Zealand citizen. He was based in Auckland for four traumatic years during which time he

became internationally renowned. In his poem *流亡的死者* (*The Dead in Exile*), he wrote:

到处是异乡  
在死亡里没有归宿.....  
日子不是真的可日复一日  
我们越来越远地离开我们

Everywhere is a foreign land,  
Death gives no refuge ...  
The days are not real but day after day,  
We are getting further and further away.  
(Yang, n.d).

Yang Lian's exile writing depicts deep pain where he feels "Unable to exist in the hostile environment that is his country of birth, yet he is alienated in the foreign land that provides refuge" (Brady, 1997, p. 126). Although he expresses exile as a state of "living death" (Chung, 2012), perhaps his most resonant description of exile in New Zealand comes from *GhostSpeak*, a meditation on writing in exile that he began writing in Auckland in April 1990. He recalls:

Every day you climb the stairs you think: this is exile.  
Feel every step carefully.  
Miss a step and the whole world comes tumbling down on you.  
Each step could be a chapter, this two-storied house a great epic of humanity in exile.  
Still, it's not you.  
You can't speak of a feeling you can't grasp.

Yang Lian's understanding of exile in this project is similar to the semi-fictional environment that Jiang Xiazheng experiences. Similarities can be discerned in Xiazheng's detached sense of brokenness and homesickness.

LIU HUNG (刘虹)

Finally, my project is contextualised by the work of the Chinese-American artist Liu Hung who immigrated to the United States from China in 1984. In her early years in San Francisco, she painted a series of works that considered the issues of identity and immigrant status. Among these was her now famous work *Resident Alien* (Figure. 3.1). This was Liu's first self-portrait and it depicted an enlarged version of her green card. It was significant because it emphasised ways in which memory



FIGURE 3.1.  
Liu Hung, *Resident Alien* (1988). San Jose Museum of Art, Gift of the Lipman Family Foundation.

and identity are shaped by geographical location (Guzman, 2013). *Resident Alien* as a commentary on exile and relocation is both wry and unsettling. A close analysis of the work shows that Liu Hung has used ‘Fortune Cookies’ instead of her real name and her birth date has been replaced with the year that she emigrated to the United States.

Isbister (2009) argues that such visual nuances might superficially imply the loss of Liu Hung’s original Chinese identity that became replaced “by a broad ethnic group” (ibid, p. 18). However, she also notes that concurrently, the signatures in the works emphasise Liu Hung’s claim to being Chinese. In many of Liu Hung’s paintings she discusses issues of identity difference (individual and national) and the nature of her wandering between her ‘hometown’ and ‘new places’. This wandering, she believes, emphasises dissociation and the emotional impact of moving between Eastern and Western cultures (Isbister, 2009).

Liu Hung’s work is significant to my study because she suggests an exotic difference in her exile environment (by using descriptions that emphasise the foreignness of her acquired identity, sadness, cultural difference, and the shock of exile).

## POETIC INQUIRY

Although this project contains ephemera housed in a portmanteau, it also houses workbooks (Figure 3.2), and assignments that the student Jiang Xiazheng has submitted for assessment (Figure 3.3). Permeating these is a distinctive poetic voice. This is because it is through poetry that she gives voice to her sense of disconnection.

Because the project is substantially autobiographical, I drew upon my habit of writing poetry when I am feeling emotions that can’t be

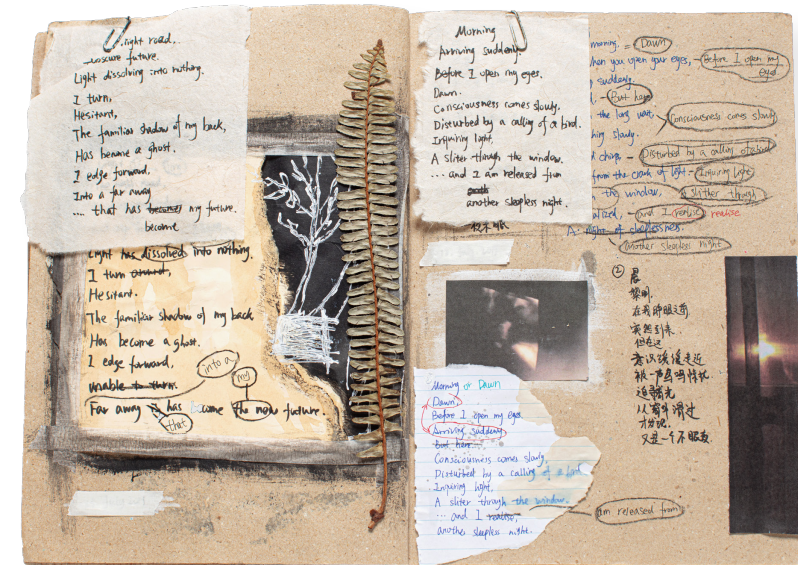


FIGURE 3.2. Pages from Jiang Xiazheng’s workbook. Here one encounters the student’s iterative refinement of five exile poems that eventually form the basis of her final degree submission.



FIGURE 3.3.  
Pages from Jiang Xiazheng's final degree assignment; a publication of poetry and photographs that lyrically express her experience as an exile.

articulated using rational thought. Consequently, the thesis may be seen partially as a poetic inquiry, where poetry is understood as a “vital way to express and learn” (Brown, Kelly, & Finn, 2021, p. 258).

Essentially, poetic inquiry describes research that uses poetry “as, in, [or] for, the inquiry” (Brown, Kelly, & Finn, 2021, p. 257). These authors suggest it “can deepen researcher reflexivity, increasing the emotive impact of research” (ibid.). Prendergast and Galvin (2012) indicate that poetry generated in an inquiry can also cross disciplines and elevate the human experience and, therefore, the human being beneath research. Wu (2021) maintains that poetic inquiry creatively explores the possibility of poetic use, emphasises the value of a personal expression, and often requires poetic awareness of nature and poetic analysis of internal and external events.

This approach to artistic research focuses on language and meaning that provides a viewer with a level of emotional participation (Brown, Kelly, & Finn, 2021). Glesne (1997) proposes that poetry gives researchers greater space and opportunities to explore core concepts and, thus, more diverse potential. As a creative method for communicating experience, poetic inquiry builds on approaches developed by Szto et al. (2005), and in art and design research, in Gannon's (2022) doctoral thesis.

## SENSORY DESIGN

Beyond what can be considered visually, Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau demonstrates heightened attention to sensory engagement. Sensory knowing draws on the Greek idea of aisthesis (sensory perception). In 1750, the word was used by the founder of philosophical aesthetics, Alexander Baumgarten, to describe “a realm of subrational, concrete knowledge” where sensation and perception enable perception (Voigts-

Virchow, 2001, p. 211). However, aisthesis embraces more than simple physical sensations; it also includes emotional and intellectual responses that one might have to designed artefacts.

Malnar and Vodvarka (2004) suggest that when designers treat touch, hearing, taste and smell as contributing considerations, these things may activate memory, emotion and self-cognition, and through this, enhance the depth of communication. Hollein (1976) maintains that these senses can elicit an immediate physical response and resonance for the viewer because they relate directly to “emotion, a certain receptivity and willingness to experience, relate to, transform and think about” what is being encountered (Hollein, 1976, p.13).

Bowers (2016) describes such engagement as ‘sensory design’. This approach “is concerned with creating products and experiences that engage the gamut of human senses, either simultaneously or across multiple touchpoints” (para. 38). Bowers argues that digital design generally “ignores neurological factors beyond sight [while] sensory design principles emphasize the interconnection of human perception and prompt designers to explore non-visual solutions” (ibid., para. 1). He also notes that in digital design we normally constrain engagement to sight, hearing and touch, but in fact humans engage nine sense modalities (sensations perceived *after* stimulus).<sup>9</sup>

In this project, I have designed artefacts that factor in a sense of perceptive inclusiveness (Brod, 2018) because, when unpacked from the portmanteau and examined, multiple sensory dimensions are “directly experienced” (Lawrie, 2008, p. 206) as an enhanced, multidimensional design encounter (Mueller, 2019; Lupton & Lipps, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> These are: Vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, pain, mechanoreception, temperature, and interoception.

On a haptic level, paper, leather, wood, card and cloth have been carefully designed and fatigued as surfaces so we ‘feel’ a sense of the student’s personal engagement and in some instances, prior, generational use. On an olfactory level, when we open medications in the portmanteau (Figures 3.4 & 3.5), we can discern distinctive smells that may align with previous encounters with Chinese medicine. These scents help to suggest a positioning on the student’s fictional homeland while creating a nostalgic atmosphere.



FIGURE 3.4. Designed fictional medicines that use visual design, touch and smell. The medication in the yellow tin emits the scent of ginseng. The medicine in the green packaging is 解毒片 (Jiedu Pian), that has the scent of Chinese herbal medicine added.



FIGURE 3.5. A fictional balm from the portmanteau that emits the smell of peppermint, a nostalgic scent associated with both Western and Eastern medicine.

The project has actively engaged with Bowers' (2016) observation that our senses work in an integrated manner where “the brain prioritizes information from senses and surroundings to inform bodily responses” (2016, para. 19). Drawing on his assertion that designers can “make sensory engagement more intentional and multifaceted [and create] designed experiences that are more appealing and memorable” (ibid. para. 16), I have created a fictional, multifaceted artefact. This work expands the dimensions of design to embrace the visual, as well as the communicative potentials of touch and smell.

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Having in this chapter considered scholarly, literary and professional discourses that contextualise the project, in the next chapter we will ‘unpack’ the thinking behind the creative work.

Chapter Four

## **Research Design**

## METHODOLOGY

Epistemologically this study emanates from Chinese and Western ways of knowing. This position has been shaped by my development as a child in one world and a tertiary design student in the other. In the study a practice-led methodological approach to research has been employed to develop artefacts through iterative experimentation and reflection (Brien et al., 2010). Candy (2006) uses the term 'practice-led inquiry' to describe an "original investigation undertaken to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (Candy, 2006, para. 2). Similarly, Gray (1996) proposes that such research is primarily initiated through practice and is carried out through practice. In a practice-led inquiry, "practice is used as a vehicle for reforming, critiquing and advancing the research question" (Steagall & Ings, 2018, p. 67).

