

**Psychedelic layerings: Fluid identities  
of a self-placed young Chinese  
immigrant in the U.K.**

**A Thesis Submitted for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to explore the complex interplay of cultural identity and artistic expression, situated within my personal experiences in the UK, in which I have imagined or self-placed myself as a young Chinese immigrant through the lens of cultural identity within my privilege as a PhD student. My goal is to address the gap in understanding the nuanced perspectives of a self-placed young Chinese immigrant in Britain, wherein I navigate a sense of dual identities amidst prevailing stereotypes. Through a Practice-led Research approach, this project employs psychedelic experimental film techniques, including non-linear narratives and psychedelic aesthetics, to portray the author's journey of self-placement as a young immigrant in Britain through the lens of cultural identity. The methodology integrates psychedelic aesthetics with auto-ethnography methods in the process of filmmaking, providing a personal exploration of identity which reverberates into the experiences of other members of my community.

The key findings attest that psychedelic aesthetics, with its fluid style open to varied analysis, serves as an apt medium for relaying the multifaceted nature of a transnational/cultural persona. My psychedelic film practice will demonstrate how cultural identity places 'self' within the context of an anti-essentialist binary form that will create a 'hybrid space'. This research, therefore, discusses the theoretical intersection of post-colonialism and transnationalism that focuses on cultural identity.

The overall research centres around an important question, how can we identify the sensation and affection in psychedelic film elements as a creative method for the perception of our cultural identity in the transnationalism of Chineseness. My film's visuality serves as key evidence that presents some fresh perspectives for experimental filmmakers involved in transnational experiences.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work, except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Brunel University or other institutions.

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## **Introduction: The Sensation of Trans-cultural Identity in the Aesthetics of Psychedelic Altered States**

I am a visual art student who was professionally trained in Chinese lacquer painting, beginning with my university study in Amoy, China, in 2013. As a form of painting with lacquer, lacquer painting usually involves decorating lacquerware. It is a four-part process that begins with four layers of coloured lacquers applied one on top of the other; the product is then sanded with abrasive paper to produce a mottled texture. The process is not only technically demanding but also requires a good understanding of colour and texture to achieve the desired effect. I often use digital tools in my works to see the effects while laying down each layer of varnish paint. This digital approach helps me to play around with the various textures, colours etc., eventually making a lacquer painting identical to the one I had in mind.

My inspiration frequently comes from the surreal and dream-like visuals prompted by psychedelic art. It is the sense of feeling the music deeply and being submerged in the imagery it conjures up that I hope to recreate through my work. The bizarre image style that comes with psychedelic art gives my imagination a bigger outlet to work, meaning I can put in almost any theme and visuals compared to what is possible with traditional forms of art.

In 2018, I first set foot in the UK for a master's degree in Contemporary Art at the University of Southampton. My digital techniques allowed me to create moving images/videos in psychedelic/altered states visuality. My motivation came from my daily life in which I extracted signs or symbols into images within superimposition and juxtaposition in the videos. At that time, I also realised that I, as a Chinese student in Britain, encountered the stereotypical narrative from others. Chinese martial art and Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee, backwards communist country and 'sissy' or 'nerd' have become the terms I received the most to essentialise students like me from mainland China.

I was doubting myself and occasionally inferior, am I smelly? Am I barbarous? Am I not masculine as a man? The racial violence (physical assaulting and verbal insult) I experienced

in the pub, and on the street has amplified the sense that my self-esteem was ‘sabotaged’. My desire has grown stronger to shape my image through interaction with native people and friends, although my spoken English can sometimes limit me to precisely deliver what I would like to communicate, my knowledge of Western music (the love for rock and roll and hip-pop) and digital video works could help me befriend with people from different countries and create different images as a Chinese student. My enthusiasm to adapt to the British lifestyle offered me comments that I am different from most Chinese students in Britain, ‘they look not confident enough,’ as one of my British friends said to me at his home party. I felt a sense of displacement in such an intercultural life.

I do realise that I constantly negotiate my cultural identity to recreate a new perception, i.e., the foraging ‘comfort zone’ in-between British and Chinese culture, in which I feel a sense of belonging. When I appropriate British culture like the dress code or pub culture, I feel that I could blend in the so-called social network mainstream, meanwhile, I also have the intention to not lose my Chinese traits. On the other hand, when I show Chinese culture like the use of chopsticks or Chinese Kungfu, to urge the natives to correctly understand my culture. However, the notion of Chineseness is easily perceived as a ‘Kungfu nation’ or ‘cook nation’. Due to my passion for being ‘cool’, I never escaped to gain the opportunity to show my uniqueness. This desire allows me to endlessly reconcile cultural identity, though there is still the risk of confronting racism.

When I finished my Master’s study in 2019, I decided to continue my art study through PhD journey to explore how I use psychedelic aesthetics in the film practice to explore my trans-cultural experience between China and Britain. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has outbreaked, and racial violence against Chinese become prevalent in Britain (Yeh 2022). This reminded me of reminiscence of my racial experiences, and I also understand the importance of problematisation of my stories and my everyday life in the UK so that I could integrate it within my practice due to a lack of racial consciousness and the absence of a robust discourse surrounding anti-Asian racism in the UK, especially in the context of Chinese international

students in the UK (Yu, Rai, Lim, and Li 2023: 6). By articulating experiences, students like me can more effectively identify and challenge the subtle forms of racism that permeate their daily lives, which are often disguised under the guise of ‘normal’ social interactions (8). Benton and Gomez (2008) assert that the racial violence against the Chinese in Britain is deeply rooted in colonial and imperial history in Britain. I therefore place my cultural identity as a young British Chinese immigrant with also my privilege as a PhD researcher. As Stuart Hall (1990) claims, cultural identity is fluid and encompasses a range of experiences and memories, histories, and positions that transcend national boundaries. Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of ‘in-between’ (1994) indicates a hybrid cultural identity, which could disrupt the imposed stereotype of minorities.

This practice-led research explores psychedelic aesthetics in the auto-ethnographic film practice from the perspectives of Chineseness in Britain (a self-placed young Chinese immigrant in the UK) and cultural symbols (Beijing opera mask, mah-jong, Loong, Hanfu-water sleeves), investigating the sensory representation of cultural identity in the filmographic sequence of altered states. I investigate three research questions: how Britain-China cultural identities contribute to psychedelic art, how psychedelic art affects fluid cultural identities, and what cultural identity is in the context of psychedelic film practice.

Pho (2020) finds that Chinese students studying in Britain have a dynamic and hybrid cultural identity, influenced significantly by their social contacts. Hall conceptualises cultural identities as unstable points of identification that recognise critical differences and discontinuities, He argues that:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. (1990: 225)

As cultural identity is constructed by the interplay of memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth (Hall 1990: 226). Meanwhile, the interplay of race, gender and social class is significant in

influencing the dynamics of cultural identity (Rutherford 1990, Stuart 1990). Symbolically, cultural identity is closely related to ‘signs’ of a signifier (such as a word, image, or sound) that are shaped by social conventions specific to each society and historical moment (Hall 2003: 18, 32).

Nonetheless, essentialism hinges Chinese students in Britain to acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity inherent in cultural identities, by bringing out rigid and oversimplified views of cultures (Pho 2020: 208, 211). This rigid view relies on binary distinctions, where one identity is defined through its negation of another, rejecting the existence of fully constituted and distinct identities (Crossberg 1996: 89). This binary from the dominant narrative in Britain often contrasts ‘East’ (or ‘Asian’) cultures against ‘West’ (or ‘European’) cultures, leading Chinese students to homogenise their cultural backgrounds (Pho 2020: 207). Thus, critiquing rigid binary for cultural identity is the basis for releasing the perception of ‘multiplicity’, through constant negotiation and marking differences (Hall 1997: 21).

From the outset, it should be recognised that there is a tension between Hall’s cultural representation (which has impacted some of the stages of this research process) and the non-representational approach, which will be followed by the employment of psychedelic aesthetics in the latest chapter of this thesis. This apparent contradiction has been, in fact, a rich and generative process, as through my work I have gradually shifted my understanding of what representation is, and how it can work in the act of creative artistic material that deals with cultural phenomena. At this early point of the thesis, I would like to discuss briefly the term-representation and signal some of the contradictions related to this term that I have worked through my thesis. As Hall asserts:

Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. Already, this definition carries the important premise that things- objects, people, events, in the world-do not have in themselves any fixed. final or true meaning. (1997: 61)

Representation is also constructed through systems of signs within a social context, which emphasises that the visible attributes of representation—what we see and how we interpret it (Mercer 2016: 4).

However, Derrida (2016: 297), amongst others, critiques the traditional understanding of representation, '[a]s correlative principle, the representative is not the represented but only the representer of the represented; it is not the same as itself'. The authority of the text is provisional and that the origin of meaning is not a stable presence but rather a trace, which itself is constituted through a non-origin:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. (Derrida 2016: xviii)

Derrida's concept (2016) suggests that 'becoming' is not merely about achieving a static state but engaging with the inherent complexities and contradictions involved in this process.

In my own film practice-*Tangling Phantoms*, the editing process marked a shift in my work in which 'becoming' was a driving force for the viewing experience, aiming to work with a series of interconnected images and sensations, which could exceed the depiction of the signs, symbols and signifiers of language and create instead non-representational schemas (Deleuze 1989, Powell 2007: 20, 99). Although cultural identity is always considered within specific social and historical contexts, I suggest that my non-representational psychedelic films frame the representation of cultural identity in a never-complete process within affections and sensations.

As such, in my film practice like *Cultural Phantoms*, representation (cultural symbols) is constantly under erasure by the non-representational tendencies of psychedelic aesthetics. In final work-*Yin-Yang Eyes*, I placed multiple cultural symbols in the filmic frame, the combination of these images and psychedelic aesthetics may produce a hybrid sensation for

trans-cultural identity. According to Derrida (2016: xiii-xvii), ‘under erasure’ highlights uncertain meaning in language; although the word is necessary, it is also inadequate. Through affection and sensation, psychedelic aesthetics in filmmaking tend to disfigure and interfere with any claim of intentional complete representation regarding cultural identity.

My visual artist status allows me to conduct psychedelic art practice to express my transcultural identity in fluidity and hybridity. Under the globalised context, cultural identity is not determined by nationality, as Lau-Clayton reminds us that ‘movement back-and-forth, remittances, business interests’ (2014: 41) are now a constant in the world and that dynamism urges the cultural identity to become more fluid and hybrid. I therefore place myself in the position of a young Chinese immigrant in the UK up against binary. Particularly, the racist accounts of the dominant narrative may essentialise a ‘pure’ Chinese identity, the notion of ‘Chineseness becomes a basis for labelling, which often leads to the ‘othering’ Chinese people in British society (Wang 2016: 296). As societal hierarchies, the ‘othering’ facilitates the binary of dominant culture/ racialised Chineseness (Yeh 2014). This ‘Chineseness’ is not seen as a fixed or singular identity; rather, is influenced by struggles over racial marginalisation and the visibility of Chinese cultural practices in Britain (Thorpe, Yeh 2018). The ‘aesthetics’ of ‘Chineseness’ is often framed through a colonial lens in Britain that both exoticised and simplified Chinese culture (Porter, Yeh, Denison 2015).

In my research, I extend the film techniques of psychedelic filmmaking with the personal cultural identity of Chineseness in Britain through autoethnography. The altered state nature of psychedelic film is originally tied to the representation of subjective experiences induced by psychedelic substances; my psychedelic film practice rather is a drug-free experiment that adopts a fusion of innovative visual techniques and narrative structures (non-linear) to evoke subjective experiences of altered consciousness (Cook 2014). In addition, a methodology of altered states of filmic language is developed which I base on Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic theories in terms of sensation and affect. I will be adapting these theories to my film aesthetics

that create a sensational ‘affect’ of cultural identity. As Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta state in ‘Translator Introduction’ for Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*:

For Deleuze, the philosophers ‘works alongside’ the cinema, producing a classification of its images and signs but reordering them for new purposes. What makes cinema of special interest is that, as with painting, it gives conceptual construction new dimensions, those of the percept and affect—which should not be confused with perception and feeling. ‘Affect, percept and concept are three inseparable powers, going from art to philosophy and the reverse’. Cinema and philosophy are brought together in a continuing process of intercutting. This is philosophy as assemblage, a kind of provoked becoming of thought. (1989: 15)

The altered states of psychedelic sequence in this research present cultural identity as hybrid and non-static (Hall 1990). This relationship is not permanently fixed but can shift over time and vary across different cultures, leading to changes in meanings (Hall 1997: 38). Hall also elaborates that culture refers to the representation of symbols:

So it follows that no culture is full unto itself, no culture is plainly platitudinous, not only because there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol-forming activity, its own interpellation in the process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making, always underscores the claim to an originary, holistic, organic identity. (1990: 210)

Building on the theories of psychedelic aesthetics through Deleuze’s concepts, my practice in this research can provide insight into the signs of Chineseness that generate non-static meaning through a filmic frame. As Hall (1990: 225) asserts, cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’, as it does not comply with the linear solid origin. The psychedelic altered state editing fosters the ‘becoming’ within the viewing experience in a series of interconnected images and sensations (Deleuze 1989, Powell 2007: 99). As a visual artist, in this doctoral research I aim to provide approaches to psychedelic filmmaking through four short films and a 40 min-length final film. The psychedelic film frame is examined in the combination of altered states film techniques and the aesthetics of cultural identity through transnational

context. Psychedelic filmmakers from the 60s in the U.S., like Bruce Conner, Dennis Hopper, Storm de Hirsch and Peter Whitehead from Britain, and Argentine filmmaker- Gaspar Noé, follow the technique of psychedelic aesthetics, offer guidance for employing the main psychedelic techniques. British Chinese filmmakers like Rosa Fong provide insights for disrupting essentialism through film practice, Simon Liu, who grew up in Hong Kong and Stoke-on-Trent in the UK, provides an experimental path for the film sequence through his intercultural experiences.

The discussion of anti-racism is also necessary to locate the ‘racial code’ that culturally essentialises ‘Chineseness’ through the power structure in Britain. Homi K. Bhabha’s post-colonial framework in *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides the notion of an in-between ‘third space’ to negotiate cultural identity in hybridity, W.E.B. Du Bois (1903)’s notion of ‘double consciousness’ marks out the conflict of cultural legacy and power dynamics, which could indicate cultural difference, especially via the constant recreation for a sense of belonging to comfort oneself. The desire for a sense of belonging, is for a sense of personal location that intends to reconcile the conflict with essentialism (Weeks 1990: 88). My practice aims to catch this affection and discord to ‘destroy’ the homogenised representation of ‘signs’ in the film sequence. To date, there has been no previous research examining psychedelic film practice from the perspective of cultural identities.

This research applies the methodology of psychedelic art and autoethnography to explore personal cultural identity in four short films: *Tangling Phantoms* (2022), *Fluid Souls* (2023) and *Cultural Phantoms* (2023), *The Sub-self* (2024). The final Film-*Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024) is the result of my ambition to make a long-length psychedelic film with a notion of ‘mobilised belongings’, that also integrates the some of the sequences displayed in my previous short films. The practice primarily intends to correspond to the theories I discuss in this thesis regarding the intersection of race, gender and social class. *Tangling Phantoms* is a ‘test’ to place elements of signs of my Chineseness within psychedelic film visuality so that I can check out the interaction of altered state techniques and cultural symbols of Chineseness. *Fluid Souls* and

*Cultural Phantoms* consider the imperial and colonial history in Britain to China, in which I posit my experiences through historical stereotypes of race to create a fluid sensation of signified. *The Sub-self* refers to how I reflect my gender and social class within race to assert the complexity of cultural identity in diasporic status. As the final part of my practice, *Yin-Yang Eyes* reflects my insights of anti-essentialism, to problematise my sense of belonging through the notion of 'home'. As my negotiation of cultural identity is to forage a 'home feeling', this motivation has driven me to 'split' myself to forge multiplicity.

Throughout the development of this thesis, my research journey has been a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. It has involved a non-linear, cyclical process in which each stage (e.g., filmmaking, reflection, and theoretical engagement) has continuously informed the next.

For example, as it will be explained in detail in Chapters 1 and 2, Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity as fluid and Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'third space' were significant to my theoretical orientation, which pointed me towards the possibility of visualising transnational identity as a space of hybridity and transformation. That understanding would have a profound effect during the early stages of my practice. In fact, *Tangling Phantoms* (my first practical experiment) explores a vast array of visible cultural symbols and personal memories, in an attempt to articulate my own transnational identity through recognisable signifiers.

Similarly, Deleuze's cinematic theories encouraged me to regard each filmic element as an 'image' that blurs the rigid perception of cultural identity. In response to those ideas, my films *Fluid Souls*, *Cultural Phantoms*, and *The Sub-self*, *Yin-Yang Eyes* moved away from narrative-driven structures towards affective experiences that prioritise rhythm and sensation over psychedelic renditions. My explorations for historical contexts of Chinese diaspora in Britain and de-colonialism help me position cultural symbols which are used into my filmic frame. Through the lens of psychedelic aesthetics, my films produce insights that place the discussion of transnational/cultural identity into haptic sensations.

In fact, my auto-ethnographical approach (which will be explained in the Methodology chapter) has enabled each film to serve both as a self-reflective practice and as a means to critically interrogate dominant norms, thus enabling me to move from the personal to the theoretical and back again.

The process of the film practice may be able to reflect or challenge the theories (Deleuze, Hall, and transcultural film practice) I use, offering new insights into developing psychedelic art within my Britain-China ‘diasporic sensory’. The theories problematise my transnational memories as an entry point for self-reflection in which I can better locate sensation within the film techniques informed by psychedelic art.

This research has involved the development of a psychedelic art practice and artistic landscapes, this practice-led research contributes to the formation of an aesthetics of an in-between cultural identity with psychedelic film language. The film works involving digital editing, camera shots and soundtrack creation were completed during this research and partly screened in a series of academic conferences and art community events in London, United Kingdom. My visual art background offers a ‘test space’ through artistic practice, particularly the ‘translation’ from everyday life to visualisation. This study can therefore act as a benchmark for future research on the relationship between psychedelic art and trans-cultural identity.

Second, this research contributes to psychedelic filmmaking from the perspective of the cultural symbol. These cultural elements as signs based on an individual’s experiences and memories, can create a notion of affect based on ‘haptic visuality’, a concept drawn from Deleuze’s notion of affect and sensation by As Laura U. Marks (2000: xiv), i.e., tactile sensations through visual experiences. This connection becomes crucial when discussing how intercultural film articulates memories and social histories through sensory engagement, diverging from dominant visual paradigms (Marks 2000: 65). For experimental film practice in cultural identity, filmmakers can reflect on their memories or experiences to point out the ‘elements of sign’ within psychedelic-like visuality.

Third, the contribution is from inter-cultural Chineseness, Chinese film practitioners in trans-cultural experiences could transcend the superficial representation of cultural elements by the non-linear altered state sequence. Especially under the context of the stereotypical narrative, the approach of psychedelic auto-ethnography offers a path in which Chinese filmmakers transfer their experiences into psychedelic sequences to affect viewers' feelings to question essentialised Chineseness. The Chinese cultural legacy is presented in a non-conventional way. The cultural elements thereby become individualised, neither collectivism of Chineseness, nor collectivism of Britishness. As Yeh notes even Chinese artists itself could essentialise Chineseness:

An examination of the promotional material advertising such events further demonstrates how the positioning of “Chinese” arts reinforced invisibility through stereotypical difference as well as the construction of Britain as “newly” multicultural. A repetitive vocabulary of “first evers,” “raising profiles,” “celebrations,” “years of the rabbit, horse, pig” and so on, provide a textual accompaniment to a surreal and fantastical Orientalized visual landscape inhabited by dragons and lions, typhoons, waves and mountains, falling leaves, takeaways, an exotic “alphabet” of calligraphic characters and endless “Chinese New Years.” (2018: 48)

The psychedelic visual has the potentiality to disrupt a fixed sensation, as Cook claims that:

the psychedelic aesthetic in cinema contributes to the postmodern deconstruction of visual and linguistic certainty and challenges totalizing myths of self and social identity. These films are not escapist stoner flicks. They are cinematic protests against singular and static Western conceptions of perception, self and society, and filmic utopias of pluralism, relativity, and social change. (2014: 201)

The methodology in this research forges contacts between psychedelic art and the study of cultural identity and postcolonial study in my chapters writing. The thesis comprises six chapters. In chapter 1, I will discuss the methodology, which is to answer, ‘why psychedelic art?’ In order to provide an answer to that question, I will discuss the distinct history of

psychedelic art and the visual forms of psychedelic film editing, for a deeper understanding of what psychedelic aesthetics are. Deleuze's theories serve as a 'bridge' to connect psychedelic aesthetics with cultural identity, the philosophy its film concepts contain emphasises non-essentialism and fluidity. Then, I will discuss autoethnography that centralises my marginalised personal narratives in the UK by collecting my personal experiences in the UK, especially the data refers to racialisation.

In chapter 2 I discuss how I use cultural elements as signs in my psychedelic films, as well as the employment of psychedelic techniques in my film practice. Supported by Kobena Mercer (2003: 247) I argue that a Semiotic approach in a diasporic film unveils the heterogeneous, contradictory, and hybrid of diasporic identity, which allows me to reflect on my sensory experiences by using cultural symbols. *Tangling Phantoms* as a 'test' reflects how I apply a range of psychedelic techniques to explore cultural identity, and what the sensation of fluidity and hybridity is.

Chapter 3 places myself into the imperial and colonial history of Britain towards China. As an act of cultural positioning, that history becomes the sensational image that creates 'haptic visuality' in *Fluid Souls*. The racial stereotypes rooted in this history become the key narrative that I need to challenge. In my work, I utilise the strategy of decolonisation to symbolically locate the conflict of binary in *Cultural Phantoms* and create a 'distinction' in the sensation that may affect the perception of essentialist views.

In chapter 4, I consider the intersection of gender and social class with race, in which I discuss how white masculinity hinders Chinese men like me in the UK from being essentially 'emasculated'. And I draw on my experience of a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant in Southampton to discuss my social class dynamics, and how this memory affects my desire to challenge white masculinity. I also reflect on my experience of rapping on the stage as a desire to catch the 'spotlight'. I therefore in *The Sub-self*, release these desires to create a kind of non-

binary notion of masculinity through the film sensation that reflects how I view self-masculinity based on personal agency.

Based on previous practice, my final film-*Yin-Yang Eyes* in chapter 5, aims to integrate them and posit cultural identity in the notion of 'home'. In transnationalism, 'home' is beyond the limitation of location, from which the sense of belonging seeks to comfort the 'self' from the conflict of displacement. The seeking of a 'home' feeling constitutes my personal agency to constantly negotiate cultural identity within multi-factors, in which I use Yin-Yang philosophy as 'rhythm' to develop 'double consciousness'. I also problematise a collective notion of Chinese culture through the notion of 'home', as the sense of belonging does not solely belong to the actual hometown or cultural legacy but is rather flexible. The 38-minute film, *Yin-Yang Eyes* marks the end of practice in my PhD study, and it is its most vital film that is not confined to the discussion of post-colonialism. Instead, it touches upon a broader narrative of trans-localism within Chineseness.

In the conclusion section of this research, I argue that cultural identity in autoethnography through cultural symbols contributes significantly to psychedelic aesthetics in film practice, particularly critiques of the rigid perception of clichés of cultures. Psychedelic filmmaking, however, also affects the representation of cultural identity in transnational Chineseness. The outcomes of this practice-led research include five film works, and the thesis provides aesthetic approaches for experimental filmmakers to enter the field of transcultural study.

## **Chapter 1: Methodology: Psychedelic Art, Deleuze and Auto-ethnography**

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology I employed throughout my research, highlighting the methods that I have followed during my doctoral studies. Even though Methodology chapters are not compulsory in Practice Research thesis, I believe that a clarification of the techniques and approaches I have followed would offer a greater degree of clarity and accessibility to my work. I will begin this chapter by offering a brief background to my research, discussing the origin and evolution of Psychedelic Arts Practice. This background will serve as a solid basis on which all other methods and approaches will be implemented. I will then discuss the use of auto-ethnography and will also situate it within a broader critique of ethnography as a colonial method. By combining auto-ethnography with psychedelic film techniques as the methodology, I intend to create a unique narrative that reflects the fluidity and hybridity of personal cultural identities for Chineseness in the U.K.

### **1.1 Background to Research: The Psychedelic Aesthetics**

Psychedelic art often features intense colours, kaleidoscopic images and surrealist elements that evoke heightened perception and emotional responses and encourage audience engagement by disrupting normative perceptions (commonly known as Altered States) (Masters, Houston 1968, Cook 2014: 12, 19, 44). Thematically, psychedelic art embodies transcendental states of subjectivity, psychic evolution, and the questioning of reality's constructs (Cook 2014: 4). This visual genre is originally related to an 'acid test' (LSD) that led to altered states and emerged from the experiences of those participating in the psychedelic movement (Wolfe 1968: 135).

Based on the above, I must reiterate that my psychedelic film practice, which attempts to control the psychedelic aesthetic while remaining drug-free (meaning that I have not ingested any hallucinogenic substance whilst creating them), at the same time weaves my own experiences as a Chinese immigrant in Britain within a larger context of marginalised narratives

created by British Chinese immigrants to confront racial stereotypes. In my work, I experiment with the effects that potent psychedelic experiences may have on vision and speculate as to how these depictions blur representational lines through my art, venturing into the uncharted territories of the shared unconscious. These visual expressions, Grof contends (1975: 198), can evoke primordial images, archetypes, and prevailing symbols of the collective unconscious as individuals embark on deep spiritual spheres and transcendental experiences.

### **1.1.1 The Histories of Psychedelic Art**

Psychedelic art emerged during the late 1960s in correlation with a generation of young people rejecting traditional social norms, seeking psychotropic drug experiences such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline, marking broader cultural shifts and countercultural movements (Lee, Shlain 1985: 88, 160). Aldous Huxley, one of the key figures of the psychedelic experience, in 1953 famously experimented with mescaline under the guidance of Humphry Osmond. It was this experiment that served as the basis for his most celebrated book, *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which explores how psychedelic means can facilitate remarkable changes in perception and consciousness on the fundamental level of life experience. Huxley drew on William Blake's idea that if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear infinite (Braunstein, Doyle 2018: 7). A mescaline<sup>1</sup> experience became Huxley's psychedelic entry point (1954) where colours became more intense and the essence of objects, referred to as 'naked existence', was revealed to him. Additionally, Huxley suggested the term 'phanerothyme' (psychoactive plants) and introduced the word 'psychedelic', meaning 'mind manifesting', which over time have helped shape the subsequent debate about these drugs (Sessa 2012: 62).

Timothy Leary, another major figure in psychedelics, had a similar interest to Huxley in the use of psychedelics for spiritual and existential purposes. His novel *Island* (1962) featured a utopian society in which psychedelic drugs played a role in coming to terms with death. Based

<sup>1</sup> Mescaline, a psychoactive compound derived from the peyote cactus, is noted for its ability to change perceptions while exhibiting minimal toxicity compared to other drugs.

on this, he started the Zihuatanejo<sup>2</sup> Project, which involved group LSD sessions at the beachfront Catalina Hotel in Zihuatanejo, Mexico (Krippner 2016: 254, Sessa 2012: 65-66). However, he faced substantial backlash from public authorities and the media, which resulted in him being fired by Harvard.

The 1960s was a period of great social change, with movements for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam and demands for more equality, power, and justice. This change began a great wave of social movements to challenge standard norms and institutional practices—a ‘heady’ atmosphere fraught with activist potential (Braunstein, Doyle 2018). The 1960s counterculture opposed the Vietnam War and participated in protests for civil rights, echoing today’s Black Lives Matter movement, and its activists led marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience against neo-colonialism, imperialism, and militarization, and for marginalised communities and peace in a time of enormous social advocacy and change. (Wolfe 1968:116, 121).

### **1.1.2 The Summer of Love and its Artistic Styles**

The ‘Summer of Love’ – so-called because it culminated in the summer months of 1967 – was a sociocultural phenomenon that occurred during the summer of 1967, when many converged on the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Noted for its culture of peace, love, and unity (Kramer 2008:77, Sessa 2012: 105), the Summer of Love was a notable point in the counterculture movement that emerged during the mid-to-late 1960s. During this time, the Haight-Ashbury psychedelic scene and the simultaneous rise in popularity of music events like the Monterey Pop Festival demonstrated an ongoing convergence of art, music, and psychedelics (Lee, Shlain 1985: 178). The hippie subculture emerged and with it, alternative lifestyles which challenged traditional norms and values causing tensions that divided the younger generation from their conservative, elders. Above all else, the consumption of

<sup>2</sup> The project was named after a small fishing village on Mexico’s Pacific Coast, which Leary saw as an ideal location for fostering human experience in a new dimension on psychedelic exploration, spiritual enlightenment, and communal living.

psychedelic drugs was widely viewed as a sociological trademark that openly defied the respectability and legitimacy set forth by adults and authorities alike. Media coverage of the drug use fuelled what Cook (2014: 307) names an ‘acid panic’, a broader societal reaction to an imagined psychedelic drug epidemic (Grunenberg, Harris and Harris 2005).

The hippie community in Haight-Ashbury embraced elements such as sexual freedom, hallucinogenic drugs, and psychedelic music as integral parts of their lifestyle and cultural expression during the 1960s (Peterson 2002). Artists of every type gravitated to the area – including many of the great poster artists of the time – to contribute to a renaissance that had no predetermined boundaries. ‘The Diggers’ and the ‘Merry Pranksters’ were archetypal subcultural manifestations of the prevailing Zeitgeist, and the common goal was to communicate ideas to a mass audience. At the forefront of this populist assault were the poster artists – public enemy number one to the establishment – whose mind-blowing visuals were plastered on any available surface to promote the new alternative happenings (Alexe 2021: 27).

The San Francisco poster renaissance brought to public attention the new visual sensibility of psychedelics. Much of the art was directly inspired by the counterculture it represented. However, the need for imagery to match a bizarre reality led to some of the most potent and, in retrospect, the most authentic psychedelic art. San Francisco's psychedelic music posters evolved from hand-drawn illustrations to photographic collages and images, reflecting shifts in cultural attitudes, which highlighted a move from vibrant to darker visuals. The transition in poster design styles, from collages in 1967 to artistic photographs by 1968, mirrored the era's changing dynamics (Peterson 2002: 319).

Born in 1936, the Spanish-American artist Victor Moscoso was instrumental to the psychedelic poster design – and with it, to creating iconic posters for music events and concerts during the counterculture explosion of the 1960s. His design style often included punchy typography, surreal visual style, and distortion, echoing psychedelic art. Moscoso’s experience with kinetic lithography, which involved moving things that are usually static, brought a new dimension to

the fluid properties of his work. This idea of visual motion and transformation caused filmmakers to venture into more adventurous territory like effects animations, morphing, and optical distortions to illustrate the psychedelic state of mind as seen through our eyes (Barton 2023).

Most psychedelic films proliferated in 1967 and beyond, and many involved people who were part of the Summer of Love. Psychedelic fashions, along with its cultural spread and extensive use of LSD, including among the younger generations, had a direct influence on creative expression at various levels, even within modes of art such as film. Both the hippie groundswell over psychedelics and the hype in such mainstream media likely peaked with an event like the Monterey Pop Festival (Lee, Shlain 1985:193). Nevertheless, the themes and artistic sensibilities of the Summer of Love permeated a wide swath of filmmakers at that time; more specifically, it developed a new phase in the cinematic approach, with psychedelic experiences that were almost congregational entering psychedelic films. Similar to how psychedelic posters functioned, psychedelic films frequently circulated novel and idiosyncratic visual interventions (including colour alteration, kaleidoscopic imagery; visual distortions; and hallucinatory animations) married to their narrative structures (such as non-linear storytelling, fragmented narratives, dream sequences), delivering an emphasis on subjective experiences, inner thoughts, and psychological expression as opposed to conventional plotting (Noonan 2021).

Although psychedelic art first originated in a distinct period of history, I borrow from it to achieve my interpretation as its nature allows me to challenge social norms. Psychedelic films reflect on the dispersed nature of diaspora through their lush colour palettes and abstract cinematic forms (Noonan 2021), offering a space beyond time, place, and identity to enable narratives that explore diasporic consciousness as altered states (Brown, Fleming 2018).

## 1.2 Deleuze's Theory

Deleuze's cinematic concepts implicate both the traits of psychedelic film and the denial of rigid essentialism, which could support the theorisation of how my psychedelic film practice creates the sensation of fluid and hybrid cultural identity. Powell (2007: 22, 78, 139) associates Deleuzian philosophy with psychedelic art due to its ability to change perception and evoke affect.

These film theories challenge the essentialism that underpins visual images and 'signs' to singular, fixed interpretations or categories. Instead, as Deleuze discusses, there is 'a cutting [*découpage*] of things, a new cutting: it groups under a single concept thing that one would have thought were different, and it separates from it others which one would have thought very close (1986: xii).' This signifies moving away from fixed categories to a more fluid understanding of relationships between ideas and images.

The movement-image and time-image are notions central to Deleuze's film theories (Deleuze 1986, 1989). Deleuze's cinematic philosophy (i.e., movement-image and time-image) examines how film induces altered states of consciousness. This framework is applied to my psychedelic practice, centred around the representation of these states. In short, this study intends to confirm that Deleuze's thought processes are indeed suitable and operate within the realms of psychedelic films, becoming capable of subverting monolithic diasporic identification.

The movement-image is concerned with the extraction of movement from moving bodies or vehicles, where the shot has dual aspects: it modifies the relative position of the elements within the set while also expressing an absolute change in the whole. Meanwhile, the time-image breaks away from this linear structure and utilises techniques such as pure optical and sound images, focusing on how time is articulated within a single shot or scene (Deleuze 1986: 19, 22, 1989: 271). It foregrounds temporality by employing techniques such as editing, framing,

and lighting to break up the conventional flow of time, whereby the narrative is driven by time perception rather than the extension of movement (Powell 2007: 145, 146). As Cook argues:

The use of Day-Glo color schemes, cosmic, indigenous and otherworldly imagery, optical art and abstract expressionism in the psychedelic aesthetic met the technical development of the light shows. Light technologies like strobes and kaleidoscopic liquid light projections disrupt audience's perceptual sense of space and appearance, and early digital experimentations with sound allowed producers to play with audience's sense of time and duration through mixed, overlapping tracks and programmed lags and delays. (2014: 214-215)

These techniques could present 'liquid perception' like 'water washing over various surfaces', marking the visual image within a permeable boundary where the image expresses depth and movement (Deleuze 1989: 258).

Deleuze's notions unpack psychedelic film by discussing modes of disrupted time and space that trigger altered states of consciousness in viewers. This 'affect', operating in the temporal 'interstice' between action and perception, is the founding conceptual basis of the Deleuzian film philosophy, allowing me to consider how an artwork's affectual machinations could impact upon the filmic subjectivity (Powell 2007). Specifically, Deleuze (1989: 180-181) encapsulates this 'interstice' as a shift from a 'One-Being' cinema to a more intricate relationship between images, where the cuts are no longer viewed as mere transitions but rather as significant parts of the cinematic experience itself. This perspective leads to 'relinkages' between images in modern cinema rather than straightforward associations (Deleuze 1989: 214). In the context of altered states, as a gap or pause between action and perception, an 'interstice' disrupts linear time and sensory-motor linkages, often creating a 'floating affect' that challenges habitual patterns of thought (Powell 2007: 14 115-116, 185-186). Bhabha (1994: 201, 227) and Hall (2003: 253) indicate that linear narratives are unable to account for the multifaceted realities of cultural modernity and identity, hindering a slippage of cultural identity between various categories through 'multiple chains of association', such as culture, class, and identity.

