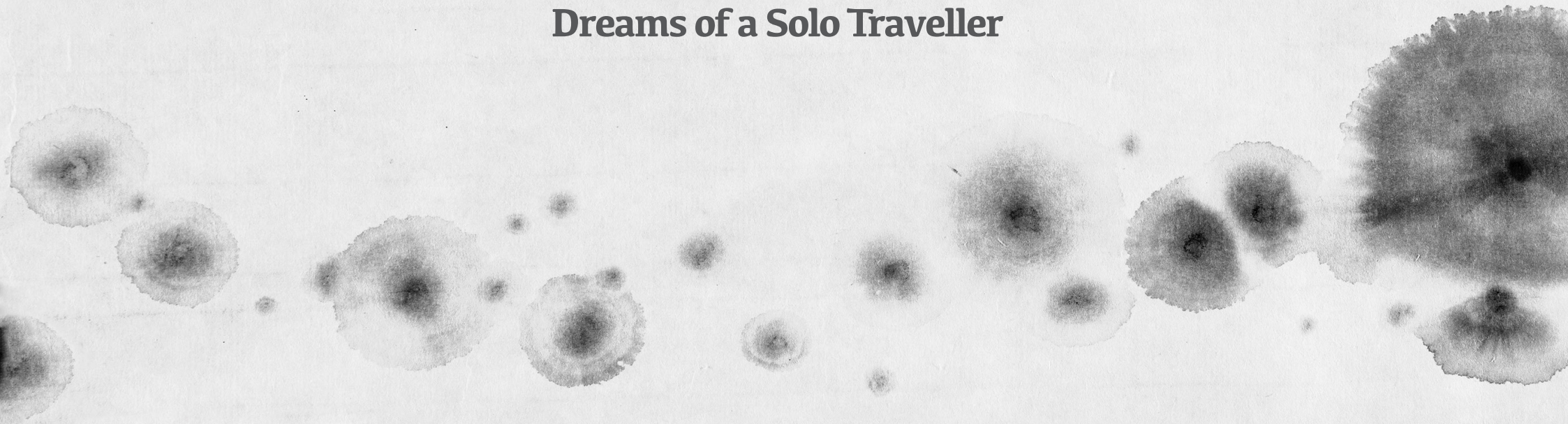


獨行之夢

Dreams of a Solo Traveller



Design by Qianying Li  
English proofread by Dr Jan Hamon  
Chinese proofread by Yu Zhang

Type set in Kefa Bold 12 pt (Headings)  
Kefa Regular 10 pt (Body text)  
Kefa Regular 8 pt (Captions and footnotes)

## **Dedication**

To future generations of independent women.

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

Bachelor of Design,  
Auckland University of Technology (2021).

1 May, 2024

## Abstract

*Dreams of a Solo Traveller* constitutes a positive rethinking of the Chinese derogatory concept of 剩女 (the Leftover Woman). The study draws on personal experience and existing literature relating to familial and cultural expectations that many young, contemporary Chinese women must navigate. Using silk as a material substrate, the study explores the potentials of poetry, calligraphy, fabric design, illustration and printing to rethink existing conventions of gender expectation and culturally mandated marriage.

The study contributes to an existing body of qualitative commentary about the construct of the Leftover Woman, by providing an embodied, aspirationally framed, artistic analysis from first-person experience. The outcome demonstrates how communication design can be employed in a poetic manner to reach audiences who have hitherto been exposed to purely academically framed discourses on the subject.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my mother, thanking her for bearing the burden of life's pressures and granting me the opportunity to explore the world.

For this transformative journey of learning, I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Welby Ings and Associate Professor Marcos Mortensen Steagall. Dr Ings helped me find my inner truth, polishing me and encouraging me to speak my mind. It is because of his dedication that I was able to complete the thesis. His respect for culture, curiosity, tradition and resistance to prejudice have influenced me and given me the courage to face, challenge, and envision the future life of a leftover woman. Dr Mortensen Steagall ... in the rain, he has held an umbrella for me. I would not (and could not) have completed my master's programme without his help and support. He understood my struggles as a foreign student and constantly helped me to overcome my difficulties.

He has been a supervisor not only in my studies but also in my life. He has taught me the meaning of holding an umbrella up for others and he has shown me what kind of person I want to be - and what I want to do in the future.

I would also like to thank Mr Zhe Chen for his invaluable guidance and expertise in silk printing for this project, and Ms Yu Zhang for meticulously proofreading the Chinese description section of the poetic writing and ink painting. Their contributions have significantly enhanced the professionalism of the project.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the staff of the School of Art and Design at Auckland University of Technology, as well as my fellow students, for fostering a stimulating learning environment. It is because of their support that I was able to complete the project.

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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 noted) 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.

1 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 others listed below in the order they appear in this exegesis:

Figure 3.1. Both of these are items are leftovers (2012).

Figure 3.2. Post from Girls don't be afraid on Weibo (2021).

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1 May, 2024

### **Ethics approval and consents**

This study did not require ethical approval because it is an autobiographical project that considers the visions of Leftover Women. It has used secondary sources (essays, documentaries, and online postings). These have been combined with the designer's personal reflections on her identity.



## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### The Leftover Woman

With the evolution of social attitudes and the redefinition of Chinese women's roles, increasing numbers of women have chosen to live independently, rather than plan their future according to the traditional expectations of marriage (Qiu, 2023; Song & Li, 2023; Tang, 2022). This trend is particularly evident among China's highly educated, high-income women who wish to shape their future by pursuing personal development and realising higher levels of independent self-worth (To, 2013).

Because the concept of the 剩女 'Leftover Woman', is less well known in the West, it is useful to briefly describe the phenomenon. In China, women who are past a marriageable age are called 'Leftover Women'. The metaphor of leftovers suggests something of diminished worth that should be discarded (Hong Fincher, 2016). Gui (2022) suggests there are many reasons why individuals may become leftover women, including fear of marriage and pregnancy, a desire for independence, or the inability to find a suitable marriage partner.

When I evaluate the costs of matrimony and childcare and the risk of entering into a potentially failing marriage, I have chosen to become a Leftover Woman who focuses on self-discovery and personal and professional development. It is in this decision that this thesis has its genesis.

Dreams of the Solo Traveler is a positive reframing of this derogatory term that I have employed in this thesis project because it emphasises the freedom to think differently about the future of life. Weaving dreams with poetic writing and abstract painting. Using artistic aesthetics and poetic paradigms, the negative view of the leftover woman is transformed into a positive expectation of a better life and a focus on self-development.

## Research Question

Accordingly, the study asks:  
How might the concept of 诗中有画, 画中有诗 ‘painting in poetry and poetry in painting’ be used to communicate the dreams of 独行之梦 ‘a solo traveller’?

## Rationale and significance

### *Rationale*

More and more Chinese women are choosing not to get married and are focusing instead on their own development. However, although there is an increasing body of literature discussing the phenomenon (Chan & Chen, 2022; Gui, 2022; He, Chen & Dong, 2022; Qiu, 2023; Yu, 2021), there is very little discussion of the Leftover Woman in the fields of design and the visual arts. Given greater levels of global mobility, and the numbers of Chinese women studying abroad at a time when traditionally they would be marrying (Ching et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2023), the study seeks to contribute a poetic bridge between two worlds where a culturally specific idea is communicated to the public in another country. Based on this rationale, the project proposes three significant contributions:

### *Significance*

Firstly, in a time when discourses surrounding the Leftover Woman are largely academic treatises, documentaries or blogs, the study offers an autobiographical, poetic approach to visual communication design that is constructed to speak to a diverse audience in a more intimate and nuanced way. In so doing, it broadens existing discourses into the realm of creative practice.

Secondly, the study considers silk painting through the lens of contemporary design practice. Given the commercial demise of design on silk (China Silk Association, 2023), the project proposes both the material and its traditional relationships with design to produce new artefacts realised through ink painting, digital image construction, and contemporary print methods.

Finally, the study draws on Chinese epistemology to revisit the traditional relationship between poetry and painting, that was described in the Song Dynasty as ‘painting in poetry and poetry in painting’. As such the project reconsiders aesthetic and conceptual relationships between poetic writing and pictorial form as a contemporary, integrated dynamic.

### **An explanation of terms used in the study**

In this study I use three terms that warrant initial discussion.

#### *Communication design*

I use the term communication design to describe the generation of “content and visually communicating ideas, messages and meaning to respond to societal, environmental and commercially relevant themes and issues” (Auckland University of Technology, 2023, para. 2). Such a definition reaches beyond conventional designations like ‘graphic design’, whose concerns are generally limited to the production of printed visual assets, including logos, brochures, posters or product packaging print (Verma, 2023). In the thesis I propose that communication design might embrace the use of visualised poetic writing, illustration, typography and fabric design, to convey aspirational information in nuanced, poetic form.

#### *剩女 ‘The Leftover Woman’*

In China, the derogatory term *shèng nǚ* 剩女 or ‘leftover woman’ is widely used to describe “an urban, professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single” (Hong Fincher, 2016, p. 2). In this thesis, I use the term to describe women who, forsaking conventional expectations of marriage, consciously make alternative choices about their future. The term leftover has negative connotations so, in the study, I have reframed the phenomenon as a ‘solo traveller’ because the title is more poetic and aspirationally considered.

#### *诗中有画，画中有诗 ‘Painting in poetry and poetry in painting’*

The Song Dynasty poet Su Shi praised the Tang Dynasty painter Wang Wei’s works by stating, “there is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry” (Murck & Fong, 1991, p. 14). Poetry and painting here refers to an ancient Chinese practice of combining literary and pictorial form in an intrinsic relationship (Qi, 1989; Murck & Fong, 1991). This thesis draws on this relationship to create contemporary design expressions of a social phenomenon.

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

The project uses poetic writing, silk, ink painting and printing to talk about the nature of love and feelings towards life from the perspective of a Leftover Woman. Formatted on draped, silk 'sheets', seven poems created by the researcher update the Chinese principle of 'painting in poetry and poetry in painting' as contemporary visual communication design practice. The works are accompanied by a catalogue that provides translations of each poem (into English) and a brief explanation of each work.

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

This exegesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research question, discusses the rationale and significance of the project, explains specific terms and describes the research practice. The second chapter positions the researcher in relation to the project, including the reasons for using poetry and silk. Chapter Three reviews knowledge that contextualises, including discourses related to the Leftover Woman, Chinese poetic writing, and art practice that relates to my work. Chapter Four discusses the research design, describing its iterative processes and methods. Chapter Five provides a critical reflection on the artistic outcomes of the inquiry. Finally, Chapter Six, offers a summary of the project and a consideration of its contribution and future potentials. And there is one appendix which gives a timeline of the artefacts mentioned in Review of Related Knowledge about poetry, ink paintings and silk.

The exegesis is interactive. Clicking on URL links will take you directly to moving image sequences mentioned in the text. Please ensure that your browser is open.



## **CHAPTER TWO: POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER**

### A cornfield at night

In the summer of 2023, a group of my friends and I went to a house they had purchased in the countryside. It was an idyllic time. I remember the summer night; the chirping of cicadas and frogs, the fragrance of the cornfield and the scent of cordite in the air. Fireworks lit up our faces and we talked about how we had missed each other during two years of absence (Figure 2.1).<sup>2</sup> These were women I had known for years, from affluent backgrounds, who had embraced higher education and built successful careers. We often speak about how we might retire together. Because we are leftover women who do not want to get married and have children, we have to start planning for single retirement as we get older. My decision to follow this path is in opposition to my mother's intention to push me to get into a relationship, to get married and to have children.



Figure 2.1. Fireworks in the cornfield (June, 2023).  
© The researcher.

---

2. The fireworks were to celebrate the wedding anniversary of the only couple in our group; the couple could not have children for medical reasons.

### **Traditional perspectives**

My mother is a professional woman, and this led to a lack of companionship while I was growing up. When I was young, she wanted me to be versatile and she had teachers come to the house to tutor me. I began learning Tang and Song dynasty poetry when I was three years old and my introduction to painting followed when I entered primary school. Perhaps my mother was prescient because poetry and painting had a deep influence on me. Her refinement and elegance were also influential. I recall that she always accessorised her outfits with a silk scarf. I do not know whether it was because my hometown had a history of silk production, but gradually silk has become synonymous for me with elegance and sensibility.

However, my mother's thinking was traditional. She never considered a woman's career success to be significant, and she still believes that marriage and children are the most important aspirations for a woman. My arguments with her have revolved around this issue. I came into this world as an independent individual and eventually, I will greet death alone. In the vastness of the universe, nothing from this world will leave with me.

Childhood without parents, youth without friends, middle age without a lover ... all of these things have happened; they are my lived experiences. But I do not perceive unhappiness in this. For me a single life can be a decision of great potential and beauty.

### **The resonance of poetry**

I also believe that poetry has the power to question the world. As a single woman I respond to the voices that question and enhance my decisions in poetic ways. I understand that friendship, affection, love, and career planning can all be part of a future vision that is understood lyrically.

During my undergraduate years in Visual Communication Design at Auckland University of Technology, I completed projects (Figures 2.2 & 2.3) that combined illustration and poetic writing. Since it was difficult for me to communicate my thinking in a language that was not my mother tongue, I found poetry afforded greater space for nuance, allusion, immersion and empathy. I drew on the delicacy and resonance of the Tang and Song poetry that my mother forced me to recite, because they offered delicate and subtle ways of expressing complex thought.



Figure 2.2 The researcher's poetic bookwork *'Memories from COVID-19'* (November, 2022).