In addressing the research question, I draw on autobiographical experience<sup>10</sup> (Faumuina, 2022; Ings, 2014) as a substrate from which to build a fictional allegory (Tavares, 2011, 2019). By combining creative writing and visual communication design, I artistically interpret the Chinese literary construct of the exile. To do this, I draw on the autobiographical to create a fictional character called Jiang Xiazheng, who we encounter through print media and correspondence. These artefacts are housed in a partitioned portmanteau, that constitutes a form of fictional social iconography where allegory and imagination are employed to communicate a student's experience of exile. In the study, sensory perception extends into the sensory design, so tactile experimentation provides "things to perceive, recognize, conceive and understand" (Mäkelä, 2007, p. 159). As a consequence, a direct and perceptible haptic experience is designed to convey information and resonance.

## METHODS

Inside the practice-led inquiry, I have employed six methods: creative writing, close reading, tactile experimentation, *denkraum*, prototyping and selective feedback.

### CREATIVE WRITING

At the beginning of the project, creative writing was used to create a context for a fictional student (Jiang Xiazheng). This method helped to

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10 In the study I use the term 'fictional autobiography' rather than autoethnography because, unlike an autoethnography, the study is not "interpretive research that examines how the researcher's identity shapes the researcher's observations and interpretations" (Garcia, 2023, para. 7). In addition, the design of the artefact-led narrative is the site of the research, rather than the autobiographical narrative itself. I also accept that although the underpinning narrative draws heavily on my personal recollections and experiences, these are edited and their projection into artefacts is fictionalised.

build a comprehensive character world, and it allowed me to organise the sequence of events surrounding her exile (see Appendix One). While developing the narrative, I introduced artefacts that could be designed as part of a fictional portrait (realised as a portable portmanteau). In addition to providing a structure for the study, creative writing also helped me to map emotions on to the design of the objects,<sup>11</sup> and draw into physical form the loneliness and nostalgia that emanated from my personal experience of exile.

As such, creative writing became a method that helped me to shape and reshape Jiang Xiazheng's world because I was able to delete, modify, and add to the fictional narrative that gave birth to the designed artefacts.

### CLOSE READING

This project used close reading as a research method to create more authentic fictional artefacts.<sup>12</sup> Fleming (1974) argues that the close reading of an artefact's materials, design, manufacture and provenance enables us to learn about the people who created the artefact, their social world and cultural life. Similarly, Brock (2016, para. 4) argues that artefacts contain 'cultural information' and we can "see people and the shape of their lives through the details of an artifact."

I used close reading to analyse details in existing print ephemera (including passports and old currencies), so I could cross reference what exists with fictional designs that might speak so articulately that

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11 For example, when I described Jiang Xiazheng examining her passport in her new homeland, I knew that the designed artefact had to integrate both the official nature of a fictional Sino state (Huayu) and the nostalgic longing for it.

12 By close reading I refer to the careful examination of an object or body of text, in such a way that an analysis is made of specific features that contribute to its meaning. These might include typography, space, fatigue, colour and context.

a 'reader' was able to suspend disbelief (Coleridge, 1817).<sup>13</sup> For example, when designing Jiang Xiazheng's passport, I close read type, language, texture, iconography, space, stock and technical details like security designs and colour transitions (Figure 4.1).

When designing artefacts, I was aiming for a fictional continuity that not only appeared 'authentic' but also expressed an emotional, idealised connection to the fictional world that the protagonist had left (Figure 4.2).

Because of my concern with tactility, close reading also extended to analyses of materials, paper weight, fatigue and decay because the portmanteau contained artefacts that spanned several decades (Figure 4.3).



FIGURE 4.1. Contemporary travel documents from China, Macau and New Zealand that were analysed for the design of Jiang Xiazheng's fictional passport. Of significance here was a close reading of date stamps, logos, security devices, portraits, typography, foiling, paper texture, surface and weight.

13 In using Coleridge's term here, I am referring to our willingness to suspend critical thinking and logic in order to temporarily believe in the actuality of a fictional artefact of narrative, for the sake of enjoying its intensity or relevance.





FIGURE 4.3.  
A comparison of original, traditional medicine labels (left) and fictional labels I designed for Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau (right). Often Chinese leaving their country will bring such medicines with them because they are difficult to procure outside of their homeland. Using such references I was able to allude to Jiang Xiazheng's attachment to nostalgia and her cultural connection to treating physical adversity.

## TACTILE EXPERIMENTATION

As a consequence of close reading, I undertook a range of approaches to designing material damage and decay. This is because I wanted to create artefacts in the portmanteau that would ‘speak’ to time and use (Figure 4.4).

I also experimented with a range of artefacts that did not appear in the final portmanteau. Among these were early iterations of the DVD we find in Jiang Xiazheng’s case. In an early design I tried to design an artefact that referenced intensive use over a shorter period of time (Figure 4.5).



FIGURE 4.4. Fictional labels (spanning many decades) that we encounter on the inside lid of the portmanteau. When designing these artefacts, I examined existing labels on old suitcases and created similar artefacts by dyeing my designs with tea, coffee and toner. I also experimented with printing and distressing the labels multiple times, so I could increase a sense of fading type.



FIGURE 4.5. A comparison of the original, fictional DVD cover I designed for Jiang Xiazheng’s second-year project and a later version as a cardboard package. To attain a sense of material fatigue in the original design, I used an existing DVD plastic sleeve that I bent, rubbed and lightly sanded. The image was produced using a photo-fugitive colour palette that I created by diminishing the volume of pale tones in the final print.<sup>14</sup> In the end I chose not to include the plastic DVD cover because its plasticity felt too inconsistent with the quiet nostalgia of the contents of the portmanteau. Instead, I redesigned the DVD cover as fold-out cardboard packaging that was available at the time for smaller release DVD collections. The tactility of this replacement design was more ‘mat’ and with it I was able to reference the aesthetics of the period while maintaining an emphasis on papery textures.

<sup>14</sup> A fugitive colour refers to a pigment that, when exposed to sunlight or humidity, is less permanent than others in the original print. Often low-grade prints of the 1990s, especially those used on pirated DVDs, were produced on colour photocopiers (rather than being printed using offset technologies). Over time, as more delicate pigments faded, the prints became increasingly contrasted and the original palettes were distorted, because while the blues often remained stable, more delicate, pale shades (like those in skin tones) faded.

Okamoto et al. (2013) argue that tactile perception can be psychophysical or emotional, and in many instances in this project these two attributes were combined. For example, I explored the difference in touch perception and viewer interpretation when encountering crumpled or creased visa certificates and how these different versions of the same letter might result in different interpretations of Jiang Xiazheng's emotional state (Figure 4.6).

Across the study, I also experimented with the tactile resonances including soft and hard, new and fatigued, textured and smooth surfaces. I often used old, soft and damaged textures to allude to nostalgia and loss (Figure 4.4), and stiff or plasticised surfaces to suggest the spiritual soullessness of officious, arbitrarily exercised institutional power (Figure 4.7).

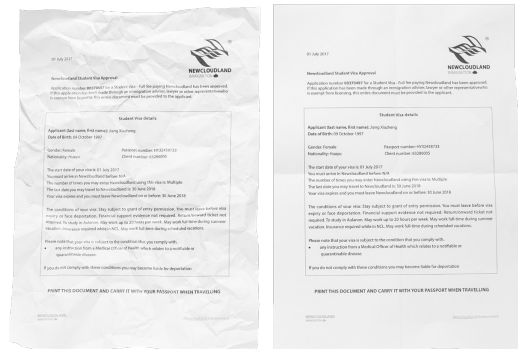


FIGURE 4.6. Tactile testing of visa surfaces (September, 2023). There is potential for considerable emotional resonance in something as simple as how a document is encountered. The version of the Jiang Xiazheng's visa on the left might narratively suggest frustration or anger, while the same artefact on the right might suggest a more emotionally stable, orderly, systematic character.



FIGURE 4.7. Passport cover test (October, 2023). After the stitch binding was completed, I used a linen textured paper for the passport cover. When foiling the type, I set the machine's printing speed very fast so the text and logo on the cover would be difficult to discern. Then I used a hard toothbrush and sandpaper to subtly distress the surface and compromise the clarity of the foiled elements and typography.



## PROTOTYPING

Prototyping is an exploratory and refining technique often used by designers in the pursuit of an effective outcome (Camburn et al., 2015). In this study it was employed to test the viable authenticity and continuity of fictional artefacts.<sup>17</sup> By prototyping I could trial the three-dimensionality of my designs, their materiality, scale, and emotional resonance when being handled (Figure 4.9). In these experiments, I was reminded that prototyping is often accompanied by failure, but Beaudouin-Lafon and Mackay (2007) suggest that failure should be seen as a way of gaining insight into new possibilities.



FIGURE 4.9. This image shows three versions of the ink packaging and label design developed using prototyping. Although indicative of contemporary ink packaging, the first two iterations lacked the sense of time, materiality and colour that was realised in the final prototype. (October, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> By continuity I mean relationships between my designs so they might 'feel' like they might aesthetically cohabit with the same fictional character and her world.

## SELECTIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Given the autobiographical nature of the study, I developed a process of critical feedback where I showed selected designers (who I held in high regard) iterations of my work once I was relatively happy with an idea. This preserved the sensitive spaces of gestation while enabling me to import critical feedback once a design had 'found a form'. During the development process, these designers asked me questions and provided technical advice that might help me to consider my decision making from more diverse perspectives. As part of this process, I also sought outside advice and critique from bookbinders, foilers, professional printers and stock suppliers.

In addition, I collected feedback from other exiles regarding the cultural lens and perspectives I was considering in my work. As I listened to their experiences and sought their opinions on iterations of the project, I was able to assess the emotional resonance and communicative clarity of my designs.

Having discussed the research design supporting the project, we can move now to a consideration of the artefacts in the project, both physically and in relation to the study's aims and contexts.