Deleuze's 'becoming' and 'multiplicity' reflect the Deleuzian cinematic philosophy related to how inter-cultural identity is not fixed and allows us to consider the formation of identity and self-hood. This is because it can challenge a fixed essence or a singular shared history to form an evolution over time, influenced by personal and collective narratives (Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 271, Hall 2003: 237). The becoming and multiplicity signify a hybrid existence incorporating multiple cultural elements by constantly producing and reproducing new transformations and differences (Hall 2003: 244).

As one example, Deleuze points to the notion of becoming as attained in cinema, primarily through the movement-image, which captures a notion of images that are constantly on their way to becoming something else since nothing is stable and fixed but constantly changing over time. The time-image also breaks with the conventional narrative, underlining more mobile and diverse temporalities, portraying temporal change rather than immutable identities or events (Deleuze 1986, 1989).

In this sense, 'becoming', as I practice it in my psychedelic film work, intertwined with 'multiplicity', is reflected by the movement-image and time-image through psychedelic film sequence, which ties and levels of intensity allow for the creation of different forms, entities, or relationships (Deleuze, Guattari 1987). Bhabha's multiplicity (1994) also seeks to underscore the not-static nature against a single cultural context under the impact of different cultures; this forms the basis upon which hybrid identities evolve. 'Becoming constantly' embodies this evolution, with Powell (2007: 21, 65) highlighting the rhizomatic nature of consciousness in altered states, characterised by interconnectedness and non-linearity, challenging traditional linear thought models. This rhizomatic perspective, where any point can connect to any other (Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 42), is mirrored in psychedelic film's non-linear patterns, reflecting complex diasporic cultural experience. Bhabha describes it as :

the stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper

and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy... (1994: 5)

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'deterritorialization' (1986: 33) results in new forms of being, followed by the rhizome, which they liken to a rhizomatic nature (Günzel 1998: 4), mimicking the mobile nature of their social order as well (Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 403-404). Such a process can occur under non-linear, decentralised, and open-ended aspects of social and cultural systems, according to the nomadic character of the rhizome (Braidotti 1994: 37).

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (Bhabha 1994: 37)

The process of becoming in the rhizome urges the representation of deterritorialization, whereby identities can become 'disembedded' or 'free-floating', detached from specific cultural and geographical contexts, times, and spaces (Procter 2004: 107). Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 508, 1933) argue that deterritorialization is a process in the 'line of flight', i.e., a 'trajectory' that allows for the creation of new possibilities and forms of existence, often in opposition to established societal norms. Powell (2007) notes that in psychedelic films, this trajectory means that the familiar coding of visual and narrative elements is disrupted, allowing new meanings and sensations to emerge.

In particular, the movement of the time-image and its correlation to non-linear storytelling and fragmented narrative also lead to a sometimes-literal divergence from traditional narrative structures, as illustrated by psychedelic films (Sessa 2012). Psychedelic filmmakers usually create 'experimental discontinuity editing and splicing' by using 'saturated lights, colour filters and special lenses' within the image superimposition, which presents 'the visual distortions of

time and space, synaesthetic visions and emotional enchantment of psychedelic altered states’ (Cook 2014: 197).

A psychedelic film, such as Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969), employs visual and sound distortion and rhythmic edits within strobe effects, altering the states of times and spaces. The non-traditional narrative and experimental filmmaking work well with Deleuze’s concept of the time-image (in cinema), which structures the storyline into a fragmentary, episodic format that mirrors the disconnected moves of characters throughout, using psychedelic visuals and advanced editing to manipulate the perception of time and reality. As Powell explains, ‘the trip sequence counterpoints randomness and repetition to intensify trance. Rapid-fire editing becomes a flicker of flash-frames too fast to process (2007: 73).’ Also, in *Peyote Queen* (1965), Storm de Hirsch uses ‘quick cross-cut editing’ in a montage to create estranging experiences for audiences, disrupting their conventional sense of time and place (Cook 2014: 204). She presents a split screen with different images of a lamp, showcasing how the hazy clusters of jewels reflect multi-coloured light that shines and blends together. This technique highlights the notion of metamorphosis within the psychedelic aesthetic, where variations in colour and perspective disrupt static notions of identity and perception.

Gaspar Noé’s psychedelic film *Enter the Void* (2009) also refers to Deleuze’s film theories in its techniques, where the camera seamlessly transitions through space, passing through solid objects and creating a perception where subjective and objective perspectives collapse (Brown, Fleming 2015: 134-135). Deleuze (1986: 84-85) calls it ‘gaseous perception’, referring to a direct engagement with time and perception that moves beyond mere movement to a more profound comprehension of perception. This allows more interaction within the filmic frame, which is no longer tied to fixed representations. The ‘gaseous state’ lies at the core concept of presenting the sensation of fluidity, which ‘mobilises pure auditory and optical images that make intervals perceptible to the senses’ (Powell 2007: 110). The sensation of ‘gaseous images’ is akin to a drug-induced state, characterised by a ‘floating’ quality that is unanchored from the personal and subjective aspects of perception (Marks 2000: 61-62). Compared to liquid

perception, gaseous perception is considered a more molecular one that underlies the formation of both the liquid and solid perceptions (Deleuze 1989: 32). This implies an even more abstract level of representation, allowing for a more dynamic interplay between the actual and virtual images. Deleuze argues that for the time-image to emerge, there must be a transformation within the actual image, which relates directly to its own virtual image; from the outset, a pure description must divide in two, 'repeat itself, take itself up again, fork, contradict itself' (273).

In order to understand the non-representational aspect of psychedelic aesthetics, I would like to discuss Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon's paintings (2002: 94). He argues that the marks and traits in Bacon's works are not meant to be representative, illustrative, or narrative. Instead, they are sensational (the art elements do not serve narratives) and described as 'asignifying', which are irrational and accidental, as non-representational. Bacon's paintings help better understand how Deleuze's film theories can be applied to psychedelic filmmaking. Although my personal experiences are often presented as a narrative, the psychedelic sequences make these stories non-linear and fragmented, purposely employed to create an ambiguous interpretation of my personal experiences and their social and historical context. In this matter, Deleuze's account of Bacon thus clarifies how sensation and affect in my practice undermine representational fixity, producing a hybrid methodological approach in which cultural identity is both constructed and continuously undone.

As Deleuze mentions (2002), the approach isolating figures in Francis Bacon's artwork, arises a tension between these two poles (representational/non-representational). In this manner, the isolation of the pure speech-act or sound image from its written support creates a different kind of artistic utterance (Deleuze 1989: 253). While Bacon acknowledges the existence of representation (even sometimes inadvertently), he strives to isolate figures to challenge and dismantle narrative potential. i.e., a circular area or a parallelepiped, which defines its location without creating a narrative backdrop. The artwork is filled with elements that do not correlate with the figure or serve a narrative function, focusing solely on the figure itself and the sensations it evokes.

Additionally, Deleuze's approach (1989:253) suggests that the isolation of figures also relates to the cinematographic practice of constructing 'pure contemplation' ( a way of engaging with cinema that transcends narrative or sensory-motor connections and allows for a direct experience of images and sounds) in spaces devoid of action or characters, allowing the visual image to achieve a sense of autonomy. For example, in *Cultural Phantoms* (chapter 3), the cultural symbols-Dragon and Mahjong are intervened upon by rapid editing, superimposition and strobe light within non-linear sequences, the conventional narrative of these symbols is isolated by sensational techniques of psychedelic layerings.

Bacon's sensory-driven approach in psychedelic filmmaking will be linked to cultural symbols in chapter 2, so that I can better discuss the tension between representation and non-representational tendencies.

Moving to another psychedelic film example which is related to diaspora-*Looking for Mushrooms* (1967), Bruce Conner combines shots of his surroundings with natural imagery, footage of villages and religious iconography. An emblematic work of psychedelic film, this film portrays Conner filming his process of going to find psilocybin mushrooms, or 'magic mushrooms'. It is made with a series of multiple-exposure sequences for aesthetics, as well as rapid rhythms/editing, montages, collages, and superimposing. As Deleuze depicts that:

this time-image will be said to presuppose montage, just as much as indirect representation did. But montage has changed its meaning, it takes on a new function: instead of being concerned with movement-images from which it extracts an indirect image of time, it is concerned with the time-image, and extracts from it the relations of time on which aberrant movement must now depend. To adopt a word of Lapo jade's, montage has become 'montage'. (1989: 41)

The rapid cuts emphasise the fluidity of time, and Deleuze (1989: 181) notes that the cut no longer forms part of one or the other image; it is rather the equivalent of an irrational cut, which determines the non-commensurable (non-logical) relations between images.

Earlier versions of *Looking for Mushrooms* were showcased as a loop until a soundtrack was added in 1967, which included The Beatles' hit song *Tomorrow Never Knows* (first released on their 1966 album *Revolver*). The song, notable for its innovative use of recording techniques and its experimental approach to music production, is considered one of the pioneering tracks in the psychedelic rock genre. Its lyrics were inspired by Timothy Leary's book *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964), co-authored by Leary, Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass), and Ralph Metzner, reflecting the band's interest in Eastern spirituality and psychedelic experiences with lyrics that evoke themes of transcendence and inner exploration. Much later down the line (in 1996), Conner created an extended version in which each frame is shown five times in a row, synced with the composition of experimental artist Terry Riley (an influential American composer and musician known for his pioneering work in minimalist music and experimental composition). The film's application of vivid colours, nature, and psychedelic components constitutes a significant addition to the concept of identity and consciousness in psychedelic art and cinema.

*Looking for Mushrooms* also offers an insight into how the idea of diaspora may be mobilised and related to psilocybin. According to Gosse (2022), the locations, time, and cultural norms (including Conner settling in Mexico and mingling with the Indigenous Mazatecs) presented in the movie all provide a more expansive reading of diasporic lives and borders. Fast cutting, superimposition and graphical-musical rhyming contribute much to the editing of *Looking for Mushrooms*. The editing techniques create visual devices to form patterns that oscillate back and forth from recognition to disorientation. Its fragmented editing style aids the film in delivering an overall disorientating and trippy effect that is perfectly in tune with its search for different states of consciousness.

The film uses the lens of a white American filmmaker engaging with Indigenous cultures and complicates the narratives of both the artist and the represented subjects. This interaction creates a dynamic where geographical borders are transgressed, and identities are redefined. As viewers witness Conner's encounters, the film critiques the colonialist lens while examining

its position within that framework, further contributing to deterritorialization, by travelling between these distinct spaces in a montage that presents a sense of a cultural exchange to undermine the fixed geographical identity. The time-image makes visible what many call a ‘diasporic turn’ in the film practice, which leads to a shift towards valuing the personal stories and perspectives of diasporic communities (Lackey 2007: 2). Conner employed the image (mushroom cloud) to signify nuclear threats correlating the psychedelic trip with the spectre of the atomic bomb. The rapid editing and graphic matches presented the tension of the Mazatecs of the individual and the Cold War in America as a broader context, where Conner likewise focused on marginalised Mazatecs. Conner hereby counters typical Western narratives that often depict Indigenous cultures as primitive or static:

Conner’s films exemplify the white avant-garde artist’s tendency to appropriate and absorb non-white and minority cultural signifiers, not exclusively for the purposes of exploitation or celebration, but as prime materials for constructing cinematic allegories in which correspondences are drawn between the status of the countercultural artist and that of non-white racial “others.” (Gosse 2022: 189)

Conner’s editing techniques echo Deleuze’s theories in terms of breaking traditional boundaries of film practice and hegemonic narrative. My intercultural experiences and skills as a visual artist allow me to use psychedelic techniques to interrogate and explore my cultural identity. Using psychedelic aesthetics as an anchor, I have extracted memories and histories from personal stories, which I have then, I used in non-linear narratives to recode them.

In this context, Naficy (2001) defines accented (intercultural) cinema as a form that emerges from the lived experiences of displacement, exile, and cultural hybridity. As he (2001: 72,157) argues, such films often exhibit visual and narrative disruptions that emphasise fragmentation, non-linearity, and self-reflexivity. Psychedelic aesthetics resonates with Naficy’s concept; they share a concern with visual instability and cultural dislocation.

The altered state's visuality serves as the medium of sensory memories which replaces the dependence of narrative to embody a transformation of cultural references as individuals move between cultures (Marks 2000: 90, 232). For instance, sensory experiences—like a familiar fragrance or sounds from one's native language—can simultaneously evoke feelings of nostalgia and loss while also serving as agents of restoration and reconnection (Naficy 2001: 28). In terms of altered states, dislocation occurs through visual and auditory disorientations within psychedelic techniques where the dynamic interactivity may create new modes of experience and perception, effectively dislocating the viewer from conventional interpretations (Powell 2007). In order to understand my transnational/cultural experiences, I will first discuss the notion of auto-ethnography first, which can help me better integrate my experiences into a broader cultural context.

### **1.3 Critical Autoethnography**

The second central axis of my methodology is autoethnography, which hinges on the researcher's personal experiences within the studied community (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011: 274). In my practice, this involves documenting and analysing my individual experiences in Britain through psychedelic aesthetics. Autoethnography allows me to blend personal narratives within broader cultural analysis (Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2017). Indeed, crafting narratives connecting the personal with the cultural is a hallmark of autoethnography, generating reflective insights while the cultural context is conceptualised by self-experiences (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). I construct narratives that explore the complexities of cultural identity and assimilation processes, offering a distinct viewpoint that bridges the observational and the experiential (Chang 2008: 130-131).

My films aim to weave stories that, while rooted in the engagement of personal experiences within Chineseness in Britain, make autoethnography critical. This approach facilitates an intimate and universally relatable narrative within the diaspora context, revealing the limitations of binary frameworks (Chang 2008). Individuals may simultaneously occupy

privileged and marginalised positions in different contexts, intersecting with factors like race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality (Boylorn, Orbe 2014: 16, 235). As Stanley (2020:11) asserts, the distinct individuals in critical auto-ethnography problematise many of the ‘comfortable certainties’ prevalent in the social paradigm to be contentious. Russell (1999) discusses autoethnography as a mode of self-representation that challenges the imposed forms of identity and explores the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities, referring to the identities and self-representations that are constructed, imposed, or influenced by external societal, cultural, or institutional forces rather than those arising from the individual’s genuine, personal experiences and self-perception. These subjectivities are often seen as not truly reflecting the individual’s authentic self but are instead shaped by the expectations, stereotypes, or norms imposed by society. Autoethnography is a tool for reframing ethnographic texts by allowing marginalised subjects to construct narratives in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan/hegemonic representations.

As a Chinese student in Britain, the reflection on racial experiences reveals how the dominant society in Britain homogenises the notion of Chineseness, which is crucial for presenting the multiplicity of cultural identity (Yu, Rai, Lim, and Li 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the continuing significance of European colonial legacies leads to new forms of otherness and exclusion (Yeh 2022: 92). Thus, the decolonising approach is still not outdated for the discussion of race, in which I can problematise personal experiences within racial oppression that systematically perpetuates the stereotypes of Chineseness.

As an experimental ethnography within the psychedelic non-linear sequence, *Looking for Mushrooms* enlightened me by placing psychedelic techniques in the focus of an Indigenous perspective, whereby I centralise my trans-cultural hybridity through my ‘eyes’. Chandrashekar (2017) argues that native struggles can be centralised, acknowledging how immigrants are often positioned within settler-colonial contexts. Indigenous knowledge production and the decolonial method challenge the Euro-centric linear narrative<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> A Euro-centric linear narrative can be inferred as a storytelling or historiographical approach that emphasises a Western

marginalised voice (Chawla, Atay 2017: 3). Centralising an Indigenous perspective and hybrid culture could make visible the fact that cultural identity is fluid, while a rupture and interstice seize the ‘value-coding<sup>4</sup>’ interrupting the linear narrative<sup>5</sup> of modernity by creating a time-lag, i.e., a delay in the acceptance of modernity as a singular, universally progressive force (Bhabha 1994: 344-345).

The critical autoethnography under the decolonial context is effective in resisting these power dynamics by focusing on personal experiences and stories (Dutta 2017: 2). The non-linear narrative in decolonising autoethnography emphasises the imbrication of collective stories and personal experiences, contrasting with the linear and categorical thinking of Western research practices (Chandrashekar 2017). Using Deleuze’s concepts to challenge the linear narrative in my auto-ethnographic and psychedelic film practice allows me to blend my personal experiences and my Indigenous knowledge (cultural legacies) within the collective histories to develop in a non-linear way.

To work with ‘insider/Indigenous knowledge’ is what decolonising approaches in autoethnography advocate, i.e., to reveal unarticulated marginalised voices and experiences, especially those often-rigid categorisations imposed by traditional research frameworks (Chawla, Atay 2017: 4). With my status as a Chinese PhD student in the UK, I share my cultural background with the Chinese community in Britain. I do need to consider the bias that the difference in social class, age, and gender might cause. As Kim (2012: 135) states, the

viewpoint, often positioning European or Euro-American histories as normative while rendering non-Western experiences and histories as secondary or invisible. This perspective overlooks the complex realities and ongoing struggles of Indigenous peoples and fails to account for the intertwined histories of colonialism and immigrant experiences.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Value-coding’ is a term used in postcolonial theory to describe the ways in which meanings, values, and identities are assigned or imposed upon certain concepts, symbols, or people by dominant cultural or political forces. In the context of colonial and postcolonial studies, value-coding involves the assignment of particular social, cultural, or moral ‘codes’ to represent certain groups in ways that reinforce power hierarchies.

<sup>5</sup> The linear narrative of modernity refers to a belief that societies naturally advance through a series of predictable, hierarchical stages—moving from traditional to modern states—often culminating in a Western model of economic, cultural, and social development. This narrative suggests a universal path of progress that societies should follow, with each stage representing a more advanced or evolved state than the one before.

insider/outsider status is dynamic, as the dichotomised ‘black/white’ or ‘insider/outsider’ category is inadequate for multifaceted experiences. For the place or community outside the Chinese community in Britain, I initially thought that I was an ‘outsider’. I would suggest that the term ‘otherness’ is more appropriate, which represents the group viewed in ‘the marginalised culture’. But I do need to sometimes stand in the ‘outsider’ status to view the collective histories or stories that I am/was not experiencing for British Chinese immigrants; this provides me with a second angle to avoid bias. For example, staying connected with the British Chinese community, especially the art community, using my ‘insider’ advantage, is how I reflect my insider/outsider dynamics, rather than reinforcing them.

In my practice, I document and analyse my interactions, observations, and emotional responses daily in the UK. Crafting narratives that connect the personal with the culture is a hallmark of autoethnography.

#### **1.4 Non-linear Transnational/Cultural Identity**

In my critical autoethnography, I, therefore, use psychedelic filmmaking to showcase the non-linear and fragmented narrative of cultural identity within a transnational/cultural context. This border-crossing allows one to reinterpret one’s identity in a simultaneous overlap of experiences from both the historical inheritance and current realities, illustrating the non-linear process of identity formation (Zhang 2016).

Deterritorialization in transnationalism ‘defines borders as permeable and flexible’ and focuses on the movement between places as central to a person’s agency where ‘place ceases to be the sole representational parameter of identity and movement between places becomes the central space...’ (Arfaoui 2017: 116). This movement weaves the style of ‘connectivity’ as a fundamental principle that defines the existence of an identity, which founds the rhizome of rootlessness (non-fixed origin and roots)—a network of interconnected roots that is fluid and

adaptable (Glissant 1997: 11), aimed at those who are colonised or essentialised, in ‘a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience’ (Bhabha 1994: 8).

Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’ (1994: 56) (a conceptual area of cultural identity that exists between different cultures, where they can engage, negotiate, and hybridise) offers a way to conceptualise international culture that acknowledges and embraces cultural differences rather than reducing them to the binary oppositions of centre and margin. Therefore, the transnational/cultural context determines the ‘field site’ of critical auto-ethnography that is not confined to a singular physical location. Instead, it is a hybrid, conceptual space where cultural identities, histories, and representations are negotiated and reinterpreted. This field site is usually related to personal memories or experiences that can affect the negotiation of cultural identity, which ‘focuses exclusively on interpersonal↔intercultural experiences of similarity↔difference.....’ (Boylorn, Orbe 2014: 237). The field site, therefore, is as much about the self as it is about the interactions and relationships with cultural communities.

Since my transnational action started in 2018 from China to Britain today has driven me to negotiate my cultural identity. As Chinese students adapt to life in the UK, they often encounter behavioural differences that make them more aware of their own cultural background. Some students identify more with ‘foreign’ cultures, enhancing their multicultural identities while still retaining connections to their home cultures (Pho 2020: 256). The experiences of cultural difference thus provide me with a third space to create my hybrid cultural identity. The neo-orientalism seen during the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain allows me to problematise racial experiences.

## **1.5 Case Analysis**

These experiences of engaging with the world around me become my autoethnographic ‘source’, in which my role is multifaceted, i.e., self-reflection and personal experience, cultural and social critique, interconnectedness of identity and engaging with the audience. For example,

Hao (2014: 103) discusses how he negotiates his racial, ethnic, national, and class identities in everyday interactions within one specific account wherein he reflects on an embarrassing experience at a restaurant that contributed to his understanding of identity and the complexities involved. In Cai's essayist film practice- *Rain, Tears and Sweat* (2022) in autoethnography, he juxtaposes personal and historical narratives through montage techniques. As he reflects, 'I consistently applied autoethnography by using narrative to interrogate the notion of Chineseness' (Cai 2024: 73). As the impact of urbanisation and government policies, such as China's 'Zero-COVID' strategy, and their effects on trauma are experienced across generations, Cai urges audiences to reflect on how collective history shapes personal narratives in China (77). Though Cai's cultural identity in Cai's artist name- Bei Yu's *Rain, Tears and Sweat* does not refer to transnationality, it is rather rooted in trans-generation within specific historical and cultural narratives in China. Cai's use of montage may be applicable to my practice of examining the juxtaposition of colonial and imperial history and myself.

Rosa Fong, in her short film *A Dream of Venus Butterfly* (1992), uses a surreal narrative that prioritises the logic of dreams over a linear plot to perform a journey of self-discovery and transcultural identity. As the protagonist, Cathay experiences a surreal adventure where she transforms from a butterfly into a caterpillar. Fong explains:

*A Dream of Venus Butterfly* was not autobiographical, but I have recognized how my work often draws on personal experiences to understand and explore cultural experiences. This is sometimes called autoethnography... I recognize now that I have used this approach in many of my films. (2018: 177)

Fong (2018: 177) claims her interest in magic realism, in which magical events are presented as part of the realist narrative, creating a condition where both elements appear simultaneously real and divergent (Aldea 2011). Aldea (2011: 28) draws on Deleuze's 'disjunctive synthesis' involving the continual perception of magic as divergent from the real, even when rendered in a realist style. I realise that Fong's film narrative contains a distinct storyline. In *Red* (1996),

Fong captures a heightened sense of reality through vivid colours and formal camera work, which is combined with ‘magical moments’ as the world portrayed is largely shaped by the protagonist’s imagination. Fong explains:

The opening sequence of *Red* places us in a village house in 1970s communist China. This is implied by the set, costume, and diegetic sound of communist slogans on a loudspeaker. A young woman, Xiao Mei, tips the contents of a small box onto the table, and we see letters and trinkets seemingly kept as mementos.....children playing and a cuckoo calling, bringing to mind English summers. The cuckoo alludes to the idea of displacement, and so the image is one of longing for an imaginary family and homeland. Xiao Mei calls in the village matchmaker, who shows her a photograph of a young Chinese man called Johnny. Johnny is Xiao Mei’s suitor and lives in England. Xiao Mei has a romantic image of England.... (2018: 180)

Fong loves to employ surreal metaphors in her film narratives, taken from individual experiences of fantasy. This approach allows her to engage with complex themes, such as cultural nostalgia and the longing for an imagined homeland. In the postcolonial context, magical realism has often been linked to narratives of ‘Third World’ societies, where it engages with the historical and cultural realities of those places, thereby creating a layered narrative form (Aldea 2011: 104). The transformation between reality and a ‘magic moment’ can present a multi-psychedelic visual element in my practice; nonetheless, the narrative becomes more fragmented than Fong’s. As Cook states:

The psychedelic aesthetic exists along a continuum of other aesthetic modes from realism, speculative fiction, magical realism, to fantasy, sharing modes of perception and thought patterns for representing the real in the occupation of this middle ground between realism and fantasy, psychedelic aesthetics make visible the way the locus of the real is always dependent on individually localized, yet communal vantage points. (2014: 21)

This indiscernibility of the actual image and virtual image becomes what Deleuze (1989: 273) proposes for time-image – ‘a perpetual exchange’.

The focus now shifts to Simon Liu, whose film works are close to the visuality I apply in my work. Liu's *In Focus: Simon Liu* (2014-2024) also reflects personal experiences within the historical context of his homeland – Hong Kong. Liu rejected a linear narrative to deliver his 'sensation'. Pan Liu (2024)<sup>6</sup>, Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Culture at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, comments that *In Focus: Simon Liu* is an 'attempt to avoid bonding Hong Kong onto any singular image, and this entanglement with a surreal parallel universe belongs precisely to Hong Kong's '(sur)realism'.' Liu uses the visual effect of strobe lights, layers overlapping, and discontinuity to disrupt the rigid perception of Hong Kong's urban landscapes. This becomes Morozoff's term of 'inverse visuality' (2006: 70-71), which refers to a mode of seeing that resists the dominant visual culture, particularly considering imperial narratives, and can be understood as a form of visual resistance. I would argue that the coalescence of the psychedelic altered state and critical autoethnography can constitute a counter-narrative of visuality, which is driven by the affection of sensational film elements. As Morozoff (2006: 70) notes, 'inverse visuality is any moment of visual experience in which the subjectivity of the viewer is called into question by the density or opacity of what he or she sees'.

Liu's use of personal archived materials in his filmic sequence is what Marks discusses concerning the 'memory of images' that connect with collective and individual memories; as she states:

Intercultural cinema moves backward and forward in time, inventing histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of official histories. (Marks 2000: 24)

Rather than a direct representation of past events, as Deleuze (1989: 47, 54) asserts, a 'recollection-images' link with actual images serves to fill a gap in our experience and actualise a formerly present moment, acting as a reflection of past experiences. Hall (1997: 10) provides

<sup>6</sup> Liu Pan (2024) *In Focus: Simon Liu*. Available at: <https://opencitylondon.com/2024-festival/programme/in-focus-simon-liu/> (Accessed 5 November 2024).

a 'practical path' to encoding memories; when one recalls a particular memory, it is often through concepts and signs that have been socially constructed within a culture. In visuality, the 'haptic sensation' creates 'see' and 'feel', in which 'memory-objects' are read as historical artefacts that carry meanings of displacement and cultural memory (Marks 2000: 77, 80). In the context of transnationality/culturality, these objects become 'transnational objects' that are created through cultural translation and transcultural movement within tangible memories and the experiences of individuals (78-79). Parish and Rugo (2021: 3-4) draw on Lynn Hodeib's article 'Objects of transgenerational memory: challenging hegemonic historical narratives of war in Lebanon'(2021), wherein objects like items on a tray and a bowl as symbols can embody layers of memory and challenge hegemonic historical narratives. Parish and Rugo call it the practice of informal/ unrecognised memories (2). In Huxley's mescaline test (1954), the objects present as 'naked existence', their 'inner light' containing infinite significance. The psychedelic aesthetics, therefore, may empower memories of signs that strip off the 'surface level'. Finally, Huxley critiques that our conventional modes of thinking act as a 'reducing valve' that filters out the vast complexity of the world, providing only a narrow perspective that he refers to as 'reduced awareness' (1954: 11-12).

To start the practice, I will attempt to locate my transnational/cultural objects as signs that become part of the filmic frame; also, this is how I posit my cultural identity through psychedelic aesthetics. My autoethnographic 'materials' is documented by my psychedelic film practice through visual, narrative, and sensory dimensions, as it tries to inform my theories to generate new insights. The 'interstice' that psychedelic filmmaking creates may present my sensation of a 'third space', that:

is neither internal nor external but 'at the frontier' between, intersecting them in 'complex relations of interference and interfacing, of syncopated junctions— a pattern of corresponding beats over two different rhythms'. (Powell 2007: 66)

This in-between frontier allows individuals to navigate the complexities of belonging and cultural translation, resulting in an ambiguous and dynamic space that challenges singular notions of cultural identity (Bhabha 1994: 321).

## 1.6 Summary

Through the analysis of altered states in filmic sequence, psychedelic aesthetics generate contacts with the study of cultural identity via the transformation of sensation and affect. Deleuze's deterritorialization offers a philosophical idea that does not respect convention in filmmaking; this is the usage of audacious sequence and images as an assemblage that refers to the hybridity of elements in the filmic frame. None of the elements is isolated, as I have answered by Liu and Morozoff's visual strategy, in which Deleuze and Marks' 'recollection-images' help bring the focus of the transnational/cultural field.

The notion of 'image' is the key element in a psychedelic altered state, and it not only refers to the image of 'see' but also that of 'sound'; as Deleuze states:

If the continuum (or the sound component) does not have separable elements, it is nonetheless differentiated at each moment into two diverging directions which express its relation to the visual image. This double relation passes through the out-of-field, even though the latter is fully part of the cinematographic visual image. It is true that it is not sound that invents the out-of-field, but it is sound which dwells in it, and which fills the visual not-seen with a specific presence. (1989: 235)

The assemblage of altered state elements works with dynamic interaction. My practice, therefore, is a process of destroying the singular image/notion, through which I constantly create fluid and hybrid 'teamwork.' In other words, I negotiate personal cultural identity through psychedelic aesthetics without the relationship of subordinationism.

The methodology in this research does not intend to offer any specific definition of personal cultural identity, as this could result in another singular perception. The filmic sequence, thus,

is an open-ended 'set-up', as liquid and gaseous perceptions indicate an unpredictability that is 'filled with contradictions and ambiguities' (Deleuze 1989: 250). Richard Doyle emphasises in *Darwin's Pharmacy* (2011) that the psychedelic trip is ineffable, occurring in 'unpredictable spins' (102).

The assemblage presents the fluid and hybrid cultural identity in psychedelic aesthetics in an 'endless trip'. This methodology offers an artistic framework that needs to be tested through a 'signs position'. This is the first step before formally entering into broader cultural critiques. In the next chapter, I will locate cultural symbols as transnational/cultural objects of Chineseness and discuss the major techniques I use in my journey of practice.

## **Chapter 2: The Cultural Symbol and Techniques**

This chapter aims to discuss cultural symbols as ‘signs’ of transnational/cultural objects in my film practice and how I perform the film techniques based on psychedelic aesthetics. I extract personal memories to locate these symbols. *Tangling Phantoms* serves as a ‘test’ presenting how I use the techniques with the symbol to constitute the spectrum of the ‘recollection images’.

### **2.1 Transnational/cultural Objects as ‘Fluid Semiotics’**

As discussed in chapter 1, the transnational/cultural memory is vital for showcasing the sensation of ‘hybrid space’. In this section, I will relate the transnational/cultural object to altered states of sensory perception (Fluid Semiotics). I can therefore locate cultural symbols as part of the filmic elements within the psychedelic sequence.

Marks (2000: 80) emphasises that transnational/cultural objects carry discursive layers of meaning from their travels. This indicates that the ‘signified’ of ‘signs’ is non-static, in that they include a range of perspectives on the same sign across different cultural contexts, producing a ‘constant play or slippage of meaning’ (Hall 1997: 2: 32). My trans-cultural experiences allow me to integrate memories, individual stories and select cultural symbols as props in the film practice. In hegemonic struggles, competing voices and positions seek to assert their meanings and interpretations, in which consciousness does not belong to just one political code but rather exists as part of a more extensive network of meanings that are continually in flux (Mercer 1990: 57). Echoing to Hall’s anti-essentialism of cultural identity, Mercer’s ‘critical dialogism’ advocates that the cultural narrative should not be limited to a binary position (self and other or dominant group and subordinate group) (Mercer 2003: 257). Therefore, recognising the complexities of identities and experiences creates a neo-narrative.

To disrupt stereotypes in my practice, I decided to employ a range of cultural symbols and redefine their traditional representation not as a mere reflection of reality but as an active

constructor of social reality. Artists within these signs and symbols recognise that images shape our understanding of the world by creating identifiers and distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Clifford 1988: 260). I, therefore, intend to use the ‘Chinese cultural symbols’ as transnational/cultural objects in my film practice. Mercer (2016: 4) emphasises the need to shift from a ‘mimetic mode’ (reality as given) to a ‘semiotic model’ due to the need to deconstruct oppressive relations of ‘othering’ generated by discourses of racism in the post-1980s.

Under psychedelic aesthetics, Huxley (1954, 1956: 10, 13) notes that ‘Mescaline raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference’, in which the perception is altered to ‘intensity of existence’, the profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern, rather than traditional spatial categories. As Cook claims:

The representational task of psychedelic accounts raises an important aesthetic question: how do we represent the unknown? Radical new knowledge must be expressed through association to familiar contexts. (2014: 139)

Although there is some truth to mimetic theories—where visual signs do have a relationship with the objects they represent—there are more complex and constructive approaches to understanding representation that go beyond a mere reflection of reality (Hall 1997: 24-25). Differently, Bhabha’s ‘mimicry’ is described as ‘almost the same but not quite’ (1994: 122, 126, 128), by imitating and appropriating colonial authority to threaten the normalising categories of the coloniser. The ‘mimetic mode’ represents a passive reflection of reality, i.e., depicting reality as a fixed and unchanging entity in a one-dimensional understanding of identity and culture. Marks (2002: xiii) also critiques the ‘mimetic mode, as she places the notion of ‘mimetic’ within the embodiment of ‘haptic sensation’, ‘it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it’.

Meanwhile, the 'semiotic approach' addresses it by understanding that representation is embedded in the shared codes and conventions. 'Critical dialogism' is connected to the semiotic mode through its emphasis on the multiplicity of meanings and the relational dynamics of communication, particularly within marginalised voices and identities (Mercer 2003); Mercer argues that:

the semiotic dominance of codes and conventions that determine the visibility some identities acquire but which others do not. In contrast to the mimetic model that thought of representation as mark-marking which passively reflects reality as an unchanging given, artists acted on the notion that images are formative in actively constructing social reality by inscribing positions of identification and othering that influence the way we make sense of the world and our place within it. (2016: 37)

I want to argue that the semiotic mode could develop mimicry, as mimicry is marked by a 'partial presence,' meaning it is both incomplete and functional (Bhabha 1994: 123). To extend, marginalised groups become 'partial representation', as they cannot replicate the dominant culture, but instead expose its contradictions and limits (123). This could point out cultural symbols within the 'signified' essentialism so that I can locate a semiotic approach within different cultural backgrounds and disclose a rigid structure. In this manner, the symbol is not limited to the binary of coloniser/colonised and extends the 'third space' within more imagination of creation. Cultural identity is 'not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark' but rather is 'subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power' (Hall 1990: 226).

By intervening in codes of semiotic mode, new films disrupt the ideological purpose of the aesthetic convention, thereby freeing the imaginative and expressive dimension of the filmic signifier as a material reality (Mercer 2003: 251). Mercer (2003: 247) points out that diasporic identities are heterogeneous and contradictory, evident in how cultural symbols are dynamically used and reinterpreted within diasporic contexts. Diasporic subjects experience a hybrid dynamic wherein they critically appropriate elements from the dominant culture and rearticulate their symbolic meanings (Brazier, Mannur 2003: 5).

