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CULTURAL MEMORIES, MIGRANT SPACE, ONTOLOGICAL LONELINESS AND NEGOTIATING HORIZONS

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my MFA project at Dunedin School of Art, the focus on the juxtaposition of my cultural identities as a first-generation Chinese immigrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand has remained constant.[1] Emerging from sustained experiences of vulnerability shaped by the endurance of alienation and estrangement, I have repeatedly examined my relationship to the society in which I live and its cultural frameworks. Through continual cycles of destabilisation and reconstruction, alongside moments of gradually established connectedness and belonging, a layered identity that combines both Chinese and Aotearoa New Zealand cultural memories has begun to take form, settling into a state of self-acceptance and self-care. While language barriers inevitably produce incomprehension, and cultural gaps distance community groups, it is equally valid that within the same cultural group individuals possess distinct perspectives. This stands in contrast to my lived experience of growing up in the communist environment of China in the 1990s, where individual subjectivity was often shaped by collective norms, converging thoughts and ideas, which have made autonomy more challenging to sustain in everyday social life.

My twelve and a half years living in Aotearoa New Zealand have therefore constituted a prolonged transition from collectivism toward individual autonomy. Yet language acquisition, behavioural adaptation and lifestyle adjustments represent only surface-level shifts. Over time, I have realised that the collective memory of my childhood upbringing—along with my personal memory—is embedded in my identity like blueprints and cannot be erased. It produces a subjectivity that holds overlapping cultural lineages within these rooted memory structures. The continuous evolution of a layered identity is a process of persistent negotiation without resolution. At various junctures, I retain or relinquish specific cultural epistemologies through the form of "selective remembering" and "ideological forgetting."[2] These decisions are not moral or absolute, but contingent and situational.

My art practice mirrors this complex negotiation. Its developmental process is clearly traceable. Initially, I engaged with questions such as whether China might articulate its own feminist discourse within globalisation; the dissonance between patriarchal structures shaped by China's historical feudalism and those of Western societies; and the status of Chinese women's autonomy and self-determination.[3] It is evident that I started reflecting on my identity from a gender perspective within overlapping cultural frameworks. The first significant change came after experiencing a macro-scale cultural environment different from my past—that transition from collectivism toward individual autonomy mentioned before.

As the process of individuality gradually formed, more complex negotiations took shape. Over time, migrant identity, which combines with gender, race and class, disrupts stabilisation. Two years ago, driven by an urgent need to relocate my sense of being, I turned toward the practice of hand-sewing traditional Chinese quilts to imagine a renewed form of strength emerging from the remembered care of my late grandmother. Subsequently, I produced a body of work, *Under The Bridge* (2025), with several hundred *shābāo* (fabric sandbags), and created a 40-minute audiovisual work, *That Was Their One Tree Hill* (2025), which narrates my immigration story using an autoethnographic method. This marked a shift from self-protection to more reflective engagement, grounded in a deepened understanding of migrant spatial conditions.

By articulating personal experience in my art, I began to identify brief, limited points of connection within local communities, especially in the art community in Aotearoa. Over time, I have begun to understand that prolonged loneliness and alienation are less internal emotional states and more a network through which the relationships among memory, space and identity can be examined. In this sense, migrant loneliness in the diaspora becomes an ontological condition.

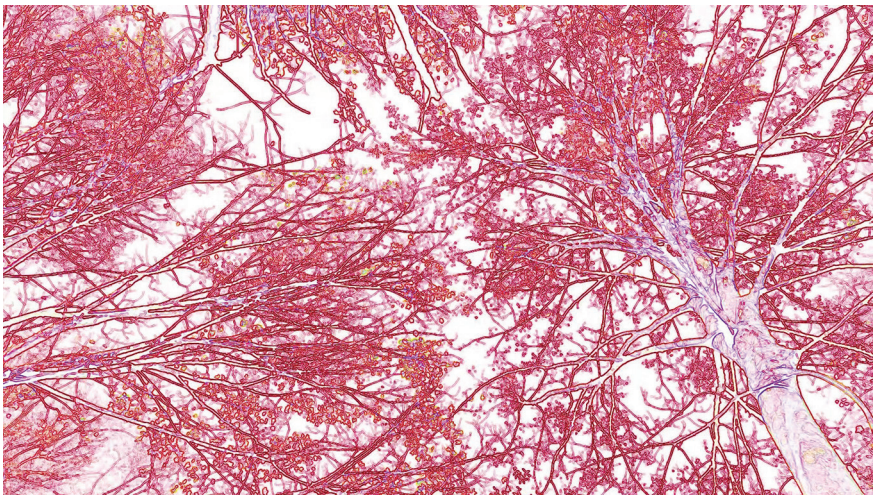


Figure 1. Eva Ding, *That Was Their One Tree Hill*, 2025.
Video Still, from 40 minute moving image with audio narration.
Exhibition at Slant Art Project Space, Dunedin.