Chapter Five

**Critical Commentary**

## OVERVIEW

This chapter begins with a technical discussion of the ideas and design decisions relating to the artefacts in the project: national identity documents, personal artefacts, ephemera, and institutional paperwork. Following this discussion, I explore relationships between the fictional portmanteau and three concepts: exile, poetry and aesthetic / sensory design.

## FICTIONAL ARTEFACTS

### NATIONAL IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

#### The passport

This 40-page replica was designed after close reading a variety of existing passports (Figure 5.1). In choosing the colour, I prioritised blue to show the fictional country's association with water. Emotionally, when Jiang Xiazheng is in a strange country, blue also speaks to her loneliness. To design the imagery I employed photo montage to interweave nostalgia and modernity into the tone of the island state of Huayu (Figure 5.2). From this base, an engraved background was added to create a texture similar to the gravure in a real passport (Figure 5.2). To replicate security details, I employed densely arranged text and alternating lines to recreate the country's anti-counterfeiting system (Figures 5.2 & 5.3). I also produced a set of dotted holes for the passport's serial number. These were placed at equal intervals, using circular patterns that traced the outline of a sans-serif font (Figure 5.3).

The interior pages were laser printed and gold foil (a common device on international passports) was used on the cover. In reference to current convention, I chose linen textured stock for the cover and 120gsm ultra-white paper for the inner pages. I also affixed laser cold lamination film to the first and last pages of the passport. This material allowed the paper to reflect changing lustre, that emulates a standard passport.<sup>18</sup>

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18 In passport design, laminating provides additional anti-counterfeiting protection for essential pages.



FIGURE 5.1.  
Fatigued cover of Jiang Xiazheng's fictional passport.



FIGURE 5.2.  
A double page spread from the fictional passport, showing Huayu's nature as an island state that combines traditional and contemporary architecture. The distinctive colour changes and engraved texture are devices used in passport design to combat counterfeiting.

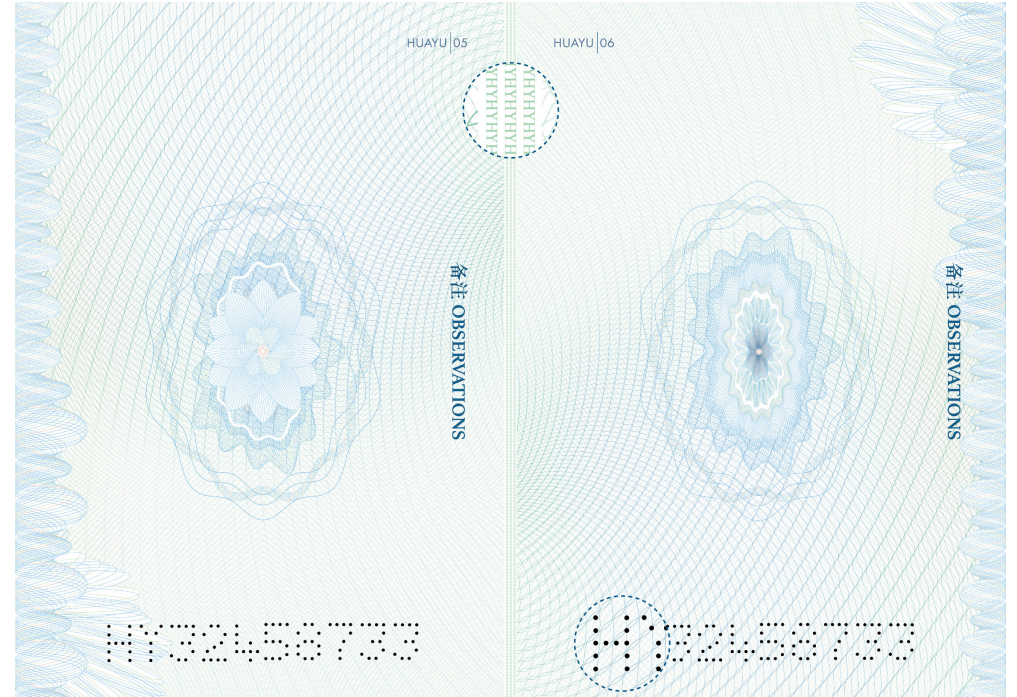


FIGURE 5.3.  
Fictional passport's security details. I employed a very small type size and used Huayu's initials "HY" as a covert security detail. The passport number which is in the lower part of the page references conventions in Chinese passport design. An official passport has nine numbers and letters but, to avoid the potential of the artifact being used illegally, I included an additional letter so it cannot be read by immigration scanning equipment.

Given that Jiang Xiazheng’s passport has experienced some use, I also created entry and exit stamps for different countries and visa stickers where appropriate. This provides an account of her life experience prior to her exile in Newcloudland (Figure 5.4).

### Money

Inside Jiang Xiazheng’s leather notebook we find banknotes from Huayu and Newcloudland<sup>19</sup> (Figure 5.5). For Huayu’s designs I referenced Asian millennial generation banknotes and considered the ‘visual voice’ of an island state. Laing (2017) notes that the Chinese commonly use flowers, animals and birds as metaphors for good luck. She suggests that “this convention is based on the tonal nature of the Chinese spoken language where one sound may have a variety of meanings, resulting in visual puns and rebuses” (p. 97). In my work, the front of the banknote features the lotus flower as the country’s national emblem. The background design follows the basic concept of the lotus flower (莲花, lián huā) and combines it with a design I created that uses four stylised goldfish (金鱼, jīn yú) (Figure 5.6). The word “莲 (lián)” is pronounced the same way as “连 (lián)”, which means continuous, and “鱼 (yú)”, which means fish, is the same as “余 (yú)”, which means rich. This linguistic convention gives the design a suggestion of blessing - 连年有余 (abundance every year). The crane on the back of the note is also an oriental symbol of good luck (Figure 5.5).

The notes are printed on 80gsm half-cooked rice paper. The yellowish tint of this stock hints at the age of the banknotes and its cotton-like texture is indicative of Chinese currency in circulation between 1980 and 2010. This sense of recent nostalgia highlights Jiang Xiazheng’s attraction to things that are now outdated.



FIGURE 5.4.  
The passport’s stamp pages (left), and visa sticker (right).



FIGURE 5.5.  
Banknote designs from Huayu and Newcloudland.

<sup>19</sup> The portraits on the banknotes are the only element in the thesis assisted by AI generated imagery. AI was used to create an initial, baseline portrait. However, I then refined these portraits using digital collage and manipulation techniques.

Newcloudland's banknotes are based on close readings of Australasian currency from around 2010 (Figure 5.5). The background design was drawn using Adobe Illustrator and the design integrates a range of anti-counterfeiting devices including complex background textures (Figure 5.7) and individual serial numbers.

The iconography of this currency suggests a colder climate but a similar national appreciation of birdlife. The figurehead (a European Queen) suggests the possibility that the country has not reached a state of post-colonisation because there is no evidence of indigenous iconography.

For these notes I chose a PP glossy photo stock (120gsm). This paper is smooth, difficult to tear, and has a plastic texture that gives it a “new” feel, indicative of Australasian banknotes of the period.



FIGURE 5.6.  
The background design of the front of the Huayu banknote, showing the delicate combination of a lotus flower (left) and four interfacng, abstracted goldfish (right).

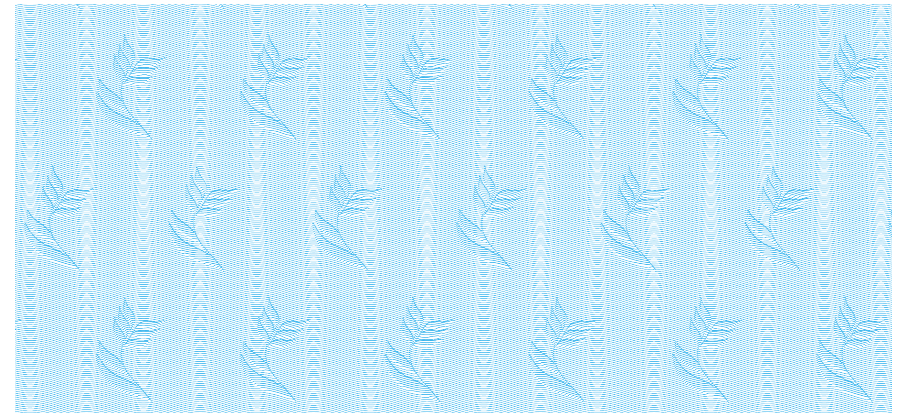


FIGURE 5.7.  
Complex, repeated background texture for the Newcloudland bank note.

## Stamps

Interspersed through Jiang Xiazheng's mother's old stamp album are fictional stamps designed from five countries: China, Danmørk, Huayu, Singapore, and Newcloudland (Figures 5.8 & 5.9). These stamps are based on Jiang Xiazheng's travel experience and are associated with timelines in her narrative. The designs for Huayu and Newcloudland reference the stamps of China and New Zealand and draw on aesthetic styles, typefaces and typographical proportions evident in stamp design of the period. Huayu's stamps employ a fusion of Chinese and Singaporean iconography. Thus, we see featured a celebration of the zodiac Year of the Ox,<sup>20</sup> Chinese window grille designs and ink paintings. The stamps from Danmørk suggest a nation very similar to Denmark with a reference made to the Little Mermaid (albeit rendered using and adding a layer of pen-and-ink painting filters). Newcloudland's stamp celebrates sailing as a contemporary sport, suggesting the country's island geography and maritime sporting history.

On some stamps I have vignetted postmarks and others are cut from envelopes (a practice evidenced in my mother's stamp collecting). Perforated edges were achieved using specialised scissors. The stamps were printed on 80gsm Dowling stock but using a lower DPI ratio, that produced the slightly faded look to the colour. Finally, coffee was used to age some specimens, to suggest a sense of nostalgia.



FIGURE 5.8.  
Fictional stamps from China, Huayu and Singapore.



FIGURE 5.9.  
Fictional stamps from Danmørk and Newcloudland.