The use of semiotic approach aims to locate my own experiences/narrative through trans-cultural lens, in which social processes of representation emphasis differentiation, exclusion and inclusion. In here, it is important to clarify that, as explained in the introduction to this thesis, the representational approach followed in this part of my research is underlined by a non-representational approach (e.g., a representational process under constant erasure). The non-representational tendencies in psychedelic aesthetics, therefore, can be understood as unpredicted sequences that refuse to comply with conventional film narratives. In this manner, the cultural symbols are not confined to their own inherent representations, as they can evoke personal sensations beyond the social norms and linguistic narratives. I will, thus, use Deleuze's filmic concepts to avoid the complete representation of cultural symbols:

Deleuze offers a kind of 'fluid semiotics', concerned less with signification or distinct elements, than with tonalities, rhythms, shifts of force and energy, movement and the materialism of a cinematic body that exists as matter. (Kennedy 2002: 115)

The non-representational tendencies of fluid semiotics can strip cultural symbols of their specific meanings, psychedelic film elements (rapid editing, superimposition and layered texture, etc.) lead these symbols into a state of ambiguity. As each one of the filmic elements does not serve as a visual effect but also disrupts the clarity of figures and backgrounds within a 'dynamic space' (Kennedy 2002: 128).

Although semiotic mode underscores the multiplicity of meanings for cultural figures, it still requires cultural signifiers to convey differences in identity and alternative interpretations of signs. Fluid semiotics do not serve only the narrative, they also focus on the affective quality of these altered states and their potential to reshape perception, challenging the linearity often found in standard narratives (Powell 2007: 72).

In my psychedelic film practice, the cultural symbols serve as an entry point for negotiating with my own transnational/cultural identity. Although my alternative interpretations for

symbols are combined with my personal memories, these interpretations depend on narratives (individual or collective). In fluid semiotics, the narrative of cultural symbols is no longer the focus; instead, it becomes part of filmic frame's sensational elements. Thus, the semiotic narrative is neither entirely excluded nor dominant, this dynamic process is, what I have discussed in the section of introduction, the tension between the representational/non-representational as the altered states (psychedelic) layerings disrupt the completeness of representation (constructed through personal experiences and cultural contexts), and thus forming the complexity and ambiguous of transcultural identity (something language cannot fully interpret or the sensational level). My interpretations of each cultural symbol do not determine the affection under the psychedelic visuality, instead, these symbols within the filmic editing may present the process of 'under erasure'.

## **2.2 Transnational/cultural Objects of 'Chineseness'**

My use of cultural symbols is enlightened by chinoiserie, which refers to the cultural fusion of Chinese artistic and decorative elements with Western designs (Porter 2015: 19). This combination is perceived as low culture (Alayrac-Fielding 2023: 661). 'Chineseness' in the context of chinoiserie indicates a superficial engagement that lacks a more profound understanding or appreciation of Chinese art and thought. This forms a 'fetishism', to draw on the term stated by Marks (2000: 87), and was used by outsiders to categorise practices they viewed as irrational or primitive, often to distinguish themselves from the 'other' cultures they encountered.

As Yeh (2015: 178) notes, as a social force, chinoiserie intertwined with themes of imperialism and racial formation, which helps us understand the dynamics of cultural identity. Catherine (1999) critiques that many Western art productions superficially employed the elements of chinoiserie to impress the international audience through the presentation of lavishness, intending to create an exotic spectacle rather than realistically engage with the cultural significance of those elements. Chinoiserie often 'excised' the modern political and creative

agency of Chinese individuals, instead portraying them in a manner that served to maintain imperialist and colonial stereotypes (Yeh 2015). The concept of chinoiserie reflects the dynamics of ‘othering’ established by racialising representations, according to the semiotic view, Bhabha argues:

The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. (1994: 162)

‘Mimicry’ is operated through this double inscription within ‘original’ and ‘authoritative’, ‘repetition’ and ‘difference’. It is a disjunction produced within the act of enunciation that allows individuals to reimagine the new meaning of signs (Bhabha 1994: 153). Marks (2000: 88) discusses intercultural dynamics, where ‘pre-emptive fetishism’ used by those being fetishised empowers cultural practices, translated from an ‘othering’ discourse through interaction. In the filmic language, fetishism as materiality and aura allows for a rethinking of how cinema signifies and communicates cultural narratives by emphasising bodily and sensory experiences (86). This interaction of duality may help develop my psychedelic filmmaking to apply autoethnography within a ‘semiotic approach’ within ‘fluid semiotics’ that allows for an understanding of film as a living event or ‘affect’ that vibrates with layers of intensity, where the image becomes ‘graded richness’ (Kennedy 2002: 61-62, 101).

### **2.3 The Cultural Symbol of Memories**

The cultural symbol selection weaves shared culture from my cultural background and personal memories. While personal memories may seem isolated and idiosyncratic, they often serve as crucial touchpoints for broader cultural histories (Marks 2000: 106). Memories hereby refer to how I employ individual ‘Chineseness’ to maintain connections with my homeland. Salman Rushdie’s concept of ‘double unbelonging’ (1994: 86), as explored in *East, West* (1996) and *Quichotte* (2019), provides insight for understanding how to tease apart the complexities of

running across racial lines and how memory, identity, and cultural heritage shape one's sense of self, particularly when one is disconnected from both one's place of origin and one's new environment. This displacement indicates the constant redirection of desire to fit in the sense of belonging within assemblages. My transnational movement amplifies the effect of memories, especially the stereotypical perception that Chineseness does not fulfil the sensational need for a homeland.

In my transcultural experiences between China and Britain, the related elements of Chineseness offer an opportunity to reinterpret the 'authoritative symbol' of chinoiserie in my psychedelic film practice. 'Chineseness' contains ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political affiliations and identifications, i.e., the identity and cultural practices associated with being Chinese. However, its meaning can be shaped and transformed by referring to other identities, such as 'Britishness' in a British context (Chan, Willis 2018:158). In this manner, Xu (2021: 14) regards Chineseness as subject to intercultural negotiation and a dynamic concept, which results in a kind of 'hybridised aesthetic'. Key's installation work *Chopstick/Knife fork* (1997) embodies this hybridity:

I carved a knife and fork onto the ends of a pair of chopsticks to make them even more useful in a new British landscape—they mutated and grew a different set of limbs to cope with the changing territory. (Key 2018: 126)

For my experiences and memories, the Beijing opera mask not only serves as a part of traditional Chinese culture, it is also related to my childhood period when I lived with my grandfather in Beijing for two years. As my grandfather was obsessed with Beijing opera, like *Stealing the Imperial Horse*, he often played it on a radio receiver, and sang the lyrics:

*The blue-faced Dou Erdun steals the imperial horse,  
The red-faced Guan Yu battles at Changsha.  
The yellow-faced Dian Wei, the white-faced Cao Cao,  
The black-faced Zhang Fei shouts fiercely.*

And *The Drunken Concubine* (one of the operas my grandfather listened to) a beloved imperial concubine during the Tang Dynasty, Yang Guifei. I hereby gained the knowledge that the different colours of the opera mask represent different characters, such as the heroic figure Dou Erdun with a blue face, which symbolises his courageous personality and unyielding sense of justice. Meanwhile, Yang Guifei is characterised by white or pale foundation make-up, i.e. with a soft, curved ‘willow-leaf’ shape, rosy cheeks, and red lips.

The experience with the Beijing opera mask increased my interest in Chinese history, as my grandfather played a significant role in my childhood education. His demise struck me as I lost the chance to share my transnational stories with him. The Beijing opera mask carries my sense of nostalgia and homesickness; this memory is fragile yet poignant in the context of the displacement of ‘double unbelonging’ (Marks 2000: 201, 228).

Therefore, I attempt to use the Beijing opera mask as part of my cultural legacy in my film practice. At the same time, I notice the risk of stereotypes in employing traditional Chinese elements such as chinoiserie. The representation of Chinese opera in Western media has been described as ‘ahistorical, formulaic, and generic’; such productions typically recycle stereotypes (Rao 2016: 56).

An English drama of chinoiserie, *Lady Precious Stream*, is based on an ancient Chinese legend titled Wang Bao Chuan in Chinese. Written by Chinese playwright S.I. Hsiung, the play premiered in London in 1934, becoming the first Chinese-language play to achieve success in the West. As Yeh (2015: 195) argues, while critically acclaimed and welcomed, *Lady Precious Stream* ultimately maintained the existing colonial and racial order. The play, she argues, fails to acknowledge S.I. Hsiung’s intention to present a modern national identity through ‘an old Chinese play’, which was adopted by institutions that sought to emphasise its exotic elements. Within Bhabha’s enlightenment to re-interpret an ‘authoritative symbol’, Deleuze’s ‘beneath or beyond representation’ (2005: 46) in art creation reminds me of the use of chinoiserie in my

non-linear narrative psychedelic cinematic sequence, in which I intend to unveil the 'authoritative symbol', likewise, use the film sequence to redefine the cultural symbol. This could help me better respond to double consciousness.

The Beijing opera mask represents various characters, emotions, and moral qualities, allowing actors to visually transform into various characters with distinct identities, emotions, and moral aspects (Tseng 2013: 307). Its symbolism extends beyond its theatrical origins, embodying the themes of disguise, transformation, and the multiplicity of identity (Denton 2016: 204). This approach might be able to present the 'hybridised aesthetics' in my film practice.



Fig. 1. Beijing opera mask (female role) for *Tangling Phantoms* (2022), © Photo by Weizhi

Gan



Fig. 2. Beijing opera mask (Dou Erdun) in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024), © Photo by Weizhi

Gan

Following the inspiration of chinoiserie, I started to add more cultural symbols into the film practice. The historical associations of the folding fan with artistry, elegance, and scholarly pursuits in Chinese culture symbolize the enduring value of cultural heritage and the continuity of tradition amidst change (Finnane 2015: 396). The folding fan's appearance often relates to enhancing the fluidity of cultural identity and the performative aspects of navigation between different cultural spaces. For instance, in Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), traditional Chinese elements of traditional attire and fans (though not the central motif) are inserted into the storyline, emphasising the characters' struggles and connections between past and present, tradition and assimilation (Maltby 2011: 56).

Similarly, Hanfu, as a historically Chinese costume, is another symbol. Cui (2023: 186) notes that Hanfu has become a visual marker of the negotiation between historical continuity and the assimilative pressures of globalisation. In Niki Caro's *Mulan*<sup>7</sup> (2020), even though it is a Hollywood adaptation with takes significant liberties, the traditional Chinese attire as visual representation plays a crucial role in exploring themes of honour, family, and the negotiation of gender and cultural identity. While not a diaspora film per se, its global reception and themes nonetheless resonate with diasporic audiences, reflecting on the preservation of cultural identity across different contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Niki Caro is a New Zealand film director, producer, and screenwriter known for her ability to craft deeply moving narratives that often focus on strong female protagonists and explore themes of culture, identity, and social issues. *Mulan* is a live-action adaptation of Disney's 1998 animated film, itself an adaptation of the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. The story follows a young Chinese woman who disguises herself as a man to take her ailing father's place in the imperial army. Set against the backdrop of Imperial China, the film explores themes of honor, family, and the role of women in society. Unlike the animated version, Caro's *Mulan* opts for a more serious tone, eschewing musical numbers for a focus on action, cultural authenticity, and the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and empowerment. While aiming to pay homage to Chinese culture and the original ballad, the film faced mixed reviews, with some praising its visuals and action sequences, and others critiquing its handling of cultural elements and depth of character development.



Fig.3. Hanfu in *The Sub-self* (2023), © Photo by Weizhi Gan

Hanfu events are popular among the younger Chinese generation in China, and some Chinese students have introduced this event in the UK to demonstrate what Chineseness is today. As a master's student at the University of Southampton, I joined a Hanfu exhibition, where several Chinese students wore different types of Hanfu to showcase Chinese traditional culture. Surprisingly, the folding fan also appeared as an embellishing element in the exhibition. A Chinese saying describes Hanfu as 'Yunwei' (implying charm in rhyme or sound). This word is widely used in China, e.g., 'This Chinese painting has Yunwei.' In my painting career in China, I always deeply appreciate receiving comments on my artwork. Thus, I intend to use Hanfu as a cultural symbol to deliver my Chineseness in my non-linear narrative film practice.

Another Chinese cultural symbol I retain in Britain is the mah-jong tiles, which I play with native friends in the UK. Thus, the mah-jong tiles are related to my personal experiences. Mah-

jong originated in China 150 years ago and was played with cards made of ivory and wood. As it evolved, these cards became tiles, leading to the creation of mah-jong as we know it today (Rep 2007). I employ mah-jong tiles to create more cultural visuals through psychedelic practice, as they tiles can be scattered and lined up in order, allowing me to re-interpret Chineseness's originality through cultural symbolism.



Fig. 4. Mah-jong in *The Sub-self* (2023), © Photo by Weizhi Gan

Based on my personal experiences and memories, I use these props with the intention of creating a non-linear narrative in psychedelic film practice. Based on my research on psychedelic aesthetics, I employ the specific path to achieve a psychedelic visual style in the film practice to ‘inspect’ the combination of the cultural symbol and the psychedelic cinematic sequence.

## 2.4 Techniques: *Tangling Phantoms*

Before I start to discuss the film techniques of psychedelic aesthetics, I will reiterate to the enlightenment of lacquering paintings to better understand of psychedelic techniques. As a traditional Chinese art form, lacquer painting relies on processes of layering, stripping back, and reapplying material. This repetitive and incremental method is both technical and sensory; it is a making process that prioritises iteration, material engagement, and visual transformation.

The lacquering mindset has fundamentally shaped how I approach my experimental filmmaking, particularly in relation to visual techniques such as superimposition, colour layering, glitching, and rhythmic repetition. These techniques may place the concept of lacquering into altered states of film practice. Just as lacquering requires the deconstruction of layers, my filmmaking repetitively adds and strips visual elements, a process that creates a psychedelic visual language where images continuously dissolve and reform.

Importantly, both lacquering and psychedelic aesthetics in my work embrace the productive role of mistakes, as mistakes become a part of the texture within the film. According to the Zentangle Method, developed by Rick Roberts and Maria Thomas, lacquering is a drawing technique that intentionally rejects erasure and values the incorporation of unintended marks into the evolving pattern (Stojcevski, Cheung, Agwu, Fan 2023). It celebrates process over outcome, fluidity over perfection, and frames mistakes as creative opportunities rather than flaws.

By foregrounding this process-based approach, I propose that psychedelic aesthetics in my practice should not be read as simply visual excess or digital experimentation, but instead as a deeply material, iterative, and historically grounded visual language. Similar to the materiality of lacquer painting, the tactility, temporality, and capacity to reveal and conceal provide a vital foundation for understanding the layered, disorienting visuals throughout my film work.

This approach to filmmaking can be exemplified by the work I did on the 3-minute film *Tangling Phantoms*. The main aim of this piece was to enhance my understanding and proficiency in the application of diverse film techniques and how I could use them as tools for developing a psychedelic aesthetic (that is, this work was not intended to establish a relationship with its potential viewer<sup>8</sup>). As such, in the following section, I will discuss the film techniques I used to create this piece (and which have since become a hallmark of my work). I will also use this film as a case study of the way in which I use cultural symbols within psychedelic filmic sequences. Although it is not my first work, it represents my technical use of psychedelic aesthetics that has established the foundation for my film practice. I utilised the image-superimposition and texture-overlapping within ‘blending mode’ in Adobe After Effects (AE) and Adobe Premiere Pro (PR), which generates overlapping images dissolving. This creates a new relationship to time, where temporal disjunctions take precedence over spatial movements (Deleuze 1989: 130). Beyond being traditionally ‘tactile’ in appearance, this digital technique simulates ‘optical printing,’ creating multi-layered images that are ‘barely legible’ and dense textures (Marks 2000: 173). Simon Liu’s techniques largely present such quasi-‘optical printing’ in his *Highview* (2017). This four-part 16 mm film intertwines various family narratives across different continents within a series of rapid, disjointed montages, reflecting how personal and collective memories influence each other. ‘Optical printing’ visuality is the core to altered states and offers a haptic sensation. As this indicates a transformation from ‘optical’ to ‘tactile’ sensation, Marks (2000: 162, 185) asserts that a haptic sensation involves a more intimate and tactile form of engagement, with images by a close examination, where the eyes function as organs of touch.

The ‘lighting element’ also becomes one of my psychedelic aesthetics, and within ‘blending mode’, it may present ‘distorted imagery’. Using these techniques, the cultural symbol could shift the interpretation given by reality, in which colour grading, layering and other digital

<sup>8</sup> In my thesis I use the term ‘viewer’ to describe the person engaging with my films. However, it should be pointed out that, for me, this term reflects a fluid, affective mode of interaction, in which the viewer is not expected to interpret a linear narrative, but rather to intuitively drift through sensory impressions and layered fragments. Thus, my films invite viewers to experience the film, rather than a viewer understood as a passive spectator.

elements convey a notion behind various states that occur during psychedelic trips. By using AE and PR, I warp the time-space of the footage to create non-linear narratives that reflect how complex a diasporic identity can be.

The selection of tools and how we shoot are essential to my films. I use an iPhone 14 Pro Max (512GB) and a Canon G7X MK III for my work due to their portability, versatility, and good imaging. The iPhone 14 Pro Max has a low-light mode that ensures adequate resolution if I film at night. When I use a tripod, I use a G7X MK III to position the camera spot at the right angle.

My camera angle is usually directed straight at my facial expression or the mask, whereby I intend to deliver the meaning of the identity of the face with/without the Beijing opera mask; my idea is to create a hybrid character by using the mask. Meanwhile, I wear glowing glasses, and their light creates neon light-like psychedelic visual aesthetics. I was enlightened by the element of strobe/stroboscope, originally an instrument for studying motion that can synchronise with brain wave patterns, enhancing the LSD experience or even simulating it without the drug (Wolfe 1968: 235). To amplify this sense of altered states, I shake and move my head with the glasses, creating the motion of flashing light, as Wolfe notes for the Acid Test scene in Los Angeles:

I looked around and people's faces were distorted ... lights were flashing everywhere ... the screen (sheets) at the end of the room had three or four different films on it at once, and the strobe light was flashing faster than it had been ... the band, the Grateful Dead, was playing but I couldn't hear the music ... people were dancing ... someone came up to me and I shut my eyes and with a machine he projected images on the back of my eyelids (I really think this happened ... I asked and there was such a machine)... and nothing was in perspective, nothing had any touch of normalcy or reality ... I was afraid, because I honestly thought that it was all in my mind, and that I had finally flipped out. (1968: 270)

In a dark space, this motion of light creates contrasting colour visuals, and the Beijing opera mask is hidden in the darkness.



Fig. 5. Visual Test with Glasses 1 (2022), © Photo by Weizhi Gan



Fig. 6. Visual Test with Glasses 2 (2022), © Photo by Weizhi Gan

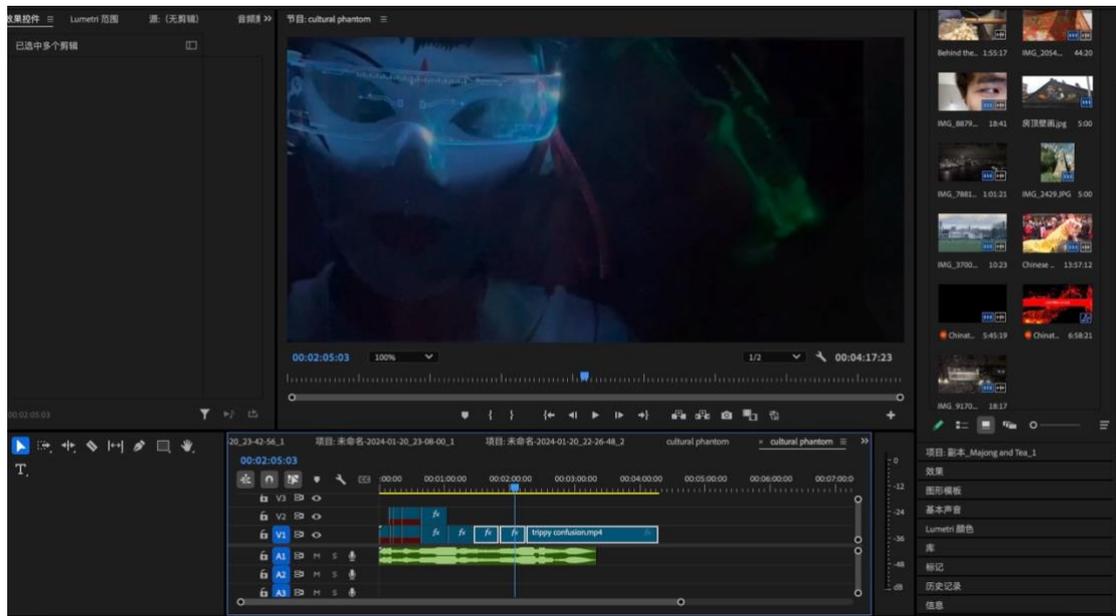


Fig. 7. PR editing for *Tangling Phantoms* (2022), screenshot by Weizhi Gan

In AE and PR, my efforts are concentrated on visual sequences with rhythmic pacing, drawing inspiration from Conner's rapid montage technique of his found footage in *Looking for Mushrooms*. By employing non-linear editing, I sequence clips to echo Conner's dynamic editing style. I use image layering/superimposition to create the 'montage' effect, which makes me juxtapose more than one film 'subject' at the exact moment when I attempt to explore my memories and hybrid culture and consciousness. Thus, the 'montage' plays a vital role in my film practice.

In *Tangling Phantoms*, I juxtapose 'two selves,' i.e., with and without the mask, a feeling of dual identities within double lenses. Moreover, with the footage of the scattered mah-jong tiles on the ground, I 'destroy' the order of mah-jong tiles to respond to the reinterpretation of cultural symbols, although the 'act' of it is still not mature enough. I superimpose 'wearing the glasses' with this image. With the combination of the 'overlay textures' function in AE and PR, I can produce the collage-like effect, to further enlarge the concept of hybridity in psychedelic visual flow. This is because I use 'blending modes' in AE, such as 'Overlay' or 'Screen', blending multi-layered images of cultural symbols, some texture images (like scratches, dust, or abstract patterns) are imported and overlaid, 'empowering' a mottled visual style. This layering technique collectively compels the viewer to experience the film more tactilely (Marks 2000: 174). De Hirsch, in *Peyote Queen*, contrasts simplistic symbols of recognisable cultural significance with non-symbolic lines and shapes, effectively levelling the significance of cultural signs against more abstract representations.

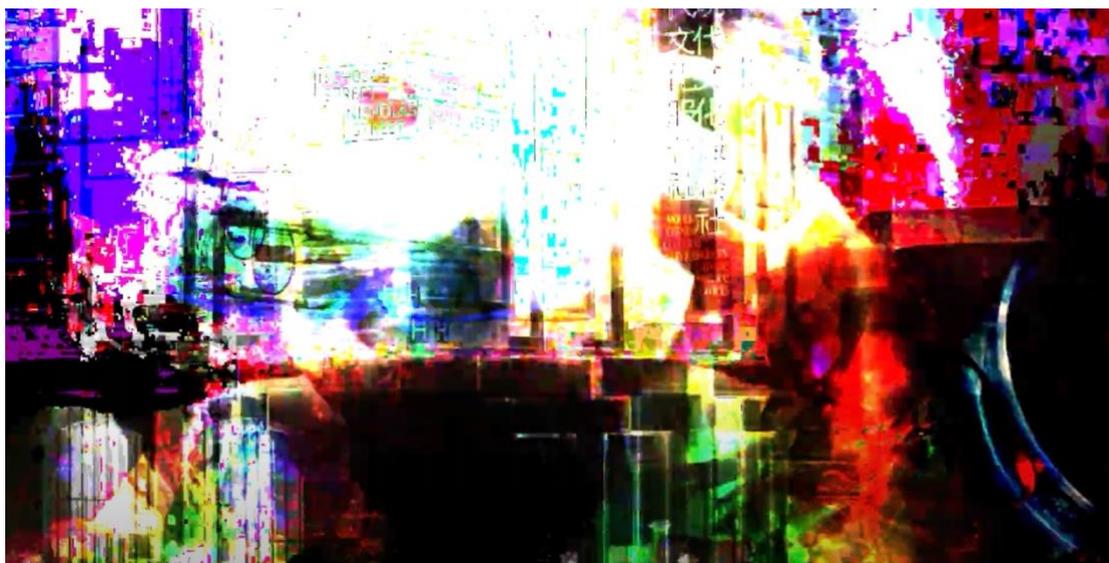


Fig. 8. The Footage in *Tangling Phantoms* (2022) by Weizhi Gan

Though Stan Brakhage is not defined as a psychedelic filmmaker, his work contains visual distortion and patterns and internal visual experience, seeking to expand consciousness and alter perception through vivid colours and dynamic forms (Miller 2018: 54). His use of overlay textures is reminiscent of my lacquer painting experience. Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) creates a collage of natural materials, e.g., leaves, flowers, and other organic matter, which produce a vibrant and tactile visual experience.

Different images overlaid with different 'overlay effects' in AE or PR by 'blending modes' also generate vibrant textures. Furthermore, I can use the 'particle' and 'liquidation' effects to intervene in the originality of each image and shot. I hereby attempt to form a visual presentation of fluid cultural identity, particularly, the shots and images containing the cultural symbol.

Stan Brakhage's view of 'overlay textures' offers the feeling of this type of collage:

Words appear on film throughout my work. By scratching them I try to be true to the way words vibrate and jiggle when they appear in closed-eye vision—which doesn't happen very often. Also, by scratching them I can at least make them more intrinsic to what film

is—they became carriers of light. Photographed words relate more to memory recall or just to the open-eyed present. (Ganguly 2017:69)

The overlapping images within blending modes can create the effect of multiple exposures, which often relies on blending the images' content between different levels of superimposition. Brakhage is renowned for his innovative use of multiple exposures and direct film manipulation techniques to create densely layered, visually complex compositions. His films like *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) showcase Brakhage's mastery of these techniques, offering a stream-of-consciousness narrative that blurs the line between the subjective experience of reality and the abstract realm of imagination.

Powell describes the feelings of multiple exposures in Kenneth Anger's early psychedelic film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954):

Images are not just overlaid temporally by earlier shots, but occult symbols are also superimposed. A red and purple eye in a triangle overlays a long-shot of intoxicated gods, fixing them in the filmmaker's magical framework. There are no edges or boundaries to shots edited together in multiplicity rather than linear sequence. The climax of the film was designed for projection on a triple screen that emerged like a pair of wings that 'took off' to transcendence. Without such triptych screening conditions, the superimpositions induce even more overload. (2007: 85)

Mercer (2016: 6) discusses how techniques like multiple image superimposition/ exposures in diasporic film practice could represent hybrid identities resulting from diasporic experiences, which capture the complexities and layered meanings in personal and collective histories. The author further (2003: 252) discusses Isaac Julien's diasporic film *Territories* (1984), noting that 'its fragmentary collage of archival and original material interrupts the transparency necessary for an 'objective' account to achieve a quality of critical reverie.'

I also employ 'rapid editing,' one of the key techniques in psychedelic film, as it can present a sense of fast fluidity. I intend to drive the 'multi-exposure' visual, producing fluid and

constantly hybrid cultural identities. In PR, I can achieve this by cutting and arranging my clips in quick succession on the timeline. This technique is effective in creating a sense of urgency or disorientation.

This timeline manipulation as a movement becomes permeable in the time-image: 'movement is always in time, and one force does not function without the other' (Powell 2007: 141). As noted throughout Deleuze's exploration of film practice in temporal relationships (1989), the rapid editing reflects a deeper engagement with memory and subjectivity to create a disjointed perception of time, as what Powell (2007: 80) depicts, i.e., a 'manic, irritant quality,' disjointed perception of time. This enlightened me to use 'rapid editing' to orchestrate conflict, a cultural symbol, through Western/Eastern eyes.

In *Tangling Phantoms*, the rapid editing speeds up the light from glowing glasses. The fast shift from my face with the Beijing opera mask under the generation of image-overlapping and dislocated placement presents the cultural symbol visible and hidden through the 'two of selves'. The glasses light marks this 'fluid track', which suggests an 'unfixed status of altered states.'

In the whole sequence, the speed-up and slow-down contrast the different transparencies of the layers in superimposition. Meanwhile, rapid editing still serves as the major role. I edited one of the images wearing the light glasses in weak visibility and out-of-focus and superimposed it on the layer of mah-jong tiles and the mask on the ground. At the same time, I tried to design a feeling of perception of the unstable self's confrontation with homogeneous authority related to chinoiserie, i.e., self to other. Peter Whitehead's *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London's* 'slow motion, stop-motion, jump cut, and image-blurring techniques' (1967) further inspired my idea; he created an 'exciting amalgam' that reflects the alienation and instability of the era he captures (Chibnall 2011: 269).

The transparency adjustment in PR and AR allows me to decide how much information I would like to disclose from certain images. As shown in *Tangling Phantoms*, within the imagination of Bhabha's third space, I mixed multi-layered images with rapid editing and blurred them with the 'blending mode', through which I turned up the contrast ratio and exposures in AE. The visual presents highly layer-mixed images, as how Camper describes the explosions in Stan Brakhage's films:

bursts of color heightened by extreme contrasts in hue and shape and by stunning depth effects; more monochromatic passages of nonetheless equal intensity that sensitize one to the glories of tiny differences; nearly flat, slowly changing fields of color that wave like blankets in the wind, only to be interrupted by a cut that opens up a vast space; rapid explosions of paint that seem just on the cusp of suggesting a nameable object. (Camper 2010:1)

My use of quick transitions between different shots aims to create a sense of spontaneity and rhythm that aligns with the harsh soundtrack, especially the faintly discernible close-ups of the face and the Beijing opera mask with the light track created by glowing glasses, whereby the soundtrack delivers a 'weak signal' of an electric stream. In doing so, I intend to amplify the sensory nature of the inner conflict. The multi-layered shots also provide a sense of climax within the soundtrack. The sound image operates through a 'disjunction' or 'dissociation' from the visual, creating a distinct relationship that forms not a whole but rather introduces an irrational cut or interstice between the two (Deleuze 1989: 251). This shift in how sound is perceived in filmmaking suggests that sound has a more potent force of 'deterritorialization' than sight, and its refined forms can connect with other elements in a machinic way (Powell 2007: 45).

Through the practice of *Tangling Phantoms*, my use of techniques potentially creates an 'interstitial space' between images, sounds, or frames. The 'interstice' explains my intention to respond as 'the articulation of resistance in an "interstitial" position that is plurilocular, bringing new subjectivities into being through everyday performances.' (Dutta 2017: 2), i.e. lifting the 'cultural signage' away from fixed points towards an 'interstitial stream' to import

a new connective possibility (Mercer 2016: 130). Bhabha (1994: 219-220, 231) argues that this interstitial stream exists between fixed categories of identity in a state of fluidity – ‘a poetic of the ‘interstitial’ community’ – by placing ‘interstitial, conflictual temporalities’ as core to understanding the dynamics of cultural identity and ‘the third space’, which locates between different historical narratives or cultural experiences, suggesting that they do not follow a linear or developmental progression.

*Tangling Phantoms*’ non-linear editing supports my imagination of ‘interstitial space’, as the image-superimposition, viewed as a dynamic method that serves not to narrate events simply linearly but rather engages in a layering of temporal experiences. In diasporic film practice, this strategy conveys the fragmented nature of memory and history (Mercer 2016: 280). The rapid cut creates a dynamic visual rhythm and results in a rich oscillation between recognition and disorientation. The frenetic pacing is characterised by jarringly quick cuts and layered superimpositions in *Looking for Mushroom* (Gosse 2022). The ‘transgressive and hallucinatory’ image created by the editing can be understood as a mechanism that presents ‘interstitial, conflictual temporalities’, where the interplay of past and present creates a non-linear narrative structure; not only is time sequential but it can also be interwoven and layered, which is crucial (Mercer 2016: 32). Having discussed the techniques used in *Tangling Phantoms*, these psychedelic layerings, will also be applied in the next step of film practice, and the decolonialist concepts will be analysed during the discussion of practice.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this chapter, I extract my cultural symbol in my film practice, using psychedelic film aesthetics to create a non-linear and fragmented narrative. The techniques activate the potentiality of these cultural props to form an ‘interstitial space’. The props do not comply with strict development or chronology in *Tangling Phantoms*, but they are also enlightened by ‘the third space’, which opens new areas in which new cultural practices can be registered in ‘generic discordance’ and ‘unexpected juxtaposition’ (Bhabha 1990: 217). As I juxtaposed

shots of props by overlapping them, the ‘blending’ of these shots produced semiotic aesthetics that translated from my thoughts and reflection on my cultural identity in real life. I, meanwhile, intervene in the strict order of cultural symbols, like when I arrange the composition of mah-jong tiles. Though I am still not satisfied with this ‘action’, more layers of shots and images can be used to work with this ‘physical damage’ of mah-jong tiles, as ‘scattered mah-jong tiles only’ might lead to the feeling of a superficial act for expressing a ‘fragmented’ narrative. Thus, further work on it might create more of the sensory of an ‘unexpected moment.’ In other words, this is still far from my purpose of unpacking cultural differences, i.e., against a homogenised narrative.

*Tangling Phantoms* establishes a foundation of editing techniques for my journey of practice. I consider the rhythm of ‘fluid semiotics’ by focusing on movement, fluidity, and the interactions among elements; hereby, we can discern new forms of cinematic meaning, as Kennedy argues:

If we remind ourselves of Deleuzian words, in comparison with the plane of organisation, the plane of immanence<sup>9</sup> has ‘only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements’, then we can begin to detect different and more creative pragmatic interpretations of the film as event... (2002: 127)

The use of techniques may form an affection image that deactualises the cultural symbol in transforming the liquid image into the gaseous image, which implies the force and rhythm of semiotics (Deleuze 1989: 32-33). The essentialism of chinoiserie may be dissolved through the interaction of images that split solid perception by personal memories into affection. The visual elements could alter the original haptic sensation of the Beijing opera mask, which indicates that the sensory assemblage in *Tangling Phantoms* made the first step guided by the methodology in this research.

<sup>9</sup> not organised by hierarchical structure

This chapter contextualises cultural symbols through a semiotic approach and fluid semiotics in *Tangling Phantoms*, showing how experimental visuality engages with memory within cultural identity. These themes carry through to the longer works explored in Chapters 3-5, where the analysis becomes more focused on decolonialism. In chapter 3, I will discuss double consciousness and racial stereotypes of Chineseness by the practice-*Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms*.

### Chapter 3: History and Stereotypes

During my visit to the British Museum for Chinese elements (relics) of the late Qing Dynasty exhibited in 2023, I saw the expired Nanjing Treaty, Chinese calligraphic works, and traditional paintings. Of course, based on the historical knowledge I learned in middle school, imperial Britain plundered vast amounts of lavish Qing antiques, which are still exhibited in the British Museum. The exhibition of the late Qing Dynasty seemingly celebrated Chinese history; it nonetheless used a vision of colonial legacy to shape the perception of Chineseness. I argue that this perception contains no contemporary perspectives of China, mainly because my vision is rooted in an updated and changing Chinese emphasis on tradition and modernisation. Likewise, the statements for each Chinese piece ‘wiped out’ the information of colonial oppression during the Opium Wars in China.

These narratives that dominant cultures have imposed often erased colonized peoples' experiences and contributions (Mercer 2003: 253). This event thus promoted a concept of an ‘exoticised prodigy’ attracting audiences with curiosity to appreciate a distant and alien ‘tone’. Engaging with Britain's imperial history helps disclose how this distorted impression of Chineseness became pervasive in Britain. On the other hand, I could reflect on my racial memories by problematising them.