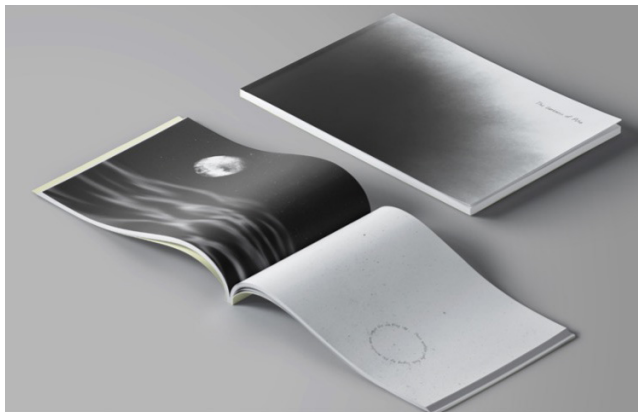


Figure 2.3. The researcher's poetic reflections on 'The darkness of Piha'. (June, 2022).

### The poetics of silk

Silk has associations with intimacy, dreaming, status, writing and the place of my birth. It is the material upon which this thesis and my aspirations find their voice. Historically silk was also used as a writing and painting fabric and, in the Tang Dynasty, it denoted social significance.

I believe that there is a relationship between poetry and silk. Silk is soft, intimate, and subtle.

Like poetry it moves with grace, it is fluid and sometimes enigmatic. It is also a fabric whose fibres run deep into the history of Nanchong, the town where I grew up. Silk manufacture in Nanchong is a craft with a thousand year history, but recently it has increasingly been abandoned due to a diminishing market, industrial development and urban progress. This has led to the closure of many of the old factories.

Although I understand silk as an elegant conduit for poetic thought, it is also the fabric of dreams. Silk has a long association with both marriage and womanhood in Chinese culture. Specifically, sheets and bedding are associated with 嫁妆 'dowry'.<sup>3</sup>

In Chinese wedding customs, bedding (including quilts, mattresses, sheets, covers, pillows and pillowcases) is prepared by a bride's parents. Because Chinese prefer to use even numbers in their wedding ceremonies (to signify that good things come in pairs), bedding normally comes in sets of two, six, eight or ten.<sup>4</sup> Although ordinary families traditionally used cotton bedding, some families indicate wealth by gifting silk bedding. Thus, silk bedding becomes a conduit for the best wishes of the family for the future life of the bride.<sup>5</sup>

In this project I print dreams on to silk sheets because they are a paradox. Sheets comfort us when we dream; they are intimate and refined. Yet they are also excluded from the leftover woman's cultural expectations. (It is rare for a single woman to own bedding gifted by her family). The sheet of the Leftover Woman is a reclamation, a substrate on which to print culturally disruptive dreams. The silken sheet transcends the conventions of matrimony; it is a delicate and beautiful wrapping of defiance and assertion.

---

3. The dowry is the property given by the bride's family when she is married. In China this may include money, property, clothes, bedding and furniture. The purpose of the dowry is for the parents to support the woman's life after marriage and to prevent her from being unpopular in her husband's family. The more generous the dowry, the higher the status of the woman in her new family.

4. Four 'Si 四' is not a lucky number. It is pronounced the same as death 'Si 死' in Chinese, so many people will avoid it.

5. The exhibition contains seven poems printed on to silk sheets. Seven is the opposite of the traditional even number associated with weddings. In Chinese feng shui, it is said that 七上八下 'seven goes up and eight goes down'. 七 'seven' represents rising fortune but it is not an even number. It is an anomaly. I have always taken seven as my lucky number. Accordingly, in this project 七 'seven' implies the positive expectations of a single woman.



**CHAPTER THREE:  
REVIEW OF RELATED KNOWLEDGE**

In this chapter, literature resourcing the inquiry has been divided into four areas: discourses relating to the concept of the Leftover Woman; poetic writing, ‘painting in poetry, poetry in painting’ and contextualising artistic practice.

### **The Leftover Woman**

#### *Origins of the term*

The term ‘leftover women’ was first used by the China Women’s Federation in state media in 2007, to define unmarried, urban, professional single women over the age of 27 (Hong Fincher, 2016). The word has a derogatory connotation (Figure 3.1). Cai and Feng (2021) and López (2020) suggest that the term arose as a result of the Chinese government (between 1980 and 2016) prohibiting families from having more than one child, which resulted in 30 million more men than women in the country and anxieties about a disproportionately ageing population.

## Both of these items are leftovers

The Women's Federation of China has defined **leftover women** as women unmarried over the age of 27.

Here is their excellent advice on the matter:

**Tip #1: Education does not make you attractive**

*The tragedy is that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls.*

**Tip #2: Don't be picky**

*The main reason many girls become "leftover women" is that their standards for a partner are too high. The perfect man may exist, but why on earth would he want to marry you?*

**Tip #3: If you do bag a man, do keep up appearances**

*When you find out that he is having an affair, you may be in a rage, but if you make a fuss, you are denying the man "face" ... No man is capable of spending a lifetime being loyal to an outmoded wife who never changes ... Try changing your hairstyle or your fashion. Women must constantly change for the better..*



The Women's Federation of China was set up by the Communist Party to "protect women's rights and interests."  
With feminists like these, who needs misogynists?

Figure 3.1. Disparaging poster from the China Women's Federation, 'Both of these items are Leftovers'. The poster combines elements from different documents. The translation was posted on R/China (2014).<sup>6</sup>

6. [https://www.reddit.com/r/China/comments/2boo5g/tips\\_for\\_leftover\\_women/?rdt=43356](https://www.reddit.com/r/China/comments/2boo5g/tips_for_leftover_women/?rdt=43356)

### *Political campaigns*

Consequently, in addition to family pressures, many contemporary Chinese women began to face pressure from a government that was concerned about the country's increasing life expectancy and falling fertility rates. Its policy changed and emphasis was now placed on the need for people to marry young and have at least two children. A range of coercive initiatives were profiled across China. Indicative of these was an official document released in 2022 from the County of Yihuang in China's Jiangsu Province, that encouraged older female cadres and female staff to marry unemployed men in rural areas (Ji, 2022).<sup>7</sup> The initiative resulted in high levels of protest on social media.

The generation of Leftover Women who grew up under the one-child policy have begun to face considerable pressure from society to marry because, despite the improving pension system, many traditional parents are still worried that their daughters will have no one to care for them when they grow old (Gui, 2022). This is why Leftover Women often devote considerable thought to planning for future economic stability in their lives.

7. See China population: county sparks uproar by telling 'leftover' women to marry unemployed men. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3165120/china-population-county-sparks-uproar-telling-leftover-women>

8. In China there's an old saying “男人四十一枝花,女人四十豆腐渣” which may be translated as: “Men at the age of forty are blossoms, women at the age of forty are tofu dregs” (Skoglund, 2020, p. 33).

Although statistically the proportion of unmarried men in China is higher than that of unmarried women, society and the media still tend to position unmarried men in a positive manner (Cheng et al., 2011). Single men with successful careers are called 钻石王老五 'diamond single men' or 黄金单身汉 'golden singles' (Zhang & Sun, 2020), and their elevated status is reinforced by the traditional Chinese saying 男人四十一枝花 'a man is a flower when he is forty'.<sup>8</sup> The government has released numerous campaigns to pressure women into marrying older, unemployed men in rural areas. For example, the 'Warm Rural Older Men's Beds Project' encouraged young women to remain in their hometown and marry local bachelors. The pressure to marry is based on prevailing anxieties that single men will have no one to take care of them when they are old or infirm (Shen, 2021). However, when this campaign was discussed on 微博 'Weibo'<sup>9</sup> (2021) and read by over two million, four hundred thousand people, the proposal was unpopular because it was seen as objectifying and demeaning women (see Figure 3.2).

9. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website. Launched by the Sina Corporation on 14 August 2009, it is one of the largest social media platforms in China, with over 582 million monthly active users.



Figure 3.2. Indicative post from ‘Girls Don’t be Afraid’ on Weibo.<sup>10</sup>

Objections to such campaigns emanate partly from recent social and economic changes that have occurred in China. Ji (2015) notes that well-educated professional Chinese women are now often reluctant to follow a traditional patriarchal ideology and they are choosing not to pursue marriage as a life option. These Leftover Women often have successful careers but face social discrimination and suffer pressure from their families and society (Feldshuh, 2018).<sup>11</sup> Partly this is because early marriage is still a predominant phenomenon in China (Ji, 2015).

In addition, men are often reluctant to choose women for marriage who have a higher level of education than they do. As a consequence, women from higher status family backgrounds and advanced education often find themselves pressured to accept partners with whom they share little in common (Ji & Yeung, 2014). Excluded from the marriage market, Leftover Women pursue independence and often focus on their professional development (Davis & Friedman, 2014).

10. Note. Translation: It’s been a few days since this happened and I’m not sure what everyone’s opinion is, but my blood pressure is back up. There’s the ‘old single men in rural areas who are sick and have no one to take care of them’, and then there’s the ‘project to warm up the quilts of old men in rural areas is very necessary’, which in effect treats women as ‘tools’, doesn’t it?

11. In the traditional Chinese marriage system, most women take responsibility for looking after the family and raising children, and they are discouraged from focusing too intently on their personal careers (Gui, 2022).

### *Academic and media discourse*

Since 2017 there has been a growing body of academic discourse around the phenomenon of the Leftover Woman (Gui, 2022; Qiu, 2023; To, 2021; Yang, 2022; You & Nussey, 2022; Zheng & Xu, 2022). Much of this literature emanates from the Social Sciences and it seeks to explain the phenomenon, and the rationales individual women adopt when choosing to pursue independence from marriage (Chan & Chen, 2022; He, et al., 2022). However, there is also considerable non-academic debate across a range of media.

A decade ago, Cheng et al., (2011) noted that the stigmatisation and commodification of single women in the media was leading to negative public perceptions. Today, disparaging narratives permeate diverse forms of entertainment. For example, the highly rated television dating show *非诚勿扰* 'If You Are the One' (Jiangsu Television, 2010) features episodes where 24 women compete for the attention of one man. Such programmes reinforce negative stereotypes, including associating women with gold-digging, selfishness, competition and subservience (Zhang & Kramarae, 2012). Zhang and Kramarae's criticism may be compared to Yu's (2021) analysis of metaphorical representations of Leftover Women that found such women are often presented in the media as a dehumanised object (a commodity or food).

Such representations both Yu (2021) and Ji (2015), argue, draw attention to the contesting ideologies of traditional patriarchy and modern egalitarianism.

Yu (2021) notes that most portrayals of Leftover Women in Chinese popular culture, mass media are negative, and Zhang and Sun (2020) observe that these women are shaped into a public stereotype as selfish, picky and materialistic.<sup>12</sup> This representation is counterpointed by euphoric, depictions of women who are fulfilled after becoming married. An example of this sanctioning can be seen in the popular drama series *我们结婚吧* 'We Get Married', (Liu, 2013). This programme, co-produced by China Central Television (CCTV) in 2015, tells the story of Tao, a 32-year-old woman who sacrifices her career for marriage and she eventually lives a happy life. The drama conveys the idea that women's achievements in marriage and family life should take precedence over their pursuit of personal achievements in education and career development (Feldshuh, 2018). Feldshuh also notes that many dramas in the media share this rhetoric. These programmes ostensibly show the lives of modern women, but invariably convey the idea that a woman's success will come from men and that women need to rely on them for fulfilment.<sup>13</sup>

Set against such rhetoric, are documentary films like *Leftover Women* (Shlam & Medalia, 2019). This work takes a nuanced look at three successful Chinese women in Beijing who, in their mid 20s and 30s, encounter pressure to marry young to avoid being labeled 'leftover'. The women attempt to reconcile the expectations of their parents and society with their individualistic goals. Berra (2019, para. 1) describes the work as "an emotionally complex piece of personal portraiture that intimately reveals the extent to which traditional attitudes still dominate Chinese society regardless of its globalised surface." However, documentaries like Shlam and Medalia's film are relatively rare, and they function as anomalies in the broader landscape of media propaganda. The prevailing expectation in contemporary China is that early marriage is sanctioned practice (Ji, 2015), and women who delay marriage are often framed as deviants (Yu, 2021).

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12. However, set against this is a building body of discourse that argues marriage should not be a compulsory condition, and women need to make choices in accordance with their personal conscience (Xu, 2021).

13. Such programmes include, *我的前半生* 'The First Half of My Life' (Shen, 2017), *三十而已* 'Nothing But Thirty' (Zhang, 2020), and *一路朝阳* 'All the Way to the Sun' (Lu, 2023).



Figure 3.3. Scenes from Shlam and Medalia's documentary *Leftover Women* (2019). This nine minute sequence from the work features a leftover woman called Qiu Huamei, following her as she contends with stigma and social pressure (The New York Times, 2020). Scenes from the film can be watched here: [https://youtu.be/4mCVS20gj\\_8?si=yZ54tCMPfBU1g2J](https://youtu.be/4mCVS20gj_8?si=yZ54tCMPfBU1g2J)

## Chinese poetic writing

### Context

This thesis project embraces poetic writing as an aspect of communication design. While from a Western perspective this may seem anomalous, in Chinese scholarship the use of poetic writing and painting is not an unfamiliar connection. Historically, Chinese painting often contained poetic script. For example, the Chinese poet-painter Tang Yin 唐寅, who created work during the Ming Dynasty, used poetry and painting as a way of composing letters to his friends (Figure 3.4). His famous work 西洲画旧图 [Xi Zhou Hua Jiu Tu] orchestrated poetry, calligraphy, and ink painting in a delicate composition that, as an example of elegant Chinese design, has become a seminal work.<sup>15</sup> His delicate poetry and paintings often deal with the relentlessness of fate, the loss of innocence and the bitterness of eventual revelation. As a consequence, his writing generally moves through optimism towards sadness. This is demonstrated in his poem, *A Short Verse on Bamboo* (Tang, 1970).<sup>16</sup>

### Relationships between poetry and calligraphy

In appreciating the relationship between poetry and visual communication design, it is useful to understand that in China calligraphy, as a method for presenting poetry, is considered both a visual and literary art form (Qi, 1989). Although Jujiro notes that during the middle Tang Dynasty calligraphy was used primarily for correspondence, due to changes in cultural practice the content of calligraphy slowly changed and both poetry and prose were presented in elegant calligraphic form (Murck & Fong, 1991).