<sup>20</sup> Jiang Xiazheng was born in 1997 and her Chinese zodiac sign is the Ox.

## PERSONAL ARTEFACTS

The second group of items in Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau speak to her personal negotiations with the world. These include a travel journal, postcards, a DVD she submitted for assessment in her second year, one of her student workbooks, and the final project she submitted for her degree.

### Travel journal

The travel journal is an intimate, portable document that Jiang Xiazheng carried with her (Figure 5.10). The cover is made of moleskin and embossed with her name. The journal contains old glasses, fictional money, plane tickets and movie tickets — artefacts that may be taken out and examined separately. The inner pages of the journal contain Polaroid photographs,<sup>21</sup> and handwritten notes and drawings (Figure 5.10), that give voice to her emotional state. To create stylistic continuity and a sense of intimate nostalgia in the journal, I used a Camera Raw Filter to rework certain images and created the final prints using the Fujifilm Instax mini Link.



FIGURE 5.10.  
Exterior and interior views of Jiang Xiazheng's travel journal.

21 While designing this journal, I travelled back and forth between China and New Zealand taking photographs that might record Jiang Xiazheng's shifting focus of attention and emotional state. The photographs are largely of airport departure spaces, voyages and destination halls. When I was immersed in 'on-location' shooting, I was constantly reacquainted with my own experience of exile and the texts arose naturally from this state.

## Postcards

The postcards in Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau illustrate a distinctive method she found of comforting himself. To create these I collaged stills from the original film *甜蜜蜜* (*Comrades: Almost a Love Story*) and real-life photographs taken in her country of exile (Figure 5.11) to create an expression of suspended disorientation. The poem on the reverse of each card is displayed in digital handwriting, and the Chinese version of the poem is written on the right-hand side. Each postcard features a fictional stamp (including postmarks that Jiang Xiazheng created). The stamps reflect upon 'hometown' memories that include ancient buildings, old alleys and antiquated telephone booths.

These postcards are expressions of the psychological state of exile and Jiang Xiazheng's desire to find comfort by combining fragments of meaning. The cards were never posted ... they were intimate communications to the self; self-contained communications in an interior world.

In terms of the aesthetic, I created a vellum texture background to evoke a sense of tactile nostalgia (that one might find in old prints). I printed the designs on to 300gsm acid-free watercolour paper because the surface texture heightens the feeling of dilapidation and damage ... and as such, speaks to the student's psychological state of exile.



FIGURE 5.11.  
The front and back of three postcards. These artefacts speak to the heart of a wanderer.

### DVD (submission for a second-year assignment)

The disk, an instruction manual, and a folding cardboard case make up a DVD design for the film *Chungking Express's* (1994) (Figure 5.12). The design was submitted by Jiang Xiazheng for an assignment in her second year of undergraduate study and it fared badly in its assessment. While lacking the production values and sense of sophistication of her final year assessment, the design was an outreach and an early example of her desire to communicate her sense of exile.

For the design I chose GSFT, a Chinese typeface with a traditional Hong Kong aesthetic (because the film was made in Hong Kong). Based on the GSFT type style, the English font employs the comparable serif font Charter. The DVD package was laser printed on to 120gsm coated white material. However, to suggest the artefact's use after submission, I softly sanded the paper's edges to suggest damage. I then exposed the print to sunlight for a month to lessen the colour clarity.



FIGURE 5.12.  
Interior of Jiang Xiazheng's DVD design submission.

### Jiang Xiazheng's workbook

Jiang Xiazheng's student workbook may be 'read' as a resourcing document for the final poetic assignment she submitted in her undergraduate degree. This document is a form of poetic scrapbook and, within it, we see her refining iterations of her poetry (Figure 5.13). In the journal, Jiang Xiazheng's sense of powerlessness in a non-idealised world is articulated aesthetically through both visual and tactile senses.

To create this artefact I used multiple writing and drawing media, paper, images, paintings, pressed flowers and leaves. These resourced a methodology that involved adopting a 'multiple variation of perspectives' as a way of the student heuristically feeling her way forward.<sup>22</sup>

### Jiang Xiazheng's final degree project

Jiang Xiazheng's final project closes her exile with success. Building on refinements in her journal and accumulated experiences across her time in exile, it demonstrates a quiet, sophisticated design sensibility that becomes a subtle expression of solitude (Figure 5.14). The images in the publication combine my photography with fragments gathered from Jiang Xiazheng's mediated world.<sup>23</sup> As composites they represent attempts at poetic reconciliation - and each collection of images speaks to the poem that precedes it. The images are largely monochromatic and contrast with the ample white space that surrounds them. This use of colour and proportion conveys a sense of contemplation and isolation. Within the images there are sometimes subtle blushes of colour (a faint voice of preserved hope or attention).



FIGURE 5.13. Jiang Xiazheng's workbook containing iterative developments of her poetry. The poetic texts and collages express the bitterness of her melancholy.

22 This process is described by Kleining and Witt (2000) in their discussion of how the chances for discovery are heightened in heuristic inquiries.

23 By this I mean fragments of images that appear in existing print media.

The book contains five illustrated poems divided into five sections. At the beginning of each section are details of the watercolour image. This voice of texture in the publication suggests vague, inner feelings that are not easily perceived by the outside world. As such, the publication design may be likened to an abstract expression of internal monologue. Structurally, each poem appears on a separate card. One side of the card contains the Chinese version of a poem and the other an English translation. Being interior voices, the cards serve as bookmarks interleaving sections of the document in such a way that they may be taken out and read (Figure 5.14) before being discreetly returned. Structurally, the work employs a concertina binding that accommodates the reclusive spaces for the poems and a linear order for the photographs.<sup>24</sup>



FIGURE 5.14. Exterior and interior views of the design for *Poems of Exile*.

24 I used 300gsm uncoated white paper to increase the thickness of the spine.

## EPHEMERA

The third group of artefacts in the portmanteau are objects of personal value to Jiang Xiazheng. These include her grandmother's annotated recipe book, a small board game, packaging, movie and airline tickets and a talisman.

### The recipe book

The recipe book was purchased at an old Chinese market then impregnated with paper notes and marginalia (Figure 5.15). The notes were written using different pens (to provide the impression that they were not entered on the same day). The recipes paint a nostalgic portrait *in absentia* of Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother and they interface with the project's references to memories of food and company.

### The small board game

斗兽棋 (dou shou qi) is a traditional board game that Jiang Xiazheng played as a child. In China it is a cheap, ubiquitous educational toy. Jiang Xiazheng brought it with her as a nostalgic connection (Figure 5.16). When designing this artefact, I was attentive to the use of cheap materials and low-grade printing methods used in such products. Accordingly, after drawing the illustration for the package cover, I imported it into Photoshop and began distorting and distressing the design.

Procuring authentic 斗兽棋 (dou shou qi)'s stock (in the form of cheap, uncoated, matte, light, unbleached cardboard) was challenging, so I printed the design on 135gsm white card and glued it to the top of the original game cover. I printed the design for the chessboard on to 50gsm rice paper. This light-weight stock is indicative of such toys, and it carries with it a delicate, tactile nostalgia that was employed to contrast with the harsher stocks used for institutional correspondence in the portmanteau.

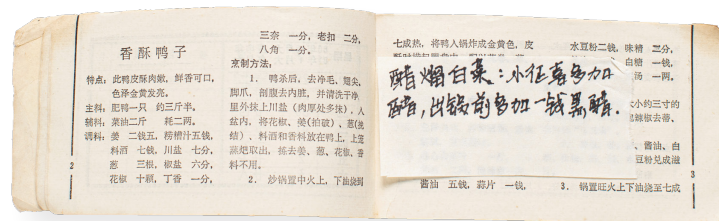
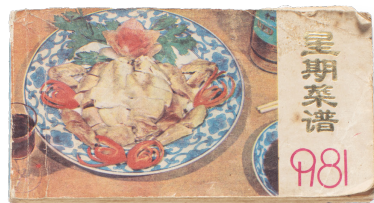


FIGURE 5.15. Cover and interior spread of Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother's recipe book.



FIGURE 5.16. Fictional packaging design for the chess board and pieces of 斗兽棋 (dou shou qi).



### Packaging (medicine and ink)

I designed a number of fictional treatments and containers that reference traditional tonics (Figure 5.17). To package medications like 宁清丸 (Ningqing Wan) (the fictional balm), I used coated paper (on the exterior) and matte material (on the interior), and the instructions were printed on 40gsm blank notebook paper. To create the sense of low-cost, multiple print ephemera, while ink from the laser printer was drying on the paper, I lightly smudged it. I also frequently opened and closed the packaging to create 'wear' folds on the final artefacts such that they might allude to a sense of frequent use.



FIGURE 5.17. Fictional medicines and instructions. With the exception of the cough medicine (the small bottle on the left), these medications are all produced by the same fictional medical company.

A similar approach to distressing was employed when designing the packaging for the calligraphy ink in Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau. The branding and development of the 孔雀 (Peacock) product (Figure 5.18) referenced the elegance and free-flowing nature of ink and a peacock's tail. Because this is an artefact from the 1980s and 1990s, I chose two fonts that suggested hand rendered calligraphy (using a hard pen). The varying thicknesses of these fonts referenced a vintage Chinese aesthetic that one finds in cheaper typography used for product packaging design in these decades. The final design was printed on to 200gsm sketch paper (for the packaging) and 70gsm copy paper (for the ink labels). I supplemented the distressing techniques I had employed in the medicine packaging with small red ink stains to suggest frequent use.



FIGURE 5.18. Fictional Ink packaging and ink bottle labels (2024).

## Tickets

In reference to incidents in Jiang Xiazheng's accompanying narrative, I included in the portmanteau a number of fictional tickets. As low-grade ephemera such things are rarely kept but by including them, I believed that I might draw attention to the fragile ways that nostalgia connects to ordinary objects. Thus, we see in evidence an old movie ticket from Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother's habit of attending the cinema and another ticket from the last movie she watched before leaving her hometown. We also find Jiang Xiazheng's airline ticket from Huayu to Newcloudland (Figure 5.19).