This chapter is a review of the historical context and stereotypes of the Chinese diaspora in Britain, the discussion of which informed film practice *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms*, where I integrated racial memories within power dynamics. In this manner, I created metaphorical cultural differences by the cultural symbol I used, particularly employing Indigenous knowledge against the homogenised narrative of power structures.

The imperial and colonial history in Britain to China allows me to place my discussion in a post-colonial context and so does decolonising autoethnography. The internal conflict between the social expectations shaped by power dynamics placed on Chinese in Britain and my racial

identity offered a space to negotiate my cultural identity of hybridity, in which I doubt whether this social expectation hinders the multiplicity of Chinese intercultural experiences. In this manner, I intend to clarify the specific exoticised narrative imposed on a certain Chinese element that denies the Indigenous narrative of Chineseness. The absence of imperial and colonial history in Chapter 2 keeps *Tangling Phantoms* in a superficial representation of chinoiserie. Although the psychedelic techniques created a type of ‘disruptive’ sequence in the film, it became dependent on a visual spectacle that lacks reflections of how historical power structures evolve, which aims to indicate the cultural identity being stabilised and fixed. *Tangling Phantoms* might mislead into a stereotypical showcase of Chinese traditional elements without putting eyes on demolishing the rigid views of the symbol of Chineseness.

In *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms*, I considered how my personal stories and memories weave with the imperial and colonial history of Chinese migration in Britain through the postcolonial context, as I suggest that this combination might help me explore my transnational/cultural experiences in Britain, and stating the internal conflict helps me create a vision that can recognise the power structure and how my memories are involved. As Mark claims:

Postcolonial history is necessarily an investigation of fossils. We are constantly discovering inexplicable factoids on the surface of represented history that invite us to cut through the layers and connect them to their source, cutting between private recollection and official discourse. More often than not, the investigator contracts their infectious quality, finding that her own history is based on partial truths. The “piece of the rock” that contains our own lives, constituting them both in terms of and separate from dominant history, disintegrates into unstable, seething sands, and we have no choice but to sift through, looking for clues. (2009: 91)

### **3.1 The Internal/external Conflict**

The colonial history elucidates how identities are constructed and deconstructed through time, emphasising that individuals and communities operate within a complex web of historical and cultural interactions, which allows artists to view history not as a linear progression but as a

fragmented collection of experiences that shape current realities (Mercer 2016: 43). the interactions between different cultural groups during colonialism led to complex identities that challenged simplistic notions of purity or separateness (Gilroy 2003: 245). The representation of colonial authority is not unidimensional; it is shaped by a hybrid interplay between the coloniser and the colonised, leading to a scenario where the British identity itself is constantly redefined through the frictions of colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994: 107-108). Postcolonial movements must not simply replicate colonial structures but should aim to create a new order that recognises the multiplicity of experiences within colonial legacies (Lowe 2003: 143).

Against the background of colonial history, the internal division in which individuals contend with a cultural affiliation with their racial identity and the demands of citizenship in a society structured around racial hierarchies forms the duality of conflict in a racially divided world—being both within and outside the Western cultural framework (Gilroy 1993: 161). Du Bois (1903: xxiii) describes it as ‘double consciousness’, originally referring to African American, representing the ‘two warring souls in one black body’. This critical duality helps understand the colonial impact and fosters a space for resistance against these oppressive systems, which transcends binaries of rigid categories, e.g., black/white or national/diaspora. As Gilroy (1993: 117) notes, double consciousness is the tangle in a shared history of oppression and cultural exchange, reflecting the ambivalences created by modernity and colonial legacies.

As seen in Fanon’s ‘double vision’, the ‘black skin’ is marked by its difference in a colonial context, and by adopting a ‘white mask’, the colonised subject is not merely mimicking their oppressor but is engaging in a performative act of survival and an assertion of identity (Bhabha 1994: 126, 172). This ‘mimicry’ results from the visibility that the ‘black mask’ slips off, i.e., the imposed vision tries to shape the colonized in a way that becomes stereotypical (Fanon 2008: xxxiv). Double consciousness, therefore, is how the internal conflict of the colonised reacts to the external conflict made by the coloniser. Notably, this system of oppression creates an inferiority of ‘the wish to be white’ that leads to a neurotic state characterised by self-evaluation and comparison against the so-called ‘superior’ race (Fanon 2008: 74, 163). This

conflict of duality could be seen in ‘double-unbelonging’, also in the context of globalisation, which could lead to Hall’s term – the ‘double movement’ of ‘both homogenisation and the creation of new differences/fractures’, i.e., going ‘local and global at the same moment’ (Procter 2004: 111).

In this way, ‘mimicry’ conceals ‘no presence or identity behind its mask’ that disrupts the authority of colonial discourse through authorised versions of ‘otherness’ (Bhabha 1994: 126). Hall (1990: 225) argues that the historical ‘rupture’ urges moving away from the ‘essentialised past’, which activates ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable other’ (Bhabha 1994: 122).

Within ‘fluid semiotics’, Kennedy claims that:

sensation replaces desire, the image can ‘vibrate’ with layers of intensity, since the image is not a single unit, but a graded richness, resolute with modulations across a time-scale from past, present and future. (2002: 115)

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 166, 279, 297) and Kennedy (2002: 42, 80) argue, desire in the ‘rhizome’ exists beyond fixed ideas of the subject (the desiring person) and the object (the thing they desire), operating on a ‘plane of immanence’ as a dynamic process as productive and energetic, generating joy. I want to argue that Deleuze’s view of ‘desire’ could place double consciousness and double vision through a productive and energetic ‘becoming’, as the ‘desire’ is not only the source of ‘internal conflict/external oppression’ and ‘feelings of lack and deficiency’ (two unreconciled strivings). Thereby, the semiotic approach within psychedelic aesthetics allows me to see ‘desire’ as effectuation in *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms* that is continuously in motion and never reaches final satisfaction (Kennedy 2002: 80). Simultaneously, this ‘desire’ is rooted in history, as Hall (1990: 226) reflects that individuals who are disconnected from their cultural roots can become ‘individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels’. Double consciousness in cultural identity, therefore, is deeply connected to the historical context (cultural heritage). In *Fluid Souls*, I intend to place the sequence of the history of British Chinese immigration

through the psychedelic layering, which may lead to multiple sensations for a given period of historical clips.

### 3.2 Imperial and Colonial History

Through the lens of double consciousness, I noticed that capturing the stereotypical images needs to discuss the imperial and colonial history of the Chinese in Britain. My visit to the British Museum also evoked my desire to disrupt what is imposed. In the experiment of *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms*, I reflected on my thoughts that wove broader history and ‘self’, as well as imprinted my sensation into cultural symbols within altered states of ‘fluid semiotics’.

For double consciousness in the British Chinese diaspora, Wang in her PhD research, discusses how:

the double consciousness of being both here and there was constructed through the present discourses in which they were constantly reminded of being ‘different’ in Britain. Frequent visits to the place of their ethnic/cultural origins and on-going interactions with people living there provided primary transnational experiences, and to a certain extent cultivated attachment to their ancestral homeland. However, their imagined symbolic ‘China and the Chinese’ was formed and conditioned by the migratory history, changing discourses and distinct positioning of diasporic Chinese in Britain. (2016: 200)

The discussion of how imperial and colonial history, especially the Opium Wars, facilitated Chinese migration to Britain helps understand the formation of the Chinese community in Britain. As a historical intercultural through a colonial lens, *Fluid Souls* aims to weave an intercultural subject (self) into this context based on our shared Chinese culture and the action of trans-location. Hereby, I intended to test how I organise the autoethnographic cultural symbol in montage/superimposition within historical elements of interculture in Britain. Firstly, I will start the review of this history I aimed to connect in *Fluid Souls*, for extracting information ‘translated’ into the film sequence.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the colonial and imperial might of Britain over China was manifested through the Opium Wars (1839–1843 and 1856–1860), in which the British East India Company led to the widespread addiction to opium and societal issues within China (Jones 1979: 398). The Treaty of Nanjing granted Britain control over crucial ports and Hong Kong (Benton, Gomez 2008: 22). This unequal treaty enabled favourable trade conditions and extraterritorial rights, not only undermining Chinese sovereignty but also weakening the Qing Dynasty. As a British colony, Hong Kong, until the 1997 handover to China, had a colonised and imperial history.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an era that saw the arrival of Chinese sailors at British ports, the Opium Wars compelled China to open its doors to British commerce and spurred the need for Chinese seafarers (Benton, Gomez 2008). The employment of Chinese and Lascar crews on East India Company vessels presented the nascent connections between China and Britain. Facilitated by maritime trade, most seafarers came from the south-eastern coast of China – Guangdong and Fujian provinces (Jones 1979: 397, Benton, Gomez 2008: 24, Lau-Clayton 2014: 16). These seafarers were known as Huagong (Chinese labour), or contract emigrant labourers (Wang 2017: 29).

These early Chinese immigrants established the foundations of what would become the vibrant Chinatowns in port cities like Liverpool and London. As Wang (2017: 36) notes, they mobilised the British Chinese community as a pool of labour in UK ports. Over time, many seafarers abandoned their ships and turned into land-based jobs like laundries and chop suey restaurants. These former sailors lived in port cities and formed relationships with native women (Lau-Clayton 2014: 10). In London, Chinese migrants initially settled in Blue Gate Fields and Limehouse (old Chinatown) in London, before moving to Gerrard Street. Decades later, this community has evolved from primarily engaging in catering and laundry services to achieving higher education and social mobility. Today, they are represented across various economic sectors, including professional fields and the hi-tech industry (Benton, Gomez 2008: 25-26).

I employed this period of history and started a ‘conversation’ with Chinese seafarers in Britain, as I used the ‘montage’ technique to create a ‘contact’ with the origin of the Chinese diaspora in Britain. During my visit to London’s Chinatown, I saw that many Chinese cultural legacies were maintained, like the signage design of Chinese restaurants, Chinese traditional patterns, and the Chinese dragon dance in the Chinese spring festival celebration. This experience made me very nostalgic and reminiscent. On the other hand, Procter (2004: 82) summarises Hall’s argument that racism arises from a denial of this colonial past, leading to binary oppositions such as ‘us’ versus ‘them’, which could resonate with the challenges I face as a minority group navigating a historically charged cultural landscape.

In diasporic aesthetics, the cultural legacy shapes the identities and expressions of artists, which offers information to establish connections within the context of history, whether individual or collective. As Hall (2003: 235) states, artistic practices can restore a sense of identity and cohesiveness by engaging with ‘hidden histories’ and proposing new interpretations of the past, thereby allowing artists to express the fragmentation and dispersal that characterise diasporic experiences. As Hall states:

Far from being grounded in mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1990: 225)

The historical context laid the path for me to position my self-history. This will be thoroughly discussed, especially for *The Sub-self* in chapter 4 and *Yin-Yang Eyes* in chapter 5. And *Fluid Souls* is a test in which I began placing historical images under psychedelic sequences.

### 3.3 Positionality: *Fluid Souls*

In *Fluid Souls*, I intend to display the difference and cultural connections between me and early Chinese migration in Britain to position my cultural identity, rather than simply re-showing the 'past'. As Hall (1996: 504) states, this 'positionality' of histories and cultural contexts or a sense of identity grounded in unique experiences can establish a fluid and hybrid cultural identity.

My technique here is still the superimposition of montage to place the visual 'fluid semiotics' into the historic images. The montage superimposes the Chinese seamen image and Li Po's poem, with me wearing a Beijing opera mask and glowing glasses and then holding a folding fan. I borrowed images from Price's book *The Chinese in Britain: A History of Visitors and Settlers* and embedded the image of dockland as a 'historical portrayal'. The use of a soundtrack in transformation aims to create an 'interstice' that breaks the 'conventional expectation' for the sound and follows the sequential development. Hereby, images under superimposition create a 'palimpsest'. In the context of a diasporic film, a 'palimpsest' refers to a work that is layered with multiple cultural texts and meanings, where earlier influences are not completely erased but remain visible and interacts with new narratives (Kucharska 2006). As this superimposition through 'blending mode' shows contrasted colour, a fluid mixture of lines and colours may ensure that:

form and matter are in fact not so easily separable: they are more interestingly connected. They cannot just be isolated as separate terms. Matter is not just a simple, and singular, substance that can be 'formed' into something. It is something which is mutable, kinetic, moving, malleable and never fixed. (Kennedy 2002: 111)

Presenting history as a palimpsest of overlapping and often conflicting narratives invites further exploration into how different identities and histories intersect within the art to manifest both aesthetic and political dimensions of the diaspora experience (Mercer 2016: 90).

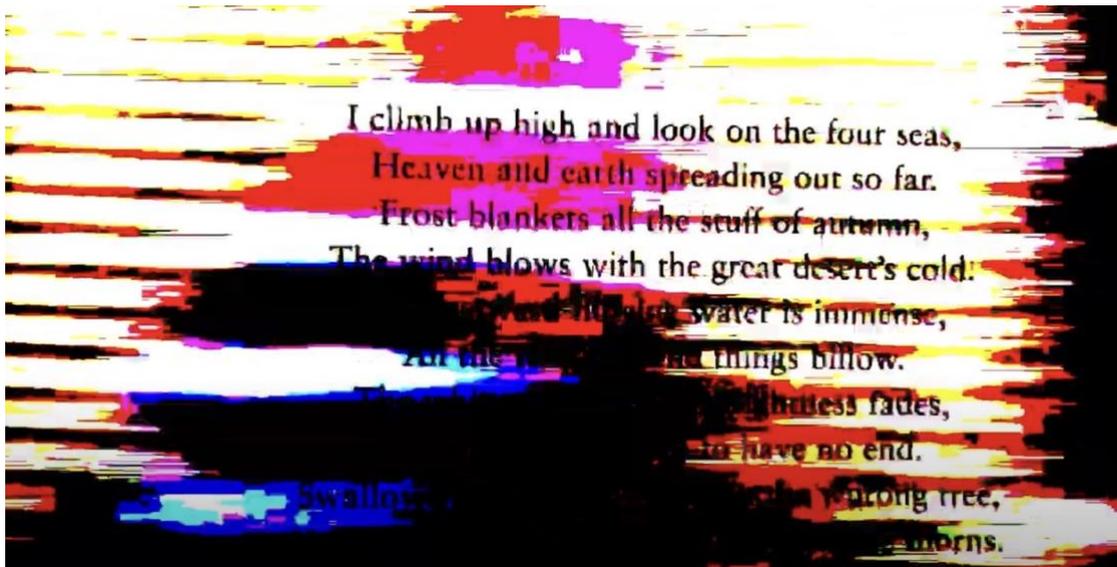


Fig. 9. Li Po's Poem within the Footage 1 in *Fluid Souls* (2022) by Weizhi Gan

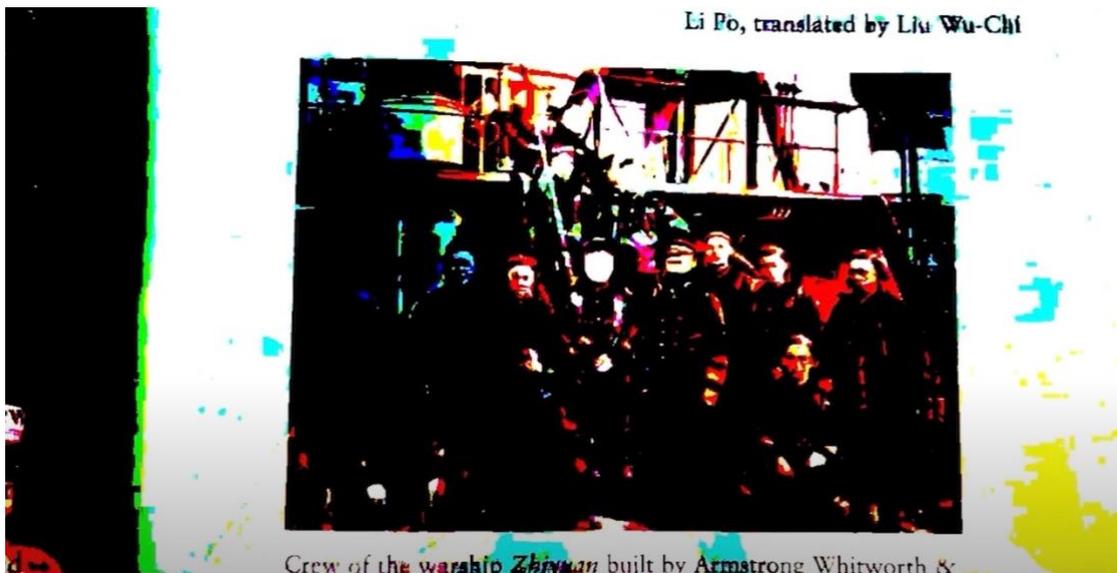


Fig. 10. Li Po's Poem within the Footage 2 *Fluid Souls* (2022) by Weizhi Gan

This palimpsest-like visual with the siren of a steamer aims to create an immersion of presenting a tangling ‘ritual’ of shared history in Britishness/Chineseness. Then, the scene focuses on my ‘body language’, holding a folding fan and shaking my body with glowing glasses to ‘unmask’. As Halprin argues:

For each body part, there are numerous themes that can take people into their life narratives. With the head and face, one of the themes we play with is “mask and unmask”. (2003: 150)

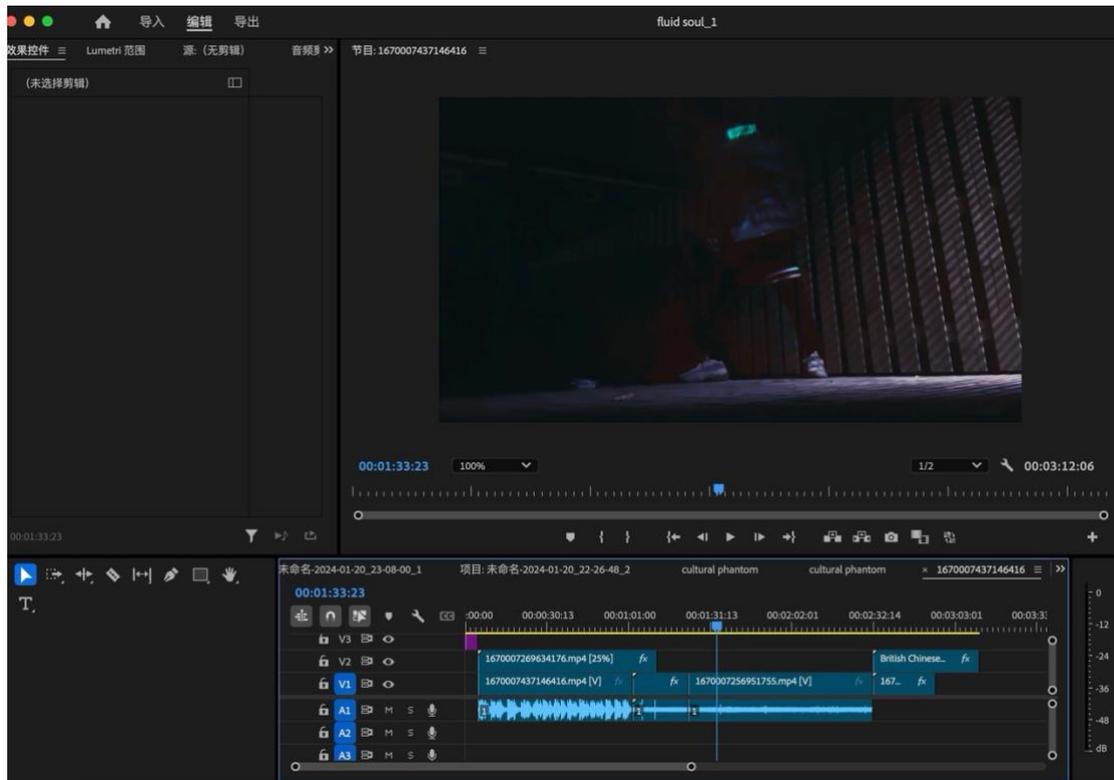


Fig. 11. ‘Dance’ Movement Editing in *Fluid Souls* (2022) by Weizhi Gan



Fig. 12. The Footage of ‘Dance’ movement in *Fluid Souls* (2022) by Weizhi Gan

I was standing in an empty garden near my accommodation, whereby the light from the glasses was obvious. The light may have formed a ‘rave<sup>10</sup> scene’, and this sensory manipulation through light, along with other technical means like ‘over textual’, is fundamental to the realisation of the rave experience, making it a ‘virtual part of the body’ for dancers as it evokes memory and facilitates a collective experience (Kyriakopoulos 2021: 14-15). The handheld camera was placed in a low angle shot, and the face was hidden in the dark, so the light drew a ‘track’ that may present a sense of ambiguity. This scene also employs ‘montage’ (two-ness of self), wherein I doubled the same layer of shot in superimposition, trying to formally respond to double consciousness when my body of ‘Chineseness’ happened to merge with ‘British-Chineseness’. Cultural studies must acknowledge these histories to effectively engage with the ongoing implications of past injustices and power dynamics (Morley, Chen 1996: 10).

Du Bois describes this two-ness as:

<sup>10</sup> ‘Rave’ are countercultural groups and may involve the use of psychoactive substances, in which participants often experience trance states—altered states of consciousness—driven by the combination of music, dance, and drugs; rave events can lead to feelings of ecstasy and mystical experiences.

One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1903: 5)

Not only does it represent the ambivalence that individuals feel, but the ‘two-ness’ of double consciousness also synthesises and critiques the conflicting cultural and racial narratives they inhabit (Gilroy 1993: 127, 202). As *Fluid Souls* offers a background of the narrative, it posits ‘self’ within a certain historical moment that may prevent my practice from going into a universal sense without the historical mark as an entry point for *Cultural Phantoms*. What *Cultural Phantoms* attempts to tell is the internal conflict of how my ‘Chineseness’ accepts ‘Chineseness in Britishness’, e.g., my recognition of the ‘chinoiserie’ makes an appearance in Britain, specifically, in and around London, delivering the ‘stereotypical feeling’ to me. Though this stereotype seems to improve and embellish British tastes and social identities, it also often excludes multi-representations of Chinese culture and experiences, in which the colonial gaze shaped the British perception of ‘the exotic other’ (Cheang 2015: 140). Before that, I will discuss how imperial and colonial histories help form stereotypes of Chineseness in Britain, which attempted to respond to double consciousness by *Cultural Phantoms*.

### 3.4 Stereotypes

*Cultural Phantoms* intends to respond to my reflections on the discussion of essentialised narrative to ‘Chineseness’ in Britain, where I problematise my memories within racial stereotypes, symbolically, to create an ‘interstice’ of narrative. Technically, I use the cultural symbol to seize a kind of conflict from one symbol to create a ‘fluid signified’. Metaphorically, I used the idea of ‘chinoiserie’ to present the disruption of the colonial narrative in Britain, as noted by Yeh:

Despite changing relations between Britain and China in the first decades of the twentieth century, as Britain’s imperial might was weakening and as China made its entrance into world affairs, the British love affair with chinoiserie did not necessarily radically alter racial and colonial attitudes towards the Chinese. (2015: 194)

The simplification into typical stereotypes suggests that the characterisation of Orientals upholds existing power structures and impedes genuine communication with and representation of these cultures (Said 1978). Critical race theory recognises stereotypes associated with imperial projects that sought to displace and dispossess Indigenous and racialised communities from the lands and cultures of diasporas, rooted in colonial histories (Delgado, Stefancic 2017). Thus, to disrupt the stereotypes, the relationship between power structure and history becomes a foundation that helps me examine the two-ness in my further practice.

The ‘classic term’ of the stereotype of Chinese diaspora in Britain is the ‘Yellow Peril’, which highlights the historical racialisation and marginalisation of Chinese and other East Asian communities (Yeh 2014: 3). Sino-phobic discourses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries portrayed a fear of an impending threat from Asian populations, particularly Chinese immigrants, which was often depicted as the idea of ‘menaces of yellow workmen’ who, by simply moving westwards, could lead to a ‘reverse colonisation’ of Britain by a perceived vindictive Orient. The anxieties surrounding the ‘Yellow Peril’ were fuelled by concerns about competition for jobs and resources and a sense of cultural and racial superiority (Milligan 2000: 38, 84, 85, Benton, Gomez 2008).

The Yellow Peril idea grew out of the perception of a deadly threat posed to the whites by yellow hordes, who had only to ‘walk slowly westwards’ to overwhelm Europe. Politicians predicted China and Japan would kick the whites out of Asia. (Benton, Gomez 2008: 293)

Early sociological explanations of racist sentiment attributed such feelings to economic conflict, while contemporary studies emphasise that it was deeply intertwined with racist ideologies (Benton, Gomez 2008: 300). Dr Fu Manchu, the epitome of the ‘Yellow Peril’, represents the Chinese menace. Sax Rohmer is the author who published *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913). In the novel, Dr Fu Manchu is depicted as a brilliant and cunning Chinese mastermind,

a criminal genius with a vast network of followers and resources. He is also often portrayed as a sinister and mysterious figure who seeks to overthrow Western civilisation and establish his empire (Frayling 2014: 234). Such portrayals contributed to the long-standing association of Chinese communities with vice and criminality, particularly in urban settings like London's Chinatown (Benton, Gomez 2008: 299-300). It should be noted that at the time, due to the prevailing indifference of the Chinese government and the hostile reception from British institutions, Chinese seafarers faced unique vulnerabilities. They, therefore, created self-help organisations to provide mutual support and shelter against abuses (Benton, Gomez 2008: 318).

The portrayal of the 'Yellow Peril' perpetuates the fear of the 'mysterious' and 'dangerous' East Asian Other (Szeto 2022: 3). In early Hollywood cinema, Asian characters were often depicted as villains or antagonists who posed a threat to white protagonists, especially white women. The fear of miscegenation and the idea of racial purity in narratives feature in the 'Yellow Peril' and reinforce notions of white supremacy. Asian men were frequently depicted as emasculated or villainous figures, while Asian women were hypersexualised and exoticised. As Yeh notes:

Though by the 1930s fears of a Yellow Peril had subsided, racist constructions of the Chinese continued to circulate throughout popular culture; men as emasculated servants or tyrannical fathers or evil Fu Manchu types who delighted in cruelty and sexual depravity, and women as subjugated wives and daughters or exotic vamps. (2015: 179)

These stereotypes positioned them in subservient or objectified roles in relation to white characters (Marchetti 1993: 3, 10). As Said (1979) asserts in his discussion about Orientalism, the West has historically constructed and represented the East as a place of exoticism, mystery, and danger. This construction has been used to justify Western imperialism and domination over the East and has had a profound impact on the way in which the East is perceived and understood by the West. Bhabha explains that this imitative behaviour leads to the coloniser intentionally shaping the colonised into a 'solid status':

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (Bhabha 1994: 107)

This homogeneity could answer the issue of chinoiserie through Western eyes, the commodification of which thus served to maintain colonial and racial hierarchies. The agency of Chinese people and cultures was systematically erased to uphold this imperial order (Yeh 2015: 196). The imperial order hinders an upgrade of the perception of Chinese in Britain, as my personal experiences gained connections with racial anxieties of the ‘Yellow Peril’ during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the racialisation of Asian individuals was intensified by media narratives that labelled COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ (Miyake 2021: 488). The spread of misinformation and xenophobic rhetoric linking the virus to Chinese people fuelled anti-Asian sentiments and contributed to the rise in racial violence. Scapegoating Chinese individuals and communities has deep historical roots in xenophobia and racism, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and prejudices (Yeh 2020: 2). The verbal attacks I received were ‘yellow virus monkey’ and ‘yellow ‘twat’. This was not the first time this kind of verbal attack was imposed on me, although I always downplayed my encounters with racism. I sometimes excused these racial insults by attributing them to the other’s character flaws and language barrier. In particular, as a Chinese student in Britain, I might lack the ability to problematise racial stereotypes and violence through a variety of responses and reflections during experiences with racialised microaggressions, due to a broader absence of anti-Asian racism discourse, which limits my ability to recognise and articulate my experiences as racially motivated (Yu, Rai, Lim, and Li 2023).

The UK’s East and Southeast Asian communities face racist attacks, which often go unacknowledged by the broader society<sup>11</sup>. Yeh (2020: 2) also notes that while some media

<sup>11</sup> Yeh Diana (2021) ‘How the UK’s East and South-East Asian communities are fighting COVID-related violence’. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/how-east-and-south-east-asian-communities-are-fighting-covid-related-violence/> (accessed March 19 2024).

outlets specifically report on offences against 'Southeast Asians' they tend to generalise and only focus on 'the Chinese' when discussing incidents of anti-Asian racism and violence, which evidences the 'homogeneity' of 'Chineseness'. Bhabha (1994: 7) argues that the idea of a pure, ethnically cleansed national identity often requires a violent erasure of the historical interweaving of cultures and the diverse voices that challenge the narrative of uniformity. The hegemonic notions of whiteness shape us, isolating us in 'yellowness' (such as flat-lying or slanting eyelids and straight black or dark hair)<sup>12</sup>, which historically indicates asymmetrical power relations (Miyake 2021: 488). The focus on the 'Chinese' experience can create a polarity between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' groups, which is influenced by the historical context of colonial legacies and the politics of the British Empire (Yeh 2000: 66). This framing can further marginalise other Asian communities and their experiences of racial violence, reinforcing the dynamics of whiteness in societal narratives.

By constructing the notion that racism is a problem located in others, whiteness is supported by colour-blindness that denies the persistence of racism and its historical effects, allowing whites to project themselves as 'not racist' (Burke 2019: 91). On the other hand, colour-blindness loves to render the notion of 'if one works hard enough, success is guaranteed' onto Asians, thereby 'delegitimising' the intricate social realities caused by systemic discrimination (Cheng, Yang 2000: 475). Due to the generational shift and new migration from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and other regions, as the Chinese community became more established in Britain, the Chinese began to be viewed through the lens of the 'model minority' (Yeh 2014).

The socio-economic landscape of the community has broadened beyond traditional sectors like catering, with significant representation in professional fields such as medicine and academia. This shift reflects a strong emphasis on education to overcome racial and cultural barriers (Knowles 2014: 5). By excelling academically and professionally, members of the community challenge stereotypes and engage in community networks. Here, they navigate challenges and

<sup>12</sup> Historically utilised, a notion of the so-called 'yellow', 'mongoloid', or 'Asian' race.

gain recognition while embracing their cultural heritage, which fosters resilience. Additionally, advocacy work helps address systemic barriers and promotes inclusivity. Building diverse relationships fosters understanding, breaks stereotypes, and contributes to their success in overcoming barriers (Yeh 2014: 19). Despite their achievements in these professional fields, the stereotype of the ‘model minority’ creates an image of Asians/Chinese in Britain as quiet and uncomplaining. This oversimplifies their diverse experiences and masks the challenges many within this group face, such as economic struggles, discrimination, and varying levels of academic success (Lee 2015: 19-25, Benton, Gomez 2008: 316-317). This misleading narrative suggests the success of certain minorities is solely due to inherent cultural traits, neglecting the historical and structural factors that contribute to their circumstances (Burke 2019: 27).

Burke (2019: 88) discusses how some diasporic Asians may internalise this stereotype by positioning themselves as ‘honorary whites’ and adhering to the logic of colourblind racism, which trivialises the ongoing effects of racism by attributing success and failures to individual effort rather than systemic barriers. Bhabha (1994: 96) emphasises the need to confront stereotypes to understand their effects and the dynamics of power that they perpetuate: “only then does it become possible to understand the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse – that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision”.

The pursuit of being white, since my intercultural experiences started, was cultivated in my heart as I practised hard-spoken English to sound like a white, not African nor Indian; in particular, I denied a Chinese accent, which is viewed as a ‘broken English.’ Many other Chinese students around me always judge others’ spoken English level through this standard. I believe my spoken English has improved compared to when I set foot in Britain, to the extent that I received a comment from a white in a party ‘you are now like us’. I was always perceived as a smart and submissive PhD student from China, and they did not think that I could ‘party hard’. If I did ‘party hard’, I would often be viewed as Japanese. When they confirmed that I am Chinese, I would be labelled as a Chinese different from other ‘typical Chinese students. Back then, though, such comments seemed to be an act of exclusion to define typical Chinese

students. Likewise, a sense of pleasure entered my psychological activity when reacting to this seeming inclusion:

many Asians may embrace a “positive”-seeming stereotype that imagines a culture of hard work and intelligence, particularly in a racist society that uses this Model Minority stereotype both to support cultural racism... (Burke 2019: 88)

The ‘model minority’ image helped turn negative stereotypes into positive ones; nonetheless, it also perpetuates a simplistic view of diasporic Asian/Chinese that fails to recognise the diversity and struggles within Asian/Chinese communities in the West. The positive image results in the hypervisibility<sup>13</sup> of the Chinese diaspora, which could contribute to negative consequences, such as increased competition among racial groups:

African Americans were locked out of the academic elite, and they interpreted Asian American students’ success as confirmation of their fears that Asians are taking over everything. Their perceptions of Asian Americans as highly successful (i.e., model minorities and fierce competitors) were confirmed by the number of Asians in the top tracks, the number of Asians ranked in the top ten of each graduating class, and teachers’ rhetoric about Asian students being smart. In this way, the stereotype of Asian Americans as high achievers and the stereotype that Asians are fierce competitors who are taking over became blurred. (Lee 2015: 169)

This superficial image of disregarding systemic issues creates the illusion of progress while perpetuating existing power structures (Mercer 2016: 246-247). The hypervisibility of the ‘model minority’ as a result of colour-blindness masks the power dynamics and inequality, forming an invisibility. This invisibility falls outside the traditional black/white dichotomy of race relations, as the Chinese in Britain are frequently not categorised in discussions of race and identity. The duality of the power dynamics expectation and the racial absence hinder the negotiation of hybrid cultural identity (Yeh 2000, 2018: 33). Mercer (2016: 243) uses the term

<sup>13</sup> Originally referring to ‘black people’, starting from the 1980s, black popular culture has achieved such saturation that the previous ideas surrounding black invisibility can no longer apply. Now speaking of a ‘moment of hyperblackness’, where black representations are ubiquitous across media such as hip-hop, cinema, and television, this hypervisibility disparities and fails to translate into substantive empowerment or social change. (Mercer 2016: 194)

‘double-faced masking’ as diasporic aesthetics to signify the internal conflict of hyper/invisibility that is ‘profoundly important to the condition of double consciousness, for it is crucial to note that a mask always has two faces.’ This aesthetics could critique *Fluid Souls*, which seldom engages in the consideration of the ‘two faces’ depiction.

Double-faced masking contributes to counter-storytelling by challenging dominant narratives and creating space for marginalised voices to be heard. It also involves presenting a different persona or identity to the outside world to conform to white societal norms and expectations:

where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination. (Gilroy 2003: 50)

As an artistic ‘term’ of double consciousness, double-faced masking can be understood as ‘inverse visibility’. Mirzoeff (2006: 70) uses Du Bois’ notion of a ‘veil’ that conceals true visibility to indicate this duality, to indicate that the subjectivity of the viewer is obscured by what they see. The ‘double vision’ of individuals as both ‘pedagogical objects’ and ‘performative subjects’ calls for rethinking cultural or political representations, emphasising the need for inclusivity and the recognition of cultural hybridity that arises within this contested state (Bhabha 1994: 209).