Increasingly, traditional Chinese calligraphy became an indispensable vehicle for the visual expression of Chinese poetry (Qi, 1989) and calligraphically-realised poetic thought became integral to both Chinese literature and scholarship (Wang, 2017). Consequently, during this period, calligraphy became an expression not only of language, but also of emotional tone. This may be evidenced in the visual treatment of the heroic poem *On the Frontier* (Figure 3.5).

15. Tang Yin is considered one of the Four Masters of Ming dynasty (Ming Si Jia). The other masters were Shen Zhou (1427–1509), Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) and Qiu Ying (1495–1552).

16. *A Short Verse on Bamboo*:

*The moon sinks in the fourth watch,  
Paper windows seem transparent;  
Stirring from wine, I prop my head and read awhile.  
High thoughts, I force myself, but I can't help it;  
Ten stalks, still green in winter, cast profuse shadows.*



Figure 3.4. 唐寅 Tang Yin, 西洲画旧图 [Xi Zhou Hua Jiu Tu], Ming Dynasty<sup>17</sup>

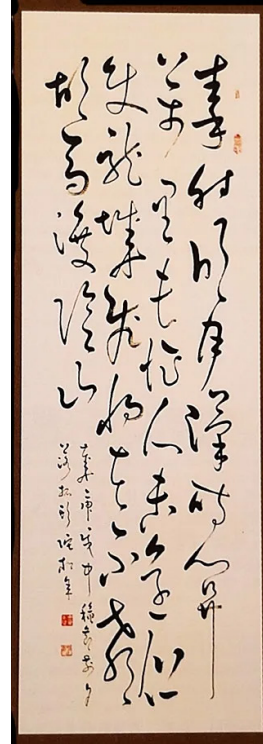


Figure 3.5. Rev. Songnian<sup>18</sup>, 出塞 [Chu Sai]<sup>19</sup>, 1970

17. Note. Historically, this work has been owned by many individuals. Possession is indicated by the red stamps on the artwork. The piece is currently in the care of the National Palace Museum, in Taipei.

18. The Reverend Song Nian (1911-1997) was ordained as a monk at 22. He lived in Singapore in the 1960s and became the abbot of the Mahabodhi Monastery in 1964. In addition to his theological undertakings he also studied calligraphy, painting and seal carving.

19. Note. Wang Changling 王昌龄, Poem 出塞 [Chu Sai/ On the Frontier], Tang Dynasty. In this piece of cursive calligraphy by Rev. Songnian, we encounter writing that displays the impassioned content of the poem with powerful strokes (Fong, 2019). The calligraphy communicates the following poem:

秦时明月汉时关，万里长征人未还。  
但使龙城飞将在，不教胡马度阴山。

The moon still shines on mountain passes as of yore,  
How many guardsmen of Great Wall come back no more.  
If the Flying General were still there in command,  
No hostile steeds would have dared to invade our land. (Xu, 2012)

Qi (1989) notes that a Chinese calligrapher seeks to interpret the emotion that the poet was trying to express, and because of this he argues that calligraphy cannot exist independently of the text. Watson (1971) states that structurally, Chinese calligraphy was governed by Classical poetry's formal literary conventions.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the use of lines containing a consistent number of characters became deterministic when creating a calligraphic composition and words are often viewed as a 'block' of text. In addition, Classical Chinese poetry is relatively condensed and tends to contain an even number of lines comprising five or seven characters.<sup>21</sup> This, Watson (1971) observes, meant that poems were able to be elegantly written and displayed on a single sheet (Figure 3.6). *Poet on a Mountaintop* shows the integration of a block of calligraphically rendered poetry, integrated with imagery in a unified composition. The work speaks to the connection between man and nature that was a prevalent concern during the Ming Dynasty. Although nature during this period was viewed as a part of one's intellectual and spiritual growth (Wang, 1995), human beings were seen as central to the relationship.

Poet on a Mountaintop may be translated as:

*White clouds sash-like  
wrap mountain waists,  
the rock terrace flies in space  
distant, a narrow path.  
Leaning on a bramble staff  
far and free I gaze,  
To the warble of valley brook  
I will reply, whistling.*

In this work, compositionally, the calligraphic text exists in a discursive relationship with the poet (we see him facing his poetic thought). The text features variations in tone, and the brush treatment reflects line treatments employed in the painting. This stylistic feature results in a heightened sense of integration and emotive continuity. As indicative of Chinese poetry, the text feels personal, concise, sensory, delicate, and concerned with ordinary things (Jiang, 2021).

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20. The term 'Classical Chinese poetry' refers to specific forms or modes of poetry written in Literary or Classical Chinese.

21. Despite its brevity, this poetry was governed by three fundamental values: harmony of tone, evocative images and a state of mind (Fu, 1966).



Figure 3.6. 沈周 (Shen Zhou), *Poet on a Mountaintop*, Ming Dynasty, c. 1427-1500 CE<sup>22</sup>

22. Note. Ink on paper, 38.7 x 60.3 cm, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

### Painting in poetry, poetry in painting

The discursive relationship between poetry and painting is articulately captured in the Chinese term 诗中有画, 画中有诗 ‘painting in poetry, poetry in painting’. The first of these two phrases refers to the pictorial vividness of a poetic work, and the second, 画中有诗 ‘poetry in painting’, refers to the poetic and aesthetic content of a painting. The idea that these two phenomena might coexist in a single work was originally proposed by Su Shi in the Song Dynasty in his discussion of the work of the poet and painter Wang Wei (an artist/poet from the preceding Tang Dynasty).

Qi’s (1989) proposition that the coexistent relationship between poetry and painting creates a unique blend of scenes, is an echo of the Song Dynasty theorist Zhang Shunmin, who stated 诗是有

形画, 画是无形诗, ‘poetry is invisible painting, and painting is tangible poetry’. “Poetry and painting share a common essence because both derive from life’s circumstances and emotions, and both have the power to demand beauty and move people” (Murck & Fong, 1991, p. 14). Qi also notes that painting and poetry are subjective aesthetic reflections of an objective world, and they work synergistically, such that the painting’s context is enriched or enhanced by the poem. This connection is epitomised in Huang Tingjian’s (1045–1105) inscription on Li Gonglin’s (1049–1105) painting *Resting in contemplation*:

Master Li had a phrase he did not want to express in words,

So with light ink he sketched out a soundless poem.

(cited in Pang, 2013, para. 9).

### *Literati painting*

A distinctive manifestation of combined poetry and painting called 文人画 ‘Literati painting’ appeared during the Song Dynasty. Before this period, painting was primarily concerned with religious and ceremonial display. However, from the late Tang Dynasty onwards, the purpose of painting changed from telling stories about people, to expressing their thoughts and feelings through landscapes, flowers and birds. This new style was called Literati Painting and it was distinguished by its move away from elaborate depictions, towards elegant levels of simplicity (Liang, 2011).

Literati painting became a dominant artform during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), and Ni Zan 倪瓒’s art was a significant manifestation of the approach. An example of his work, 水竹居图 [*Dwelling amidst Water and Bamboo*], depicts a landscape with lush foliage on flat land near the shore. Hidden among the trees is a thatched cottage, behind which mountains form a harmonious backdrop (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7. 倪瓒 (Ni Zan), 水竹居图 [*Dwelling amidst Water and Bamboo*], 1343 Yuan dynasty.<sup>23</sup>

23. Note. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 53.6 x 27.7 cm. Collection of the National Museum of China.

Integrated with the painting is the poem:

傲得城东二亩居，  
水光竹色照琴书。  
晨起开轩惊宿鸟，  
诗成洗研没游鱼。

*I've leased a house in the east of the city,  
Where water gleams and  
bamboo's hues enhance my gown.  
At dawn, I raise the window,  
birds from slumber take flight.  
As my poem takes shape, I wash the ink,  
and no longer fish from the pond.*

Ni relied on his imagination to paint such landscapes, and his poems depict an imagined, ideal life of seclusion in the mountains and forests, where he was comforted by the sounds of a zither and the presence of poetry. On first encounter we might assume that *Dwelling Amidst Water and Bamboo* is a pictorial representation of an existing environment but, as we read the poem, we realise that the composite work is communicating a state of poetic immersion wherein the poet is seeking idealised peace of mind and body.

*Poetry as a research method in the Western academy*

Although the subject of this thesis embraces poetic form as a component of visual communication design, poetic thinking and writing is also part of its methodological approach. In the Western academy the role of poetry in research has surfaced across a range of disciplines including anthropology, education, health care, sociology, and art and design (Ings, 2021). As a method of processing data, poetry has also been employed in transdisciplinary research (Gannon, 2022; Ings, 2021; Leggo et al., 2011; Neilsen, 2008; Sinner et al., 2006). Leggo (2008) suggested that writing poetry helps us to understand or perceive the world differently, and when employed in research, it can broaden the scope of academic writing and what it means to be a researcher.

Furman (2006) argues that poetry can enable a researcher to delve more deeply into an experience than prose, and Prendergast et al. (2009) propose that because poetry is more concise than prose, it changes the way we read information. These authors also suggest that pauses in reading poetry provide the reader with the opportunity to stop, savour and reflect on conveyed meaning. However, significant to this research project is Gannon's (2022) assertion that the combined interaction of poetic writing and visual imagery can afford new perspectives that can produce heightened levels of resonance and contemplation.

### *Poetry in communication design research*

Increasingly, academics and designers have combined poetic writing with scholarship. Ings (2021) notes diverse uses in doctoral research where poetry is employed in artistic inquiries to document and reflect on experience (Mortensen Steagall, 2019; Gannon 2022; Sinfield, 2020) or among certain indigenous scholars (Pouwhare, 2020; Faumuina, 2022; Paora 2023; Williams, 2024) where it is used as a method for processing and formatting thought that takes the form of image-text artifacts.

Among Chinese researchers working in Western academia, Chen (2018) has utilised poetry and film to create *Heart of Spring*<sup>24</sup>, and recently Cheung (2023) employed poetic writing and cyanotype illustration to construct a contemporary form of Chinese travelogue.<sup>25</sup> In this project I employ poetic writing as both a method of inquiry and a means of communicating my dreams as a leftover woman. Thus, poetry is employed to draw forward personal perspectives, such that I might increase both emotional resonance (Furman, 2006) and communicative clarity (Gannon, 2022).

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24. See <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ef1051t670umr83/the%20heart%20of%20spring.mov?dl=0>

25. See <https://bestawards.co.nz/graphic/student-academic-graphics/aut-art-design/using-nostalgic-illustration-and-poetry-to/>

### Contextualising practices

In concluding this review, it is useful to turn to a consideration of artistic texts that position the study's contribution.

#### *The visual fluidity of ink*

Although my work is designed for print on silk, my illustrative treatment explores how the fluidity of ink can be used to express poetic ideas that feel like moments in time. Over the last 35 years, the use of ink painting has surfaced as a distinctive aesthetic in spatio-temporal design, specifically in television advertising, film title design and animation.

An early expression of this fluidity in contemporary Chinese design is evident in 山水情 *'Feelings of Mountains and Waters'*, a 30 minute film produced in 1988 by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. This work featured animated graphics that artfully balanced the painterly qualities of ink, delicate movement and calligraphy (Figure 3.8). The meditative narrative tells the story of an old master who passes a Guqin (Chinese zither) on to a young fisherman. The work concludes with the boy playing an ode to his master and to nature. Throughout the film, the pain of parting and the depth of friendship are portrayed in subtle shifts between the figurative and the abstract.



Figure 3.8. Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Fame grab from *Feelings of Mountains and Waters*, 1988.<sup>26</sup>

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26. Note. Using traditional Chinese ink and landscape painting, the animation nominates human characters as its primary focus, but it combines man and nature in harmony. This may be likened to the Ming Dynasty artist Shen Zhou's paintings and the relationships he expressed in *Poet on a Mountaintop* (Figure 3.6). The film can be watched here: [https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/play/ep426816?share\\_source=copy\\_web](https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/play/ep426816?share_source=copy_web) (Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 2021)

The fluidity of ink was explored in an arguably more sophisticated, dynamic fashion two decades later when, in 2009, a German design company Troublemakers and Weareflink created the promotional advertisement *相信品牌的力量* 'The Power of Brand' for China Central Television's-CCTV identity campaign (Liu, 2010). By emphasising the aesthetic of ink's mutability, the work created a continuum of aesthetic evolution that suggested a continuity between traditional Chinese ink painting and contemporary technologies (Figure 3.9).

Ink's dynamic mutability was further explored in 2014 when Netflix commissioned Ben Smith and Bryce Wymer to create an animated 'inked' title sequence for the television series *Marco Polo* (Figure 3.10). This work was created by hand and the natural flow of ink on paper was recorded then digitally compiled so it referenced imagery and themes appearing in the narrative. In the sequence, the texture of paper and the flowing behaviour of ink became the focus of a dynamic process of form creation and detailing. Within the images, digitally rendered typography was positioned discreetly as an asymmetrical element.