In designing such ephemera I close read the type and layout of indicative documents and the final designs were shaped by the idea that print artefact might gather value and meaning through a 'baptism of time'. In other words, a sense of realism might be achieved by imitating what happens to a print artefact after it has been issued. To achieve this 'look' I used a rough brush in Photoshop to create a worn texture.

In reference to Chinese movie tickets of the period, I printed the fictional artefacts on 70gsm stock and created small tears and creases by repeatedly rubbing the paper in random ways. I then coated the ticket with brown powder and smudged it into the textured surface. For the other movie ticket, I used paper from a Warwick unruled exercise book (which is similar to thermal paper and has a tactile quality akin to a modern movie ticket). The airline ticket was printed on 250gsm Fujifilm Digi Colotech Uncoated Pro (which is similar to stock that is currently used).



FIGURE 5.19. Movie and airline ticket designs. The movie ticket references a Chinese design (circa 2017). The flight tickets are based on an airline's typography and layout from the same year. In the designs we see contrasted regional and international design aesthetics.

### A talisman

The portmanteau contains a single talisman. Traditionally such artefacts symbolise friendship and hometown connections but in the context of Jiang Xiazheng the artefact represents loss and alienation (Figure 5.20). In designing the item I used thermal transfer technology to print her Chinese name (and the word ‘peace’) on the fabric. The talisman is a gourd (a Chinese symbol of peace), so the calligraphy and graphic reference both peace and good luck.



FIGURE 5.20.  
The front and back of the talisman packaging and its contents.

### INSTITUTIONAL PAPERWORK

The final group of items in the portmanteau are paper documents issued by various organisations. These include a visa, an injury report, a police report, a tenancy agreement, an assessment sheet and academic transcript related to Jiang Xiazheng's undergraduate degree.

These designs carry a sense of formal distance and objectivity. Their brands lack any sense of empathy because the documents emphasise a kind of dispassionate authority (Figure 5.21). Although the hospital's logo suggests a formal sense of care and the tenancy agreement's header posits an allusion to modernity and warmth, all of the documents use in sans-serif typefaces in the pursuit of simplicity, clarity and readability. Todd and DeCotes (2023) note that such fonts are often used to underscore a sense of the modern, clinical and institutional and in all of the correspondence featured in the portmanteau my designs utilise InDesign's grid and baseline system for layout. The documents are all printed on standard A4, 90 – 100gsm bleached stationary paper so they conform with standard institutional issue.

#### Assessment sheet and academic transcript

An assessment sheet and Jiang Xiazheng's final academic transcript continue this sense of institutional objectivity (Figure 5.22). The design is bland. The assessment sheet contains feedback on her second year DVD design assignment. When conceptualising the project, I imagined that, as an international student, Jiang Xiazheng might experience grades that corresponded with cultural misunderstandings. Accordingly, the feedback on her second-year assignment mixes critique with an unawareness of why she is absent from classes and a misreading of the subject matter and design references in her submission.

However, Jiang Xiazheng's final transcript indicates that over the three years of her study there has been a gradual upward trend, and her final book of poetry and photographs was appreciated as indicative of sensitive design.



FIGURE 5.21. Visa, injury report, police report, and tenancy agreement (2023). These paper documents are hidden in an archive bag in the corner of Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau.

**BACHELOR DESIGN – COMMUNICATION DESIGN**  
**DESIGN STUDIO HUBRIC – 2019**  
**BRIEF (Year 2) – DESP602 (Design project III)**

Student name: Xiazheng Jiang | Date: 13.10.2019  
 Grade: Second year | Tutor Feedback: James Smith

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	FAC (1-10) 10 POINTS	D-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	C-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	C-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	C-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	B-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	B-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	A-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	A-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS	A-RANGE (1-10) 10 POINTS
<b>1. Visual Communication</b>										
<b>2. Written Communication</b>										
<b>3. Creative Problem Solving</b>										
<b>4. Professional Practice</b>										

**AULANON SCHOOL OF DESIGN**  
**UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM**  
**Academic Transcript**

Name: Xiazheng Jiang  
 Student number: 1900802

PROGRAMME ENROLMENT					
Year	Code	Title			
2018	AK005	Bachelor of Communication Design			
ACADEMIC RESULTS					
Year	Code	Title	Level	Points	Grade
2018	DESP01	Design Project I	5	30	C
	GRAC02	Image and Identity	5	15	C-
	GRAC03	Typography in Design	5	15	C
	GRAC04	Design Studies I	5	15	C
	DESP02	Design Project II	5	30	C
	GRAC05	Design Studies II	5	15	C+
2019	DESP01	Design Project III	6	30	C+
	GRAC02	Image Making	6	15	C+
	GRAC03	Design Thinking I	6	15	B-
	GRAC04	Design Studies III	6	15	C

FIGURE 5.22. An assessment sheet and final academic transcript (2024). In the project, a mark sheet appears inside the DVD. Jiang Xiazheng's final academic transcript appears in the archive bag along with other institutional paperwork.

## CRITICAL IDEAS

### UNDERPINNING THE PORTMANTEAU

#### EXILE

The concept of exile is both the subject and the poetic voice of the thesis. Zhao (n.d.) argues that the mental state and sensibilities of many poets are changed by their experiences of exile, and Al-Musawi (2001) suggests that exiles often use recollection to soothe the shadows of their isolation. Although exile may be regarded as a form of immigration (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989), the experience of being set adrift and unsupported can create distinctive forms of nostalgia (Lijtmaer, 2022) that demarcate exiles from people who enter into a voluntary form of relocation - where there are provisions for reversal if necessary. Karagöz and Ramkissoon (2023) observe that “nostalgia triggers inherently tend to be negative, and loneliness is one of these” (p. 219). They also note that people who experience loneliness often resort to nostalgia more than other groups. Lijtmaer claims that exiles use nostalgia as a coping mechanism and they resort “to linking objects or linking phenomena that help them continue having contact with the past, while adjusting to their new environment” (2022, p. 305).

In my work, the expression of exile not only includes loneliness and nostalgia but also extends Lijtmaer’s theory of linking objects or phenomena through a process of collecting and archiving. Jiang Xiazheng is an exile in a foreign land, and she has lost a sense of belonging and familiarity. She is trapped by loneliness and her longing for a spiritual home (Yang, 2016). Her portmanteau displays attempts she has made to cure loneliness through nostalgia (Zhou et al., 2021) and these have been forms of spiritual and “emotional longing” (Karagöz & Ramkissoon, 2023, p. 219). Her portmanteau is a repository of

memories; fragments of a life left behind and another in exile that is causing emotional damage. She keeps her passport, money, stamps, recipes, a board game, medication, tickets and other ephemera as connections to a world from which she is separated.

While the portmanteau contains nostalgic fragments, it also houses examples of Jiang Xiazheng’s attempt to make meaning of her exile. Thus, her travel journal, workbook, DVD, postcards and final book of poetry are designed instances of her attempt to understand her isolation.

As an exile who “is deprived of a holding, secure environment to continue [her] life” (Lijtmaer, 2022, p. 305), she experiences debilitation and mental pain (Shuai, 2004). Institutional responses to this pain are illustrated in official documents that through their lack of empathy have intensified her exile.

#### POETRY

The primary method that Jiang Xiazheng uses to make meaning of her isolation is poetry. Like the Chinese poet and essayist Yang Lian (杨炼), she records small moments and composes these into lyrical accounts. Such poetry, Simecek and Rumbold (2016) suggest, “can offer crucial ‘thinking spaces’ in which to reflect on our lives, thereby enhancing understanding of the self through personal engagement” (p. 310). Drawing on Yang Lian’s modernist-style of ‘misty’ poetry,

Jiang Xiazheng's writing reflects on ordinary things. Her approach can be compared to the 'natural blandness' of Song Dynasty poetry (Pan, 2022) that is characterised by showing emotions, descriptions of the natural environment and reflections on everyday aspects of one's current situation. These things become metaphors for deeper ideas.

Consequently, the poetry in the project is intimate, isolated and vulnerable. The poems connect the experience of the exile to "cognitive and affective responses, mind and body, experiences and memories" (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016, p. 310).

For example, let us consider Jiang Xiazheng's poem 晨 (*morning*):

晨  
早晨，  
不是在睁眼之间，  
突然到来。  
是在漫长的等待中，  
缓缓走近。  
一声鸟鸣，  
从光的缝隙中传来。  
透过窗外，  
才发现，  
一夜未眠

Morning  
Arriving suddenly.  
Before I open my eyes,  
Dawn.  
Consciousness comes slowly,  
Disturbed by a calling of a bird.

Inquiring light,  
A slither through the window.  
... and I am released from,  
another sleepless night.

Here we encounter what appears to be a description of ordinary signs that follow the dawn. But through these, it is revealed that the poet spends sleepless nights while in exile. This form of poetry employs everyday observations as a form of self-reevaluation (Ketelle, 2004), while capturing the mysterious feelings of living in exile (Arnold, 2000) through reflections on a small interior space (Yang, 1996).

Poetry of this project is also a way that Jiang Xiazheng explores her world. In her workbook, we not only observe the negative impact of exile, but we also see that she is constantly updating and refining her poems. Thus, she uses poetry as a means of refining reflection on character and circumstances in the face of adversity.

## SENSORY DESIGN

The sensory design in *Wanderer* embraces aisthesis as a multisensory engagement with material fatigue, texture, weight, colour and space. Through the fictional designs I "intentionally try to create specific experiences for people" (Schifferstein, 2011, p. 361), allowing them access into an experienced state of exile. This approach combines written text, imagery and the haptic. Wang and Li (2014) suggest that such combinations can deepen sensorial engagement through a variety of materials, textures, processes and surfaces.

Jiang Xiazheng's portmanteau is an old object that has housed the experiences of generations of her family. Its textured surface is full of

signs of age. It has become the carrier of the artefacts and dreams.<sup>25</sup> It comprises two levels that mimic the vicissitudes of a bygone period (Figure 5.23). To achieve this, I have used low-saturation colours, frayed surfaces, torn edges and lightweight paper. This fragility speaks to time lost yet, paradoxically, still faintly present. The suitcase is a multifaceted, emotional bridge that connects exile and self-awareness. Its subtle sensuality connects dilapidation to emotional loss and a need to make meaning through documentation and preservation.