In this manner, an artist’s work often aims not to provide more accurate or pleasing depictions of identity but to investigate how codes and conventions influence the visibility and perception of specific identities while marginalising others (Mercer 2016: 37). By decolonising the autoethnography of centralising marginalised context, I intend to ‘unveil’ how power dynamics in Britain impose the hegemonic ‘explanation’ of what is expected by dominant cultures on some certain representations. I will re-interpret them based on my ‘Indigenous knowledge’ of my shared cultural background, as I can create an untune conflict by the psychedelic sequence.

Through my reflections on the historical power dynamics of the Chinese in Britain, I strategically placed myself in the stereotype. Based on my strategy of semiotic approach and understanding double consciousness as a hybrid site, I conducted a critique of orientalism and appropriation when utilising chinoiserie ‘as an index of profound civilisational difference’ (Porter 2015: 22). This difference disrupts the fixed representation that fails to encompass the actual, lived experiences of the colonised, thereby complicating the representation in cultural narratives (Bhabha 1994: 107). These rigid stereotypes will also be noted to explore gender and social class in chapter 4, so that I can reveal the complexity of power dynamics and erase them by altered states techniques. As response to the historically rooted stereotypes of Chinese in Britain, *Cultural Phantoms* is a practice that aims to locate double consciousness through the lens of cultural symbols.

### **3.5 The ‘Signified’ in Conflict: *Cultural Phantoms***

A new cultural symbol, a dragon, is employed within the context of chinoiserie. The enthusiastic adoption of dragons on wallpapers, carpets and Chinese textiles or ornaments like Chinese lacquer and fretwork has come from the ideas of Western designers (Cheang 2015: 133). In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolises auspiciousness, authority, and wisdom, and is associated with the nation, emperors, and individuals of great ambition and achievement. It is revered as a positive and powerful creature that represents good fortune and prosperity. Conversely, in Western culture, dragons often embody evil, greed, and destruction, and are depicted as cruel, monstrous, and autocratic. Western mythologies commonly portray dragons as enemies of humanity, linked to Satan and other malevolent forces (Liu 2015: 42). The proposed translation for the Chinese character ‘龙’ to avoid confusion with the Western dragon is ‘Loong’. This revised translation aims to differentiate the Chinese Loong from the Western dragon and to accurately represent the positive attributes and cultural significance associated with the Chinese dragon symbol (Zeng 2008: 31).

The duality of ‘dragon/Loong’ or ‘negative/positive’ could potentially unveil a form of twoness within my psychedelic sequence. As an example of this, in the late 1990s, a dragon sculpture by Peter Dunn<sup>14</sup> was installed at the intersection of Mandarin Street and East India Dock Road to commemorate this connection. Named Dragon’s Gate<sup>15</sup>, it was crafted with assistance from a community co-operative in Docklands called the Art of Change. The dragon sculpture features a large stainless-steel sculpture that incorporates fibre optic lighting, representing two dragons intertwined to embody the shape of the river in Docklands, London (Dunn, Leeson 1997: 35).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Dunn is an artist and the coordinator of the Art of Change, based in London. He also lectures in digital imaging at the University of Westminster and in public art at Chelsea College of Art. Additionally, he is one of the authors of the document *The Aesthetics of Collaboration*, where he explores the transformative power of artistic collaboration in empowering marginalised communities.

<sup>15</sup> Available at: <http://www.tiredoflondontiredoflife.com/2011/05/find-dragons-gate.html> (accessed March 23 2024).



Fig. 13. Limehouse Dragon's Gate (2022), © Photo by Weizhi Gan

During the visit to Dragon's Gate, I saw that no gate exists there today, nor are there marks for the site. Nonetheless, I found the sculpture and became confused about its design. According to my Indigenous knowledge, especially from my lacquer painting study and career, for a vital Chinese element by a visual artist, it shows no sense of auspiciousness, i.e., the green head, red eyeballs and lavish scales demonstrate an overuse of imagined Chinese design. Although the

‘Loong’ in my red square mah-jong box is a sketch-like image, its curve and hovering dynamics are vivid.

Within the strategy of double vision for Loong/dragon, I intended to use Dragon’s Gate and the ‘Loong’ in my red square mah-jong box (it is also shown in *Tangling Phantoms*, too) to depict double consciousness beyond the representation of the dragon pattern. I empowered ‘Loong’ in a dynamic movement of distorted virtual animation from an actualised material-red box, which may display a ‘magic moment’ like Rosa Fong’s strategy in *A Dream of Venus Butterfly* and *Red*, within liquid perception.

By ‘mimicry’, the scenario where the evil dragon hovers menacingly around Big Ben might evoke images of urban catastrophe, echoing the dramatic ‘valley of death’ scene from Sax Rohmer’s novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*. In Rohmer’s narrative, Dr Fu-Manchu uses giant toxic fungi to conduct lethal experiments, where white spores descend like a silent doom, enveloping victims in a deadly embrace (Seshagiri 2006: 178).



Fig. 14. Mah-jong box in *Cultural Phantoms* (2023) © Photo by Weizhi Gan



Fig. 15. The Footage of ‘Dragon hovers around Big Ben’ in *Cultural Phantoms* (2023) by Weizhi Gan

I did not simply visually juxtapose these dual symbols in the filmic frame; instead, I used the distortion on the subject (Loong) to amplify its hovering movement. The ‘Loong’ flies away from the red box; here, I overlapped the image of a British tea package. I moved on to my own cultural fusion with my cultural heritage, as I placed a mah-jong box with scattered Yorkshire Tea packaging debris within the distortion.

Tea and sugar were imported to Britain from colonial plantations in South Asia and the Caribbean respectively. They were commodities that carried with them the burden of slavery, conquest and colonisation and which helped fuel Britain’s rise into a dominant and wealthy imperial power. Britain’s economy, as well its culture (the British cuppa as ‘national’ institution) were not simply generated from within according to this inside-out history. (Procter 2004: 82)

I intended to implicate the colonial legacy of tea, which always makes an ‘attendance’ in hybrid cultural identity to marginalised groups.

Through multi-exposures and superimposition (Fig. 13), I manipulate the rapid change of the colour, aiming to present how hybrid my two-ness is. As opposed to Chinese tea like Pu-er, which is expensive in Britain, I chose British tea bags to save money, having this tea while I play Mah-jong with my non-Chinese friends in Britain. I also taught them how to play the game, which is a way of expressing my culture. Similarly, Chau and Yu (2001: 117) write that teaching customers how to use chopsticks is a common practice in Chinese restaurants as part of the cultural experience they provide. In *Cultural Phantoms*, I always play with two cultural symbols, a kind of ‘ethnographic juxtaposition<sup>16</sup>’ that involves placing diverse cultural symbols, artefacts, or concepts side by side to generate new meanings or insights and cultural hybridity (Clifford 1988).



Fig. 16. Superimposition of ‘Tea and Mah-jong Box *Cultural Phantoms* (2023) by Weizhi

Gan

<sup>16</sup> Clifford (1988: 132) discussed juxtaposition to challenge commonplace cultural symbols and provoke critical reflection on the meanings we attach to different artifacts. The journal engaged in ‘fortuitous or ironic collage’, questioning what belongs together in cultural displays and forcing a re-evaluation of classifications and values.

This juxtaposition allowed me to deploy ‘hybrid techniques’, which can undermine the ‘trap’ of the binary of each cultural symbol. The massive ‘distortion’ I use in the film aims to create a ‘self-splitting’, as Bhabha critiques traditional ethnography:

The significance of this narrative splitting of the subject of identification is borne out in Lévi-Strauss’s description of the ethnographic act. The ethnographic demands that the observer himself is a part of his observation and this requires that the field of knowledge – the total social fact – must be appropriated from the outside like a thing, but like a thing which comprises within itself the subjective understanding of the indigenous. The transposition of this process into the language of the outsider’s grasp – this entry into the area of the symbolic of representation/signification – then makes the social fact ‘three-dimensional’. (Bhabha 1994: 215)

By engaging with my personal experiences, I could challenge and unpack the colonial tropes embedded within academia, which resonates with the idea of the ‘three-dimensional’ via incorporating subjective insights. Dutta (2017:1) notes that a storied form of voicing knowledge claims work through/on the scholar's location. In my intercultural experiences, my self-splitting is a process wherein I project my sensation of Chineseness onto my hybrid culture, which happens in Britain. My subject and Indigenous knowledge are an observed part and my ‘diminishing fragments of itself’ reflect Indigenous knowledge within the knowledge of power structures and dynamics, forming a continuous reflection.

Centralising marginalised narrative refers to amplifying the critiques of the Indigenous knowledge to the dominant one. In *Cultural Phantoms*, Dragon’s Gate is always in a ‘stable’ position within my imagination, where the solid power structure locates and categorises me in a contact-lost status away from the Chinese ethnic group, because my ‘party-hard’ behaviour broke a perception of social expectation. The colour blindness attributed this to an issue of character difference resulting in a fixation on stereotypes of Chinese students in Britain, which delegitimised the racial problems existing amidst Chinese in Britain.

With respect, though Peter Dunn's design scheme for Dragon's Gate may have referenced subject knowledge from the Chinese community, as an outsider to Chinese culture, Peter's objective knowledge rooted in mainstream society in Britain could distort Chinese indigenous knowledge. Chawla and Atay (2017) argue that the lack of postcolonial insights allows mainstream narratives to remain unchallenged, which can lead to the erasure or misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge. As a culturally colonised subject, uncovering the knowledge of power dynamics could reversely distort the colonial authority's discourse within 'doubly inscribed'. Enlightened by Bhabha's concept of 'partial representation' (1994: 123), the colonised subject, like the Chinese community here, is often seen through a fragmented or incomplete lens. This results in a 'double inscription' of two-ness, where my attempts to assert an Indigenous interpretation of the dragon (Loong) not only reverse the colonial gaze but also subvert the authority of the coloniser. In this mimicry, I present an altered reflection of the coloniser's image, creating a hybrid cultural identity that both adopts and distorts the dominant narrative.

In *Cultural Phantoms*, while the 'Loong' flies and hovers alongside the London Eye (Fig. 14), the sound of mah-jong tiles clashing with Chinese characters inside the box is distorted. In this visual, I did not think of any specific 'signified' for the characters and mah-jong but considered them as the rhythms and movement of fluid semiotics. What feeling did this shot create for viewers? I intended to conceptualise a dislocation of perception for which a 'subject' creates the anxiety of menace, in which a marginalised representation of 'Loong' forges a process of reproduction to the discourse of the menacing 'Yellow Peril'. The superimposition of images is derived from the division of vermilion red and light yellow, a kind of aesthetics used to express Chinese elements in lacquer painting; in contrast, I placed the still Dragon's Gate in a dark colour of horror and multi-exposures. My aesthetics aim to deliver a sense of a partially evil portrayal being broken since the Indigenous narrative has been trespassed.

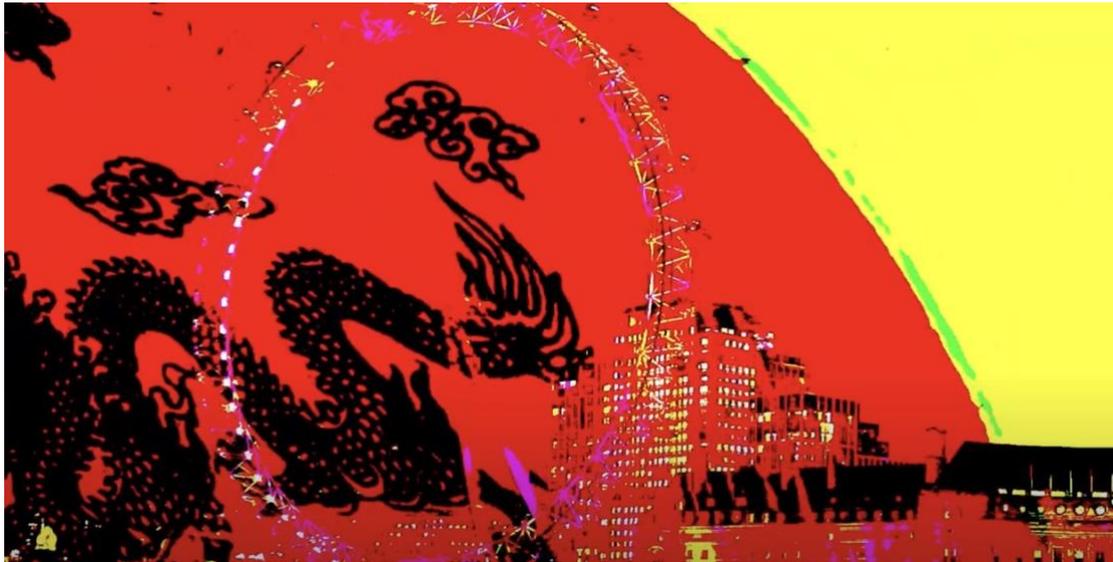


Fig. 17. The Footage of ‘a Loong flies’ in *Cultural Phantoms* (2023) by Weizhi Gan

I offer what I wrote down, namely a poetic monologue before I started this experiment, to suggest a further aesthetic interpretation:

*Try to think about it,*

*How a native behaviour being distorted as menace,*

*Stand up, get up, don't give up the fight,*

*We just wanna hover, not destroy,*

*You are destroying, you are isolating,*

*We wanna update, not stay quiet, not accept,*

*Because we found something wrong, you are the one threatens,*

*Burn it up, burn it down!*

*While you point your fingers someone else is judging you.*

### **3.6 Summary**

By using the Chinese cultural symbol under the enlightenment of the semiotic approach and discussing partial presence and representation, the risk of Chinese elements being superficially showcased in my practice could be reduced. I nonetheless need to discern this misperception

that has been extended to Chinese artistic practice in Britain, which denies the differences in what artists concern themselves with.

Thorpe (2018: 200) emphasises that challenging the notion of ‘exotic’ multicultural work must consider internal generative forces, i.e., the ‘recognition of the essential (internal) generative forces of cultural achievement, not simply its exotic exterior’. For example, in 1992, at the art event ‘Beyond Chinese Take-away’ at the Chinese Art Centre in Manchester, the ‘exhibition was designed to challenge the stereotypes associated with the Chinese community in Britain’ (i.e. take-away label) (Chan, Willis 2018: 110). British Chinese Xu Bing’s installation work *Tianshu/Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) comprised hanging scrolls with printed meaningless ideograms that offer an impression of Chinese characters. This form of art aims to provide an open interpretation of certain Chinese cultural symbols as undefinable, questioning homogeneity.

In this manner, *Cultural Phantoms* still showcases its potential, and I went beyond the representation of ‘Loong’ to obtain representational differences. I will still try to argue that the insufficient information on the internal conflict of double consciousness has not depicted the hybridity of the dragon/Loong. However, I provided an open imagination for ‘Loong hovering’, as well as the comparison of distortion of the ‘flow’ and ‘still’ status. As I overemphasised duality, which may result in a trap of binarism, the two representations of dragon/Loong may affect the sensation of hybridity that is limited in the collective narrative of Britishness/Chineseness. As Marks (2000: 8) argues, the Tran-cultural relation is ‘not between two cultures but between a racial minority group....and a Eurocentric nationalist discourse’. Hereby, the film ‘tends neither to seek inclusion for another cultural group in the national mosaic (multiculturalism) nor to posit an alternative nationalism (separatism)’.

In Britain, multiculturalism to Chineseness has evolved into a tool that can both empower and suppress minority cultures. It was noted that in the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism provided a platform for individuals to act as cultural ambassadors for wider ethnic groups. However, it

also risks creating fixed, essentialist identities that limit political subversion and authentic representation (Thorpe, Yeh 2018: 16). The notion of ‘Chinese arts<sup>17</sup>’ initiatives often led to homogenised narratives, rather than recognising the diverse practices within the British Chinese community (Chan, Willis 2018: 112). I would argue that *Cultural Phantoms* is still in the process of desire creation. I must consider the gender and social class within race to reach the spectrum of complex cultural identity. Both *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms* place my autoethnographic narrative into the discussion of colonial history and legacy, particularly the exploration of power structures and the homogenised oppressions stemming from racial inequality. This practice helps problematise racial experiences to recognise the complexity of power dynamics within power structures so that I can create a ‘hybrid space’ to negotiate my cultural identity.

In this chapter, I explore the historical context and racial stereotypes of Chineseness through *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms*, which provides an entry point to problematise transcultural experiences. I will discuss gender and social class within race, offering a lens on hybrid and non-static expressions of cultural identity.

<sup>17</sup> A kind of essentialism, in which artists are often compelled to work within enforced notions of ‘Chineseness’ that goes opposite of their individual artistic aspirations. As they are expected to conform specific cultural projects that align with stereotypical representations of Chinese culture.

## Chapter 4 *The Sub-self*: The Fluidity of Gender and Class

This chapter discusses how I conduct the film practice in *The Sub-self*, considering what critical race theory suggests concerning the intersection of race, gender, and class (Delgado, Stefancic 2017). I hereby draw on personal experiences to challenge white masculinity and perform a process to disrupt the narrative of whiteness. I realise the idea of double consciousness applied to *Cultural Phantoms* still needs to showcase how complex and hybrid the inter-cultural identity is. Although the duality of Loong/dragon is that the collective narrative of ‘Loong’ is centralised to challenge the narrative of the dragon; this idea shows the omission of personalised marks.

Translating experiences through gender and class can help develop the formation of a hybrid cultural identity. Likewise, I intend to change the aesthetics for the cultural symbol rather than relying only on the film frame beside the ‘semiotics.’ The film aesthetics of ‘fluid semiotics’ underscore the sensation of ‘affect’ as the ‘signs’ in the film within the non-linear narrative of time and movement, which stems from Deleuze’s ‘rhizome’ and ‘becoming’ (Kennedy 2002). In *The Sub-self*, Hanfu ‘fluid semiotics’ guided me to empower the sensation of effect on water sleeves and the Beijing opera mask, which becomes a stated driver in the film frame as the lipsticks and perfume become the new prop used to disrupt the gender-based stereotypes of Asian men. Fluid semiotics can integrate aspects of Mercer’s semiotic mode via a reconceptualised, dynamic approach that allows for non-binary interactions and fluid identities. In contrast, fluid semiotics emphasises continuous, sensory-based interactions.

This strategy in the film might help address the understanding of two-ness efficiently in a representational and collective narrative. Though Allen (1999) critiques double consciousness, suggesting that it lacks substantial analytical depth and clarity due to its enigmatic references and inadequate examples, the double consciousness of dual identities within an oppressive system sets the groundwork for understanding race in relation to class struggle (Lindsay 2022: 172). Understanding this duality is not merely a struggle over identity but also encompasses

broader socio-economic dimensions, linking cultural affiliation and citizenship to the fight against class-based oppression (Gilroy 1993: 167). The concept of class is presented not just as an economic position but also as a lived experience intertwined with racial and cultural identities, making it a significant aspect of the discussions around black political culture and intellectual life (Gilroy 1993: 8). Stuart Hall in an interview suggests that class identity extends beyond solely income levels; it instead involves the presence of economic security and stability, and functions as a communicative entity shaped by historically specific contexts, including ideological and imagined elements such as a sense of community, status symbols, territories, rituals, and gender and racial difference. These class dynamics influence the understanding of identity (i.e., feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk) (Grossberg 1996: 144, Orbe 2014: 196, Langston 1998: 128). Likewise, gender and sexual desire are considered as performative acts that are ‘the way people unconsciously learn and ‘cite’, or act out, gendered ways of being’, i.e., language, rituals, and roles shape how people see their bodies and their identities (Butler 1990: 25, Hickey-Moody 2019). This indicates that masculinity is dynamic and shaped by social contexts.

#### **4.1 Class and Gender within Race**

For Chinese in Britain, divisions persist within the community based on socio-economic class, with some members trapped in ethnic-based businesses. In contrast, others transition into professional sectors (Wang 2016: 16). Benton and Gomez (2008: 359) argue that these dynamics create a contrast between those who have successfully climbed the socio-economic ladder and those still in traditional industries, like catering, which refers to lower status. Even in times of economic growth, the association of the Chinese with lower-class occupations perpetuates harmful stereotypes, while those who succeed in upward mobility may still face the stigma of racialised tropes derived from historical prejudices, constrained by structural factors, including socio-economic status, and shaped by hybrid cultural flows (Benton, Gomez 2008, Wang 2016).

Certain postcolonial immigrants are often positioned in ways that privilege them within settler narratives, thereby overshadowing the realities of Indigenous peoples (Chandrasheka 2018). Bhabha (1994: 318, 359) argues that considering class identity could see through the ‘bottom of the stream’, which is not a singular and primary category to analyse hybrid identity; instead, it is an intersection with race and gender that should be recognised within power structures. The narrative around socioeconomic disadvantage suggests that attempts to dissolve racial inequalities by focusing on class alone may still favour those who are already privileged, often white, thus perpetuating existing inequalities (Delgado, Stefancic 2017: 94). Bhabha (1994) notes that class identity exhibits a narcissistic tendency that can overshadow race, gender, and other social differences by presenting a singular narrative that subsumes these complexities within class relations. The narcissistic tendency can lead to the disavowal of cultural differences, as individuals or groups may prioritise their identity and narratives while marginalising or devaluing others (Bhabha 1994: 110). Thus, before I start to discuss my stories for social class, it is necessary to explore the gender stereotypes I might have experienced so that I can identify the intersection of race, class, and gender.

For gender issues, Crenshaw (1991) argues that antiracist discourses overlooking the significance of gender fail to interrogate the implications of race. Though I am a Chinese heterosexual man, there is still the omission of consideration for gender-based stereotypes in *Cultural Phantoms*. I might face the oppression of racial castration, as it stems from the historical fear of the ‘Yellow Peril’, which views Asian men as both weak and submissive. The model minority stereotype adds psychological pressure, demanding assimilation into the mainstream culture while still framing these individuals as either inadequately masculine or, paradoxically, a potential threat (Frayling 2014, Yeh 2014).

Throughout this thesis, I will employ the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as it is more appropriate than merely using the more generic term ‘masculinity’. Hegemonic masculinity was introduced by R. W. Connell (1995), and it refers to the cultural dynamics by which a particular form of masculinity is exalted above others, thus sustaining male dominance and

patriarchal structures. Also, it is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities, as well as in relation to women, highlighting how different masculinities interact within the framework of gender relations (Messerschmidt, Messner 2018: 37). These masculinities vary by societal contexts, historical moments, and other social conditions. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity should not be related to simply ‘toxic’ masculinity; it is rather a relational concept embedded in cultural and institutional power structures. As Messerschmidt and Messner (2018: 35) argue, hegemonic masculinity acknowledges diverse masculinities and their implications for power and inequality. These hybrid masculinities illustrate how dominant groups can adopt elements from subordinated identities to reinforce existing power structures while also reflecting a broader variability in masculine practices (Bridges, Pascoe 2018: 258, 259).

As Eng (2001: 29) argues, using ‘emasculated sissy’ to depict Asian men reflects that the predominant societal perceptions equate Asian masculinity with femininity and weakness, contrasting these with Western ideals of strength embodied by white masculinity. As British masculinity was often positioned above its colonial counterpart, reflecting and reinforcing imperial power structures, the ideal of the ‘manly Englishman’ is of sportsmanship, ruggedness, and a chivalrous demeanour towards women (Sinha 1995: vii, 7). Contractedly, Chineseness in Britain has nothing to do with ‘laddishness’ and so-called ‘normal masculinity’ (Wang 2016: 238)

White masculinity is associated with power and the idea that white men possess a ‘sufficient’ masculinity that is reinforced through societal narratives. In this manner, whiteness uses symbolic norms that align with ideals of paternal authority, often subordinating those who are racialised as ‘other’ or feminised. This is often upheld through mechanisms of fetishism<sup>18</sup>, where the Asian male body becomes the site of denial for the white male subject through

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud’s fetishism posits that a man, who is traumatised by the sight of female castration (the absence of a penis), constructs a fetish to project a surrogate penis onto the female body to make her tolerable as a sexual object without confronting her difference.

‘reverse fetishism’ (Eng 2001: 31, 150, 152). Such power of privilege stemming from whiteness always refers to the male organ, ‘penis’, fetishising Asian men by refusing to acknowledge the penises owned by Asian men. This is like ‘Asian and anus are conflated’, which reinforces the stereotype that Asian men lack traditional masculine qualities (Mercer 2016: 121, Eng 2001: 1, 151).

Fetishism here is the projection to desires and beliefs of racialised others, which leads to dehumanisation and objectification; ‘the white man is sealed in his whiteness’ suggests a rigidity to identity and perception grounded in racial superiority (Fanon 2008: 3, 136). Bhabha (1994: 107) suggests that fetishism operates through a dual process of metaphor and metonymy (referring to partial representation and double inscription), which serves to mask absence while simultaneously registering a perceived lack, to provide access to an ‘identity’ informed by both mastery and pleasure yet also fraught with anxiety and defence:

There is an important difference between fetishism and hybridity. The fetish reacts to the change in the value of the phallus by fixing on an object prior to the perception of difference, an object that can metaphorically substitute for its presence while registering the difference. So long as it fulfils the fetishistic ritual, the object can look like anything (or nothing!). (Bhabha 1994: 164)

Fetishism, therefore, becomes a strategy for managing forbidden desires, enabling individuals to indulge these desires while simultaneously denying their existence (Hall 1997: 266). Desire is redirected toward another object, leading to a method for representing and disavowing tabooed subjects, facilitating a dual engagement with both desire and denial (267). *The Sub-self* still follows Marks’ haptic sensation to experiment with ‘reverse fetishism’ through the texture of the cultural symbols themselves and the shots of ‘desire’.

Eng (2001: 136, 138) advocates that heterosexual Asian men can reveal the fragility of normative white masculinity and embrace the vulnerability of racial oppression. In other words, using non-normative masculinity to question the monolithic of whiteness and making

‘whiteness’ visible helps us understand its role in maintaining traditional masculinity. Double-faced masking allows for the performance of identities that can push against the rigid and often violent expectations imposed by white patriarchal norms, by utilising this duality to interrogate and critique the stereotypes tied to black masculinity, which are often laden with both cultural pathos and the grotesque (Mercer 2016: 66). Hooks (2004: 120) suggests that heterosexual men could ally with the feminist discourse to create new concepts of masculinity, like countering misogyny or homophobic remarks, thereby promoting a culture of respect and integrity (Kimmel 2008). The experiences of women of colour are often side-lined in discussions focused solely on racial or class identity, which can mask the internal hierarchies and conflicts present and hinder the disruption of white masculinity (Lowe 2003: 142). As Eng argues:

If being gendered ‘male’ in our culture is having power and speech—phallus and logos—the silenced and powerless subject is female, whatever her anatomical construction’. As such, this model of male hysteria—significantly crosshatched by class issues.... (2001: 179)

Eng (2001: 11, 14) and Milani (2018: 33, 34) emphasise that engaging with desire and pleasure enables us to challenge social norms and redefine our masculinities, as understanding desire is a cultural and constructed phenomenon. While much of the discussion of challenging white masculinity centres on sexual desire, it also indicates the desire for power, acceptance, or social identity, especially for the intersection with race (Guarracino 2018, Eng 2001). As ‘desire’ is framed as a pathway free of patriarchal representation, men could escape the rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity to affirm difference and resistance to oppressive norms (Wojtaszek 2019). Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 277) argue that ‘fluid desire’ could break the restrictions imposed by traditional masculinity. For example, traditional ideals of masculinity pressure Asian men to conform to a specific standard of ‘handsomeness’ like that of Bruce Lee, which contains both racial and gendered narratives (Guarracino 2018: 135). As for what ‘fluid semiotics’ advocates, the ‘desire’ has no fixed objective, and traditional masculinity, therefore, is not a straightforward goal. There are somewhat various manifestations (molecular entities) (Deleuze, Guatarri 1987: 292).

Masculinity in contemporary China is also shaped by cultural hybridisation, where traditional Chinese ideals merge with global narratives, including those related to femininity and queerness. This hybridity leads to various expressions of masculinity which, sometimes resist hegemonic norms (Song, Xi 2024: 321, 322). In *The Sub-self*, such hybridity emphasises the ambiguous presentation of male figures who oscillate between strength and vulnerability, resisting singular interpretations of masculine identity.

‘Becoming-woman’ is considered as understanding masculinity, which posits all becomings, including the ‘becoming of a man’ into a different identity or role, which necessitates passing through the experience of becoming-woman (Deleuze, Guatarri 1987: 277). It does not mean solely adopting feminine traits or roles (which could be seen as feminisation) but rather refers to undergoing a specific transformation that produces a ‘molecular woman’ that exists beyond these established classifications (275). This ‘becoming’ process could lead to the fixed ‘signified’ of masculinity losing its dominance.

In *The Sub-self*, I intend to challenge gender-based stereotypes by showing how my class dynamics affect me to create differences from the racial castration of white masculinity, wherein I embrace my vulnerability, pleasure, and desire. As the experience of vulnerability is not solely a female experience and can indeed be shared among men in specific contexts, the overlapping dichotomies, such as female/male, are inadequate to perform hybrid identities for disrupting white masculinity (Bakrania 2013). In this manner, Mercer (2016: 116-117) mentions a shared human experience beyond gender binaries, indicating that the androgynous, i.e., both male and female perspectives, are inherently a part of everyone. As the only difference between a man and a woman is their sex organs, this emphasises that socially constructed identities are intertwined with experiences of oppression and personal agency (McLennan 2019). Bhabha (1994: 2) also critiques using simple categorisations of identity, rather than the singularities of class or gender, to address the subject positions influenced by race, generation, and geopolitical locale, suggesting new signs of unique cultural identity.

In this manner, the discussion of the intersection of class and gender must be embedded in racial stories, as our identities fluctuate based on contextual intersections such as race, class, and gender, reinforcing the need to fully grasp the complexities of personal narratives in autoethnography (Johnson 2014: 94). For my social class, I intend to draw my racial experiences of a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant in Southampton in 2019, where the racial encounter could respond to both the economic necessity and social narratives, referring to a class identity shaped by racial and ethnic assumptions. Furthermore, the status shift between a student and restaurant waitperson might be able to reflect the white masculinity in class dynamics. I do realise the privilege that my middle-class status brings me, as a Chinese student, in that my family can afford tuition fees for me to study in Britain. When I worked in a Chinese restaurant, compared to those who worked there to make a living, I was different. At this moment, I posited myself as both an international student and a waiter seeking to earn more spending money.

#### **4.2 Social Class in Autoethnography**

This restaurant, however, was not in a typical Chinese community such as Chinatown. Chinese take-aways in Britain tend to adopt a strategy of geographic differentiation, where each establishment tries to keep a distance from others to minimise competition (Chau, Yu 2001: 114). The restaurant where I worked provides take-away service, usually from the 'Hungry Panda' mobile phone application. With the landlord's illegal migration background, social exclusion is inevitable as a caterer in the private market. Someone like this is, as Chau and Yu (2001, 119) argue, 'more as a commodity than as a citizen'. Yeh (2014: 1205: 9) notes that many British Chinese-owned restaurants are scattered geographically, creating an isolated environment where caterers must deal with racism alone.

Contact between customers and Chinese individuals is often driven by an interest in Chinese cuisine in the catering business. However, this interaction sometimes leads to negative

outcomes, such as when customers baselessly speculate that Chinese dishes contain inappropriate ingredients like cat bones and dog meat, which often results in the ridicule and mockery of the Chinese community (Parker 1994: 627, Chau, Yu 2001: 117). The stereotype that Chinese businesses engage in unsanitary or unethical practices acts as a mechanism to demonise the cultural ‘other’ and maintain white, Western dominance over cultural and economic spaces (Eng 2001: 66). This aligns with the dominance of white masculinity, which often positions itself as the norm or ‘gold standard’ (i.e. predominantly white, urban, heterosexual, and middle class) while marking others as ‘deviant’ or ‘unethical’ (Hooks 2004: 122, Kimmel 2008: 54).

As a student from China working in a restaurant, I was always viewed as a dirty-handed kid from China. For instance, I would come out of the kitchen wearing an apron after washing dishes to serve food-orders or act as a waiter. It was assumed that I offered homosexual services due to my seemingly unaged face and slim body. I was even spoken to in a ‘gentle tone’ as Asian men are often relegated to lower-status jobs that carry certain negative connotations, such as those involving food service. This reflects how economic hardships feminise and force Asian American men into professions traditionally associated with women, such as waitstaff or cooks (Eng 2001: 92).

Hegemonic masculinity homogenises Asian men through racial markers like ‘yellowness’, framing their identity as a context-specific, socially constructed category shaped by historical and global power dynamics. This racial and sexual differentiation reinforces mainstream norms by falsely treating them as distinct categories (Miyake 2021: 493, Eng 2001: 19). I suggest that Hegemonic masculinity reflects the anxiety of dominant norms in obscuring the systemic barriers that various racial groups face.

#### ***4.3 The Sub-self***

In *The Sub-self*, I will use Deleuze and Guattari's 'desire' to develop my own personal agency, the 'desire' is divided into three parts. To challenge the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 13) advocate a schizophrenic condition of desire in non-linear trajectories, which represents an immanent, experimental, and affirmative process of being with the pursuit of life's intensities:

It is desire itself that affectively adjudicates ethical problems according to, and from the perspective of, desire itself. Desire is not about mindless, unbridled or chaotic experimentation; rather, it is about "extracting from alcohol the life that it contains without drinking," getting drunk on water.... (Wojtaszek 2019: 200)

The 'crisis of masculinity' is recognised as an 'event' that marks a relationship between subjective experiences and social conditions, which has resulted in a transformation of the sense of what it means 'to be a man' (Harman2010: 36). While hegemonic masculinity remains dominant, it faces challenges from rising female empowerment, the emergence of effeminate male icons. For example, the popularity of androgynous male presentations and subcultures like 'fake girls' (weiniang), illustrates this push against traditional hegemonic masculine ideals (Song, Xi 2024: 321, 325).

Within this 'desire' in *The Sub-self*, I continue to use double inscription to partially represent the narrative of white masculinity by chinoiserie. The footage does not follow the rigid binary of masculinity and femininity, whiteness, and racial difference, like how the Asian male body is often feminised within a colonial narrative (Eng 2001: 159). In this manner, Hanfu, i.e., water sleeves, beauty pursuit and a neon Beijing opera mask constitute my narrative for the hybrid cultural identity. To extend, based on what I posited, the shift of social class reflects an intersection of race, gender and class, the narrative of 'emasculinity' essentially towards how the patriarchy of whiteness has estranged Asian men from mainstream culture. The part-time job introduces a 'dirty' and feminised image, and the student status gives me a 'submissive' image; the dynamics of 'yellowness' allow me to shape a more multifaceted 'self' in which I not only explore the internal conflict of two-ness, but also consider a subjective gender-based

perception as a ‘biological man’ status to point out how whiteness fails to monopolise the definition of masculinity. ‘Fluid semiotics’ advocates focusing on the smaller, fluid, and constantly shifting aspects of experience to move beyond the binary of gender, as ‘the film is not only a semiotic, or metaphorical, account of the complexities of gendered subjectivities’; instead, the aim is to embrace ‘relations of movement and rest, speed, and slowness between unformed elements’ (Kennedy 2002: 127, 186).

#### **4.4 Desire of ‘Chinoiserie’**

The desire for ‘chinoiserie’ as a nostalgic view of ‘otherness’ was intertwined with notions of femininity, as chinoiserie fashions tied into women’s roles as consumers in the early twentieth century (Witchard 2015: 13). The ‘mimicry’ for a ‘fantasised femininity’ could indicate my desire for the disruption for white masculinity.