Figure 3.9. Framegrabs from the CCTV promotion, *相信品牌的力量* 'The Power of Brand' (2009).<sup>27</sup>

27. Note. CCTV: *相信品牌的力量* - *The Power of Brand*. The film can be watched here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf\\_MRhKl5PO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf_MRhKl5PO)

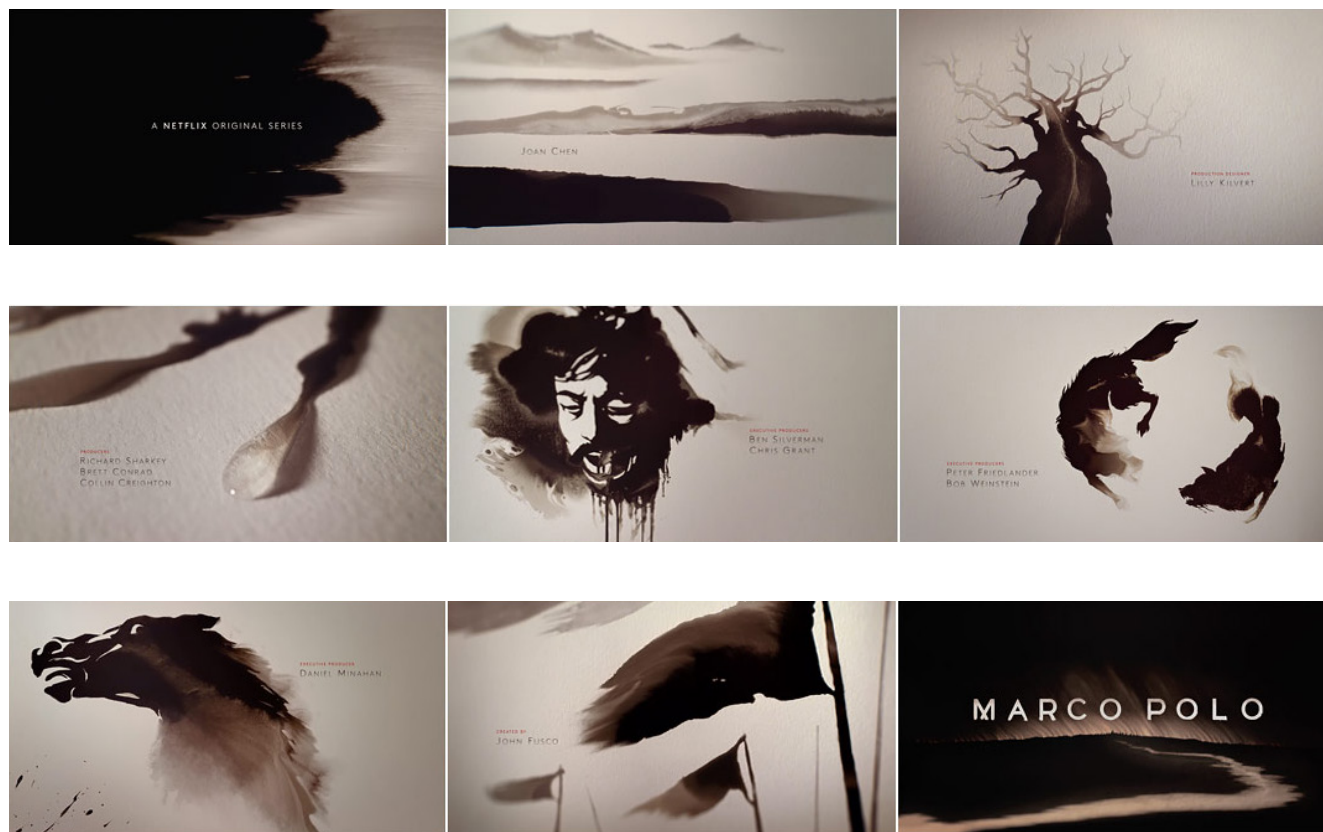


Figure 3.10. Framegrabs from the Netflix title sequence 'Marco Polo'. Digital ink titles (2014.)<sup>28</sup>

28. Note. This title sequence was designed in 2014 by Ben Smith, Bryce Wymer and The Mill and Co. for the original series 'Marco Polo' (Millchannel, 2014). The film can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6onwcVx8BDg>

The animated feature film *长安三万里* [*Chang'an*], directed by Xie and Zou (2023) and animated by Light Chaser Animation Studios, also serves to contextualise my project. The film was set in China after the Anshi Rebellion during the Kaiyuan period of the Tang Dynasty. The story follows the main

character, Gao Shi, as he reminisces about his past with the poet Li Bai<sup>29</sup>. Several scenes in the film employ ink paintings (Figure 3.11), and Gao Shi's poems *燕歌行* [*Songs of Yan*] are integrated to describe the fighting and suffering caused by the war.



Figure 3.11. Screenshot from the feature film *长安三万里* [*Chang'an*] (2023).<sup>30</sup>

29. 李白 (Li Bai), also pronounced as Li Bo (whose courtesy name was 太白 - Taibai) lived during the Tang Dynasty. He is regarded as one of China's greatest poets.

30. Note. At 1:19:45 Gao Shi's poem and the ink drawings describe the tragic fate of soldiers in war. At 2:05:08 the generals and the intensity of the war are rendered as an ink drawing. The film can be watched here: <https://ca.duboku.fun/vodplay/4208-1-1.html>

### *Three artworks that contextualise my prints*

In ancient China, integrated relationships between poetry and painting were not only expressed on paper; they also appeared on other substrates including porcelain, silk and jade.

Indicative of silk painting is a well-preserved artwork from the Qing Dynasty that depicts a lotus pond in autumn (Figure 3.12). This piece of traditional Gongbi (silk painting) reflects the figurative aesthetics and exacting craft of managing ink on an absorbent material by employing gutta-percha as a resist medium.<sup>31</sup> The painting's sinuous brushwork has a distinctive delicacy that speaks to silk's fluid tactility.<sup>32</sup> As an example of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) aesthetics, the image is more colourful than the silk funerary paintings of the earlier, Western Han Dynasty.<sup>33</sup> The poem inscribed in the work reads:

初日耀朱花， 灼烁漾前浦。  
远香静中闻， 水仙欲起舞。  
净植不染泥， 名冠群芳谱。  
绰有君子风， 岂与凡卉伍。

31. Gutta is a solvent-based substance derived from rubber trees (Gutta Percha). Gutta is widely used for painting on silk. The resist medium has a thick, rubbery texture and it is removed after paint has been fixed on the substrate.

32. These earlier works were adorned with designs rendered in black ink, often made from soot and an animal-based

凉风满虚亭， 万柄难悉数。  
茂叔雅爱同， 赏心达今古。

*The first rays of the sun sparkle like red flowers,  
its light shimmers on the river.  
Distant fragrances are quietly sensed,  
the water nymphs appear ready to dance.  
Pure plants untouched by mud,  
their names prominent in the book  
of countless flowers.  
With an outstanding noble air,  
they are far from ordinary.  
Cool winds fill empty pavilions,  
too numerous to count.  
The illustrious and elegant admire them,  
appreciating their beauty across the ages.*

This artwork is an example of silk painting that combines poetry and imagery. Although the iconography is more figurative than my work, the relationship between the delicacy of silk and the delicacy of image and text is something I sought to attain in my work.

adhesive (Richman-Abdou, 2020). This same black ink was used for calligraphy.

33. Funerary silk paintings from this period were discovered in 马堆 'Mawangdui'/'King Ma's Mound' in Changsha and were created between 206 BC – 9 AD.



Figure 3.12. Silk Painting, 御制秋荷诗 [Yu Zhi Qiu He Shi], from the Qing Dynasty.<sup>34</sup>

34. Note. Silk, 御制秋荷诗 [Yu Zhi Qiu He Shi], scroll, Tianjin Museum. Photo by researcher.

Also contextualising my prints is a painting by the Ming Dynasty artist, Zhou Zhimian, (Figure 3.13). This work profiles the formal delicate restraint indicative of an earlier period. The painting is inscribed with the poem:

翠盖拥湘娥月明  
风细飘香处应有  
人间宝瑟歌

*Under the emerald canopy,  
Xiang'e embraces the bright moonlight.  
The gentle wind carries a fragrant scent.  
In this world, there is a precious zither song.*

This work employs delicate poetic metaphors to describe the painted imagery. The poem describes the fragrance of the lotus on the evening breeze. The emerald canopy describes the enveloping lotus leaf, and the moon refers to the flower's elegant whiteness. Such subtle, metaphorical description is a distinctive feature of Chinese poetry, and it is evident in my work, where poetry is allusive. In my poetic dreams, love, aspiration, parting and conflict are all discussed through metaphors that are delicately shaped and thematically woven.



Figure 3.13. Part of 仿陈道复花卉卷 [Imitation of Chen Daofu Flower Roll] by 周之冕 (Zhou Zhimian), Ming dynasty 1598.<sup>35</sup>

35. Note. 31.2 x 478, ink, paper, scroll. Collection of the Tianjin Museum. Photo by researcher.

In 春风又绿江南岸 [*Chun Feng You Lu Jiang Nan An*] (Figure 3.14), he quotes the famous line of the Song dynasty poet Wang Anshi.

春风又绿江南岸，明月何时照我还

*Spring has graced the Southern Shore  
with green again.*

*When will the moon shine on my country road?*

In this work, Wang Anshi's poem is both the title of the painting and a description of the scenery of the town 江南 (Jiangnan) that the artist has depicted in springtime.

Like much of the work discussed in this chapter, Wu Guanzhong's painting reflects continuity between brushwork used in the calligraphy and imagery. Although the painting's treatment of space is less formal than Zhou Zhimian's composition, the centrality of its poetic voice is an example of a contemporary artist who is working with conventions similar to those I have considered in my study.



Figure 3.14. Wu Guanzhong, 春风又绿江南岸 [*Chun Feng You Lu Jiang Nan An*], 1990.<sup>36</sup>

36. Note. From 吴冠中自选画集 (p. 146), by Wu, 1992, 中国北京东方出版社.

These three artworks are significant because, although they come from different periods of Chinese history, they all employ delicate metaphorical allusion that is used to draw a viewer into a contemplative state. In addition, each artwork features a subtle dialogue between the painted image and its calligraphically rendered poetic text. The creators also express their feelings through reflections on scenery. As with my work, each of these paintings explores a single theme that is expanded enigmatically through poetic inscriptions.

Having now reviewed knowledge relating to my work, we might turn to the methodological approach I took to its realisation.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN**

## Research design

### *Design of the inquiry*

Paradigmatically this project may be framed as artistic research (Klein, 2010), that employed a combination of practice and reflection in-and-on practice (Schön, 1983)<sup>37</sup> to progress thinking through an iterative design process (Candy & Edmonds, 2010; Gannon, 2022; Mäkelä, 2007). This system of inquiry resulted in a set of seven poetically reflective prints.

Because the theme of the project drew on a personal response to the concept of the Leftover Woman and contemplations on love, friendship and aspiration, the thesis' outcomes were initially uncertain. Accordingly, the research design was constructed to enable a subjective interplay between literary and artistic processes (Figure 4.1).

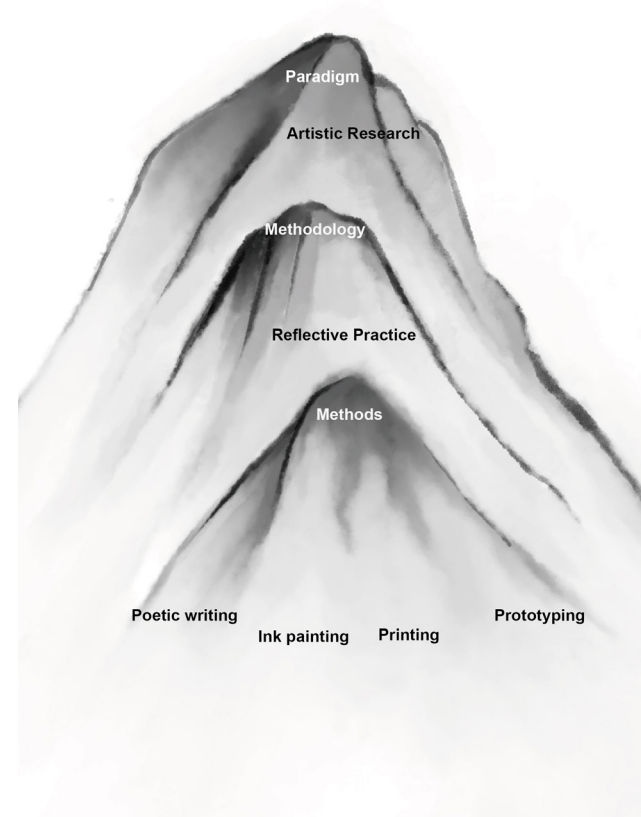


Figure 4.1. Research design constructed for the project.  
© The researcher.

37. According to Schön, 'reflection-in-action' describes a thinking process that occurs during an action, while 'reflection-on-action' refers to an evaluative process that takes place after an action has occurred.

### *Artistic research as a paradigm*

Klein (2010) maintains that artistic research is subjective, and the experience of the researcher is negotiated intersubjectively. He argues that if art can be understood as a mode of insight, then reflection on artistic practice takes place “at the level of artistic experience itself” (2010, para. 13). Klein also proposes that artistic knowledge “has to be acquired through sensory and emotional perception” (ibid., para. 17). In this project the creation of subjective, artistic responses drew inspiration from a combination of lived experience and introspective reflection.

### *Practice-led inquiry*

Being artistically oriented, the research developed its thinking iteratively through a process of creative practice. In so doing, it generated new knowledge about the operation of practice in order to improve knowledge about, and in practice (Candy, 2006; Skains, 2018).

In 1983, Schön proposed that the design process is ‘situated’ and doing and thinking are complementary. Visser (2010) describes Schön’s reflective practitioner as one who pursues design thinking “through stages of appreciation, action, and re-appreciation” (p. 24). In this process each “unique and uncertain situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it, [and] the situation talks back, the practitioner listens, and as he appreciates what he hears, he reframes the situation once again” (Schön, 1983, pp. 131-132).