The portmanteau, as a composite, is designed using a limited colour spectrum so its disparate parts form a visually coherent unit. Within this, haptic design gives the work a rich three-dimensionality (Wang & Li, 2014), while a careful “unity in variety” (Hekkert, 2006, p.157) suggests a sensitive gathering of artefacts that, in composite, create a story and a portrait. Here, three dimensions of aisthesis (vision, touch and smell) are brought into a harmonious relationship to express an experience of exile. The physical textures, weights, colours, sense of distress and smell lift a fictional account beyond the limited realm of words.

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25 An examination of the suitcase’s exterior reveals old (fictional) travel labels.



FIGURE 5.23.  
Exterior and interior views of the portmanteau.  
Please see Appendix Two for a diagram annotating the contents of the suitcase.

Chapter Six

## **Conclusion**

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis asked,

If a sensory designer draws on a historical literary convention of the 羁旅 (exile), how might she create a fictional portmanteau to speak to the experience of loss and disorientation experienced by a Chinese student studying overseas?

Drawing on autobiographical experiences, in the study I have artistically considered the nature of exile through the application of graphic design devices. In support of artefacts in the portmanteau, I have also written a separate small book that tells us the story of Jiang Xiazheng's childhood and exile. This narrative connects the contents of the portmanteau to a biographical account of complexities that can be experienced by an international student living abroad. Drawing on expressions of alienation and longing in the work of Chinese exile poets like Liu Zongyuan, Yang Lian and Liu Hung, I considered ways in which a fictional character and narrative might give a unique voice to a combination of loneliness, nostalgia and the archiving of memories. At the methodological core of the study is a dynamic that has brought close reading of artefacts, visual communication design, aisthesis, poetry and creative writing together as an artistic synergy.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

I suggest that the study offers three contributions to knowledge. First, at the core of the inquiry is a consideration of the concept of exile that produces melancholy, alienation, nostalgia and a 'dislocation of

the emotional spirit' (Said, 2021). By extending a first-person narrative into fictional artefacts, the study may have expanded insight into, and empathy for, the plight of a foreign student and her experience of exile during international study.

Second, the project demonstrates ways in which poetic thinking can be integrated with visual communication design and creative writing to produce a form of narration that reaches beyond surface description. The use of poetry has been employed to 'voice' layers of experience that are interconnected, subtle, nostalgic and nuanced.

Finally, by aligning the Greek principle of aisthesis with contemporary discourses on sensory design, I have demonstrated how the agency of visual communication can expand its voice to speak through multisensory interactions that stimulate emotions on both material and psychological levels (Garg, 2019; Voigts-Virchow, 2001; Wang & Li, 2014). Consequently, the project demonstrates that what we experience beyond the visual may further activate memory, emotion and self-cognition (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004) through directly experienced multiple sensory dimensions (Lawrie, 2008).

## FURTHER RESEARCH

As a designer, I want to pursue discoveries made in this project into professional contexts and explore how such dimensions might increase interactivity and understanding in an audience.

I am also interested in exploring the concept of the Chinese exile as a contemporary, artistically expressed phenomenon. Although

contemporary Chinese practitioners like the poet Yang Lian and the visual artist Liu Hung, have explored the potentials, of the idea, it has not, to the best of my knowledge, been applied to visual communication design and the potential of designed fictional artefacts to speak narratively to experience. Given this circumstance, I think that there is potential to move studies like this into the realm of polysemic storytelling.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, during contextual reading around this topic I became aware of a body of academic writing that considers mental health amongst Chinese international students (Ching et al., 2017; Guy, 2018; O'Malley, 2020; Shuai, 2004; Yu et al., 2023). If a conference that examines such research surfaces, I would like to submit this project for consideration because it might demonstrate (as an installation) how a non-conventional inquiry can demonstrate resonance and insight into student alienation in ways that a formally written academic paper cannot.

## REFLECTION

This is my 7<sup>th</sup> year in New Zealand. When I think back to the first half of my study abroad, many painful events surface. With the exception of the two submitted projects (the DVD and the book of poetry), all of the incidents in Jiang Xiazheng's narrative happened to me. These are not things that I am ashamed of, but they are difficult to discuss. Because of this, I chose to relate them metaphorically through a fictional character whose life is a reflection of my own.

Completing this thesis has been a milestone achievement for me. The journey was accompanied by anxiety and self-doubt but also by moments of deep insight and achievement. The study became a personal

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26 Polysemic storytelling sat outside of the immediate concerns of this study. However, it is a form of narration that Ceccarelli (1998) and Williams (2011) note is experienced through multiple mediums (objects) or methods (writing, sound, texture, and image construction).

challenge to design fictional artefacts that carry a convincing sense of authenticity. Reading each item closely and repeatedly testing and revising it allowed me to grow in my experience as a designer. The process also taught me respect for the beauty of the ephemeral, the mundane and the overlooked.

The project has been huge. A strategic approach to a master's degree might shy away from such a complex undertaking, but I felt a deep personal and professional connection to the topic. I thought that I might be able to give voice to what had been unvoiceable, but in a way that demonstrated a commitment to high production values, close reading as a research method, creative synthesis and an expansion to how we might think about the storytelling potential of visual communication design.

Chinese is my first language so writing this exegesis and Jiang Xiazheng's story has meant thinking in Chinese then writing in a less familiar language. The thesis has involved multiple drafts. Across the year of research my thoughts were often interrupted. I would sit in front of the computer for hours but I could not think of a word. I would stay up late and reduce sleep to make up for the extra time needed to complete the writing. But the pressure turned into motivation to move forward. In the end, a fictional portmanteau found poetic expression in nostalgia, isolation, loneliness ... and hope. It connected the human senses with information turning an artistic, academic inquiry into a comprehensive and personally fulfilling work of art.

As a designer who has lived inside and between worlds, I want to express voices that deserve to be heard, especially when they cross languages and cultures. I am a citizen of change, a citizen of exile, and a researcher in

a changing world. I write this at the change of a season, and in closing the exegesis I am reminded of Li's delicate poem:

Beyond the curtain, the rain keeps pattering,  
the spring on the decline.  
The satin quilt is not enough,  
to resist the dawn chill.  
Forgetting I'm far, far away from home,  
in the dream, I was carried away  
with a short spell of pleasure.

Don't lean on the railing, alone—  
the boundless view of rivers and mountains.  
It's easy to leave, but hard to see again.  
The water flows, flowers fall, and the spring fades.  
It's a changed world.

*A Changed World - to the Tune of Langtaosha*  
(浪淘沙·帘外雨潺潺)  
(Li, n.d.)

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## **Appendices**

## APPENDIX ONE

### EXILE: THE STORY OF JIANG XIAZHENG

*It is 2023 and Jiang Xiazheng, a quiet girl, is seated on a plane returning to Huayu. She is a traveller who left her hometown to study in a distant land. She has been away for many years and she gazes out the window, recalling her exile . . .*

#### **Beginning**

On October 9, 1997, Jiang Xiazheng was born in the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital of Jinbei City, in Huayu. It was a windy spring day. As an only child she grew up in a harmonious and supportive environment where her parents encouraged her early desire to paint. Although they wanted another child, they knew that Jiang Xiazheng didn't wish for a divided portion of their love. Growing up in this environment, her world was protected and secure. Her greatest wish was to explore a larger world ... and find stability and fulfillment on her journey.

#### **Early years**

In 1999, Jiang Xiazheng's father, who was a golf course manager, was required by his company to visit other cities to manage newly opened venues. Accordingly, two-year-old Jiang Xiazheng followed her parents to Baoan City and from there to Shentan City. These two places were vastly different to her hometown. Jinbei was old; its ancient architecture and culture had been integrated seamlessly with its modern pursuit of progress. In its antiquated streets she travelled through a suspension of time.

At seven, Jiang Xiazheng was enrolled in elementary school. Her father was concerned that his job might lead to instability for her, so her

parents decided that she should return to her hometown to live. Thus, in 2004, she followed her mother back to Jinbei and her father travelled on alone. For the next eight years, she rarely saw him; instead, her world unfurled in the company of her mother and grandmother. Her mother, who loved art, was gentle and cheerful. As a child, Jiang Xiazheng felt that her mother was all-powerful, and this filled the emotional space left by her father's absence.

At the age of 14, Jiang Xiazheng's father returned to the family and their world developed steadily in Jinbei City. But he felt guilty for not being with his child across the formative years of her childhood. So, he doted on her. If Jiang Xiazheng wanted to learn to paint, he would buy art equipment for her. If she wanted a toy, he would search everywhere. However, he also had a strict nature that caused his daughter to paradoxically respect and fear him.

#### **Ancestral ties**

After returning to Jinbei, Jiang Xiazheng's mother and grandmother became her reconstituted family. Occasionally Jiang Xiazheng would hear stories about her grandparents, but she was only three years old when her grandfather passed away and her recollections of him were vague. She was told that he was a very traditional person who was serious and hardworking. He and her grandmother were very grounded people.

Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother became her first teacher. The old woman had never been to college, but she was intelligent. Every night she would tell Jiang Xiazheng exotic stories to lull her to sleep. It was through these

fables that her grandmother's wisdom and insight surfaced. Her stories inspired the child to pick up paintbrushes and create fantasy pictures.

Her grandmother also loved cinema and she watched nostalgic movies because they reminded her of her youth. Often, she would take Jiang Xiazheng to the last old movie theatre in Jinbei. The building was tired and dilapidated but inside, it was full of wonder. Here, old movies played weekly. Her grandmother's favourite film was *The Wrangler* (the story of a hero who gave up the opportunity to go to the United States with his rich father and instead, stayed to teach in the countryside of China). The film played at the theatre every Thursday after dinner, and her grandmother was always in the audience. She maintained this weekly ritual until the day when the old movie theatre was demolished – and after that Jiang Xiazheng remembered the old woman feeling despondent and lost.