I placed the shot of feminine water-sleeves in the sequence with the intention of amplifying the Chinese aesthetics represented by the movements and textures. The aim is to critique how white masculinity has ignored the aesthetics of the East and instead objectified them. An example is David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, which erroneously conflates elements like the Chinese ‘cheongsam’ and the Japanese kimono, where the ‘Oriental’ is defined not by its own attributes but rather by the desires and projections of the Western gaze (Eng 2001: 139). And the shot might deliver an attitude that the ‘Bruce Lee’ type is not the only standard to define Asian male masculinity. For example, natives in Britain usually expect me to know Chinese martial arts, like Jackie Chan or Jet Li; it sounds like martial arts have become the only channel through which people in Britain perceive Chineseness.

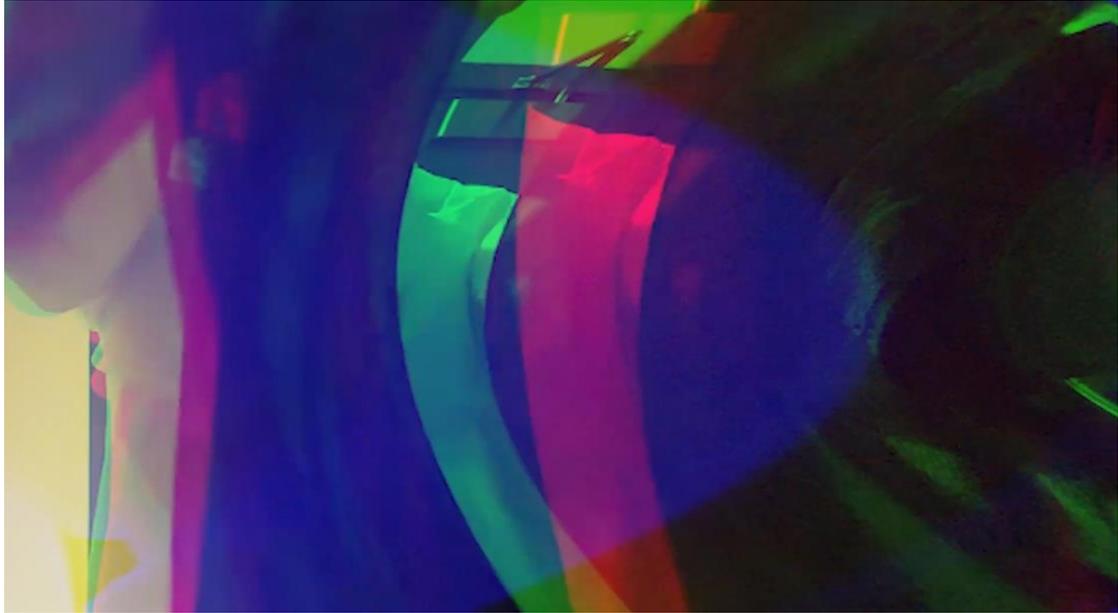


Fig. 18. Water-sleeves within Superimposition in *The Sub-self* (2024) by Weizhi Gan

As I wore the glowing glasses and water sleeves, I rhythm-waved within the distorted and rainbow-like superimposition. I also used the ‘strobe’ within the slow frame to manipulate the rhythm, attempting to capture and intensify the fluid dynamics and grace inherent to the movements of the water-sleeves. The movement of the water-sleeves emphasises the elegance and fluidity required to perform this traditional style effectively. When casting out and returning the sleeve, the dancer should give the initial stimulus and then let the sleeve unfurl naturally, creating an ethereal quality in the choreography (Wilcox 2019: 1). I used the light element in distortion to visually fuse with the movement of the water-sleeves, whereby the screen does not distinguish individual objects. As noted by Marks (2000: 187), this focus shift could affect the audience’s attention to the film’s visuality. My touch of intimacy with the water-sleeves intends to invite viewers to sense it as an event.

Kennedy’s discussion is not separate from Deleuze’s ‘rhizomatic’ (1987: 21), without a predetermined beginning or end, ultimately favouring connections and flows over rigid structures. I therefore intend to create beyond the representational of Hanfu sleeves; this is unlike how I insisted on the duality of Loong/dragon in *Cultural Phantoms* and is rather empowering a powerful connection that transcends the traditional narrative of Hanfu-sleeves.

In this manner, I mean that I employed the material of the water-sleeves to present a kind of ‘softly fluid’ nature, instead of complying with the solid implication of its representation. An example would be providing a traditional water-sleeves dance or using a Western dance to make an interpretation of hybridity within it. This ‘materiality’ (the filmic frame) encompasses not just the physical body but also how the brain and mind process sensations in relation to the cinematic experiences, the ‘affect’ of which theorises pleasure and the desire of ‘body’ (colours, textures, sounds, and movement) in the ‘becoming’ of neo-aesthetics (referring to sensation and affect) (Kennedy 2002: 23, 51).

Mercer (2016: 130) emphasises that the body is portrayed and perceived by handling representations of bodies and identities in ways that allow for ambiguity, to disrupt established notions of gender in the semiotic approach. This idea likewise involves my review of the ‘queer drag performance’, as Eng (2001: 21) critiques regarding the cultural responses to white masculinity, i.e., a group’s efforts to recuperate a sense of masculinity from a patriarchal perspective entrenched in heterosexism. This response often fails to engage with feminist and queer critiques, resulting in a legacy that is partially defined by a struggle against both racial and sexual marginalisation. As an autoethnographic film, *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016) by Rosa Fong, reinterprets and challenges white masculinity through ‘chinoiserie drag’:

By masquerading as the Oriental Other, Zoe produces a similar effect as Koo’s ghost mother in Yeung’s film – that of mimicry. Zoe performs the enduring imperialist narrative of the Oriental woman with ‘sly civility’. (Fong 2020: 53)

Zoe navigates her identity as a transgender woman within the framework of racialised gender to expose the constraints and expectations surrounding masculinity. Zoe thereby reveals the insecurities (she articulates a stark contrast in visibility and desirability between her experiences as an East Asian man and as a Chinese Malay transgender woman in Britain) within these structures (Fong 2020).

Zoe creates a persona that plays on chinoiserie drag by embodying different versions of the butterfly myth, where Zoe's desire is to make the invisible visible. She performs as a delicate oriental butterfly that presents Zoe's 'affect', projecting an image of exoticness and otherness that is often associated with East Asian women in Western cultures:

Zoe uses *M. Butterfly* to empower herself. In *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016), Zoe describes how she was a dancer in London's West End version of *M. Butterfly* (1988). Acting and performing in Hwang's play night after night must have left an impression on the young Zoe. Wearing a butterfly-themed shirt and sitting on the chaise longue Zoe says, 'The East has always been seen as something feminine, mystical [...] The West has always been seen as very masculine, very powerful, you know. And I think there is always this urge for the West to colonize the East because the woman needs to be protected. (Fong 2020: 54)

Ang (2001: 148) highlights a contradictory position for Asian women, who may be seen as desirable others within a multicultural narrative while still being marginalised, as they often occupy a space of 'objectified otherness'. The concept of 'Yellow Fever' refers to a fetish for Asian women (Eng 2001: 158). As chinoiserie was also trivialised and objectified as a manifestation of women's irrational desires for exotic and ornamental items, it is often depicted negatively in literature as a preoccupation with 'useless foreign goods' as frivolous and lacking in serious artistic merit (Porter 2015: 19). By exploring the exotification of race through chinoiserie drag, Zoe can reveal the fluidity and hybridity of her gender identity. She challenges the fixed stereotypes and expectations of how East Asian women should be perceived, making her invisible self-visible in the West. Zoe's refusal to conform to a linear understanding of racialised gendered identity enables her to 'create manifold identities of contestation' and 'destabilise the hegemonic order' (Fong 2020: 55).

Nonetheless, the water-sleeves scene could somehow leave a feminine impression if viewers do not acquire the aesthetics and categorise it as an exotic act, as with Zoe, which might have left an oriental dream-like narrative. As a Chinese man, the water-sleeves become the 'falsetto', i.e., a vocal technique for Chinese male performers to represent the perceived femininity in

Chinese opera, which could perpetuate Chinese men's racial castration (Rao 2016: 55, Guarracino 2018: 135). I suggest that the water-sleeves move could be seen as a process of productivity and included in one of the factors in the multiplicity I created, leading to more multifaceted 'sides' I need to add to the film. To extend, I admit a desire for Eastern aesthetics, although that is not the only option.

#### **4.5 'Desire' of Beauty**

Other than Hanfu sleeves, according to my middle class and student status, I consider how my desire has driven my lifestyle (status, ritual, dress, act), which is the opposite of the British male standard of whiteness and instead related to the exotic image. The lipsticks and a bottle of perfume become numbered among the props to depict my desire for the body as part of my pursuit of beauty. In contrast with Zoe, I also use a non-exotic narrative to encourage viewers to capture a dynamic occurrence, operating as a 'multiplicity' (Kennedy 2002), particularly compared to the water-sleeve sequence. This image of lifestyle implies my desire to create something different from the 'unethical' and 'barbarous' image I obtained at the Chinese restaurant. Likewise, this desire also comes from my heterosexual status, which indicates how I think what 'charming' is, and that the source of desire is not only from the intention to resist the oppression of racial castration. This desire is masked by the narrative of whiteness of being invincible, and I, as a result of this, use it as a non-linear 'rhizomatic' and 'becoming' process to establish a unique mark of an individual Chinese man.

Lipsticks and perfume, representing the desire for beauty, are often used in my everyday life in Britain. In this manner, I intend to create a unique fashion image as a Chinese man due to my sometimes self-contemptuous psychology. 'I need to be fashionable', 'have a high hygiene standard', and 'smell good' may make me more attractive as a Chinese man in Britain. Nevertheless, I suggest that this 'fashion' pursuit is not always positive, regarding changing the dirty image and being accepted by whiteness. I place myself in an inferior status to imagine the ideal of the 'manly Englishman'. I do not think I can achieve this norm, so the fashion style

might be more of a Western style, instead of backward and exotically ‘corny’ (the distorted depiction of whiteness, as this contradicts the psychological activity of double consciousness that likewise exists. I used superimposition of another-self in a textural effect to create a sense of instability of double-faced masking within Deleuze’s ‘desire’ and Kennedy’s ‘fluid semiotics’. I also juxtaposed the psychedelic shot (rapid editing, strobe) of the montage to become a film texture of reality and dream-like virtuality. In doing so, I intend to offer a sensory layer to present a fluid psychological activity.



Fig. 19. ‘Lipsticks’ in *The Sub-self* (2024) by Weizhi Gan

Under this sensory frame, I used lipsticks on my face across the border of my mouth to disrupt the traditional use of lipsticks, becoming blurred, which might throw out a thought to viewers – male or female?

Through the simple act of applying one element of make-up, a flash of red ruining what might be seen as an otherwise normalized appearance, it demonstrates the fragility of normative power systems that seek to repress the underlying force of desire. But more than this, it also demonstrates the fragility of ‘masculinity’ itself. (Taylor 2020: 177)

Unlike the make-up of lipsticks and perfume, which created new scenes, the footage of me shaving aims to reject British masculinity of ruggedness. I was told that a ‘hairy face is macho, my face looks like an egg without the shell, not like a real man’, in which whiteness monopolises the trait of men who have a ‘penis’, ‘racially castrating’ the Asian male (Eng 2001: 158). In white masculinity, shaving the face could be seen as a male action. I intentionally removed the imposed definition of men, and so this definition is not determined by whether I embrace the value of white masculinity.

Men today face pressures regarding their body image, whereby appearances have become significant in defining masculinity. Bordo (1999) observes a shift in which beauty standards increasingly overshadow traditional masculine (rugged, dominant figures) traits, as many men now seek to be seen as ‘attractive’ and ‘good-looking’. This trend pushes men to be as well-groomed as women, adding layers of patriarchal pressure to conform not only to masculine ideals but also to contemporary standards of attractiveness (224). Meanwhile, ‘the culture of entitlement’ (over-conformity to masculine ideals) plays a role in how numerous young men perceive and react to these beauty standards, fostering a sense of insecurity linked to their appearance, leading them to prioritise looking attractive over other qualities traditionally associated with masculinity (Kimmel 2008: 59, 253).

This shift reflects that the historical representation of masculinity—often linked with notions of dominance and strength—has been complicated by factors such as race, class, and evolving cultural standards of beauty (Bordo 1999: 202, 297). However, Bordo (1999: 285) critiques that beauty remains a prerequisite for success for women and that the standards have only become more stringent over time. I will argue that using contemporised beauty standards as an entry point to challenge rigid white masculinity could still create a difference and multiplicity, thereby transcending the binary of men/women. However, we need to be watchful to avoid producing a new homogenised concept, as the narrative of beauty standards might also result in a loss of focus on race, and stereotypes of what beauty is.

#### 4.6 Desire for Creativity

Therefore, I started to move back to chinoiserie, the aesthetics of the Beijing opera mask that presents no recreation of aesthetics within the psychedelic aesthetics of my previous practice. I would like to find a way to apply the double vision to the Beijing Opera mask, where I project the ‘productive desire’ onto the mask to create a sensational dimension beyond ‘mimicry’.

Chinoiserie has been trivialised as a decorative art that supports white modernity, which parallels how various elements of culture were appropriated to maintain white patriarchal dominance by contrasting them with a feminised and exotic view of Chinese culture (Cheang 2015: 152). Metaphorically, I thus indicate that the whiteness has ignored how many characters Beijing opera masks have. As illustrated through the experiences of Asian American men facing both romanticised perceptions and stereotypes of femininity and weakness, the ‘West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor’ (Eng 2001: 1). Asian men are thus either sexual predators of white women or submissive figures to white men (Yeh 2015: 181), pretty much like the use of Chinese motifs became a way for whiteness to express its own aesthetic and cultural desires by stripping away the dignity of Chinese culture, turning it into a collection of ornamental motifs that white men could manipulate (Witchard 2015: 6). By creating the neon vision on the Beijing opera mask, my intention to ‘destroy’ dependency on traditional beauty standards might be able to respond to the fact that chinoiserie has been often viewed as lacking depth, yet represents a sphere of material culture that transcends mere aesthetic appreciation; this interplay presents how Chinoiserie can act as a counter-narrative to the dominant linear narrative of modernism (Porter 2015: 19, Cheang 2015: 152, Yeh 2015: 195, Witchard 2015).

Dynamically, Deleuze’s desire enlightened me to ‘inject’ my subjective experiences (productively, the desire and pleasure of music-rap, hairstyle, dress) into the mask, which enables it to be objectified by viewers. The mask is not limited to the situation of ‘chinoiserie,’ but rather lies in a dynamic mix of cultural influences. As Bhangra (2013: 34, 56-57) advocates,

Asian artists in Britain must reconfigure their identity in a way that resonates within the UK mainstream without emasculating themselves. This is similar to black music genres, which create a dynamic against white masculinity by asserting a shared cultural experience. This could relate to my desire and pleasure in live-music culture and open-mic in the pub. Singing on the stage has made me visible, giving me not an exotic visibility, but rather an indefinite mixture, i.e., ‘Asian face, rapping, hip-pop, punk, curly hairstyle, saggy and baggy khaki, singing Coolio’s *Gangsta’s Paradise*’. Hereby, I slightly changed the lyrics: ‘as I walk through the valley of the shadow of whiteness.... been spending most our lives living in an oriental paradise’. The comments I received were ‘was cool like Afroman’. The neon light on the stage created a sense of pleasure; I brought this pleasure into the Chinese face-Beijing opera mask that became a neon mask. Here, I intend to take action to influence my own ‘masculinity,’ as Kennedy (2002: 89) notes that personal agency is like ‘proto subjectivities’ (non-single, unified self), repositioning within movements, forces, and intensities rather than a fixed self.

In this manner, I aim to release personal agency that refers to a critical site for the formation of subjectivity and identity. Bhabha describes how ‘the affective ‘borderland’... opens unexpected and hitherto unrecognised ways in which the native subject can circumvent colonial power’ (Moore-Gilbert 2005: 458). This is determined by the dynamics of insider/outsider, observer/observed, and experiencer or perceiver, which aims to use ‘fluid semiotics’ to achieve the non-binary subject/object in the metonymy of psychedelic aesthetics. To extend this, how do I view my masculinity? How do others view me? How can the binary of masculine and feminine in the film frame be ‘fuzzy’ and hybrid?

To amplify the effect of ‘fluid semiotics’, I use the Beijing opera mask interspersed through the sequence to create a fragmented order. In my previous practice, the Beijing opera mask was presented as a ‘solid image’; I, therefore, optimized it through the rhythm of ‘fluid semiotics.’ By this means, I intended to ‘destroy’ the dependency on beauty standards and draw the ‘semiotic mode’ back to post-colonial dynamics. The neon mask attempts to drive this double vision/inscription to be formed through an ordinary view with a heightened awareness of

existence, an interaction with the image of the 'penis'. The image of my topless body and an archived shot of rapping on the stage, meanwhile, are superimposed through the filmic frame. Huxley's test (2010: 11) has driven free from the usual mental filters that characterise everyday observation. As the mask transitions from its original form into a neon-lit version that produces a vivid colour shift to create the strobe light from the mask itself:

The mise-en-scène is both reality and fantasy conjoined. Vibrant colours, reds, blues and yellows splatter our visual senses, .... The mind/body/brain is already in a state of disorientation this early on in the movie. (Kennedy 2002: 188)

In doing so, I tested what Powell (2007: 81) states, namely using a gyrating camera and stroboscopic flickering from neon lighting to amplify this disorientation and visually encode emotional responses. I intend to ensure that 'subjects not as static givens' in psychedelic aesthetics, as Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters sought to create a psychedelic subjectivity reflective of the vibrant, media-saturated environment of the 1960s, which included elements like neon billboards and automobiles (Cook 2014: 172, 206). I still posit the mask as my cultural legacy here; in the context of racial castration, white masculinity creates a fragmented cultural legacy that reflects no lived experiences of individuals (Eng 2001: 33). I thereby placed the image of a 'penis' to enable the overlapping with the neon mask, in psychedelic aesthetics and the fluid semiotics – the mask aimed to affect the toxic masculinity to become unstable. The shot of the body within the 'texture-overlaid' intends to create a 'haptic mimesis', in an overexposure 'enlarging the grain, and creating mises-en-abyme of video within film, to create a more or less optical or haptic sensation', thus fostering a more embodied and multisensory relationship with the image (Marks 2000: 171).



Fig. 20. 'Neon Scene' in *The Sub-self* (2024) by Weizhi Gan



Fig. 21. 'Neon Scene 2' in *The Sub-self* (2024) by Weizhi Gan

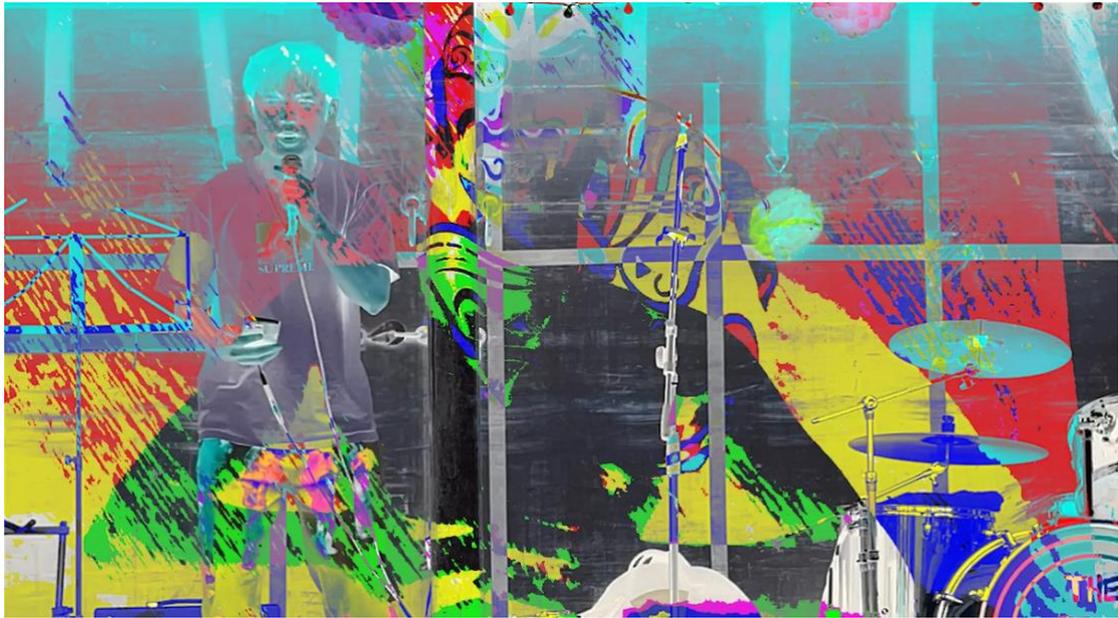


Fig. 22. 'Neon Scene 3' in *The Sub-self* (2024) by Weizhi Gan

I, therefore, employed the neon mask as a 'sensory medium' to affect each of the images. This relates to Huxley's narratives, which offer the contribution to the sensory of 'fluid semiotics' that could affect viewers' perception. The image of the 'penis' is partly hidden and visible because of how the neon light and the track of the glowing glasses release the strobe, whereby I poetically imagined an aesthetics of Aldous Huxley's mescaline test (a derivative of peyote): 'I was back where I had been when I was looking at the flowers – back in a world where everything shone with the 'Inner Light', and was infinite in its significance' (Huxley 1954: 11). The light of illumination allows individuals to confront both their reality and the potential for redemption, factualising for the awakening and radical transformation of consciousness to 'our reification through the fetishisation of the commodity has made us just another commodity amongst commodities'. Hereby, objects that present a 'naked existence' are perceived with extraordinary vividness, leading to an overwhelming sense of beauty and significance that allows for a direct, unmediated experience of reality, contrasting with the conventional, objective view dictated by systematic reasoning (Redlins 2020: 38, Huxley 1954: 8). This could indicate what Bhabha states:

Despite appearances, the text of transparency inscribes a double vision: the field of the 'true' emerges as a visible sign of authority only after the regulatory and displacing division of the true and the false. From this point of view, discursive 'transparency' is best read in the photographic sense in which a transparency is also always a negative, processed into visibility through the technologies of reversal, enlargement, lighting, editing, projection, not a source but a re-source of light. Such a bringing to light is a question of the provision of visibility as a capacity, a strategy, an agency. (1994: 157)

I, therefore, imprinted the dimension of my pre-subjective affection into this idea to create a broader awareness. As Kennedy argues:

They work as a concerto of rhythmical voices or bodies, as 'sensation', the haecceitas beyond of any subjective encounter, which is effected through the brain/mind and body meld, in the Deleuzian sense. (Kennedy 2002: 207)

The neon light allowed me to not rely on the narrative explanation of the Beijing opera mask, merely to keep its importance in my memories. This was inspired by what Mercer (2016: 130) describes, 'Elements previously found or fixed in one code or tradition are freed up to travel through unexpected conduits and passageways...'. In this film frame, the light forms a disturbance to the image of the penis that loses its originally fixed status. Meanwhile, my topless body shows a 'wax and wane' relationship with the 'penis,' introducing a fluid interaction between identity and symbolism.

Unlike the aesthetic presentation of the Hanfu water sleeves, I made unexpected changes to the eastern aesthetics of the Beijing opera mask, as the mask became a source of illumination and an element with its presence and impact; viewers might thus perceive it as a purely visual and sensory experience. This experiment reflected that I intend to embrace more psychedelic origins, also called a de-territorial test, to produce an intercultural and de-colonising narrative in my psychedelic film practice.

When my 'affect' of pleasure and desire is constituted, I might be able to deny a focal point of threat or emasculation, instead honing in on the aestheticization, inviting visual pleasure while subverting stereotypes. I aim for the audience to experience visual pleasure rather than feeling threatened or menaced by the exotic.

#### **4.7 Summary**

*The Sub-self* transcends the gender binary by blurring the lines between the self as the filmmaker and the viewers. This chapter explores personal memories, resisting the concept that the cultural symbol in the film must be according to the original meaning. However, the Indigenous meaning represents a kind of authenticity against the Western demonised narrative. For example, I always like to explain what authentic Chinese food is, but regional differences and personal preferences cannot fit into the term 'authenticity'. So do gender stereotypes: there is no single and authentic Chinese 'masculinity' for Chinese men either. Therefore, personal production becomes significant in multiplicity. In other words, you can be like Bruce Lee or as elegant as a butterfly.

My aesthetic preference for Hanfu, my passion on the stage, and my demand to be seen as a 'charming' man could be considered as a process of how I think of myself as a heterosexual Chinese man who desires to be. My status as a heterosexual Chinese man does not bother me in seeking out the self-defined 'masculinity' beyond the rigid binary of the male/female.

I, therefore, used the concept of 'fluid semiotics' to create non-binary interactions of images, rhythm and experiencing sensation), whereby I consider my subjective experiences as 'molecularity'; Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 291) highlight that all 'becomings' are molecular, the realm of which operates through connections and flows rather than defined segments. Thus, every power centre has a micro-texture, where molecular elements can shape and influence social structures, often leading to novel forms of organisation and identity beyond traditional

categorisations. This leads to the dynamics of collectives and individuals, and personal experiences are affected.

Mainly, the intention of the neon mask transcends what the Beijing opera mask used to be in previous practice, which creates a path in which I employ the aesthetics' altered states on the cultural symbol itself. For example, the water-sleeves materially deliver a sense of 'softness'. I can also amplify this sensation, rather than just using the sense of which dynasty in which the water-sleeves originated. Thus, the neon light comes from the subjective feeling that the pub live music offers; in the meantime, this feeling is ongoing, as I can experience nostalgic or vaporwave music. Viewers, as the subject, can diversify the 'affect' within the film frame.

The experiences I draw reflect how my social class in dynamics shapes my choice of ritual, dress, and feel in terms of my desire for 'masculinity'; the catering part-time job drove me to stay away from the 'dirty' stereotypes, and my desire to occupy a heterosexual male status produced the narrative that also stands in contrast to white masculinity and individualisation, rather than acting collectively.

Through the practice of *The Sub-self*, I started to think about my advantage as most of my life has been spent in China; thus, I do not have to imagine my Chineseness besides my intercultural experiences in Britain. Wang (2017: 157, 200, 295) argues that many young British Chinese immigrants who spend most of their lives in Britain show a protective view of an imagined traditional, oriental, and exotic China, shaped by their family's cultural heritage and past experiences. In addition, the British media shapes their understanding of China. This disconnection somehow hinders the complexity of updated Chineseness constitutes. Thus, in the final stage of my film practice, I will focus on a narrative that can reflect how I view today's China; this will be combined with my intercultural experiences to display a kind of neo-production of my cultural identity.

Building on the visual and conceptual foundation in this chapter, where I aim to address gendered subjectivity, particularly hegemonic masculinity within cultural identity, in the film *The Sub-Self*. In chapter 5, I will explore the notion of ‘home’, which presents the sense of belonging. *Yin-Yang Eyes*, as a final film of this research, will integrate what has been explored and create more filmic elements.

## Chapter 5: Final Experiment – *Yin-Yang Eyes*

The final experiment, a 36-minute film called *Yin-Yang Eyes*, integrates my previous film sequence within the notion of ‘home’ in my transcultural/national experiences. I consider the cultural legacy and the culture beyond tradition to constitute ‘home.’ I hereby constantly balance and negotiate the sense of belonging within the concept of ‘home.’ *Yin-Yang Eyes*, the landscapes of Chinatown, a hometown village in China, and a modernised urban scene become a ‘hybrid home space’. In addition to my living space, Britain has become a site of identity transformation. By psychedelic aesthetics, I intend to embody memories and affective ties to geography beyond conventional visual representations. Through psychedelic aesthetics, I intend to embody memories and affective ties to geography beyond conventional visual representations. This sensation of ‘haunting or ghostly qualities<sup>19</sup>’ allows individuals to feel and navigate their surroundings through tactile impressions (Birch-Bayley 2013: 20, 83).

The desire for a sense of belonging mirrors the sense of personal location and a stable core to one’s individuality (Weeks 1990: 88). ‘Only when we achieve a sense of personal integrity can we represent ourselves and be recognised - this is home, this is belonging’ (Rutherford 1990: 24). ‘Such a politics must be the discovery and making of ‘home’ – the formation of values and collectivities that move beyond the postmodern and its fragmentation of the social’ (25). In transnationalism, ‘home’ is beyond the limitation of location, from which the sense of belonging seeks to comfort the ‘self’ from the conflict of displacement. Providing the sense of ‘home’ for *Yin-Yang Eyes*, I can create the rhythm of ‘fluid semiotics’ within ‘two souls in belonging and unbelonging, reconciled and irreconciled’.

Looking at my practice process, I was slightly trapped in the collective narrative of Chineseness, i.e., my inclination to describe authentic Chinese culture, like Loong/dragon and Hanfu water

<sup>19</sup> As Birch-Bayley discusses, this refers to tactile and affective forms in spatial awareness, which shows haunting forms. I understand that this in psychedelic visuality becomes texture – overlaid of landscapes in superimposition to allow altered states to emerge.

sleeves. *The Sub-self* provides the vision of class and gender within race; however, the experiences in China before I came to Britain are still omitted. These experiences may help me develop more differences and negotiate my hybrid cultural identity, which is the target of the final film, *Yin-Yang Eyes*. *Yin-Yang Eyes* aims to integrate my insights into previous practice within transnationalism and globalisation. Due to Britain's power structures and dynamics, the homogenisation of Chineseness hides the diversity of backgrounds and origins among the Chinese. I am from Mainland China, originally Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, i.e., not Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan. This difference of origins could affect how I depict self-cultural legacies, and the economic rise of Mainland China could also influence my interaction with local traditions. My trans-region experiences of from-village-to-urban mainly present a more fluid and hybrid spectrum of my cultural identity. Technically, when the cultural symbols in the film weave with these experiences, I might be able to tell a more complex identity to 'damage' the original images, producing a neo-discourse.

In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, the ambiguous 'home', modernised 'home' and 'home' crisis constitute the concept for this final practice. These parts are not in a strict division in the film sequence but rather interact with each other. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I divide these ideas to clarify how I think and conduct.

## **5.1 Rhythm Framing**

I title the film *Yin-Yang Eyes*; these are eyes metaphorically described as having the ability to 'see persons and ghosts'. In diaspora study, they can see beyond the simplistic binaries often imposed by dominant cultural narratives (Liew 2001: 19). Yin-Yang is an anti-binary Daoist philosophy, encouraging an exploration of the world that transcends ordinary language and representation (Chen, Ji 2016: 177). The inspiration comes from an informal interview with Daniel York Loh, whose project for performance *The Dao of Unrepresentative British Chinese*

*Experience* (2024) uses the metaphor of ‘The Dream of the Butterfly’<sup>20</sup> to surreally present his semi-autobiographical psychedelic gig-theatrical punk pop rock riff.

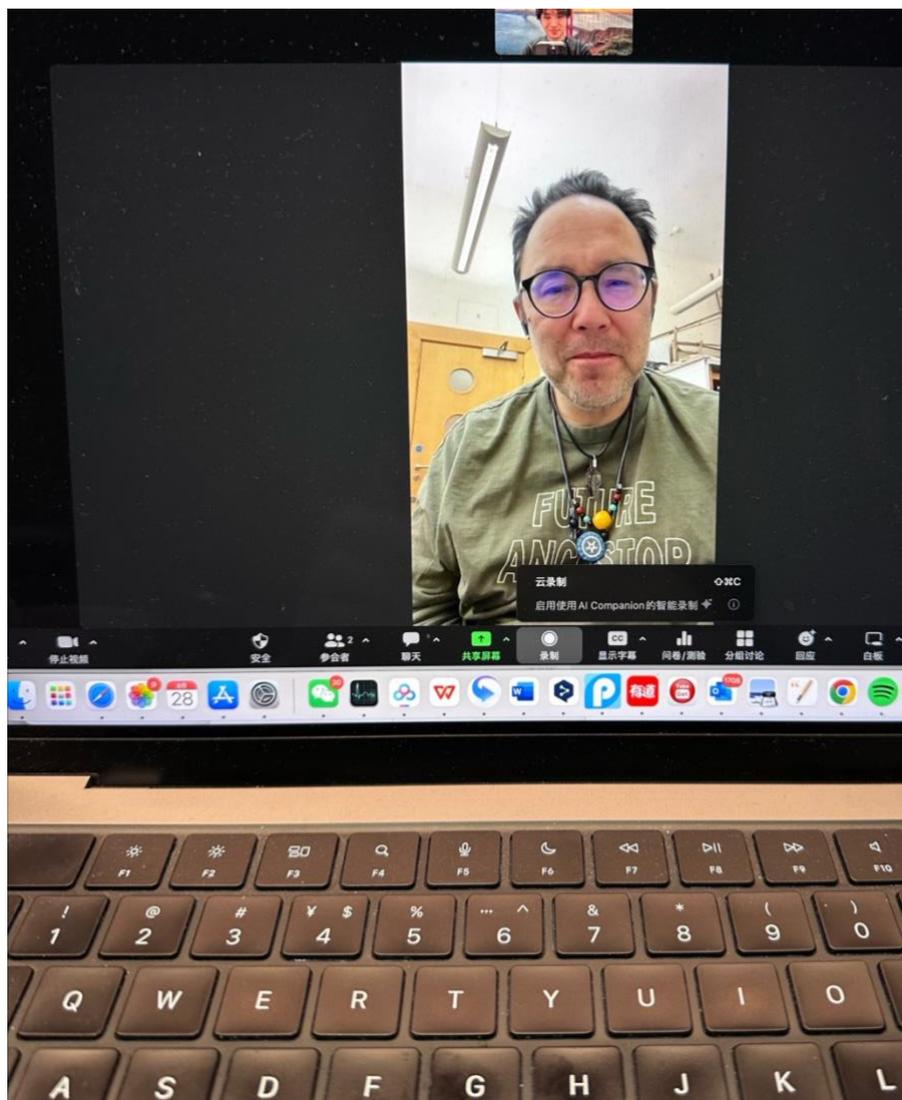


Fig. 23. Interview with Daniel York Loh in March 2024

<sup>20</sup> A famous Daoist allegory found in the Zhuangzi text. In the allegory, Zhuangzi dreams that he is a butterfly, fluttering about without any awareness of his human identity. Upon waking up, Zhuangzi is uncertain whether he is a man who dreams of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. This allegory is often interpreted as a representation of the Daoist teaching of change and the relativity of experience.