Kleining and Witt suggest that in such forms of inquiry:

... the topic of research is preliminary and may change during the research process. It is only fully known after being successfully explored. The topic may be overlapped by another one or turn out as part of a different problem or just disappear. (2000, p. 2)

Given this situation, the authors suggest that changes in expectation and assumptions “should be regarded as a positive sign of accumulation of knowledge” (ibid.).

### Process

The ability to change expectations and assumptions was intrinsic to this study. Initially I explored the potential of poetry to communicate stories of leftover women's futures (as distinct from traditional women's experiences). This writing progressed into more autobiographical reflection and exploration of my relationship and emotional attachment to people and the nature of silk. At this point, I began considering the idea of a poem as a dream, and through this I linked dreaming to sleeping. From this association, I began designing silk night attire. In these experiments, I created and applied imagery digitally (Figure 4.2). However, as my practice developed, I began to feel a disconnect between digital realisation and the intimate nature of my poetry.

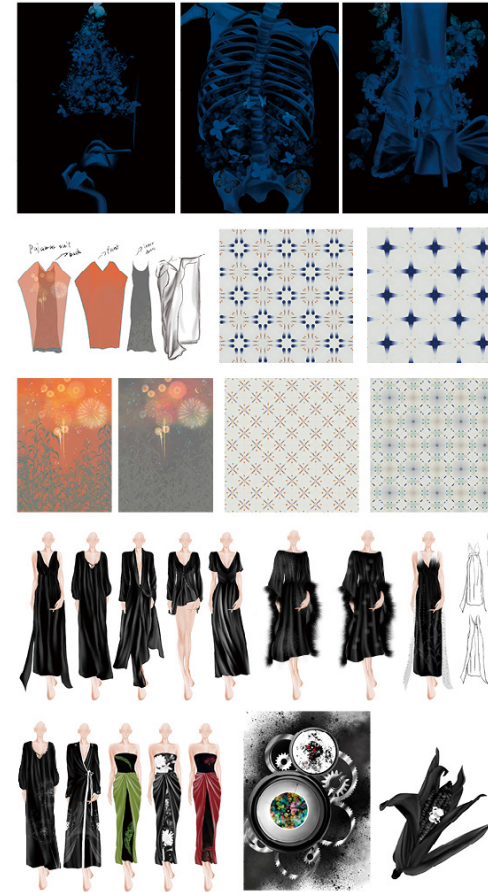


Figure 4.2. Early designs of night attire based on the poem 'Up to the Summer' (August 2023). ©The researcher.

Consequently, I reconsidered the association between dreaming and sleeping and I began experimenting with the idea of a silk bed sheet that might be draped or suspended. During this stage, I also began to consider the traditional Chinese concept of 'painting in poetry, poetry in painting' and I developed multiple experiments using ink, paper, water and non-traditional substances like salt and alcohol.

As these experiments developed, I began photographing the paintings and making small digital adjustments to highlight the poetic sensibility of the images. I then converted the designs to TIFF files for printing on to sheets of silk.

At the same time, I began considering a bilingual catalogue that might complement the fusion of poetry and silk painting. These experiments involved iterative processing where I employed prototyping to discover harmonious relationships between texture, colour, weight and structure, such that the final print media might 'speak' on multiple levels to the poetic nature of my work.

## Methods

The study employed four methods: poetic writing, ink painting, printing and prototyping. While discussed separately, in practice these processes often merged, and I would return to each as I refined the others.

### *Poetic writing*

I employed poetic writing as a method of feeling my way through internal reflection. I wrote in both Chinese and English.<sup>38</sup>

Prendergast and Galvin (2012) argue that poetry employed in research enables a practitioner to deeply evaluate the human experience and therefore humanity within a study. In my research, writing poetry enabled me to return to incidents of my past while contemplating my present and future. Gannon (2022) suggests that when combined with imagery, poetry can increase resonance and communicative depth in a design, and as the project progressed, my painting and refinements to my poems formed a co-creative dialogue. In other words, the paintings and poems began speaking to each other, changing their form as they sought to find higher levels of harmony.

My poetic writing style was influenced by traditional Chinese literature<sup>39</sup> and drew upon certain conventions of Tang poetry<sup>40</sup> and Song lyrical poetry<sup>41</sup>. However, Song lyrical poetry had the greater influence because the style is more flexible, subtle and personalised. It also has a less rigid structure, and it is distinguished by its use of repetition, sometimes of a sentence and sometimes of a phrase or idea.

Poetic writing became an adaptable way of engaging with introspection because it enabled me to think about ideas in other ways, condensing and crystalising experience (Gannon, 2022) and reshaping it into articulate expressions of the human condition.

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38. My poems were initially written in Chinese. Poetic writing requires fluency and cohesive cognitive processes, but utilising English disrupted my flow of thought. Because of this, the English versions are not direct translations of the Chinese text, they are literary parallels. As such they translate both ideas and tone into another form of poetic expression.

39. Traditional Chinese literature can be broadly divided into five forms, 诗 'Shi', 词 'Ci', 歌 'Ge', 赋 'Fu', 曲 'Qu'.

40. Tang poetry is generally concerned with social life, nature and scenery (Wang, 2017).

41. Song lyrical poetry is more often associated with delicate emotions and one's state of mind (Fong, 1990).

### *Ink painting/illustration*

Because early experiments with digital illustration and fashion design failed to speak resonantly with the poems I was writing, I began considering the potential of Chinese ‘painting in poetry and poetry in painting’. Accordingly, I began experimenting with photography, stereoscopic cropping and hand painting. The ink experiments explored an amorphous space between abstraction and figurative painting (Figure 4.3). Just as the poems used subtle allusion, association and metaphor, so did the images and textures I created on paper. In some of these paintings, I would suggest a landscape, an animal or an event, but the explicit was always pared back so the imagery spoke as a delicate contemplation rather than didactic illustration. This approach, I hoped, would give the viewer greater space to think and imagine.

When constructing these paintings<sup>42</sup> I was aware that my poems would become part of the composition so, because I decided that calligraphic or digitally imitative text would be integrated, I constructed spaces where poetry might be harmoniously included as an integrated element.<sup>43</sup>

42. In total I produced over 70 paintings on a variety of paper surfaces. These ranged in scale from small A5 ink experiments to paintings measuring almost a metre in length.

43. I chose a calligraphic font instead of traditional Chinese handwritten calligraphy. This is because the latter increases difficulties in post-production, and I am not a classically trained

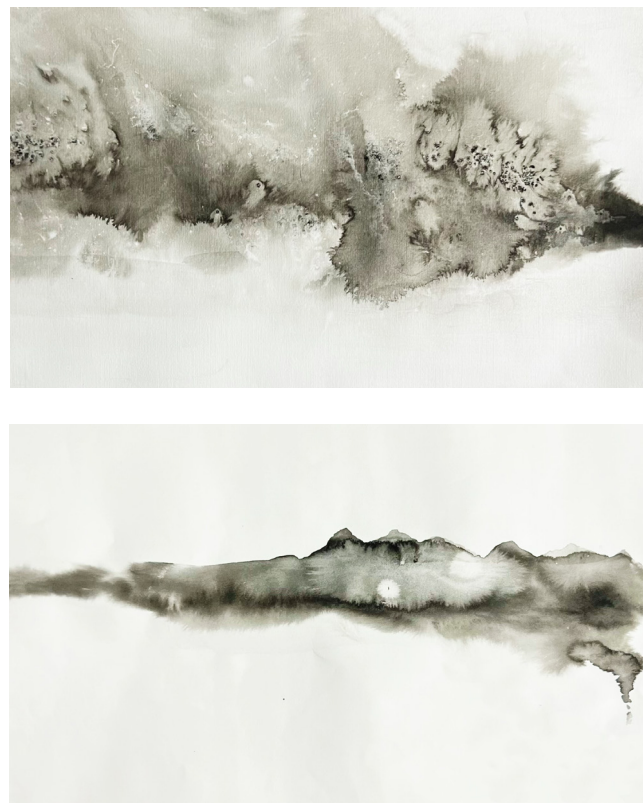


Figure 4.3. Ink experiments showing subtle allusions to landscapes (September, 2023). ©The researcher.

calligrapher. (It takes many years to master this skill). My initial plan was to use embroidery to stitch the poems on to the silk sheets. However, the printed typeface was so delicate and spoke so quietly, that embroidering over it changed the visual volume and grace of the poetry. Embroidering also caused the silk to gather and logistically, using either hand stitching or non-heritage techniques meant compromises to the weight and flow of the fabric.

### Print

Given that the concept of ‘painting in poetry, poetry in painting’ would be produced as silk prints, I devoted considerable time to investigating the potential of digital printing on to the fabric. Because my original photographs of the artwork were of poor quality, I had to reshoot the imagery (Figure 4.4).

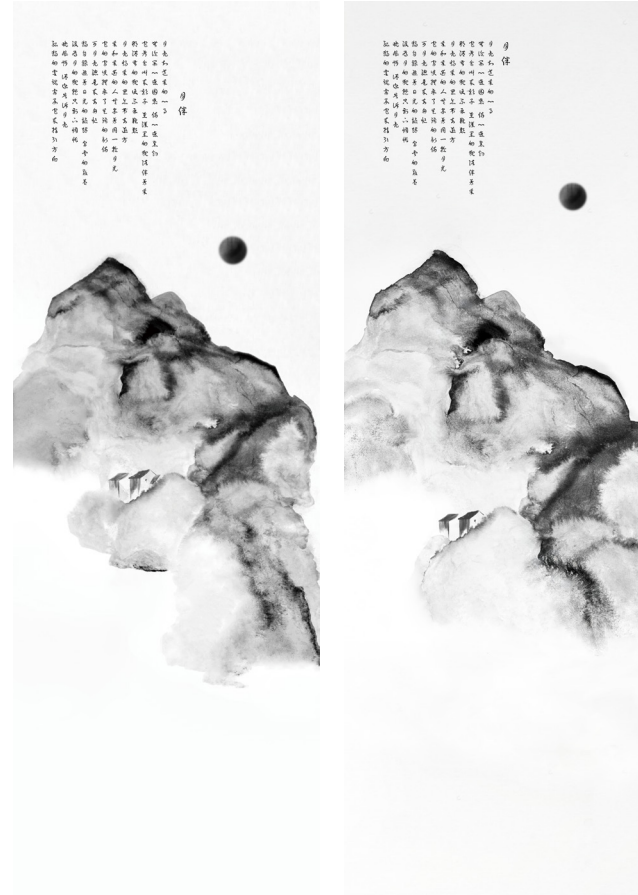


Figure 4.4. Comparative files in preparation for printing. The image on the right shows sharpened levels of detailing (November, 2023). © The researcher.

I then contacted silk printers in China<sup>44</sup> and prepared files according to their specifications. I decided to have the fabric printed in my hometown by Chinese practitioners because I knew how specialised the printing process was, and I was aware that I would have access to a wider range of silk fabric for consideration.

The printing process used digital inkjet technology (Figure 4.5). I experimented with several silk textures and thicknesses because I wanted to hang the finished pieces. I eventually selected a thick, 19 mm crepe plain satin fabric.<sup>45</sup> Although the silk has a significant weight, it is effective for hanging because it moves gracefully in air flows while maintaining the surface shine of high-quality fabric.

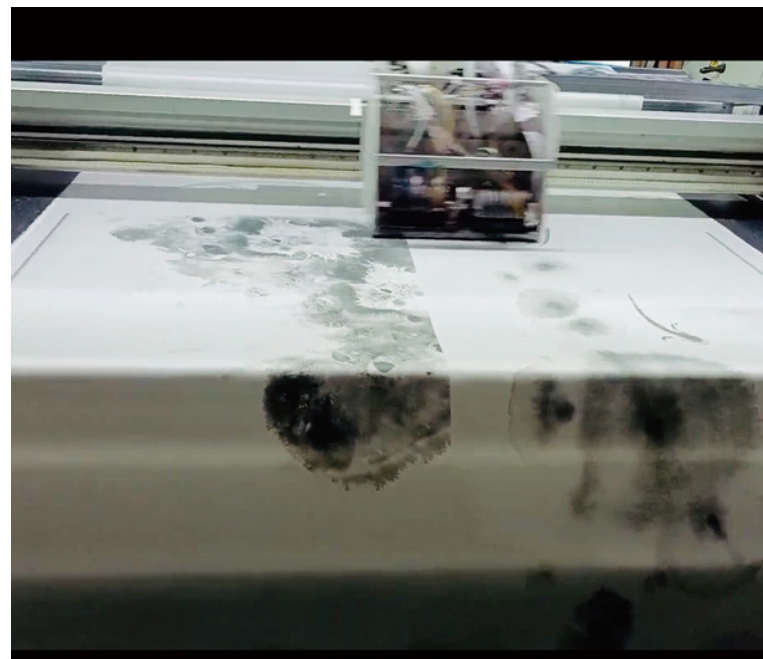


Figure 4.5. Silk print test (November, 2023).© The researcher.

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44. The Nanchong Yin Hai Silk Company.

45. The print specialist was unwilling to supply information about the cartridge dye configuration because it was a trade secret.

### *Prototyping*

I used prototyping as a method for testing the feasibility of approaches to designing the catalogue that would eventually accompany the printed silk poems. Corsín Jiménez (2014) has argued that prototyping is an important interpretative and descriptive tool because it places emphasis on productive and processual aspects of experimentation. Prototyping enabled me to experiment with image-text relationships and harmonies of scale, texture, structure and space. The catalogue design and binding method drew inspiration from an ancient Chinese Buddhist technique known as sutra-folding. Sutra involves a process of folding a long sheet of paper back and forth, then gluing stiff paper to the back of the first and last pages for protection (Eubanks, 2010). (Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6. Early experiment with pages on both sides of a sutra-folded structure (November, 2023). © The researcher.