Her grandmother's other hobby was collecting old objects, and Jiang Xiazheng continued this obsession. Like her grandmother she was attracted to the sense of time held in old artefacts. Even today, when she touches an old object, the smell and surface are like a 'memory exchange' to her.

Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother wasted nothing. She rarely bought decorative items, preferring to craft things by herself rather than spend money on them. She kept old reading glasses that she couldn't bring herself to discard. And she kept the old ticket stubs from her favourite movie. These objects she stored in a dilapidated portmanteau, occasionally taking them out and reflecting on them.

When she was 16 Jiang Xiazheng decided to attend an international high school to prepare for studying abroad and her grandmother gave her the portmanteau and its extraordinary contents. It appears that

the portmanteau had belonged to Jiang Xiazheng's great grandfather. Before he married, he had dreamed of studying in England. He had been a college student and the child of an engineer, so his family was not poor. When he bought the case, he was excited about his planned journey, and he packed it carefully for his trip. But World War II struck suddenly, and his family was almost bankrupted. When the Japanese invaded, they had to flee to escape the hostilities.

Forced to relinquish his dream, he later met his wife, Wang Meijuan, and Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother was born two years later. When the old man died, his portmanteau passed into the care of Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother.

Because Jiang Xiazheng's grandmother knew that the thwarted opportunity to travel abroad was the regret of his life, she understood the significance of the portmanteau. Over time she added to its contents small object-memories of her own. In the end she hoped that her granddaughter might fulfil her ancestor's dream of living in worlds that he had never been able to experience.

Looking back, Jiang Xiazheng realised that her love for art, painting, old movies and collecting old objects originated from the experience of living with her grandmother. The portmanteau symbolised the dreams of generations; it was full of promises, disappointments and sacrifices. When her grandmother died when Jiang Xiazheng was 24, the portmanteau became a living connection to the past.

### **Expanding worlds**

Before Jiang Xiazheng journeyed abroad to study, she sometimes travelled with her parents to other cities. The first of these excursions was in 2005. She was now back in the company of her father and the family visited Denmark. Here she saw a different kind of Western art,

with its old churches, sea-facing houses, and modernist sculptures. While she was overseas, she began collecting stamps and she sequestered these inside her mother's old stamp album where they became fragments of memory.

Her second trip abroad was to Singapore in 2012. Here she saw a different culture, tasted new foods and, in a gallery in Singapore, she encountered new forms of art. The seduction of the new began to grow in intensity and Jiang Xiazheng wanted to travel even further afield. During this trip, she added more stamps to her mother's old album. She also saw beautiful postcards with representative images of Singapore. Captured by their intensity she bought some as mementos, and on to the back of the cards she wrote about her feelings.

When Jiang Xiazheng graduated from junior high school at the age of 16, she received an offer of a place in a public high school and also an international college. She thought of the countless medals and certificates that she had accumulated because of her writing and drawing abilities and she wanted to extend her talents. Suddenly a wider world seemed to be beckoning.

But the dilemma of choice posed a problem for her parents. While their daughter wanted to ignore the offer of a place in a public high school, they knew how risky such a decision was. Not only would an international school mean paying more money, if Jiang Xiazheng chose to study in such an institution, she would never be able to access further education in her home country. She would also need to learn a new language because tertiary education would have to be overseas. They also worried whether their only child would be able to live independently and care for herself.

But Jiang Xiazheng was stubborn. She promised to overcome the difficulties they discussed and eventually they paid the tuition fees

(several times higher than those required for a public high school). They acquiesced because they wanted their daughter to be happy, to have opportunities they never had, and to follow the dreams she was so clearly drawn to. In addition, Jiang Xiazheng insisted on taking expensive IELTS tutoring courses every week while in the new school. She would make numerous plans and she studied and read relentlessly. All this she did because she knew the risk that her parents were taking, and she wanted their support of her to be warranted. She promised them that she would succeed, and she intended to do so.

As the time to go abroad approached, the psychological pressure on Jiang Xiazheng also increased, and negative emotions filled her heart. Consequently, she chose to drop out of school so she could deal with her physical and mental health. Instead of blaming her, her parents gave her understanding. Still, she felt guilty that she had failed to meet their expectations and she had wasted their time and money.

During this period, Jiang Xiazheng participated in after-school tutoring classes, club activities and volunteer work, and she relieved her stress and unhappiness by writing and painting. Although she did not finish high school, after self-reflection and in-depth conversations with her parents she understood that she needed to face challenges and uncertainties. So, she reaffirmed her desire to study abroad and was determined to do better.

### **The first year in exile**

The unexpected situation of her suspended education was traumatic but in 2017, she left Huayu to study abroad in Aulanon, a city in a western nation of Newcloudland. This was an English-speaking country. When she arrived, the city seemed like a new land of rolling hills and pleasant coastlines. The sea reminded her of Jinbei. She had bought with her the old portmanteau containing medicines, gifts from her parents that helped her to remember the comfort of home. She also began recording

her life's impressions using a Polaroid camera and a small travel journal that her father had handed her at the airport when she left. He told her, "This is a special journey. Record it and keep it close to your heart".

When she arrived in Newcloudland she found it very different to what she was expecting. Although she had felt prepared for the trip, Aulanon was not an idealised postcard of simple dreams and easily grasped aspirations. Jiang Xiazheng had assumed that she would find new friends with similar interests, but this did not eventuate. Instead, she felt increasingly alienated, isolated and cast into exile.

During her foundation year of study, she became afraid to go to class for fear of not understanding the language and the resulting embarrassment. Incrementally her world began closing in on her. All of her preparations and plans became increasingly fragile, and she felt helpless because there was no one to reach out to.

Then reprieve appeared in the form of a boy who came from her country. Although Jiang Xiazheng was a little older than him, they were both studying in the preparatory class. They comforted each other and a relationship gradually grew between them. Jiang Xiazheng thought that she had found someone to share her pain, someone as sincere and as harmonious as her parents. But as their relationship developed, she discovered that the boy was controlling and manipulative. As his need to possess her became pathological, he became increasingly violent and eventually he threatened to take her life.

Jiang Xiazheng was terrified. Overwhelmed in a strange country without the security of her family, she fled to a nearby hospital, but when the situation worsened, she called the police. She didn't dare to tell her parents about what was happening because she had promised them so adamantly that, despite dropping out of school, she would flourish if

they supported her dream of an international education. But with little assistance she was forced to seek the security of a women's refuge. Here she was given legal aid. After ten months, she finally settled a lawsuit and when the court made its final ruling, her ex-boyfriend was deported.

Jiang Xiazheng buried the experience as a secret in her heart, along with the injury report at that time. These things became part of the fabric of her loneliness, tiny additions to her portmanteau of broken dreams.

### University

In 2018, Jiang Xiazheng successfully entered university and began to study graphic design. Life here was vastly different to the foundation college. She found fewer people from her country and the courses were more complex. She tried her best to understand what was being taught, but often when the teacher asked her a question she couldn't speak. She was afraid of misunderstanding what was being asked and fearful that her substandard English pronunciation might result in outbursts of laughter. Her increasing sense of exile became both physical and social. Her life became two points connected by a line; from home to school - from school to home. She seldom went out to eat, instead ordering takeaways to be delivered to her home. She hated sitting alone in a cafe and she recalled with embarrassment the first time she ate at a restaurant in this new land, because she was unable to read the menu. She looked at the waiter's puzzled expression and shrank with humiliation. Jiang Xiazheng wanted to crawl into a dark hole. She missed the taste of familiar food and she remembered the warmth of her relatives sitting around, eating and chatting. Sometimes she would take out the old, hand-notated recipe book her grandmother had given her and leaf nostalgically through its pages.

This new city of Aulanon had become her place of exile and she was unable to reach out for help. She could not return home for shame, she

could not ask for support for shame ... and increasingly, helplessness became her companion.

### **Awakening from a dream**

As the days passed, Jiang Xiazheng gradually became familiar with another girl in her class and when she proposed that they might flat together, she agreed without hesitation. But the security didn't last. One afternoon, the girl said goodbye in a hurry, and she never appeared again. In the debris of false promises and protestations of friendship, Jiang Xiazheng began to think about the nature of friendship. She remembered Wang Xiuqi, a friend she made in Jinbei, and the gift she had been given before she left. It was a talisman from a temple that her friend told her would bring good luck and peace. The talisman and a board game Jiang Xiazheng used to play with her friend were secreted away into a compartment of her portmanteau.

Now she was alone with her damaged pride, secrecy, doubt and broken relationships. Warmth existed as memories, and she hid the torn up rental contract in an envelope in her portmanteau. With her bonds to home broken and relationships in tatters, she felt like a frozen tree before a door that wouldn't open; her leaves scattered by the chill of exile.

Between 2018 and the end of 2019, Jiang Xiazheng moved many times, shunted into new abodes because landlords leased her flat to other tenants or increased the rent. She became an exhausted vagrant, moving and powerless. During this period, she often missed classes or had difficulty concentrating. It was at the end of her second year at university, amidst the physical and psychological dislocation, that she recalled an old movie, *Chungking Express*. She became infatuated with Christopher Doyle, his dream-like aesthetic and his devotion to light and composition. His work spoke to a world she sought but was unable to find in Newcloudland.

Drawing on the comfort of empathy, in an assignment Jiang Xiazheng tried to reach out to her tutors, to talk about nostalgia and isolation. Using stills from the movie, she designed an old-fashioned, damaged DVD. She thought perhaps they might recognise her sensitivity and longing in the design. But they didn't. She got a bad grade and was criticised for missing the point of the brief. The tutors also complained about her poor attendance. Jiang Xiazheng didn't protest – she silently slipped the DVD into her portmanteau - together with its assessment sheet ... and she closed the lid.