York Loh answered, ‘I don’t want to define my cultural identity as British Chinese, but human being, the surrealism of ‘The Dream of the Butterfly’ provides me inspiration to write down my lyrics within the psychedelic rock soundtrack, I want to bring viewers to be immersive and feeling my personal stories.’ The transformation of the butterfly also indicates the borderless nature of the actualised and virtualised. As Jessica Potts, a theatre reviewer, comments on *The Dao of Unrepresentative British Chinese Experience* in the review:

York Loh defies genres whilst remaining coherent and witty. Video projections paint the scene behind on the white walls of the set, providing abstract artistic visuals of the scenes. Composed by An-Ting Chang, the cast take up instruments to perform songs seamlessly and transitions are inventive and effective. During the midpoint the stage separates to reveal an octagonal screen, evoking a Pink Floyd gig as well as a wooden dock, emulating an older setting. The music is vibrant and sometimes angry. Songs about “The East vs West” and “Virtuosity” add to the reflective stream-of-consciousness style, whilst also being enjoyable musical moments. The base guitar hits through the lead’s oscillating notes whilst spoken word and lyrics are delivered. (2024, June)<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, the eyes in *Yin-Yang Eyes* enable me to create a surreal meaning that layers up my psychedelic practice within Chinese philosophy. Particularly, the ‘duality’ of Yin-Yang may help ‘double consciousness’ and point to a new angle:

“One time Yin and one time Yang—this is called [the rhythm] of Dao.” This general concept of nature meant in a more specifically Daoist context that the Dao is the regulator of nature as a rhythmic process, and the Daoist sage has to identify him/herself with the Dao. (Moeller 2006: 106)

Hereby, a dot of black exists in the white, and vice versa, signifying that within each opposite lies a part of the other, which counters the traditional binary thinking that sees opposites as entirely separate and contradictory (Fang, Faure 2010: 325). Both Yin (female, passive) and Yang (male, active) are essential components of a whole as a dynamic balance between

<sup>21</sup> Potts Jessica (2024) ‘*The Dao of Unrepresentative British Chinese Experience* at the Soho Theatre’. Available at: <https://thespyinthestalls.com/2024/06/the-dao-of/> (Accessed 15 December 2024).

contrasting forces, rather than opposing entities that conflict with each other (Fang 2011: 31). As individuals or cultures may simultaneously exhibit traits categorised as individualistic and collectivistic, or strong and weak, depending on the context, this aligns with the Yin Yang view of dualities being interconnected and complementary. Nonetheless, the structure of symmetry may obscure or limit the representation of a more fluid cultural identity. As Fang (2011: 35) clarifies, it is indeed necessary to embrace ‘paradox’ to understand the intercultural dynamics, as ‘culture in action is full of paradoxes, diversity and change’. The Yin Yang perspective therefore advocates for a ‘both/and’ thinking, as opposed to the traditional ‘either/or’ dichotomy, which is especially valuable in cross-cultural engagements (34).

The gap between language and things is effectively bridged, since the images are re-inscribed, as it were, on the “paper” of the mind already. What is most intriguing seems the simultaneity of two actions – the ceasing of the eyes and the capturing of the images; this, and the contrast of day (a Yang image) and night (a Yin element) in the entire poem, are highly suggestive of the Yin/Yang continuum in complementary relation. (Chen, Ji 2016: 33)

I would like to argue that Yin-Yang could frame double consciousness to move beyond solely internal conflict toward a more integrative and dynamic understanding of identity, one that embraces hybridity, fluidity, and balance. In ‘fluid semiotics’, the notion of ‘rest’(slowness) coexists with ‘movement’(speed) as the assemblage of ‘becoming’ (Kennedy 2002: 99-100), which may reflect a kind of Yin-Yang relation as it works ‘outside subjectivity and gendered subjectivity through affect’. Glissant’s transnational ‘connectivity’ could correspond to such relational interaction in which *Yin-Yang Eyes* gains the permission to place each element through mutable complexity. Also, Hall’s critiques of ‘a race of angels’ also indicate the interaction of relation that is crucial for situating my ‘transnational/cultural belonging’. Technically, the Yin-Yang relation within the aesthetics of altered states is the rhythm of gaseous and liquid perception, and the ‘solid’ image constitutes modalities in a ‘plane of consistency’ (Kennedy 2002: 119-120). While in the psychedelic state, Huxley (1954: 20) found himself in a state of profound contemplation that felt incompatible with action, embodying the tension between rest (contemplation) and movement (action). Rather than

straightforward action sequences, this emphasises the intervals or pauses that exist between actions and perceptions, allowing a deeper awareness of time itself, often resulting in a more contemplative viewing experience: 'Despite footage being chopped into discrete shots and edited together, no shot, even a freeze-frame, can ever be still' (Powell 2007: 143).

I, therefore, adopted more ways to present the fluid images, e.g., the moving train, the moving camera and walking around landscapes with a handheld camera and drone-shot sequences within altered state techniques. The use of close-ups, time-pause and photographs could play the role of 'rest'. This rhythm may deliver the 'affect' and 'event' of the Yin-Yang relation in terms of coexisting and paradox.

I would like to not strictly define a specific yin or yang element, where east/west, Chineseness/Britishness, and emasculated/maculated could play a part in the 'paradox.' By importing transnational aesthetics into the psychedelic sensation of 'fluid semiotics,' *Yin-Yang Eyes* may offer a borderless and margin-less feeling to integrate my previous practice. 'There is also no claim that a global or world consciousness is evolving linearly', as transnationalism underscores cross-border or 'deterritorialized' relationships, which add layers for individual experiences in complexity (Faist 2010: 15). In the Yin-Yang framework, 'all individuals can represent multiple cultures in their minds and switching between representations of cultures' (Fang 2011: 45). Hereby, the inter-textualisation of Yin-yang within transnationalism in *Yin-Yang Eyes* could latently and poetically show another layer of sensation through psychedelic aesthetics. The Yin-Yang is used to interpret the 'rhizome' or connectivity in transnationalism, as:

The yin and the yang reside in everything, and in its changes and movements; and the interfusion and interpenetration of one another guarantees an equilibrium that has to be renewed in an ever-lasting dynamic interplay. (Chen, Ji 2016: 44)

In particular, this interfusion in the context of transnationalism could emphasise 'permeable and flexible', from which the adaptation is a process of foraging reconciliation between two

souls. Likewise, the ‘balance’ is constantly attempting to create a sense of belonging or a feeling of home to conform to ‘self’ following displacement and dislocation.

## 5.2 ‘Home’ as Transnational/Cultural Objects

Bhabha (1994: 13) refers to ‘double movement’ as an ‘unhomely moment’ when the boundaries between home and the outside world become blurred, leading to estrangement and confusion. This reflects a broader recognition that the traditional notions of nationhood and the fixed identities attached to them are inadequate in capturing the realities of contemporary cultural flows and the hybrid identities within transnational landscapes (Arfaoui 2017: 115-116). The ‘homing desire’ is not limited to the point of origin but rather desires to reconcile from hybrid cultures (Brah 1996: 193). Nyman (2009: 26) asserts that this ‘desire’ moves beyond ‘statics’ through ‘home’ reconstruction in new locations.

In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, I consider the notion of ‘home’ within the transnational/cultural and Yin-yang context to deny the singular ‘home.’ For the Chinese diaspora, the homogenisation of globalisation leads to a singular view of essentialised understandings of identities and experiences, as various Chinese communities around the world, driven by similar global economic forces, experience uniformity in cultural practices (Benton, Gomez 2011: 89, 101). The singular view somehow helps homogenise the notion of ‘Chineseness’. The notion of British Chinese as the subject of transnationalism results in the ‘missing’ of multi-location and multi-emergence, denying ‘collectivities and the wider role of transnational culture in all our everyday lives’ (Rogers 2018: 243). In *Cultural Phantoms*, the ‘missing’ personal narrative leads to the ‘Loong’ being limited to a defined and regulated term. This singular term might cause ‘double movement’ to become an either/or binary rather than a ‘rhizome’. In this transnational framework, Bhabha (1994: 247) argues that it becomes difficult to rely on ideas of a stable ‘nation,’ ‘people, or ‘authentic’ cultural traditions, such that a specific, unified identity is somewhat destabilised by transnational interactions and exchanges.

Although I considered my aesthetics through ‘Loong,’ this is still insufficient to seize the transnational landscapes, as well as the aesthetics of the Hanfu water sleeves, which present a slight tendency of cultural authenticity by employing the idea of ‘fluid semiotics.’ Technically, the intervention of more layers in the film frame interrupts the view of the singular aesthetics of tradition. Sensationally, although the idea of the ‘neon mask’ avoids this static notion, there is still space to enhance the ‘affect’ of multiplicity, and the concept of ‘connectivity’. Through a series of shots for transnationalism, the use of location-transfer could intervene in the centralisation of cultural symbols in the frame of the ‘blending mode’, which might be able to somewhat desalinate the ‘recognition’ of the cultural symbol, both partly and visually. In this manner, I aim to amplify the sense of hybridity through ‘partial representation’, as I would argue that the ‘mimicry’ is not only of the stereotypical narrative in Britain but also the singular view of the Indigenous. The shots in ‘composed and decomposed, multi-layering’ could forge the ‘fuzzy’ distinction of subjectivity and objectivity (Powell 2007: 85), which evidently shows that this non-totalising approach in practice enables singular Indigenousness fused in an individual mixture. The cultural norm plays a role in what Huxley (1954, 1956: 11) notes is a ‘reducing valve’, as Procter quotes from Stuart Hall:

“It insists on specificity, on conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion.” (2004: 121)

The landscape transfer in *Yin-Yang Eyes* includes shots of London Chinatown, a hometown village and a modern city view in China, and a London city view. In this manner, I intend to present the transnational perspective through the hybridity of local and global to deny the either/or mode within the cultural symbol shots. The sensation of ‘double unbelonging’ could be rooted in the strategy of ‘fluid semiotics’, allowing me to use ‘connectivity’ to grow the new discourses within personal stories. These landscapes aim to reflect on the ‘fluid home and cultural legacy’, which transcends the definition of ‘home’ in the mind of the rootless.

Bhabha (1990: 419) critiques the position of nation as a holistic construct with clear, unambiguous boundaries. Rather, it is a metaphorical framework that foregrounds the ‘slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories’ that blur the distinctions between people, minorities, and cultural differences. This metaphor allows a ‘smooth space’ of nomadism, as argued by Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 380), and is marked by trajectories as temporary relays that surpass fixed points, emphasising the significance of the journey itself over the endpoint. Janz clarifies:

When we are at home, we have a set of rhythms that define a place as home, and in fact when we are away from home, we often find ourselves setting up familiar rhythms to make a new place into home. There are codes—items are placed in a way meaningful to those that know a place as home, and only partially accessible (if at all) by others. (2001: 395)

This creates a ‘border zone’ condition where home can be transnational as ‘out-of-oneself’ experiences, linking experiences and identities from various locations (Zhang 2016: 122-123).

American East Asian Li-young Lee answers what ‘home’ means in the interview, ‘Home’ as a word embodies a paradox shared by all words: the fewer definitions it has, the more explicit and more stable its meaning, but also the less room it leaves for subtleties and possibilities, as ‘the Chinese as tai ji of Yin-Yang, or the great polarity, and known in the West as The Word, or Logos, the dynamism of polar opposites’ (Wong 2017: 169). Yin-Yang reflects a productive ongoing process, and I have discussed Deleuze’s desire in the previous chapter. The ‘home’ paradox allows me to constantly rethink my ‘double unbelonging’ of ‘home’ in ‘self-adjustment’.

### **5.3 The Ambiguous ‘Home’**

In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, the first step to considering ‘home’ is the notion of Chinatown; However, Chinatown in Britain somehow fulfils whiteness and exotic curiosity; simultaneously, I feel a

sense of belonging to Chinatown in London, as it is a Chinese community that offers the ‘home feeling.’ Some geographies evoke a sense of longing, or one’s attachment to them is significant, and thus ‘longing’ can move one’s perception of space (Birch-Bayley 2012: 82). This means that I need to balance the expectation of my Indigenous culture and how the singular notion of Chinatown homogenises Chineseness. For example, although I participated in the Chinese New Year celebration in London Soho Chinatown, I felt that post-colonialism has highly alienated this Chinese community within a ‘packaging of diversity’, as Chinatown might be marketed as an exotic tourist destination (Mayer 2011: 6). How can a Cantonese restaurant in Chinatown label itself as authentic Beijing food? White tourists seek an ‘authentic’ Chinese experience, sometimes leading to cultural commodification (Guo 2022: 866). In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, the landscapes of London Chinatown permeate within my ‘Chineseness’ as a montage, and together with my hometown village and a modernised China are used to negotiate and recreate a new cultural identity.

The dialect in my hometown is called ‘Baihua’, which sounds like a mutation of Cantonese. Although I am not good at speaking my home dialect, as my urban living encourages me to speak Mandarin as my first language and my parents also speak with me on Mandarin, it does not interfere with my understanding of ‘Baihua’ and Cantonese. As many early restaurants and shops were operated by Cantonese immigrants, who catered primarily to the local Chinese community and gradually opened to a broader clientele, including non-Chinese customers, Cantonese emerged as the lingua franca. Most Chinese raised in Britain were exposed to Cantonese due to its prevalence in Chinese schools and popular culture (Benton, Gomez 2008: 113, 337). My understanding of Cantonese helped me communicate with restaurants in Chinatown. I often enjoy Chinese food in Chinatown and chat with the restaurant owners and workers.

Sales and co-authors (2023) emphasise the role of Chinatowns as physical manifestations of diaspora, where the cultural signs of Chineseness are both a connection to the homeland and a distinction from the wider population. This transnationalism of duality allows for community

building and the reinforcement of ethnic identity while engaging with the broader urban landscape. As the notion of Chinatown shows a conservative ‘affect’, viewed as an ageing space, it can be interpreted as both a benefit and a limitation for the community. While Chinatown in Manchester served the needs of the older generations well, it also solidified the area’s image as being trapped in the past, which conflicted with efforts of the city council to modernise and rebrand the city in the 1990s (Chan, Willis 2018: 106, 108). This uniform representation in the Chinese diaspora community obscures the heterogeneity of overseas Chinese populations (Guo 2022: 855-856). Parmar (1990: 118, 120) critiques that the process of engaging with various cultural movements has led to an essentialist slant that can hinder the acknowledgement of intersecting identities (such as race, gender, and class). On the other hand, the stylisations of the past in Chinatown underestimate the personal agency and self-determination of Chineseness to embrace exotic images and orientalism (Mayer 2011: 1). I, therefore, argue that the multiplicity of ‘self’ is of the transcendence of ‘Chinatown’ and my origin. As Anthias (2001: 632) argues, the concept of the diaspora often relies on ethnic bonds centred around ‘origin’, which can conflict with the idea of transcending homelands.

In this manner, I employed prismatic-like ‘distortion’ in the shot of Chinatown, as I intended to deliver the sensation of a ‘line of flight’:

If the plane of immanence is fractal in nature like Deleuze and Guattari suggest, or is even a fractal, concepts form like whirlpools made by waves stirred by turbulence. (Powell 2016: 185)

The ‘distortion’ moves in the film frame, as the lion dance and lantern undergo ‘overlapping’, as I aim to manipulate the ‘feeling’ of the internal conflict for how I experience these traditional elements within my vision of ‘Chineseness’. I use the vertical ‘mirror’ effect, with two layers of Chinatown presenting contrasted visual styles. This is what Deleuze notes: “a mirror-image as in the virtual object which, from its side and simultaneously, envelops the real, as both sides coexist in a crystalline structure that is both real and imagined” (Powell 2007:148). Here, I use the same footage in juxtaposition, in which Chinatown through my eyes presents different

perceptions and yet also coexists, i.e., my expectation of cultural legacy is disjointed from the stereotypes from Chinatown I need to rely on to find the sense of belonging.



Fig. 24. London Chinatown within prismatic-like 'distortion' 1 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)



Fig. 25. London Chinatown within prismatic-like ‘distortion’ 2 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

I considered my memories of class dynamics in China to forage what ‘home’ is. I grew up in an urban area in China, and my family’s indigenous hometown is in a village, my ancestral roots. When I was 2 years old, my family ‘migrated’ to an urban are, which affected how I viewed my Indigenous culture as an urban kid. Older family members always attempted to indoctrinate and teach me the understanding of the traditional customs and rituals of fetes, such as Tomb Sweeping Day (Ching Ming festival), a regional celebration for Chinese New Year. All these events show respect to ancestors to consolidate the family bond. Maxine Hong Kingston poetically describes her root:

People walking the wide, pathless ground, placing on the thresholds flowers and red paper, wine and food, incense. Ah, altars, doorsills of graves. Ah, Ching Ming. All over China, and places where Chinese are, populations are on the move, going home. (2011: 51)

My urban status allowed me to embrace a modernised lifestyle and reduced my interest in and motivation for such traditional culture, which disqualifies me from being an Indigenous expert, especially after I moved to Beijing – China’s capital and one of its most modernised cities.

However, my lacquer painting career in Amoy, China drove me to increase my passion for parts of Chinese traditional culture. As noted by Kingston

China's changing. China's changed. China gone. Old China nevermore. Too late. Too late. Too late. Too late. Voyage far, and end up at another globalized city just like the one you left. (2011: 51)

Translocation dynamics also founded two souls of self as a reconciling process for modernisation and transnationalism. My transnational views naturally contain such trans-localist activity in China. Chinatown, meanwhile, is a space where Chinese identity is both celebrated and commodified, a performance for Western consumption (Künnemann 2011:166). I, thus, see Chinatown as a rigid system, and I attempted to use visual distortion to create this strict structure, which should have the 'interstice' to show the multiplicity.

In 2021, I used DJI drones to take aerial videos of my hometown village to create a dream-like vision of floating in the air to watch what goes on below. In this film production, the footage of my hometown, which is material that has been stored for a long time, is used. The red roofs lie on the village and the villagers are celebrating an event. The shot goes in for a more 'fuzzy' distortion within the mirror image, as I did to the Chinatown shots. These red roofs wriggle in the distortion; I then place the 'Loong' image within the village shots. Like many cultural symbols in China, 'hometown' contains a kind of collective culture that may confine individuals to creating a hybrid identity. As Hao (2014: 106) argues in his autoethnographic exploration, to 'distinguish who is culturally similar or different in order to establish solidarity', the authenticity aims to find out 'shared systems of symbols and meanings'; nonetheless, the hybrid identity is never finished. My cultural legacies in the transnational move have become non-normative; this 'in-betweenness' negotiates within the interstice of 'overlap and displacement of domains of difference' (Bhabha 1994: 2).

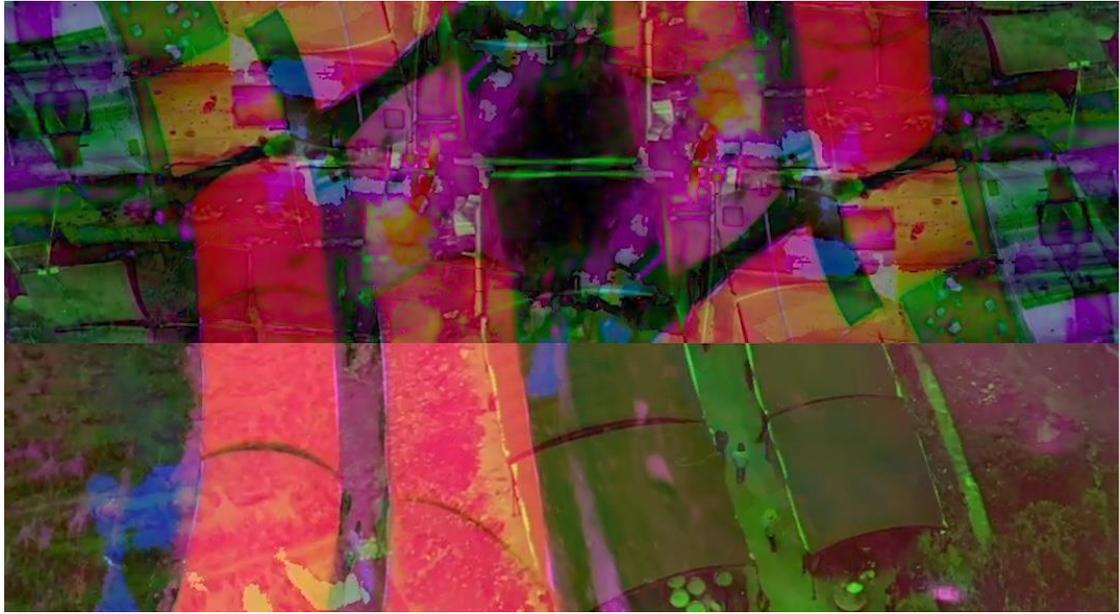


Fig. 26. The Footage of Hometown Village 1 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

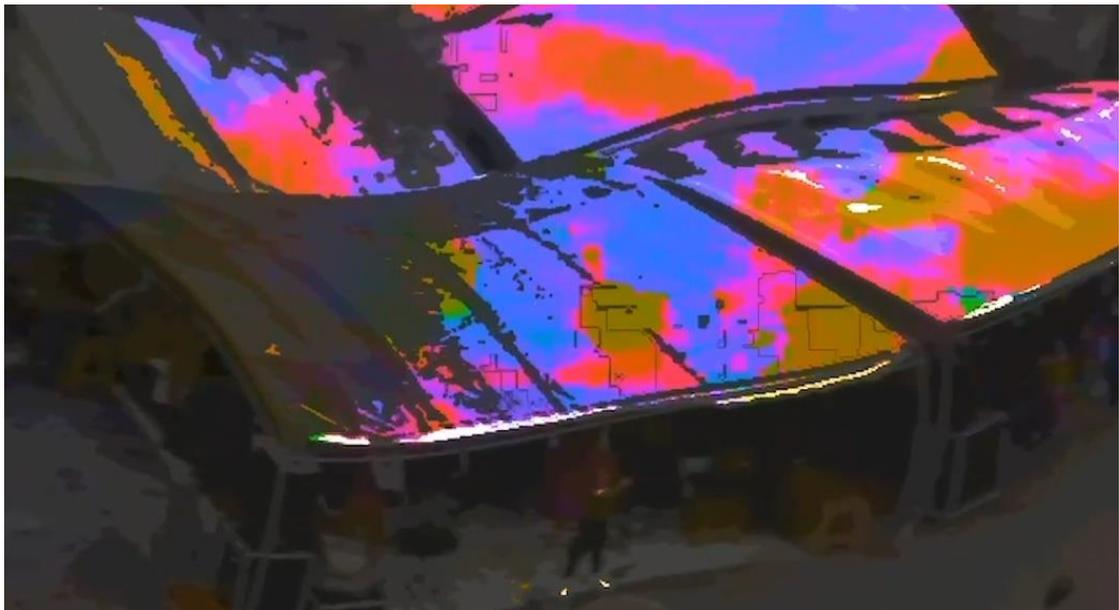


Fig. 27. The Footage of Hometown village 2 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

My urbanised experiences give me the perception to connect with globalisation, as Western movies and music have driven my imagination of the West. As a middle school student, Western hip-hop culture taught me how to be ‘cool’ – ripped jeans and Nike shoes. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Chineseness in Hollywood films also influenced how I was trying to understand and posit my image. The ‘stereotypical pop culture images’ noted by Yomtoob (2014: 144) mean that the engagement with Western culture through media may create an aspiration or connection that contrasts with one’s lived reality.

The trans-nationalist intercultural experience offers me a perspective of ‘permeable and flexible’ in recognition of ‘something wrong’ with the distorted vision of shared cultural symbols (Arfaoui 2017: 116). In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, therefore, I employ the shot of the ‘infamous’ Limehouse to invent the disclosure of dominant norms so that I can use ‘overlapping’ to dilute original images to form hybridity. Compared to *Cultural Phantoms*, I intend to emphasise the internal conflict with the power structure, and the relations and interstices of images and shots. Likewise, I seek to juxtapose the trans-localism of London Chinatown from the Limehouse to the current one with my own.

As an origin of the Chinese community in London, Limehouse was infamously known for opium dens and criminal activities, a stereotype amplified by media portrayals and popular fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. This stigmatised the Chinese community, framing the area as dangerous and exotic (Loo 2022). Such depictions created a sense of ‘otherness’, reducing the community’s complexity and presenting it as a spectacle for British visitors. Interestingly, the storefronts in Limehouse were mainly Western in style, with only occasional Chinese elements, suggesting that the area was more a product of British expectations and commercial interests than a true reflection of Chinese culture (Chou 2014: 68). This contrasts sharply with Sax Rohmer’s depiction of Limehouse as a hub of sinister oriental criminal activity, reinforcing racial fears and stereotypes about Chinese immigrants.

I added 'original images' (collected from the Underground Map<sup>22</sup>) from Limehouse-Chun Yee Society, a Chinese school on Sundays founded in 1906 related to Sun Yat-sen's rebellion against the Qing Dynasty, and the bar where Chinese sailors gathered, as well as some old images of Limehouse Chinatown, to the sequence, using vivid and contrasted colour and rapid-editing. As noted by Powell (2007: 46), the interaction of colours under varying lighting conditions creates heightened affective discord. This discord from the Yin-Yang of the retaining of cultural tradition could unite the Chinese community and its cultural identity, yet the cultural tradition somehow emphasises authentic Chinese culture. Thus, the diversity of Chineseness has become unseen. I used close-ups of today's ruins of Peking Street, Nanking Street, and Canton Street in Limehouse within multi-exposures to intervene in the linear narrative of Chinese cultural legacies. The 'neon mask' started to enter within the 'high angle shot' of my hometown village, as I tried to simulate 'swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object', which exposes the 'optical unconscious' by altering the viewer's understanding of both time and space (Redlins 2020: 54). Rapid editing within it introduces the potential for 'unstable sets of floating memories' that move rapidly at 'dizzying speed' (Powell 2007: 25).

<sup>22</sup> Hatton Scott (2016) 'Limehouse – London's first Chinatown'. Available at: <https://www.theundergroundmap.com/wp/limehouse-londons-first-chinatown/> (Accessed 20 June 2024).



Fig. 28. Limehouse, © Photo: by Hatton Scott in *The Underground Map* (2016)



Fig. 29. The Footage of Limehouse in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

The scenes of sitting at Docklands Light Railway train contribute to that via a semblance of mobility, amplifying the sensation of ‘optical unconscious’. The movement of the train may emphasise a ‘fluid image’, which may create a relation with ‘hometown’ and ‘Chinatown,’ in which I adopted closeups in the sequence. The strategy often involves overlaying images that may seem unrelated at first glance, thereby ‘stratifying meanings temporally’ and opening ‘cracks in the film’s sequentiality’ (Rascaroli 2017: 39). Hereby, the ‘whole’ becomes an open system where images are defined through the interstices between them—essentially, the gaps that exist between images are where the significant interactions and meanings lie (Deleuze 1989: 179).

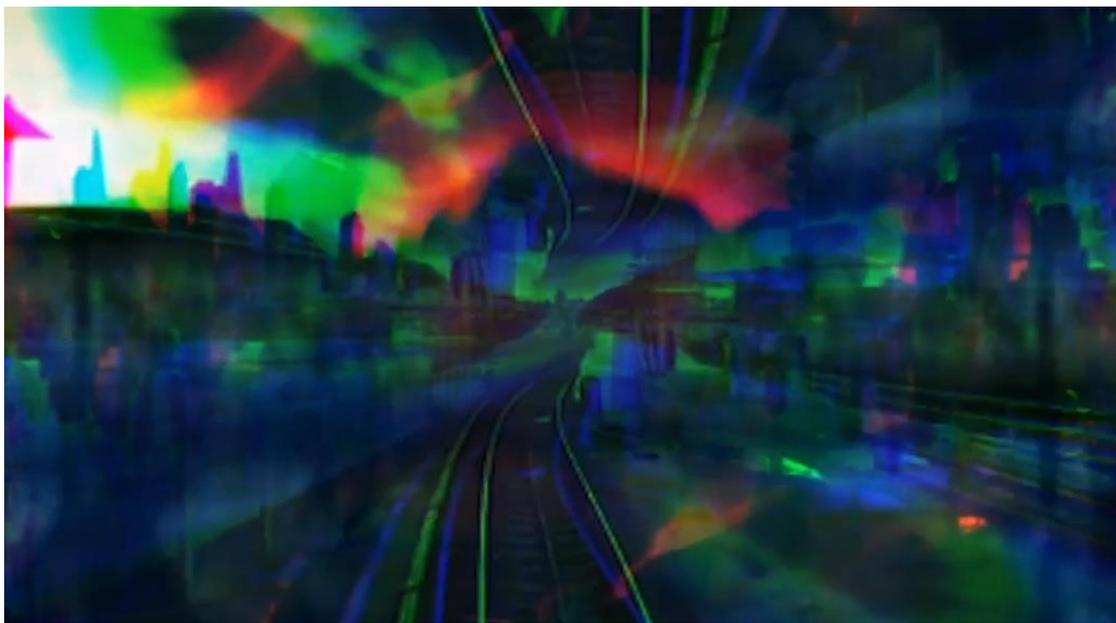


Fig. 30. ‘Train Movement’ in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

In multi-temporal axes of cultural identification, the Chinese community in Britain builds up ‘connectivity’ in minority culture, which highlights the productivity of transnationalism to reconfigure dominant power (Roger 2018: 257, 258). In this manner, transnationalism acknowledges ‘the transitory nature of historical and political moments’ (Parmar 1990: 120).

## 5.4 Modernised 'Home'

My urbanised experiences could also offer an angle, as this is an upgraded vision of Chineseness. I overlapped the modernised Chinese city of Shenzhen in the film frame, a highly modernised city in which technological industries have proliferated. I have been there many times, ever since I graduated from Fuzhou University. Shenzhen can explain how convenient city life is in China.

The nine-screen film installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) provides a view of China, whereby Isaac Julien juxtaposed Beijing's modern city landscape with some images that are very oriental, such as Shanghai women in cheongsams, chivalrous women flying through the air, contemporary Chinese street scenes, and, of course, calligraphy. Zhang (2017: 13) critiques that *Ten Thousand Waves* has an Eastern aesthetics only in the Hollywood style: 'the colour palette is not quite Chinese, like American Chinese food, the taste is often very 'American', they love China, they just love a mood they have imagined'. Despite his previous bold denials of stereotypes and clichés, and public declarations of engagement with cosmopolitanism and globalisation, this kind of spectre of orientalism still exists (Zhang 2019: 174).

This indicates that the presentation of the urban landscapes from China in the film might result in the modern/traditional binary. This, as neo-orientalism, associates technological advancements with negative implications for traditional values. Western attitudes no longer see China as threatening the global order due to the growing power diverging from Western democratic ideals (Mahoney 2022: 9-10). In Chinese communication, the rapid economic growth and globalisation highlight contradictions that are characteristic of the culture, showcasing that old and new values coexist and interact dynamically (Fang 2011: 35). This dynamic allows me to sensitively recognise orientalist aesthetics and adapt to the modern lifestyle in Britain. As the scene of Chinatown occasionally leaves me a sense of belonging tracking to my origin, I can coexist with Orientalism when I become nostalgic. Before my transnational experiences started, I was not willing to embrace the traditions of my hometown

village too much. However, I still learned a lot of Indigenous knowledge from my parents. I thus need cultural legacies to balance this with other parts of cultural identity; when the stereotypes take advantage of this, I can draw or create new aspects of self, which depends on how I create a new notion of home.

The Shenzhen shot therefore does not comply with the ‘split screen’ role, but rather presents a status of ‘multiple dimensions’ of fluid connections and the interplay of various elements. This is similar to how Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 473) discuss ‘undecidable propositions’, exhibiting the dynamic coexistence of constantly transforming and adapting. Huxley describes the paradox of this coexistence:

We live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves.....Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves. From family to nation, every human group is a society of island universes. (1954, 1956: 7)

This state of disconnection urges us to disrupt simplified and codified images, which are constantly at risk of being reduced to clichés trapped in expected sensory-motor connections (Deleuze 1989: 21). Moving forward, I use the scene of London city outside Chinatown, which works together with the Shenzhen shot. The images of ‘Chinatown’ might become ‘thinner’ within such ‘interstice’. In this manner, the modernised images start to cut and slice the images of clichés for the intention of expressing these neo-complex cultural identities, in which each shot is tangled and distorted, the light of glowing glasses ‘haunts’ the night vision in Shenzhen, and then the cars speed down the road. The dockland-railway scene partially trespasses in the frame in a stream of transnational and deterritorialized sensation. Thus, the notion of Chinatown, the village hometown and a modernised China becomes a tool to depict my ‘Chineseness’ and explore my displacement of cultural legacies by erasing the margin of a national border.



Fig. 31. Shenzhen, 2022, © Photo by Weizhi Gan



Fig. 32. 'Shenzhen Scene' 1 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)



Fig. 33. 'Shenzhen Scene' 2 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

As I am still not satisfied with the complexity of the hometown village layer in the film frame, I continue to explore the inherited narrative-cultural memories passed down through generations. It is a belief in our village that 'Tudi Gong' is the 'Earth God'. As opposed to modernity, this 'traditional' aspect could lead to a portrayal of Indigenous customs that are

‘stuck in primitive behaviours’ and rendered as unchanging, thereby creating an oriental stereotype of the ‘Other’ (Hichri 2017: 165). Here, I also intended to create a montage of ‘Indigenous’ and ‘modernity’ by extracting cultural elements from the ‘Tudi Gong’ belief.



Fig. 34. ‘Electric Candles’ in *Yin-Yang Eyes* 2024

There is one big Tudi temple located in the village, where kinfolks worship at ‘Tudi Gong’ shrines during every important festival of China to ask for future fortune as part of a localised ritual. ‘Tudi Gong’ is widely recognised for his role in local worship and is associated with agricultural functions, as well as the safeguarding of neighbourhoods and communities (Sweeny 2008: 15). Though I see myself as a non-religious person, I also show my respect for this ritual and perform this ritual. While younger generations may not actively practice shrine-related rituals, they often still acknowledge their significance and efficacy within the cultural context (Woo 2010: 162). I extracted a symbol from the ritual – two electric candles. During the light railway shot and urban scene, while the train moves, the image of the candles becomes constantly fluid, wherein I tried to emphasise the sensation ‘deterritorialization’ and the train as a transborder metaphor.

Meanwhile, I intended to evoke a sense of multiplicity in digital transnationalism. I can also post my rap videos on TikTok to challenge the stereotypical image. As digital media fosters this inter-cultural and transnational relation of connectivity, seen as a 'feedback network', it enables the creation of community networks that transcend geographical boundaries (Candidatu, Leurs, Ponzanesi 2019: 31-32). This has resulted in the emergence of hybrid identities and the blurring of cultural boundaries, as individuals participate in dialogues and exchanges that mix their local contexts with global influences (Arfaoui 2017: 126). Diasporas in digital media facilitate connections with homelands, with diasporic individuals navigating both their host countries and the contexts from which they originate; however, they can also lead to a sense of not fully belonging in the host country or the digital space where these interactions occur (Ponzanesi 2020: 985).

As the interface of digital social media is fast-scrolling, it might create a kind of 'dizzy' sense and a rapid-editing simulation. The sense of transnational or diaspora 'connectivity' in digital media presents the imagination of 'possible lives' and 'imagined selves' (Hoyle 2013: 1). 'Home' is hereby redefined as 'not necessarily where one belongs but the place where one starts, reflecting the idea that being displaced or in transit can also shape one's sense of belonging' (Arfaoui 2017: 124). My personal self-expression connects and positions me within a community through social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. This position offers depictions of conflict in the 'homeland' presented in both official news outlets and citizen journalist media, through which the representation can intersect, amplify, or challenge others. I can also post videos on WeChat in which I rap on the stage and UK life, delivering a kind of new cultural identity to my friends in China. This digital imagination facilitates the intercultural practice and provides a 'close-up and tactile way of looking' that affects the viewer emotionally and physically within their personal introspection of the broader themes of diaspora visibility (Hoyle 2013: 20). I, thus, place this sensation into a 'texture overlaid' sequence, according to:

As diasporic film and media are produced, translated and recreated in the diasporic setting (and create further disjunctive flows as they circulate around the world in other diasporic centres), the touch of sight of the diasporic body is amalgamated with its other bodily

senses that create an embodiment of the diasporic subject through his or her interactions with the local–global circulations of diasporic media in given urban cultural environments. (Dudrah 2014: 42)

Under the ‘digital media-haptic’ images, the inclusion of found footage from Thames News (2015) contextualises Limehouse within broader media representations, showing how external gazes have shaped public perceptions of the area and its connection to the Chinese community. These found clips juxtapose my personal exploration of Limehouse with how it has been mythologised and racialised in popular culture. In the intercultural film practice, the imperfections and gaps are leveraged in found footage—whether grainy, faded, or poorly recorded—to search for unrepresentable memories (Marks 2000: 153).