However, the pages of a sutra-fold are often turned over and were easily damaged. The printed content was also limited by the thickness of the folded binding and the length of the book was restricted. Being cognisant of these issues, I discovered through prototyping that it was feasible to add paper by stitching in the middle of each fold. This preserved the traditionally elegant look of the system while enabling me to add expressiveness and detail to the content. Experimenting with scale, binding and materials, I created numerous prototypes, trialling versions of single and double-sided formatting. Eventually, I decided that a single-sided design afforded a more intimate, delicate and concise structure (Figure 4.7).

For the layout of the catalogue, I borrowed the characteristic of Chinese typography, of writing on the right side of a page and leaving white space around the text. Through iterative experiments, I adjusted the content of the layout and trialled the weights and textures of imported Chinese papers. In the catalogue design, I wanted to allude, through the paper, to the texture and surface qualities of silk. Eventually I selected a black stock that contained a subtle pattern for the body page, and inside this I sewed handmade, pearl-white pages, that alluded to the glow and tactile qualities of silk.



Figure 4.6. Early experiment with pages on both sides of a sutra-folded structure (November, 2023). © The researcher.



**CHAPTER FIVE:  
CRITICAL COMMENTARY**



### **Description of poetic writing and ink painting**

In my upbringing I was exposed to the aesthetics and structure of traditional Chinese poetry and painting. Concurrently, I embraced a modern Western model of education. In this project I have tried to combine traditional culture with modern practices. My writing leans more towards contemporary poetic forms that express both subjective emotions and thought. However, my writing maintains a distinctive Chinese aesthetic, delicacy, and thought processes indicative of Song Dynasty poetry. In my image-making experiments, I have drawn on traditional ink painting approaches, but I have explored diverse materials and image processing techniques in expressing the idea of 'painting in poetry and poetry in painting'.

The seven silk prints developed from the study are:



### 错过春天

忽然到来的春天  
雨，潮湿了我的眼

旧日的时光  
早已落幕不再重演  
你是我遗失的信件

你喜温柔的春  
我偏做炽热的夏  
春夏注定的交替  
早已写下了结局

别急，总有人能与你踏青  
春又来，花会开，夏天不会远

### Missed Spring

Suddenly, spring arrived,  
My eyes moistened by rain.

The old days  
Long gone will not be repeated,  
You are my lost letter.

You favour the gentle spring,  
And I, the hot summer.  
But seasons change,  
Their ends pre-written.

Don't grieve,  
someone will walk with you,

Figure 5.1. Ink painting, 错过春天 *Missed Spring*. (2023). © The researcher.

Poetic writing, 错过春天 *Missed Spring*, by researcher, 2023

### The poem

This work describes a relationship and incident I experienced, and it was through these that I realised that I did not wish to enter into marriage until I had become a better version of myself. My ex-boyfriend proposed to me, ten years after we broke up. This was because of family and social pressure. Like many traditional Chinese men, he felt that he needed to be married and to produce children who would look after him when he grew old, after he had completed a successful career.

The poem is tender because he still has feelings for me. However, the marriage proposal caused me to recognise that I am afraid of marriage, and I do not wish to be tied to another person for the rest of my life. The poem gently describes personality differences through its allusion to seasons. Eventually, I rejected the man's proposal with my blessings, knowing the inevitability of different journeys to different destinations.

### The painting

The image for the silk print was rendered on rice paper by making constant adjustments to the constitution of ink and water. Like the poem, the painting is delicate. It depicts lotus leaves and two fish in a pond. The lotus leaves are a metaphor for the established social environment and, around them, the two fish swim in different directions. The fish can be free and uninhibited if they can come to understand their inherent potential. This is the form of relationship to which I aspire.



## 月伴

月亮知道我的心事  
 无论开心或困惑，伤心或焦灼  
 它都会叫来影子，在漆黑的夜陪伴着我  
 那清苦的夜，便不再难熬

月亮将我的思念带去远方  
 我和我爱的人共享着同一轮月光  
 它的守护抚平了生活的创伤

可月亮总是来去匆忙  
 独自躲避着日光的驱赶，乌云的覆盖  
 没有月的夜就只剩下惆怅

晚风啊，请你告诉月亮  
 孤独的灵魂需要它来指引方向

## Moon Companion

The moon knows my heart,  
 Whether happy or confused, sad or anxious.  
 It calls to the shadows that  
 keep me company in the night.  
 The night is not so hard to bear.

The moon carries my longing to distant places.  
 My beloved and I share its same light,  
 It soothes our wounds.

But it rises and leaves with such haste.  
 Hiding from the sun and darkening clouds.  
 Without the moon, the night is filled with sorrow.

Evening breeze, please tell the moon,  
 That my lonely soul seeks its guidance.

Figure 5.2. Ink painting, 月伴  
 Moon Companion. (2023). ©  
 The researcher.

Poetic writing, 月伴 Moon Companion, by  
 researcher, 2023

### The poem

In this work, I talk about the moon as an object that accompanies me and through it, I send my thoughts to my friends and family. The poem illustrates my emotional state of being lonely at the end of the night. Despite the occasional company of friends, I live overseas and spend most of my time by myself. Chronic insomnia and late-night work have made it difficult for me to sleep. Across the endless nights, the only thing that accompanies me is the lonely moon outside my window.

The moon has a rich meaning in Chinese culture; it is a symbol of the human emotion of 'lovesickness'. I speak poetically to the moon expressing my longing for distant relatives and friends. The moon in the poem symbolises spiritual support and it is the solace of my soul. Hidden beneath the lines of the poem is my adaption to a solitary life and my unwillingness to be bound by traditional family norms. In my solitary life, I find inner peace, and the moon becomes the harbour of my spirit.

### The painting

This painting depicts a hut in the mountains with the moon. The image is a metaphor for the artist's mind. Although in real life I live in the hustle and bustle of the city, the painting presents a peaceful state of mind that does not wish to be disturbed. The mountain hut is transcendent; surrounded by clouds and mist, as if floating in the sky. The moon is presented as black, and thus it contrasts with the white sky. In the painting it is no longer figurative; it is a symbol of my adaptation to a life of solitude and my enjoyment of the silence and inner peace that it brings.



### 逝去的童年

穿行新年伊始的小镇，繁忙的街道  
我带着你，你带着玉米和压岁钱

制作爆米花的老人，慢慢悠悠不急不躁  
漆黑的炉子在柴火的燃烧中旋转  
爆炸的声音伴随焦香的炉烟弥漫  
爆米花从炉子里跳进麻袋  
两块五毛钱就能换取所有快乐

一晃二十年，  
回不去的是童年，和故乡的新年  
买不到的是经历，和友情的记忆  
你总是声声问候，切切关怀

成长像是儿时的爆米花，  
我们走入了社会的熔炉，  
经历了烈火的洗礼打磨，  
或变成焦炭，或最终绽放

Figure 5.3. Ink painting, 逝去的童年 *Lost Childhood*. (2023). © The researcher.

### Lost Childhood

Strolling through the bustling streets  
A town at the beginning of the New Year,  
I carry you,  
And you bring corn and lucky money.

There is old man making popcorn,  
In a pitch-black stove,  
Wood crackles and burns,  
Spinning around,  
The kernels explode in the scent of caramel.  
Popcorn leaps into a burlap bag.  
Two dollars and fifty cents  
For all the joy you can get.

Twenty years  
A flash and no return  
To childhood and a New Year  
In our hometown.  
No price, the warmth of childhood,  
Greeting and warmth from the heart.

Growing up is like childhood popcorn.  
We enter the furnace of the world,  
Baptised and polished by the fire,  
To become charred,  
Or to finally blossom.

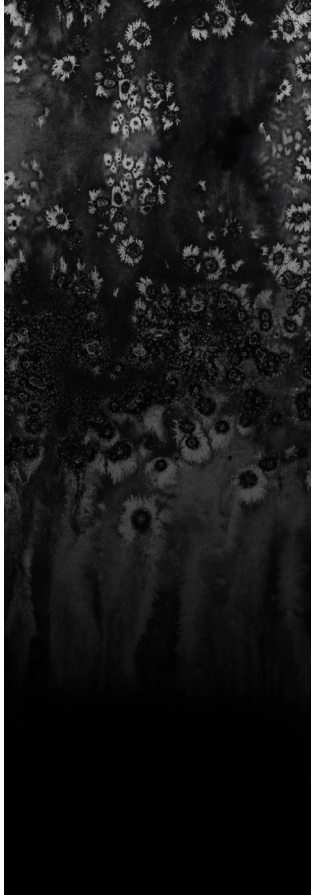
Poetic writing, 逝去的童年 *Lost Childhood*, by researcher, 2023

### The poem

This is a nostalgic reflection that recalls a childhood event that happened during the Spring Festival many years ago. It expresses the inevitability of growing up with views that are different to those held in childhood. I was born in a small town and moved to the city when my parents changed careers. In my childhood, returning to our hometown for Chinese New Year was something that I looked forward to. The poem considers the nature of childhood friendships between individuals who eventually come to lead very different lives. Over time, because of the demolition of houses and the moving away of friends, I can no longer return to the place I remember. I feel powerless in the face of the pressures that I encounter as an adult. The poem is a reflection on the fact that different people have different upbringings. As a result, my friend and I have diverse views on life. However, these differing perspectives do not hinder our friendship, and we are a blessing to each other's futures.

### The painting

The image was produced using mixtures of alcohol and Indian and Chinese inks. Alcohol is more volatile than water and it has a distinctive fluidity and viscosity. The manipulation of these materials creates unusual textures on paper, but the technique is difficult to control. In this work, I tried to express the feeling of blossoming again, after being burnt in a furnace. The texture of the painting echoes this theme, presenting a visual effect of scorching and regeneration.



### 至夏

774 天的等待，  
我逃离了寒冬，  
只为趁着初夏的晚风再次重逢。

我，你，你们，  
夜，因为我们更加美丽。

依稀还听得见，  
蛙鸣池塘、蝉鸣树上，  
青草气，玉米地，欢声笑语。

我们是绚烂多彩的烟花。  
聚在一起照亮彼此，  
散落开来化成繁星。

烟火并不为短暂的相聚而伤感，  
夜色会淡去，太阳会升起，  
而我们终将会分离。

Poetic writing, *至夏 Up to the Summer*,  
by researcher, 2023

### Up to the Summer

774 days of waiting,  
I escaped the cold winter,  
Only to reunite under an early summer breeze.

Me, you, all of you,  
The night is more beautiful because of us.  
Faintly, I can still hear,  
Frogs croaking by the pond,  
Cicadas in the trees,  
The scent of grass,

Cornfields, filled with laughter and  
the sound of cicadas.

We are splendid and colourful fireworks.  
Gathered together, we illuminate each other,  
Scattered apart, we become twinkling stars.

Fireworks do not lament fleeting reunions,  
The night will fade,  
The sun will rise,  
And eventually, our ways will part.

Figure 5.4. Ink painting, *至夏 Up to the Summer*. (2023). ©  
The researcher.

### The poem

This work describes a mood of anticipation; capturing the longing for reunion after separation, as I escape the cold winter months and await a reconnection with a friend in the evening breeze of early summer. The poem explores the collective "we" and how the night is made more beautiful by our presence. It suggests a connection to nature, evidenced by the sounds of frogs, cicadas, the fragrance of the grass, and the voice of joy emanating from a cornfield. The colourful fireworks display symbolises people coming together, momentarily illuminating each other's lives, then scattering like stars as they part. However, the poem also recognises the ephemeral nature of such gatherings, suggesting that although the fireworks may bring joy to a brief reunion, the night will eventually fade, the sun will eventually rise, and the group will inevitably disperse. This reflects the bittersweet nature of human connection and the inevitable passage of time. The poem captures a realisation that joyful times are impermanent. It expresses an understanding that, as an independent woman, I will be separated from my friends but there will remain a deep resonance in connection.

### The painting

This painting used material tensions between Indian ink, salt and water to create a unique texture that suggests fireworks blossoming in the sky. Two different kinds of salt were used in the painting, each producing a different effect. The large salt crystals remained in the painting, while the fine salt blended with the ink, and the different textures enriched the image. The work speaks to vitality. It places us in the night, in the heart of fireworks punctuating the heavens. Being an abstraction, the design leaves space for the viewer's feelings and imagination. At the bottom of the painting I tried to show the smoke left in the sky after the fireworks have dispersed. This effect was achieved by using water stains with different levels of lightness and darkness, imitating the ephemeral effect of smoke that dissipates in the night.



### 等风来

如果风，能带我去，想要去的地方

我会乘风；

降落山顶，看江河，看森林，

览波澜壮阔，等潮起潮落

听鹿鸣森林，聆鸟叫回响

可是风，不会总是去，我想去的地方

我愿逆风；

攀上悬崖，等日出，等日落，

观宇宙银河

我要等

等我有逐风飞翔的勇气

等我有逆风而行的实力

等成为更好的自己

等风来

### Wait For The Wind

If the wind could take me where I want to go

I would ride it;

Alight on mountains,

Gaze at the rivers and forests,

Watch the magnificence of waves,

Wait for the tides to rise and fall,

Hear the call of deer in the woods

And the flighted echo of birds.

But the wind won't go,

Where I want to travel.

I hope against the wind;

I climb the cliff,

Waiting for the sunrise,

Waiting for the sunset,

Gazing at the universe.

I must wait,

I am waiting until I have the courage to fly.

Waiting until I have the strength to lean against the wind.

Waiting to become a better version of myself.

... Waiting for the wind.

Figure 5.5. Ink painting, 等风来 Wait For The Wind . (2023). © The researcher.