Around this time, having found a safer place to live, Jiang Xiazheng sought respite in a short trip to Fiji. The experience was wonderful but, when she returned to her new residence, she found that her home had been burgled. Her computer, camera, and bag had all disappeared. Fortunately, the precious portmanteau was still there. Perhaps such an object, being tattered and housing what appeared to only be bits of rubbish, held no appeal to the thieves. Panicking, she repeatedly checked its contents – her grandmother's glasses, the beautiful banknotes of Huayu, the medicines that had been passed down through generations of her family, a bottle of traditional calligraphy ink, a ticket stub from the last movie she and her grandmother watched before she left for Newcloudland. Fortunately, the thieves had also missed her passport with its subtle pages showing the great rivers and mountains of her homeland. This small document had travelled with her into foreign worlds. She also touched the ticket that flew her from Huayu to Newcloudland and the first Newcloudland banknote she owned, long before going abroad. There was comfort in these small things, an assurance of substance when you are in exile. Drawing strength from what remained, she called the police, but they failed to investigate and her insurance company refused compensation. They said that the information she provided was not comprehensive enough. In an old envelope with her visa, injury report, and rental contract, she now included the dismissive police report.

### Recreating the voice of the heart

With nothing but a battered suitcase and the comfort of old movies Jiang Xiazheng tried to rebuild the fragile substance of her life. She began rewatching the movie 甜蜜蜜 (*Comrades: Almost a Love Story*). Reacquainted with its beautiful atmosphere and the movie's main character who also encountered a strange and confusing world in which he hid his embarrassment by writing a daily diary, she found comfort in a fictional parallel.

She also began making postcards where she combined stills from the film with images from her current situation. On to the backs of these, she wrote in Chinese and English, pretending that this correspondence would be sent back home to her parents. They would show them her competency with language and design. She didn't want them to worry. But the postcards were never sent. They became part of her unspoken dialogue with a world that she couldn't escape. She designed stamps for the correspondence and even invented postage marks - but it was all fictitious ... reaching out – and going nowhere. Eventually the postcards also accumulated in her portmanteau.

In her final year of her studies, unable to reach out successfully to support agencies, Jiang Xiazheng began producing a scrapbook; a compendium of poems about her exile. These were not the elegant constructions of T'ang dynasty style or the literary exquisiteness of the S'ong poetic writing but, inside them she tried to find a voice for her isolated world. As she refined these poems she sketched and took photographs, as she tried to describe what it was like to live in exile. It was her final attempt to communicate something profound. This work, she decided, would become her graduation project—an interplay of photographs and poetry ... a lyrical, voice for experience. She imagined the book as a paradox; a quiet, deafening sound that beneath its restraint spoke for her feelings of vulnerability.

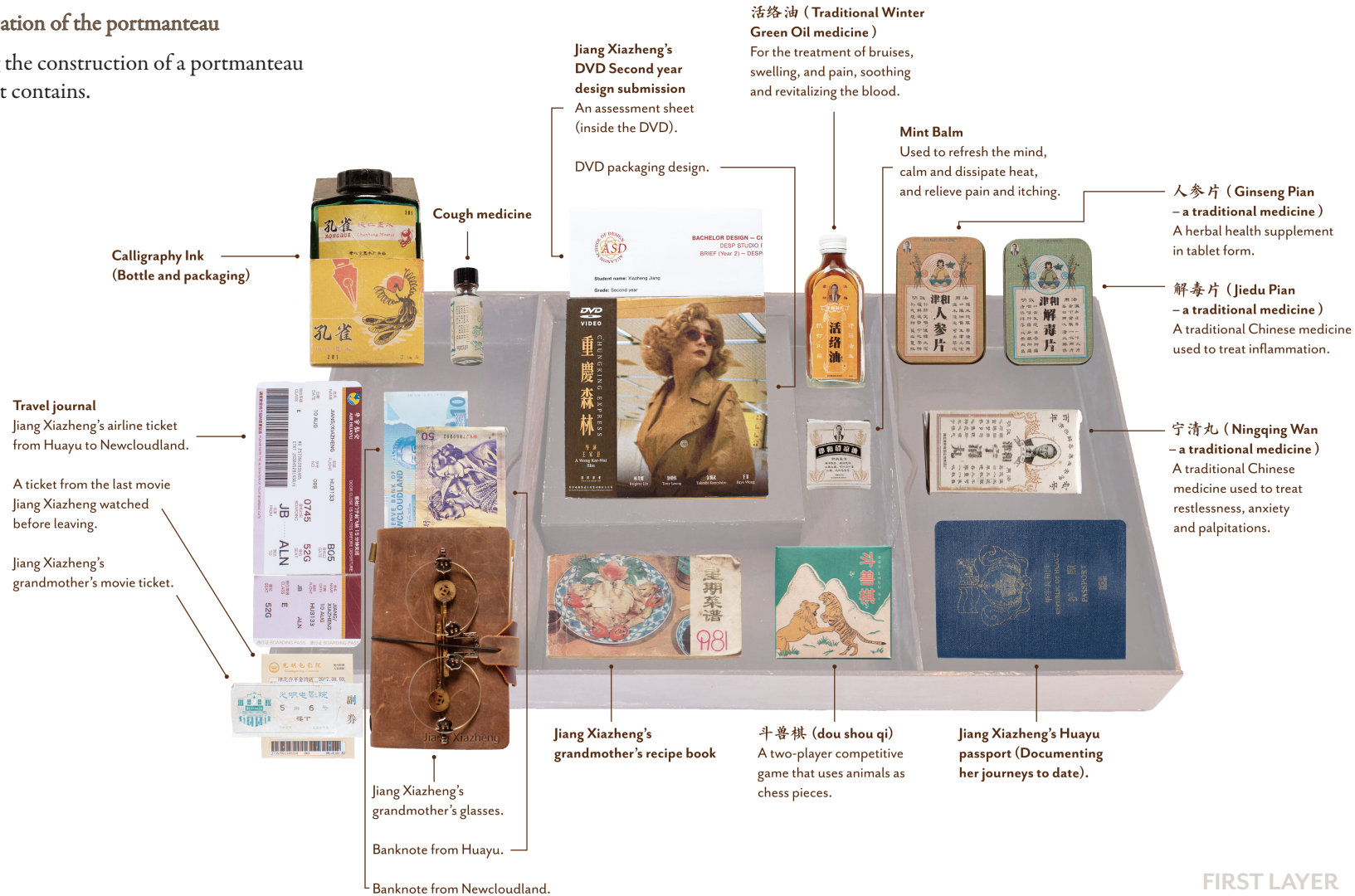
The reception to her assignment was not what she expected. The failure of her earlier attempts to communicate nostalgia and isolation had bruised themselves against marksheets and accusations of poor-quality engagement. However, this project was different. In her book of poetry, Jiang Xiazheng managed to design the whiteness of loss. The isolation of a solitary voice. She found connections between poetry, space and imagery, and her assessment feedback gave her one, deeply affirming result on her academic transcript. She took this small publication and placed it carefully inside her portmanteau,

... and then she closed the lid.

## APPENDIX TWO

### Expanded visualisation of the portmanteau

Diagram showing the construction of a portmanteau and the artefacts it contains.



FIRST LAYER



SECOND LAYER

1

羁旅 POEMS  
旅 OF  
诗 EXILE

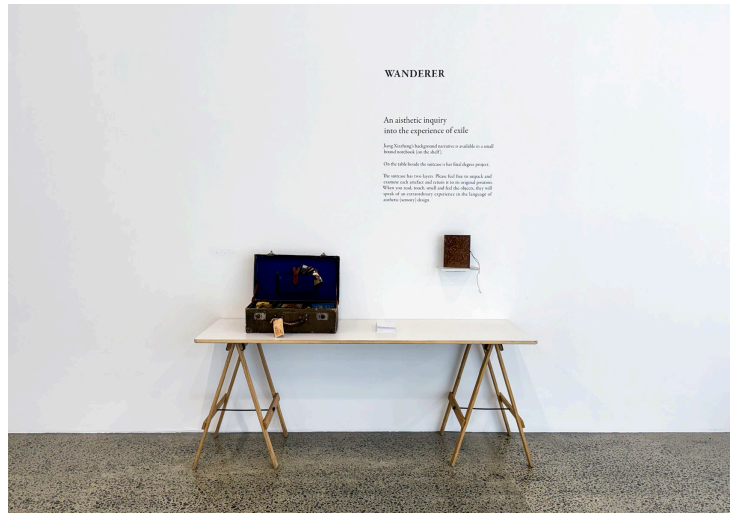
*Poems of exile* (Jiang Xiazheng's  
final degree project).

ADJACENT TO  
THE PORTMANTEAU

## APPENDIX THREE

### Visual documentation of the exhibition

The following photographs document the installation design and the exploration of artefacts during the exhibition in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā: Gallery 2, (June, 2024).



#### INSTALLATION AND LAYOUT

On the wall, I affixed vinyl lettering to introduce my work. On the table was the fictional portmanteau, and beside the portmanteau was Jiang Xiazheng's final degree project. Jiang Xiazheng's background narrative was available in a small bound notebook on the shelf. The audience were able to unpack and examine each artefact at will. When reading, touching, smelling and feeling the objects, the artefacts spoke of an extraordinary experience in the language of aesthetic design.



#### INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION

These photographs demonstrate the way the audience interacted with *Poems of Exile* during the exhibition. It was an intimate exchange. The images show how the publication was opened, bound and folded.



ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

In the exhibition, the artefacts inside the portmanteau were often replaced in different ways and showed traces of diverse orders of reading.



ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

These traditional Chinese medicines had a strong odour and audiences were confronted by the scent when they opened the packets. The ginseng tablets on the left, a daily health supplement, were sampled by some of the viewers in the exhibition, which connected the project with their sense of taste.





#### ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

A composite travel journal showing multiple compartments for tickets, money, photographs and notes that Jiang Xiazheng recorded while travelling.





#### ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Banknotes from Huayu, (Jiang Xiazheng's fictional homeland) and New Cloudland (her allegorical country of exile). Because of their high level of credibility, the banknotes were often pulled out of the travel journal and examined in detail.





ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Calligraphy ink in an exhibition. When people were touching the surface of the object, they could feel its fragile, ageing surface peeling away. This allowed the message of nostalgia to be conveyed to the viewer through tactility.



ARTEFACTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Jiang Xiazheng's mother's stamp album.