Fig. 35. 'The Scene of digital media' 1 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)



Fig. 36. 'The Scene of digital media' 2 in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

I would like to argue that my 'found footage' and the 'interface' from digital media can foster a sense of connection that transcends mere observation, amplifying the haptic qualities of visual media and providing a tactile, sensory connection that allows audiences to engage with the experiences of those living between transnational cultures. As Marks (2000: 131) notes,

intercultural cinema has an ‘especially good reason to push the media beyond their audio-visual bounds’ to express marginalised or overlooked memories and identities. In this manner, I imprint my imagination on this sequence, as the digital media constitutes the virtual space as ‘home’ to balance the sense of belonging, which also reflects ‘hyperconnectivity’ and ‘solitude’ in a Yin-Yang paradox. Barber discusses how digital media advocates ‘a politics of solitude’:

these turn out to be vicarious conglomerations lacking the empathy and need for common ground that define real-world communities. Lolling in your underwear in front of an electronic screen while accessing with dancing fingers the pixels generated by anonymous strangers across the world is not my idea of forging a community of concern or establishing common ground, let alone cementing a trusting friendship. If large-scale modern societies are already troubled by isolation, civic alienation. (2003: 39)

Bhabha (1994: xxi) argues that contemporary societies, influenced by globalisation and mass migration, often present a veneer of community while masking underlying tensions and conflicts.

## **5.5 ‘Home’ Crisis**

‘Double unbelonging’ indicates that ‘home’ or community is not always ideal, and Morley (2000: 27) highlights how the image of home as a safe, private space is challenged by visible homelessness, which disrupts our idealised perceptions of domesticity. Bhabha (1994: 13) states, “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres”. The experience of unhomeliness reveals how the domestic sphere can become a site of historical invasions and culturally hybrid realities, thus questioning the idealised perceptions of home. I therefore would like to present how the ‘homeless’ are often marginalised by the power structure. I intend to present a ‘character’ of the power structure that imposes on my body and covers up the multiplicity, the displacement of which results in the vulnerability of transnational individuals, which posits myself in ‘otherness’, as what Yomtoob reflects:

While my sense of myself feels whole to me, the sense that I take from others' response to me is shattering. Clearly, to many others with whom I move in and out of a spatial community, I am positioned as a person who is embodied and imbued with meaning, meanings that make me foreign to them, other. My otherness is not organized in a clearly consumable package that meets their apprehensions and expectations. My otherness, like their reactions to me, causes some kind of erasure. In so many ways, my different cultural locations create the illusion of somewhat irreconcilable positions because I appear to be from traditionally marginalized communities and my concerns and stances appear to be at odds, foreign, or erased from what appears to be the everyday center. (2014: 157)

Here, I intended to use the two-ness of double-faced masking, which is different from the twoness of Loong/dragon, rather than amplifying the sensation of internal conflict. In this manner, I depicted the vulnerability of the body against Fu-Manchu's opium den, which plays a sensual role in the dominant norms.

In the churchyard of St Anne's Church in Limehouse, north-west of the church itself is a tall pyramid. In the stories of Sax Rohmer this was the entrance to Dr Fu-Manchu's opium den! The pyramid was built by Nicholas Hawksmoor who was also the architect of the church itself (Black-rat 2023)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Black-Rat (2023) '1700S, Churches, Fiction, Freemasonry Limehouse Pyramid'. Available at: <https://blackrat.org.uk/tag/sax-rohmer/> (Accessed 20 March 2024).

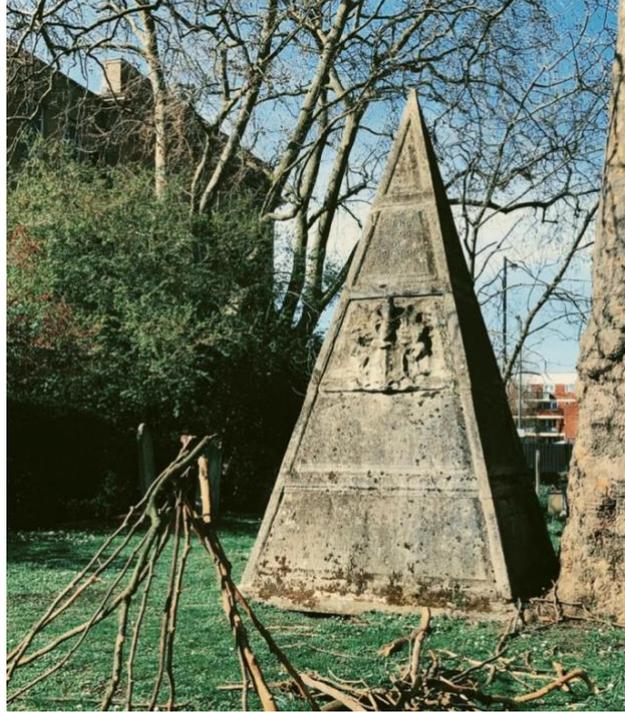


Fig. 37. 'Opium Den', 2023, © Photo by Weizhi Gan

In the meantime, I used the concept of Fanon's white mask to display a compelled identity in the aesthetics of double-faced masking. The actual white mask I have was used for the Halloween masquerade, as I rejected the expectation from friends to dress up as a martial arts master; instead, I had picked this white mask without any specific content. I therefore place the mask in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy (1987: 176-177), as the face represents a type of 'machine' or abstract system that works by categorising people through binary identities (e.g., man/woman, rich/poor, adult/child). This system of racialisation reduces individuals to types or categories, reinforcing social hierarchies and maintaining control.



Fig. 38. 'The overlapping of body and 'Opium Den' in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

The Beijing opera mask and the white mask could possibly transfer the meaning of double-faced masking by manipulating the images into the 'relation' that connects with the shots of the 'opium den,' my 'body' wearing the mask, and the mask itself. Glissant's notions of 'relation' as a 'passage' (1997: 32, 118) forms circular, volumetric interconnectedness of 'aesthetics of chaos', where diverse perspectives co-exist, influencing and reshaping each other within the unpredictable nature of global cultural exchange. I would argue that the dominant norms coexist with other elements in hybrid identity; this volumetric interconnectedness allows one to sensually present how one interacts with it.

I imagine my body as 'unhomely', trapped in an 'opium den' as a cage. Thus, the 'den' is in the centre of the film frame, aiming to transmit the sense that the exotic narrative is in a stable position that needs to be overthrown. I started to empower the body the visual 'exposure'; it should not be as an actual body, but rather a 'body without organs' (BwO) in 'becoming':

The concept of 'body without organs' is an attempt to denaturalise the body. Rather than see the body as a corporeal element, Deleuze and Guattari describe the body as a set of variously informed 'speeds' and 'intensities'. (Kenney 2000: 98)

It is different from *The Sub-self*, where the visual of the topless body is too much in the ‘reality’ as a static object. Rather it is, as Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 158, 153) note, populated by intensities, each BwO communicates with other BwOs, which allows for multi-experiences and intensities on the flows of desire rather than fixed identities.

The ‘various masks’ are in a fast shift, wherein specific meanings for these elements become ‘chaotic’, in which I deploy a horror soundtrack intending to affect how viewers sense the vulnerability and desire: the body’s arms close, and open arms to break out, and ‘softness conquers hardness’. As Chen and Ji claim:

I-speaker (not necessarily male ego; a woman can also be yang – masculine – too..... may be construed as a symbol for anyone aggressive, ego-centric, inflexible, and hard; however, the yin/yang scheme is more profound than that, since the archetypal water is nature-related. The rock stands then, literally and literarily, for anything strong, unyielding, and rigid on the physical level, as much as for such qualities on the abstract, metaphysical level. (2016: 114)

In ‘fluid semiotics’, the force of ‘softness’ is a collective, relational function rather than an isolated phenomenon (Kennedy 2002: 114), yet I need to develop it, particularly for challenging the standard of masculinity. Here, I combine the ‘becoming’ quality of Yin Yang for gender issues with the ‘becoming’ of ‘home’.

## **5.6 Crisis as a Sound-Image in Non-linearity**

The voiceover poem aims to create a sense of rhetorical incommensurabilities<sup>24</sup> within the film sequence here:

<sup>24</sup> In the context of Laura Rascaroli's exploration of essay films, these incommensurabilities can manifest in various forms, such as the disjointedness between sound and image or the contrasting tones in voiceovers compared to the visuals being presented.

00:09:00:10

*The white mask is the echo of my voice,  
Singing hard into the night,  
Where melodies blend with moonlight,  
And each note is a release,  
A moment of truth in a world of pretences,  
A comfort to my restless soul,  
As it seeks to blend in, yet stand apart.*

Voiceover poem:

00:26:25:00

*In the spotlight, all eyes on me,  
Rapping words, dancing free,  
In the city where the streets don't sleep,  
Every beat, every move, running deep.  
I'm the rhythm, I'm the rhyme,  
Flowing smooth, no sense of time,  
Crowd's eyes locked, can't look away,  
As I spit fire and bodies sway.*

The dual-track audio of the monograph-

00:16:09:22

*Cheers, no problem, that's...*

The most frequent words I speak; also, it sounds polite to avoid some conflicts.

The mandarin audio is:

*陌生，惶恐，一切都没有关系，新鲜感，审视，凝视，深渊*

*The strangeness, the fear, it doesn't matter, the novelty, the scrutiny, the gaze, the abyss*

Audio from Sky News-Coronavirus: *Hate crimes against Chinese people in the UK on the rise.*

00:17:40:27

*It's ridiculous,*

*You know it did not come from Chinese food, it came from, it's a zoonotic disease.*

As Bhabha states:

The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences. (1994: 312)

### **5.7 'Home' as Fluid Masculinity!**

The Yin-Yang philosophy also allows for a more fluid understanding of gender roles. Nonetheless, the potential for 'interminable interactiveness' within the Yin-Yang binary means that statements applicable to masculinity could just as easily apply to femininity, and thus lack specificity in focus (Louie 2002: 8). Wang (2016: 223) also argues that the fixed version of Yin-Yang loves to promote a 'gender asymmetry where the masculine poses as a disembodied universality while the feminine gets constructed as disavowed corporeality', i.e., masculinity/femininity, or yin/yang are not fixed entities or essential elements. Evidently, 'becoming' feminine may not be the only path to challenge solid masculinity. I therefore consider what collective masculinity in China is, and what it masks. Hereby, I may present the film sequence, which is not just limited to denying white masculinity.

Traditionally, Chinese masculinity was heavily influenced by Confucian ideals, which emphasised virtues such as filial piety, loyalty, and the role of men as providers and protectors of the family (Song, Hird 2023: 263). This ideal may dictate that men should be strong, stoic, and the primary providers for their families, and this cultural pressure can create a sense of vulnerability when men feel they cannot meet these expectations, leading to feelings of inadequacy or failure (Louie 2002: 8). Transnationalism creates a setting where Chinese men

often grapple with local gender norms while attempting to maintain their inherited cultural masculinity. In this context, I try to maintain ‘filial piety’ as many Chinese men do, while also being open to change and redefining their masculine identities (Aboim 2023: 227, Cao 2021: 175). Meanwhile, I may encounter a double pressure of masculinity: one is from the transitional ‘home’, and the other one is from whiteness. Cao (2021: 171) notes that the term ‘elastic masculinity’ concerns flexibility and adaptability among young men in China, where masculinities can be ‘stretched, expanded and forged differently depending on the context’. The term elastic offers me an ‘adjustment system’, which, again, advocates an open-ended answer for what my masculinity is. Notably, “the standpoint of its greatest divisibility, consists in particles of decreasing size, flows or elastic fluids that ‘deploy themselves’ by radiating through space” (Deleuze, Guatarri 1987: 45).

According to nomadism, I see the space I live in as the ‘temporal home’ of the self in ‘transition,’ in which I negotiate my cultural identity to create a sense of belonging, of course, and my ‘elastic masculinity.’ Here, I referenced Morley’s idea of home sense (2000: 34), rather than just the physical location, whereby the symbols can arouse my emotions connected with the past. In this manner, I intend to show the side of emotional expressiveness, as a cherished bed toy, Jellycat Bear, which has become a ‘delicate’ balance between traditional gender roles and modern expectations. For example, I need to escape from the expectation of family for masculinity like a man! A doll can be seen as a ‘coward’s toy’ for a ‘macho boy’ in the family. Other than that, I navigated to disrupt white masculinity in Britain. The ‘home’ to me can be a shade that protects the side of vulnerability, rejecting ‘the notion of an unproblematic geographic location of home’; rather, it is both ‘living within familiar, safe, protected boundaries’, and the ‘exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself’ (Martin, Mohanty 1986: 196). As Mercer states:

Once we consider the enigmatic relation to “home” that is preserved on the inward side of the mask, we may understand its deeply layered meanings as performing a protective function for diaspora subjectivity. Not only does the mask seek to protect the inner world from the social violence of supremacist ideology; .... (2002: 245)



Fig. 39. 'The overlapping of Bear and White Mask' in *Yin-Yang Eyes* (2024)

In *Yin-Yang Eyes*, the bear hovers under the white mask, and my body is in the montage within the sequence. The 'Loong' flies around, entangled with the waving of the Hanfu water sleeves. The close-up of lipstick lips seems to show speaking. The shots aim to offer a 'site' for the sub-self; I intend to place the idea of 'lipsticks and perfume' within the sense of 'home.' The filming location is my 'temporal home' in Britain, wherein I continue to use visuality to intervene in its stability. The 'face shaving' shot becomes non-linear within the 'optical unconscious', in which I employ 'frame extraction' and partially 'zoom out' to amplify my movement of 'shaving'. It is a layer of 'homing desire' to 'reinvent and rewrite home' that discloses pleasure, which plays a central role in narratives of transcultural experiences (Nasta 2002: 7-8). In this manner, close-ups can facilitate a reading of the image that goes beyond movement, drawing attention to the essence of time and memory (Deleuze 1989: 35). As the 'actual living room' may become a space of 'connectivity' within personal memories. The image of 'Loong' and water sleeves is here imagined as the 'epitome' of memories, as I aim to present my 'feeling' of how shots of 'beauty' and indulgence affect the exotic code of cultural symbols within the film's 'rhythm.'

And the shots of *Cultural Phantoms* at the end of the sequence, I aim to ‘damage’ the collective interpretation of ‘Loong’ within the notion of home; as the shot of a ‘modern city’ and the ‘glowing glasses light’ intervenes in the visuality, the layer of ‘Loong’ proliferates through this superimposition. These ‘Loong’ layers present different colours within the ‘multi-interstices’ of the montage. Here, I employed the ‘liquid image’, and the idea likens the perception to water, which serves as an ideal medium for extracting movement, suggesting that just as water can adapt and flow, so too can perception adapt based on the interplay of the images and the viewer’s experience (Kennedy 2002: 119). Also, there is the sequence of the tea kettle into which water flows, with Bruce Lee’s audio discussing ‘water’. Thus, the traditional Chinese tea making at ‘home’ also became a liquid montage. Within the liquid perception, the definition of ‘Loong’ and ‘tea making’ may be ambiguous in the sensation within shots of ‘lipsticks and perfume’ and ‘face shaving’, like what Papastergiadis reflects:

The search for home is neither a nostalgic retreat to a familiar past nor a defensive reaction against the brutalities of the present. The meaning of home is now found in the future-oriented projects of constructing a sense of belonging in a context of change and belonging. (1998: 9)

Brah (1996: 191) articulates that “the double, triple, or multi-placedness of ‘home’ in the imaginary of people in the diaspora does not mean that such groups do not feel anchored in the place of settlement”.

As with earlier works, the viewer in *Yin-Yang Eyes* is again positioned as an affective sensor, engaging intuitively with the flux of non-linear, non-representational imagery.

## 5.8 Summary

The sequence of *Yin-Yang Eyes* centralises my notion of ‘home’. The ‘home’ of crisis encounters not only the oppression of conventional culture in China, but also colonial legacies

in Britain. The Yin-Yang texts within the film may poetically provide viewers with an ‘interstice’ to help them sense what the definition of ‘home’ is.

In the film, ‘home’ can serve to integrate my previous practice to emphasise the ‘complexity’ of my cultural identity. Simultaneously, I intend to avoid viewers having the feeling of stereotypes. I use the landscapes to overlap within the old sequence in *Fluid Souls*, *Cultural Phantoms* and *The Sub-self*, and I similarly added more psychedelic film techniques to amplify the sensation here. *Yin-Yang Eyes* does not have central symbols per se, as these are fragmented and through the non-linear narrative are constituted as an undefinable ‘cultural landscapes’ as well as the ‘sound image’.

I do realise that using double-faced masking as aesthetics could lead to another binary, i.e., how I consider the ‘semiotics’ for this. The white mask and Beijing opera mask show the sense of a ‘binary symbol’. As Chinese collective culture could be seen as a mask that hinders the individual’s culture from being multifaceted, Fanon’s notion of a ‘white mask’ is inadequate to be the only factor considered in my filmmaking for representing the sense of ‘whiteness’.

I innovatively consider the space I inhabit in Britain as part of ‘home’. This strategy allows individuals insight through montage weaving with my personal history and broader narrative. However, in decolonising autoethnography Indigenous knowledge can disrupt the linear homogeneity, which can facilitate a new wave of stereotypes. To avoid this, more critical self-reflexivity is indeed, simultaneously, considering a broader cultural background. Compared to those diasporas, who have very little experience in their home countries, my experiences in China could allow me better to portray an updated ‘Chineseness’.

I also found it hard to balance psychedelic visuals and narrative and am concerned about how much content viewers can experience from my film. Although I already emphasise that viewers become part of a sensation producer, they may have a completely opposite sense of my film. This underlines how interesting this process of altered states filmmaking is.

From *Tangling Phantoms* to *Yin-Yang Eyes*, I would argue that this process presents as a sensational trip, in which I negotiate cultural identity by ‘constantly adding or removing images’. This action symbolically locates the ‘self’ within a ‘culture-image’ which intends to reflect my ‘affect’ in a transnational/cultural hybridity. The material of landscapes in the ‘rhythm’ of liquid and gaseous perceptions offers a ‘direct sensation’, as cultural symbols in the film sequence may amplify the ‘ambiguousness’ that ‘injects’ individual ‘signified’ interwoven within ‘triviality image’. Meanwhile, ‘constantly adding or removing images’ serves as a ritual of ‘self-splitting’ that will never attempt to possess a distinct definition.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This practice-led research contributes a methodology in experimental film practice for filmmakers drawing on visuality, film signs, and sensation to explore cultural identity in altered states of film sequence. This work also contributes insights on the fluid cultural identity of transnational Chineseness in film, offering a useful tool to filmmaking scholars and practitioners working on the subject. To date, there has been no practice-led research studies on psychedelic film practice articulating Chinese transnational cultural identity in Chineseness.

As I approach the final stage of my psychedelic film practice-based study, I intend to reflect on my journey in this research and its attempt to explore fluid cultural identities. Throughout my doctoral studies, I produced five psychedelic experimental films supported by an auto-ethnographical approach and provided a detailed analysis of my filmmaking process through the thesis. Psychedelic aesthetics in film practice are markers of a specific cultural perspective, in my case, of a personal sense of both interculturality and Chineseness. Psychedelic aesthetics, therefore, can be viewed as an art practice of cultural identity; its visuality serves as auto-ethnographic images and cultural symbols. These practical works and the discussion throughout the thesis have allowed me to address my research questions. As I have explained in the introduction of this thesis, those research questions are:

- How British Chinese cultural identities contribute to psychedelic art
- How psychedelic art affects fluid cultural identities, and
- What the cultural identity is in the context of psychedelic film practice.

As a trained visual artist and a PhD student in the UK, my cross-cultural experiences allow me to reflect on my cultural identities through psychedelic, experimental film practice.

My consciousness of hybrid cultural identities has been formed since I arrived in the UK in 2018. I was often asked, ‘Which country are you from?’, ‘Are you from Japan?’, ‘Do Chinese all know martial arts?’ and ‘Do Chinese people still smoke opium?’ My skin colour and how I speak English can affect how people judge me and make assumptions about my identity. To

avoid racialised assaults, I tried to adapt to the ‘new culture,’ but I also felt that I needed to maintain my cultural roots so that I could stay culturally connected with my homeland. Therefore, I was always struggling for a sense of belonging. Conducting my psychedelic film practice involved recording and transcribing my consciousness within an aestheticized product. Aided by the exploration of a decolonising auto-ethnographical process, I foregrounded my racialised and marginalised experiences in the UK by extracting indigenous knowledge to posit a series of cultural symbols (props) within my psychedelic film sequences. Through my studies, I became familiar with the theories of post-colonialism and transnationalism, and in them, I recognised the importance of cultural identity and its hybridity and fluidity. This required me to critically consider the intersection of gender, class within race, and the mimicry of the ‘double inscription’.

## **6.1 Summary of Research**

In this practice-led research, I created an innovative methodology that connects psychedelic aesthetics with transnational/cultural identity in auto-ethnography. In this manner, I have produced five pieces of experimental films which, through the use of psychedelic aesthetics, explore my cultural identities addressing the notion of transnationalism of China/Britain. I employed a de-colonial approach (anti-essentialism) to shape a ‘third space’ where a ‘semiotic mode’ and ‘fluid semiotics’ provide hybridity and fluidity for transcultural identities. The non-linear narratives in the films formed an ambiguous assemblage of memories (history, cultural adaptation). The individual cultural symbols I chose to work with became semiotic representations within the psychedelic sequences I created. Cultural symbols as ‘signs’ created altered states of sensations.

As I have argued throughout the thesis, the techniques of psychedelic film practice can create a narrative of ‘hybrid space’, as the major film techniques of superimposition and juxtaposition blurred the rigid binary in the visuality of ‘blending mode’ that generated vibrant colours and textures. Within strobe effects and neon light, the rapid-editing and distorted visuals condense

and manipulate the perception of time and space, presenting the sensation of a fluid cultural identity. Hereby, the ‘interstice’ in the films becomes creative potential and becoming. These techniques thus translated personal information into fragmented and non-linear narratives, which formed a sensation of altered states of psychedelia.

From *Fluid Souls* and *Cultural Phantoms* to *The Sub-self*, I extended a ‘double inscribed’ within Deleuze’s notion of ‘desire’ and personal affection for cultural identity, which emphasises sensation as the fundamental element of artistic expression. In this manner, I imprinted the sensation onto cultural symbols to disrupt the rigid stereotypical narratives. In my final long film *Yin-Yang Eyes*, I built up my notion of ‘home’, whereby the static ‘home’ becomes fragmented and non-linear. Throughout these practical works, I showcased different ways in which the visuality of psychedelic art can be viewed as diasporic aesthetics.

## **6.2 Addressing Research Questions**

### **6.2.1 Research Question 1**

Through my practice, I identified and explored how transcultural identities between China and Britain contribute to psychedelic art by using the approach of ‘double inscribed’ within a ‘semiotic mode’. I consider the ‘semiotics’ in psychedelic filmmaking via a specific cultural context. This gives the genre of the psychedelic film a space to challenge the traditional narrative of diaspora and articulate marginalised groups in the fragmented and non-linear narratives.

Through the psychedelic film sequence of montage and distorted visuals, the symbol of cultural legacies becomes blurred and unstable. In *Fluid Souls*, I explored the two-ness of self and colonial history. Through the ‘double-inscribed’, I could create an ambiguous feeling of superimposition within the broader historical context. In *Cultural Phantoms* the two-ness was further imprinted into a cultural symbol, ‘Loong’, which empowered it and facilitated a ‘hybrid meaning’ through problematising the imposition of stereotypical narratives. In my practice,

transcultural identities provide psychedelic aesthetics a pathway to connect with broader cultural contexts and layers of cultural aesthetics within the filmic frame.

### **6.2.2 Research Question 2**

With regards to RQ2, I found that psychedelic aesthetics can affect a transcultural identity through the creation of a sensation that produces a non-static perception. By selecting cultural symbols for films, psychedelic aesthetics offers cultural identity a non-linear development and ambiguous interpretations. In *The Sub-self*, psychedelic aesthetics integrate multi-narratives based on individual experiences, in which the fragmented visuality (textures, colours) formed a hybrid masculinity. Overall, psychedelic aesthetics serves as the representation of hybridity and fluidity for cultural identities that do not have to rely on specified storylines and single images. In filmmaking, I constantly ‘split off’ more categories of cultural identities to refine ‘fragmented information’, which aims to avoid the binary narrative. The psychedelic film sequence is capable of integrating this ‘debris’, creating multi-layered shots that offer sound and visual space via ‘affect’ and may deterritorialize the ‘walls of perception’ of cultural identity.

### **6.2.3 Research Question 3**

Based on my practice, I found that the cultural identity as symbols is ‘mottled (overlapping textures)’ and enigmatic in the context of psychedelic art. The visuality allows each shot in the sequence to be entangled and distorted through ‘fluid editing’. Psychedelic art provides no specific definition for cultural identity and is rather ambiguous and an ‘unreal given’. The fragmented film sequence breaks its linear transnational order – homeland to the UK – as the cultural symbols also play the role of homeland, or the mixture of homeland and the UK; this mixture, through ‘image entanglement’, burst out unique transcultural landscapes.

### 6.3 Contributions to Knowledge

This practice-led research has enabled new contributions to decolonial auto-ethnography with anti-binarism and double consciousness in psychedelic film practice, in which the discussion of Yin-Yang perspectives also helps re-read the decolonial approach. The discussion of postcolonial/decolonial theories extends the psychedelic art genre within broader cultural contexts. The thesis's contributions to knowledge are divided into three sections:

First, the work has shown the potential of psychedelic aesthetics to connect with the study of diasporic artistic practice; mainly, challenging rigid binarism serves as an anchor to emphasise the fluidity and hybridity within personal narratives. This research notes that post-colonialism should not only pay attention to the representation of colonial authority by using 'desire' but also seek to create new narratives based on the multiplicity of experiences. Although 'double vision' in mimicry can create racial differences, objectifying the colonial authority may limit the self to perpetuate a duality of colonised/coloniser. In my film practice, I avoided the restraints of the binary by constantly re-categorising my indigenous knowledge through a trans-local/national 'home'. I argue that centralising indigenous knowledge may produce essentialised definitions as it excludes the colonial representation and seemingly refuses to acknowledge the cultural hybridity present in globalisation, which is not limited to the kind of hybridity created by mimicry when faced with colonial authority.

The sense of trans-localism from my hometown village to an urban area in my home country indicates that indigenous knowledge can create a hybrid cultural identity. The term 'centre' may not be appropriate for indigenous knowledge as it entails a homogenisation of indigenous knowledge. I would suggest that the hybridity of indigenous knowledge never intends to confine the boundaries of the perception of self-indigenesness. Decolonial auto-ethnography, therefore, can be understood as a process that attempts to create a 'centreless' narrative where

indigenous knowledge becomes fluid. The psychedelic filmic frame fragments narrative centres, in which each of the film element is equalised to play a role to affect viewers' sensation.

In my psychedelic film practice, I use the term 'the On and Off-Image' to describe such flexible dynamics. The creative cultural identity does not permanently fully attach to indigenous knowledge. It is instead a globalised and transculturalised production which is not confined to objectifying the colonial context.

Second, the use of techniques of superimposition and juxtaposition within diasporic aesthetics can create a hybrid space producing an 'inverse visuality' that intends to challenge the rigidity of binary. I have discovered that the use of film techniques often employed by psychedelic filmmakers -such as superimposition and juxtaposition, in which 'multi-images' in the filmic frame use textures, and their colour change dissolves the single meaning for each single image, this form of visuality delivers a 'feeling' of tension within the fusion of centreless film elements. In this manner, the essential 'signified' has become 'soluble' and 'abrasively mottled' within fragmented memories rather than a 'sleek surface' (singular image) that aims to define the 'signs' fully. It captures the complexities and layered meanings in personal and collective histories by overlaying multiple images to form a continuous narrative without clear boundaries. The multiple exposures from superimposition and juxtaposition in practice created a dense structure that blurs the line between personal experiences and abstract imagination. Constantly recombining and juxtaposing cultural symbols in a semiotic mode offered a 'cultural sensation' of Chineseness.

I also noticed that fast cutting and graphical-musical rhyming as editing techniques can disorient different states of consciousness. In this manner, the changing perception of binaries to 'signs' in the film sequence produces an open space for diversity in the exploration of personal cultural identities. Hall's concept of 'memory' has been transformed into a 'ruleless flow' within the 'rhythm' of 'fluid semiotics'.

I would argue that this visuality shows the cultural conflict and realises the ‘balanced state’ of duality. The ‘rhythm’ aims to present this nuanced transformation. Due to the overlapping images, the cultural symbols flow through the visual of clearness, semi-clearness, and complete abstraction within the editing of ‘slow’ and ‘fast’, ‘intense’ and ‘harmonious’. The discovery of the term ‘fluidity’ in my psychedelic films was the result of an attempt to distort the footage’s ‘average speed’, which responds to the instability of cultural identity that presents the complexity of ‘hybrid space’.

Third, I found that the Chinese understanding of Yin-Yang amplifies and renders complex the binary relationship by offering it a sense of paradox and complementing it through the idea of ‘becoming’. The paradox indicates the conflict of homo/heterogenisation; the visibility of transcultural memories serves as a foundation that empowers this fluid binary contained within the Yin-Yang dynamics. Homogenisation and essentialism also happen in non-colonial narratives where diasporas intend to claim the authenticity of their cultural identity. Thus, the authenticity needs to be split into the Yin-Yang duality of collective/individual that cannot fully represent each other. From a Yin-Yang’s perspective, I would argue that decolonial auto-ethnography constantly relocates a new duality that comprises a kind of ‘personal signature’ as the production of hybridity and fluidity. In this manner, Double consciousness not only refers to ‘two warring souls’; it also allows ‘two reconcilable souls’ to temporarily exist. For example, although the stereotypical image of Chinatown might produce an exotic homogenisation, it also may provide a sense of belonging due to its cultural legacy. The resultant process from binary to hybridity and fluidity is ‘partly overlapping’; though ‘mimicry’ and ‘double-inscribed’ present their ‘partly representation’ of essentialised narratives to create a cultural difference, it is ‘passive dynamics’ imposed within the limitation of a singular duality.

The ‘partly overlapping’ comes from multi-layered images (memories) in ambiguity, which may offer the feeling that ‘represented (overlapping) parts’ of essentialisation serve as ‘components’ in hybrid space, as the complementary relationship of colonised/coloniser is fluid with constant updates of individual experiences. The ‘represented (overlapping) parts’,

therefore, can move beyond the rigid categorisation of subject/object, as what is represented creates new 'partly unrepresented'. For example, the exotic symbols in Chineseness may partly represent my 'home feeling', while these symbols can restrict myself within stereotypical images. Thus, I will have to forage new experiences (hip-pop performance) driven by 'desire' for supplementing the missed part of belonging. The visibility of paradox in dynamics serves as non-overlapping parts that deny self-subordination to power structures in Yin Yang interaction. In psychedelic aesthetics, I have discovered that Yin-Yang presents itself as the 'rhythm' of 'fluid semiotics' without uniformity and standardisation, as the duality is not simply juxtaposed by two aspects of the symbol within the film.

Overall, these new contributions also provide valuable insights for psychedelic filmmaking where filmmakers should pay attention to the 'rhythm' of consciousness within the filmic elements; particularly, the duality of conflict and reconciliation. The insights can further develop nuanced changes of consciousness through the psychedelic visuality.

#### **6.4 Challenges**

It is important to identify several challenges that I faced during this research. First, the selection of cultural 'signs' are dependent on traditional Chinese symbols that dominate the display of filmic frame. We still lack a new identification of a wider range of 'signs' of Chineseness in the western world, thus, as a visual artist, I must consider that the films I produced need to be identifiable as Chineseness within some seemingly stereotypical symbols. Although I used decolonial methods to create multi-layered 'signifieds', the film may still leave essentialised sensations to viewers.

Second, in terms of exhibiting my work more widely, I still lack a promotion strategy, mainly because of the misrepresentation of Chineseness in Britain. Also, I need to frame my work in an exhibition context to communicate with the audience and consider what environment to showcase the films in a particular space.

Third, I always want to seek reviews from other scholars and filmmakers and work with other artists to help the work develop in the future, which refers to building up a social network. The presentation techniques for my research and films have become crucial.

Overall, these challenges are not only confined to conducting academic research and practice but also to managing one's future career and communicating with relevant fields.

### **6.5 Further Research and Opportunities**

The practical works and theoretical arguments in this research could fill the gap, as this doctoral research provides references for art practice-based researchers who are interested in the interaction of visual art and psychedelic film. More importantly, the methodology of the research encourages a layered-symbolic approach that empowers transnational/cultural Chineseness diverse interpretations into dialogue. On the other hand, this research points out the future potential for the immersive art exhibition and art therapy regarding psychedelia. I would wish to develop the methodology of psychedelic representations on cultural identities further based on multi-device connections that create more immersive 'haptic' sensations.

### **6.6 Understanding of Self**

Through this practice-led research, I have gained my aesthetics for cultural identity from psychedelic art to continue this approach to immersive multi-mediums. This aesthetics allows me to visualise the fluidity and hybridity of self-placed diasporic experiences, which has built up a foundation that enables me to relate to more sensory-rich artworks.

Through exploring auto-ethnography, I have learnt problematisation of experiences to critically examine how stereotypical narratives shape cultural identity, and how art can serve as a tool for amplifying marginalised voices. By engaging with post-colonial theorists like Homi

Bhabha and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, I have developed a framework for analysing how hybridity and fluidity operate within diasporic art practices.

To inspire the practice of others, I participated in the British Asian art community to witness the diversity of diasporic experiences within art practice. The theoretical discussions in the thesis have taught me how to analyse practical work in detail, improved my understanding of conducting practice-led research.

This research has also built a strong foundation for my future academic career. I plan to continue exploring the intersection of psychedelic aesthetics and cultural identity. By publishing my findings and presenting at conferences, I hope to contribute to ongoing conversations on the interculturality of Chineseness.

I also intend to develop further and disseminate in a more active and conscious way my film practice. It is important to point out that the films that I created during my research were never conceived as finalised products. Thus, at this stage, they have not been formally disseminated through gallery or cinematic contexts but have only circulated in online platforms to allow some viewers to watch them.

I imagine that future screenings might occur in informal settings, e.g., immersive installations, small collective screenings, or intimate digital spaces where the viewer's attention can fluctuate between focus and drift. Also, these works encourage openness and personal reflection to generate sensations and affections.

The journey of this practice-led research helps me better understand how to embark on art practice within theoretical foundations. Meanwhile, the practice produced artistic insights that offer unique perspectives for theories. The research is therefore significant for my art career as a visual artist. In particular, I have learnt how to integrate my individual experiences into my practice, enabling me to develop my own "signature" in art.

On the other hand, the PhD journey also motivated me to participate in many art communities focused on Asian migration in the UK, which have supported my artistic inspiration. My plan for the future is to step into art education, and I will bring my experiences and practice-led research knowledge into my classes. I plan to further contribute to this area.

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## Appendix: Film Works to Each of Chapter

### Chapter 2

*Tangling Phantoms*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma9G2ITC9p0>

### Chapter 3

*Fluid Souls*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUGWkcap9xs>

*Cultural Phantoms*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKw5QyuqIqI>

### Chapter 4

*The Sub-self*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5fxGUXSrQs>

### Chapter 5

*Yin-Yang Eyes*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSkNy3Jp-Zs>

Within dim or quiet environments, these films are ideally viewed on a small screen with headphones. Viewers are encouraged to meditate to engage with the material repeatedly, casually, or while semi-distracted, as the works are intended to be immersive rather than conclusive with narratives.