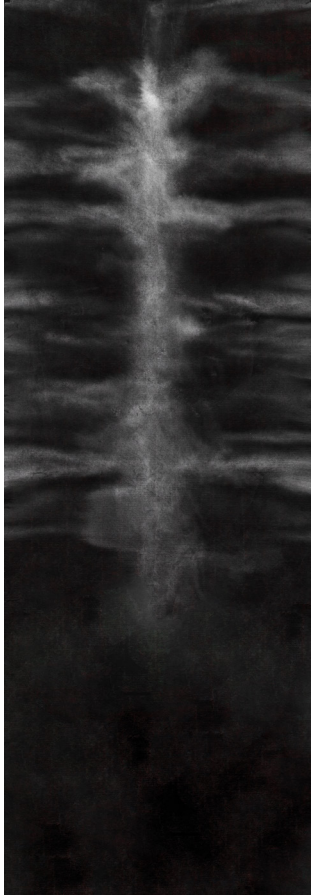
Poetic writing, 等风来 Wait For The Wind, by researcher, 2023

### The poem

This work expresses an inner desire to step out of my comfort zone and explore the possibilities of the world. I long to experience a different life. However, life does not always match my ideals and the pressure of reality forces me to face a kind of terrestrial restraint. In the process of release, I must pursue a balance between my dreams and reality. The wind in the poem symbolises a moment in the future, when I have sufficient strength to become a better version of myself. In this state, I will embark on a journey to experience the beauty and challenge of the world that matches the vision of my heart.

### The painting

This painting combines traditional approaches to Chinese landscape painting and contemporary ink experiments. This process gives voice to my reverence for traditional culture and my association with contemporary ideals. The image is both fictional and real. On close analysis we see that the reflection in the water is not consistent with the form of the mountains above. This subtle difference implies that the scene depicted in the painting only exists in the ideal world - deep in the mind of the artist. This paradox constitutes a visual metaphor that may entice us to reflect on the differences between reality and ideals.



### 未来的颂歌

如果可以  
未来的日子里

如光一般，穿越黑夜的深渊

照亮黑暗，温暖心房

如伞一般，在风雨的洗礼中

相互依偎，遮风避雨

如桥一般，连接文化的河流

打破偏见，融合差异

如帆一般，探索未知的宇宙

星辰与大海，永不止步

未来，是光与温暖的日子

Figure 5.6. Ink painting, 未来的颂歌 *Ode to the Future*. (2023). © The researcher.

### Ode to the Future

If it was possible ...

Like light,  
Through the abyss of night.  
Illuminating darkness.

Like an umbrella,  
Against a baptism of wind and rain,  
Shielding us.

Like a bridge,  
Dissolving prejudice - integrating difference,  
Connecting cultures.

Like a sail,  
Exploring the unknown,  
Among the stars - the vast, eternal sea.

In a distant future,  
There may be days of light and comfort.

Poetic writing, 未来的颂歌 *Ode to the Future*, by researcher, 2023

### The poem

The work gives voice to my aspirations for a future life. Here, I anthropomorphised light, umbrellas, bridges and sails, to talk about the dreams that my heart yearns to realise. The abstract 'ideal life' is visualised as 'real-life artefacts', and personal will is conveyed through the description of the functions these objects serve. By integrating traditional Chinese poetic and pictorial elements into a contemporary poem, I have used metaphors of the ordinary to allude to the dreams of a contemporary, solo traveller whose reflections form a positive rethinking of the Chinese derogatory concept of the Leftover Woman. As independent women we step beyond the marginalised spaces; we are thoughtful and capable - and can make our own contributions to society.

### The painting

This painting was created using traditional Chinese painting tools, rice paper and ink. The rice paper was folded and the ink was dipped in at different angles to create the image. The image shows an X-ray outline of a human body that is made up of dust particles. The concept is that the body and dust constitute a subtle connection with the universe. This connection symbolises the mysterious relationship between the human state and the greater cosmos. The cosmic dust flows around the contours of the human body and speaks to the idea of infinite vastness and mystery. Through abstraction, the painting evokes deep thoughts about life, the corporeal and the unknown.



### 自由之梦

你可以是火  
 易燃易爆，温暖炽热  
 带来光明，将黑暗和肮脏烧为灰烬  
 火，不容忽视  
 星星之火，便可燎原

你可以是水  
 无色无味，清澈纯净  
 维持生命，把心灵和污秽洗涤干净  
 水，深不可测  
 水可载舟，亦能覆舟

你可以是世间万物  
 对错不由他人评说  
 我们曾经历的风景  
 终究消散在宇宙里

### Dream of Freedom

You can be fire.  
 Flammable, hot.  
 Bringing light, burning darkness and filth to ashes.  
 Fire, can't be ignored,  
 A single spark ignites a prairie.

You can be water.  
 Colourless, odourless, pure.  
 You sustain life, cleansing the soul of impurity,  
 Unfathomable.  
 Water floats or overturns a boat.

You can be anything in the world,  
 Beyond judgement.  
 The landscapes we experience,  
 Eventually disappear,  
 Back into the universe.

Figure 5.7. Ink painting, 自由之梦 *Dream of Freedom*.(2023).© The researcher.

Poetic writing, 自由之梦 *Dream of Freedom*, by researcher, 2023

### The poem

This work explores the theme of 'being your true self'. It uses water and fire as symbols to highlight the diversity of individuality and the power of self-agency. Water not only represents inner softness and tolerance, but it also contains surging energy, demonstrating the depth and power of the mind. Fire, representing inner passion and vitality, also symbolises the relentless pursuit of dreams and self-realisation. The blazing heat of fire cannot be ignored; it expresses strength and determination of the heart. In the poem these elements no longer exist in opposition but complement each other; highlighting the diversity and strength of the inner world.

### The painting

This image was created with alcohol and Chinese ink. It alludes to a metaphorical state where water and fire mingle. It suggests that the true self can be found in combinations that were traditionally thought to be impossible. By fusing two different materials, a unique, abstract visual effect has been created. Here, the softness of water and the heat of fire reflect each other. In Chinese philosophy, water and fire comprise two of the Five Elements '五行, wǔxíng'. Fire is associated with the South, but it also symbolises energy, transformation and purification. Water is the most yin in character. It symbolises flexibility, intelligence, softness and being pliant. The interaction between these elements demonstrates inner unity and harmony.

## Catalogue design

The catalogue was designed as an extension of ideas expressed in the exhibited prints. In unpacking the thinking behind it, it is useful to consider four features:

Structure and scale  
 Typography  
 Space  
 Paper and binding.

### *Structure and scale*

I designed the catalogue to contextualise seven works so viewers might better understand the depth of the project. The content is housed inside a single-sided, sutra-folding outer page that, when extended measures 14/110 mm x 220 mm, in total 1540 mm long. The catalogue initially followed the traditional Chinese reading style of unfolding from left to right. However, because the audience will comprise of predominantly English readers, I changed the format to a right to left orientation. The structure contains seven signatures, each containing eight pages of content. Each page measures 100 x 210mm.<sup>46</sup>

The scale of the catalogue is intimate so it can be easily held in the hand while working effectively as an expanded system for display on a pedestal.

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46. The first of the inner pages contains a print of the ink painting; the second and third present English and Chinese versions of the poems. Then, for those who read in Chinese, the third, fifth and seventh pages follow the vertical order from right to left. The English version is presented on the second, fourth and sixth pages. This design decision responds to the habits of English readers who process text horizontally, from left to right.

### Typography

The typeface used on the first of the catalogue's inner pages is the same as that which appears on the silk sheets. Because hand-rendered cursive calligraphy is often difficult to read on a small scale (Figure 5.8), I selected the typeface 'Wait for the Wind 等风来', because it alludes to the free-flowing and ethereal nature of traditional calligraphy while maintaining legibility at a diminutive scale. The typeface has a poetic sensibility that speaks to the broader design consideration of 'painting in poetry, poetry in painting.'

The font I used for the catalogue's main content evolved from the ancient Chinese clerical script '隶书', which is distinguished by a restrained aesthetic. The font is easy to read. In concord with Chinese typographic convention, I omitted punctuation and breaking sentences up with spaces. The English font 'Kefa' was chosen as a translative typeface because it spoke harmoniously with the Chinese font (Figure 5.9).

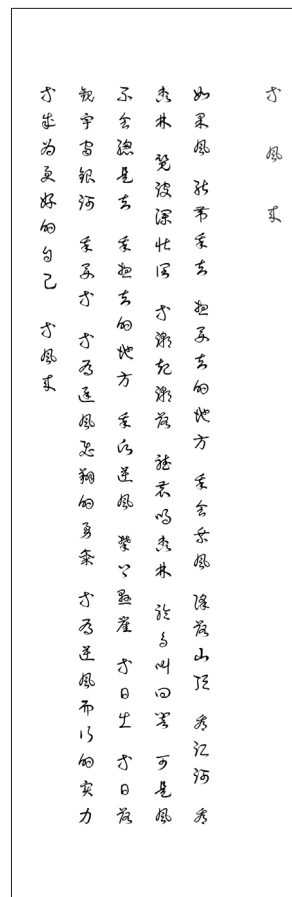


Figure 5.8. Last page of the catalogue design, the cursive calligraphy version of the Chinese poetic writing 'Wait for the Wind 等风来'. (2023). © The researcher.

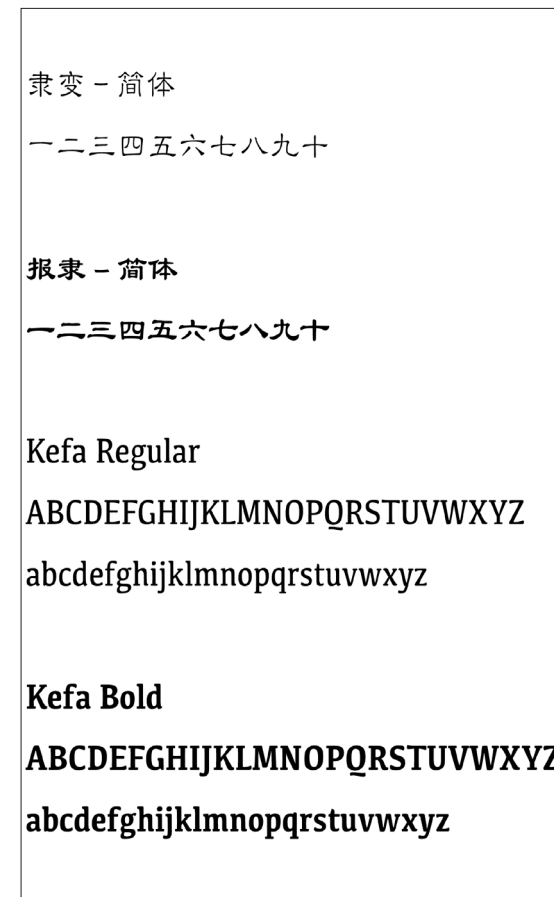


Figure 5.9. A comparison between the clerical script, Chinese font 隶变 / 报隶, and the English font Kefa.

### *Space*

The catalogue employs a luxurious sense of space. Here, I was inspired by Chinese art, where space is understood as 'designing white' (Wu, 2016). According to Wu, 'white space' is communicated through the absence of imagery. However, she notes that it is typically more challenging to work with than solidity. Wu maintains that in Chinese design, white space piques the curiosity and imagination of the observer. Within the catalogue, rhythm, emphasis and pause are created using white space.

The catalogue design uses black space to draw attention to the title and white space to add emphasis to the main content. This creates an environment that maintains a balance between English and Chinese. Structurally, the catalogue's seven signatures are read as white dreams. These dreams dwell in the duration of a night.

### *Paper and binding*

The catalogue is realised using imported Chinese paper that I selected based on its weight, colour and texture (Figure 5.10). This stock has a silken texture that creates a connection with the silk prints. The seven signatures are printed on a wood-pulp white paper that has subtly more coarse texture, so it contrasts with the colour and texture of the black stock. Because the silk prints are rectangular, I wanted the form of the catalogue to reference this proportion. Because the catalogue serves the dreams of a living person, I wanted the scale of the artefact to be intimate; something that could be held easily in the hand ... small, discreet, and softly spoken. Its textures have been designed to speak to the silk and the darkness.

Given the nature of the silk poetry prints, the catalogue design does not use glue. The signatures are subtly sewn into place with black silk thread. Because of its colour, this thread is not visible on the main body, but it is discernible if one carefully examines the signatures.

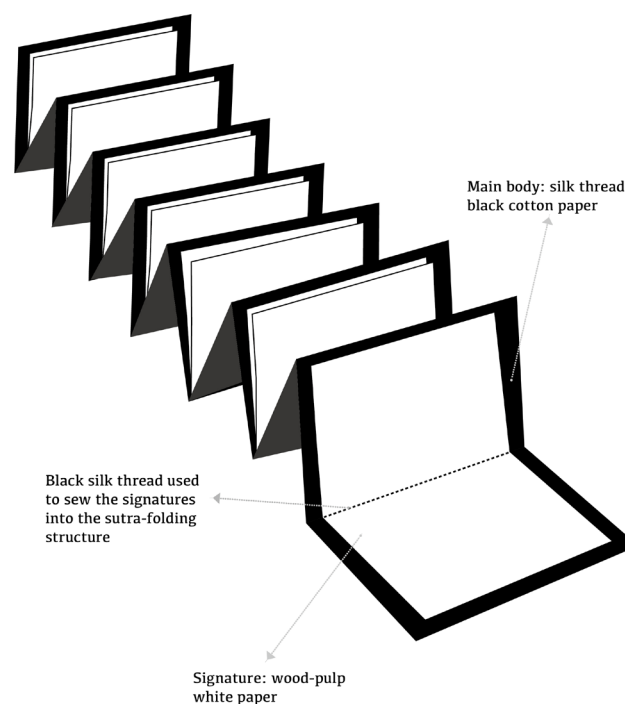


Figure 5.10. Binding structure of the catalogue.

## Exhibition

The exhibition contains seven silk works and a printed catalogue. The scale of each sheet is 1900 x 650 mm.<sup>47</sup> The length alludes to the traditional Chinese, single bed sheet but the width is narrower because the form, when hung, is more elegantly proportioned. This scale gives the artwork a bodily presence similar to that of a human. Thus, we can walk up to, engage intimately with, and walk between the dreams as if they are silent human dreams suspended in the darkness. The silk creates a sensation of hanging, floating, subtle movement.

It is unusual to find works on silk at this scale because the fabric is very expensive and any mistakes are costly. Accordingly, considerable care had to be taken with files and printing processes to ensure both clarity and subtlety. The silk used in the exhibition is genuine (it is not a synthetic substitute).

It is envisaged that the exhibition will be set in a black, sonically neutral space, punctuated by subtle pin spot lighting on each of the sheets, and on a pedestal that displays the catalogue (Figure 5.11). The exhibition will reference two ideas: relationships between darkness and dreams and quietness.



Figure 5.11. Pre-visualisation of the exhibition.

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47. 50mm of this proportion was used in the silk-locking system.

### *Relationships between darkness and dreams*

Shaped by the concepts of ‘night’ and ‘dream’, the spatial design will be one of immersion in silken dreams where poetry is silent, but paradoxically speaks in intimate ways. Dreaming is a nocturnal activity and a time where the irrational and nebulous dwell in harmony (Heijnen, 2005). However, the verb to dream also refers to aspiration and these poems and paintings also talk about hope and a delicate vision for a future of sensitive care.

Dreams and their interpretation have a deeply embedded history in China (with the most famous reference for interpretation being the book *Duke of Zhou Interprets Dreams*).<sup>48</sup> The iconography of dreams is often related to health or emotions. In my work, both fire and water are significant themes. In traditional Chinese thinking, to encounter water in a dream normally alludes to “affection, femininity, or creativity” (Jiang, 2023, para. 32) and dreaming of calm or still waters may suggest a happy and auspicious life. Fire, however, has more diverse associations. In my work it is more aligned with “passion and desire” rather than with “frustration, anger, worry, or destruction” (ibid. para. 34).

These references explicitly and subtly permeate the project and in the ambient darkness and faint lighting, I position them within a nocturnal state where poems are suspended as moments of dreaming that provide the viewer with space for reflection and association.

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48. The book is attributed to Ji Dan (Duke Wen of Zhou during) who reigned between 1042 and 1035 BC. ‘Duke of Zhou Interprets Dreams’ is often considered in relation to *The Book of Changes* (I Ching or Yi Jing) and *The Book of Poetry* (Shi Jing). Jiang suggests that all three of these texts “were probably written and changed by others over time, before being standardized as “classics” around the time of Emperor Wu of Han (reign 157–87 BC)” (2023, para. 16).

### *Quietness*

According to Wu (2016), the beauty of Chinese literature lies in its omission of words. In music, silence speaks louder than sound; in painting, one can elevate consciousness to the point where brushstrokes become increasingly unnecessary. Quietness is often thought of as the muting or absence of sound and words. However, in Chinese culture, quietness relates to higher thinking and the value of wisdom (Wilkinson & Olliver-Gray, 2006).

Quietness permeates my exhibition design and the artefacts within it. The ink paintings use abstract shapes that become tangible poems after quiet reflection (Qi, 1989). The intimacy between poetry and painting resides in quietness. In quietness the viewer touches the silk, and when touched, images and poems move.

In Chinese thought, silence can be understood as a positive phenomenon that gives expression without the use of spoken words (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). The idea of a fertile, silent void is a fundamental tenet of Chinese Taoism. This explains why Cheng and Tadjadod (1990) suggest that paintings should be 'heard', rather than simply seen. Inside a quietened state they suggest that watching and listening become participatory activities and a type of meditation.

When you move silk, it makes almost no sound – but there is something discernible. In a space where everything is quiet, the most subtle aural signal becomes present and elevated. In the half-light we might see sound as a movement, the shimmer of light as fabric slides across our hand ... something living that has sound correlating with the same volume as our breathing. Here, things that cannot be put into words because they are mysterious and beyond the boundaries of language, can be interpreted philosophically through moments of subtle deliberation. Such mysteries, Tong (1976) argues, may be present in poetry, art, and religion.

Tong (1976) also notes that in Taoist philosophy, poetic language is used to talk about everyday things, through metaphors. This form of speech cannot be expressed in conventional discourse and is by nature a form of allusive ‘silence’ in the deepest sense of the word. In the exhibition of my prints, poetry has the manner of silence housed in a physical realm of quietness. Each poem is a dream, but it is not sleeping. It is a quiet dream of the future that sometimes draws on the past and the present. The silken sheets are whispers in the darkness, the sound of the poet’s inner voice ... the dreams of a silent traveller, an independent woman who transcends the construct of a Leftover Woman.



## **CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

## Introduction

This project explored how the principle of ‘painting in poetry and poetry in painting’ might be used to communicate the dreams of ‘a solo traveler’.

The concept of the solo traveller is a positive reframing of the contemporary, derogatory Chinese construct of the ‘Leftover Woman’. In China, these women are a marginalised group that has arisen as a consequence of changes in the nation’s economic and social structure (Cai & Feng, 2021; López, 2020).

The study draws upon the concept of [ 诗中有画, 画中有诗 ] ‘painting in poetry and poetry in painting’ that surfaced during the Song Dynasty (Murck & Fong, 1991). In the project I brought poetry and painting into a discourse of images and text, using contemporary poems and ink paintings to communicate seven dreams of a solo traveller. Because silk has a historical association with women (Chen, 2017) and the city of my birth, the dreams were printed on to the fabric as suspended thoughts in a quiet, darkened space.

### Contributions to the field

I would suggest that the thesis makes three contributions to knowledge.

First, despite an expanding discourse around the phenomenon of leftover women in both academic and non-academic fields, relatively few works engaging with or critiquing the subject have been produced in visual communication design. Therefore, the thesis contributes to existing academic and social discourse by offering a self-reflective, poetic consideration of the issue as an exhibited artwork accompanied by exegetical writing.

Second, the project demonstrates how contemporary printing on silk, while being technologically realised, can draw inspiration from traditional Chinese approaches to ink painting. Because contemporary silk production is economically challenged (China Silk Association, 2023), the project demonstrates the unique and delicate features of the material as a printable substrate and through this it offers an example of potential future artistic and commercial applications.

Finally, the thesis contributes to a contemporary application of the Song Dynasty principle of [ 诗中有画, 画中有诗 ] 'painting in poetry and poetry in painting'. In the context of visual communication design, where image and text are compositional elements, a Chinese concept that deals with a related idea (albeit in a poetic manner) demonstrates how similar concerns might be envisaged from a different cultural perspective.

### Further research

While researching this study I came across a number of examples where the aesthetics of ink painting was explored as motion graphics (Li, 2019; Liu, 2010; Millchannel, 2014; Xie & Zhou, 2023). I imagine that a further iteration of this project might explore ‘painting in poetry, poetry in painting’ inside motion graphic environments. Such an inquiry might explore digital illustration, stop-frame ink painting, and analogue and digital animation video.

In 2020, at the Fifth International Conference on Communication and Media Studies, Yating Yu presented the paper Representations of “Leftover Women” in the Chinese English-Language News Media: A Keyword Analysis of Thematic Concepts. While cultural considerations of the Leftover Woman occur in wider disciplinary contexts like media studies, I will remain alert to future international conferences that draw together researchers whose studies unpack the nature and implications of the role and expectations of women in China.

I am also considering submitting the catalogue designed for this project to the 2024 New Zealand Best Design Awards, in the student section, as an example of cross-cultural visual communication design.

### Reflection in closing

This thesis has been a deep journey of self-awareness. The project has meant a great deal to me. Through exploration and learning I have clarified inner thoughts. I have examined the depth of expectation and the potential for growth. The road has not been smooth. However, through a morphing topic and through creative anxiety and pressure to lift my work into higher realms of realisation, the thesis has been transformative. I have learned to manage time, to communicate carefully with professionals, to trust poetic thought and to structure research into a coherent narrative.

用秋收硕果新酿的酒，敬落叶不舍离别的愁。

With the wine newly brewed from the fruit of the fall harvest.  
To the sadness of the falling leaves that don't wish to part.

[Poem by the researcher]

This study now has a future and now a past. It has progressed through six seasons and at the time of writing this conclusion, we are entering autumn.

Now, I am about to begin another phase of my life. The thesis has been a learning journey. I once believed that the first thirty years of my life had been wasted learning things that had no relevance (poetry, painting, fashion design, sewing techniques), yet they became the threads of the fabric of this study. These threads have connected the poetic and the industrial, the traditional and the contemporary and the personal and social critique.

In closing, I am reminded of the Chinese expression:

一分耕耘，一分收获

'You will be rewarded for your effort proportionally.'

This thesis has been a hugely challenging undertaking. English is not my first language and many of the texts referred to in the exegesis have required me to translate things that have no exact equivalence in English (including my poetry). But the reward for the study is more than a grade or parchment, it is growth and clarity and a journey through the self into the future in here – a rich future accompanied by the dreams of a solo traveller.



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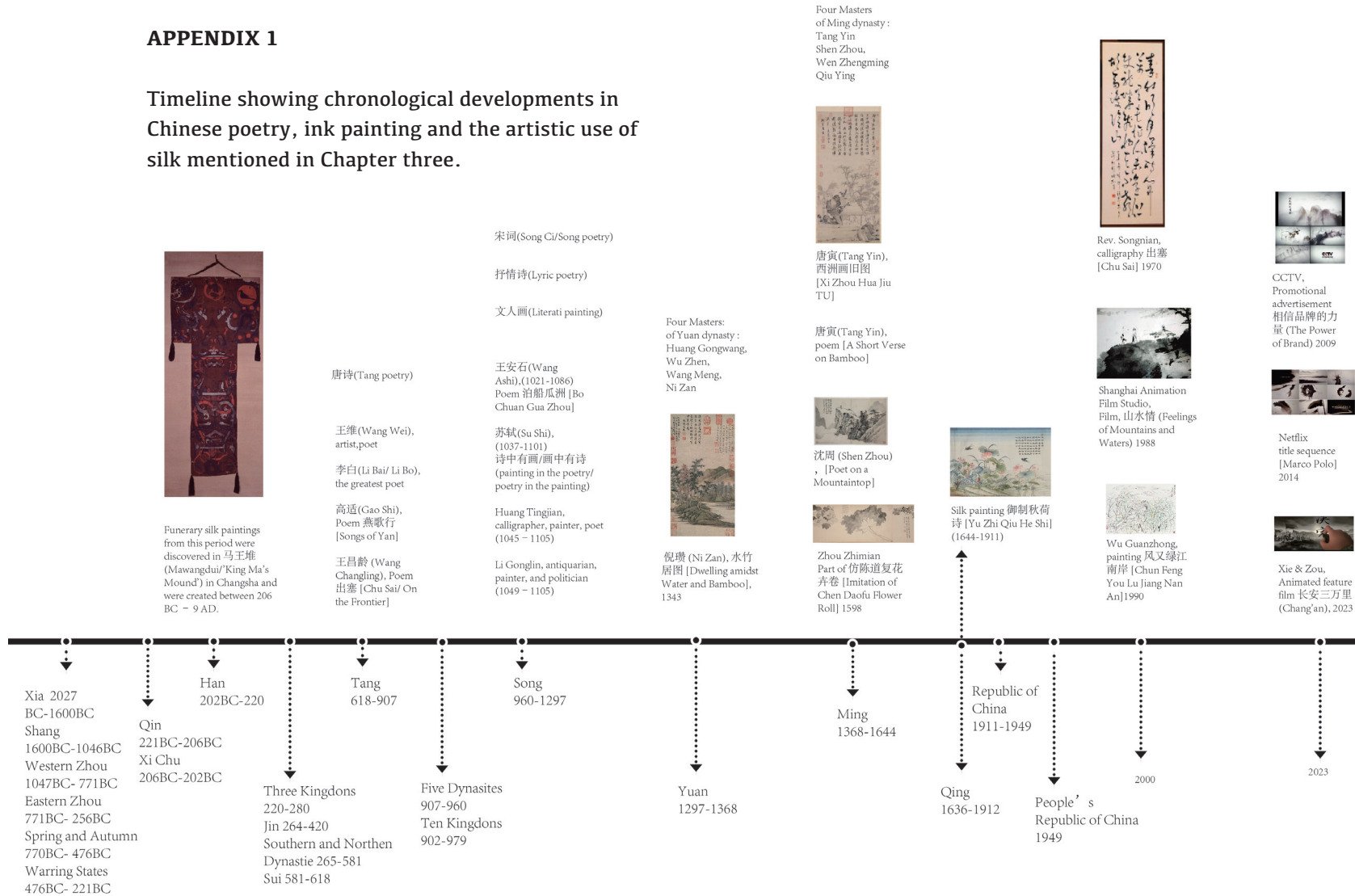
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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Timeline showing chronological developments in Chinese poetry, ink painting and the artistic use of silk mentioned in Chapter three.



## APPENDIX 2

### APPENDIX 2

Dreams of a solo traveller: Silk prints and poetry  
by Qianying Li. (19-22 June, 2024)  
Exhibited in WM508A, AUT, 40 St Paul St,  
Auckland, New Zealand

Film footage showing proportion and spatial  
treatment of the works inside the exhibition  
space can be viewed here: [https://youtu.be/  
VYwZt8EMD1U](https://youtu.be/VYwZt8EMD1U)







**APPENDIX 3**

The catalogue images.