My Master of Fine Arts project reflects my current conceptual position after this extended period of transformation. It explores how cultural identity is re-shaped in 'lieu' (a concept drawn from Pierre Nora's "Lieu de Mémoire," discussed in due course),[4] where cultural memory and migrant space continuously co-produce one another. Following Friedrich Nietzsche's term 'horizon,' for a threshold that both enables and limits what can be held in relation, horizons in my work function as negotiated boundaries between my own memory spaces and between myself and others.[5] Traditional Chinese landscape ink painting, *shanshui* (山水/ mountain-water), creates an imaginary space where multiple horizons coexist.[6] It resists single-point perspective, allowing viewers to travel through the landscape. My work extends this context into three-dimensional *shanshui*. Through viewers' 'travelling,' horizons shift in space, negotiating between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

This spatial reconstruction materialises a condition in which cultural memory and lived space do not fully align but remain in continuous negotiation. Viewers' movements enable different cultural frameworks to coexist without resolution, therefore operating as a 'lieu' where ontological loneliness is bodily experienced.

1. MEMORY AND MEMORY-SPACE

Early morning. Before dawn entirely breaks, the noise from the street outside the *hutong* begins to rise from a distance.[7] After washing up, I ask my grandmother for one yuan and walk down the alley toward the street corner. Halfway there, I can already smell the fried buns in the breakfast vendor's wok—the scent of diced beef, spring onion, vermicelli, flour and sesame oil mingling in the air. There is always a queue; everyone in the neighbourhood waits for those buns. Fortunately, the vendor is so practised that within five minutes, another ten portions are ready. Catching the first batch feels like luck; more often, I have to wait through two, standing in the aroma, mouth watering, until finally receiving my share.

Memory itself cannot exist in a vacuum. It requires concrete spatial frameworks to take form: locations, objects, materials, bodily practices, routines, landscapes, architectures … things that anchor and stabilise it.[8] For me, the noise from the distance breaking in the silence of the dawn, the smell of the fried bun diffusing in the air, the route walking to the breakfast shop, the waiting and hoping to get my portion, has been repeated and restored, forming a collective memory shared with neighbours inhabiting the same community. Memory, hence, is produced within social space by constantly reactivating meanings attached to material settings.

Simultaneously, memory reproduces social space because memory relies on spatial and material structures that enable its collective maintenance. Because of their shared fried buns experience, neighbours created a social environment, checking on each other while waiting in the queue, a space where memories could continually evolve from yesterday to today and keep renewing when tomorrow morning comes, in a continual process of production and reproduction.

Representational space (lived space) is bodily and emotional, produced through everyday practice and tied to identity.[9] Meanwhile, remembering inscribes meaning into space through recalling, retelling and remaking, activating space in the present moment.[10] Pierre Nora refers to it as a 'lieu de mémoire' (site of memory), which contains three coexisting senses: material, symbolic and functional. They characterise the physical space as a container for collective memory recalled as 'true memory,' distinct from history; it is collective, social, and encompassing. The 'lieu' functions intimately as a bond between the collective and the individual, and as an endlessly recycling form of meaning through metamorphosis. "[Collective] memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects," and this collective sense is stabilised in symbolically condensed forms.[11]

If memory requires spatial forms to exist, and if space becomes meaningful only through the memories that are recalled, then 'memory-space' refers to the spatial and material forms through which memory is reproduced and reactivated. It is a mutually constitutive relation: space provides the frameworks that stabilise memory, while memory invests space with meaning to reinforce a sense of being. In this continual exchange, memory-space becomes a 'lieu' where personal and collective memories are continuously living.



Figure 2. Eva Ding, *Under The Bridge* (2025).
Hand-sewn shābāo filled with wheat, rice and beans, and a 35-minute audio narration.
Installation view at AV gallery, the Arts House Trust, Pah Homestead. Auckland.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

In visual art, the relationship between objects and memory is often emphasised. We frequently hear the claim that objects 'contain' memory, or artworks 'preserve' the artist's memories and act as mediators through which viewers recall. However, it is challenging to rely on the stability of the meaning of such an object, as it is not universal but specific to a particular person, community, cultural experience or spatial history.

When I was sewing *shābāo* in 2025, I was fully aware that these objects would not function as memory carriers that resonate with local cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand.[12] However, for first-generation immigrants who share a similar collective memory, the throwing of *shābāo* is a kids' game familiar to almost every Chinese child. The object itself does not contain memory in the manner of a hard drive or OneCloud; it operates more like a trigger. When a viewer encounters an art object, it activates memories drawn from the viewer's own life and opens a space in the present moment to reproduce the past. Memory occurs in relation to, not within, the object itself.

Supporting this relational concept of memory, artist Louise Bliss cites archaeologist Andrew Jones' 2007 book *Memory and Material Culture*, where he argues that we tend to imagine memory as a physical entity that "stores the objects of perception," mainly because we associate memory with the architecture of the mind.[13] The attic is an intuitive metaphor: a place where we put things we do not need every day but do not want to lose. For Bliss, discussing French artist

Christian Boltanski's archival practice, the attic is an informal archive composed of sedimented layers of what has been forgotten. This accumulation resembles Andy Warhol's time capsules—a form of semi-disposal. Bliss argues that the attic is a safe holding zone where the significance of objects can be re-evaluated over time. However, it is not a memory container. Rather, the art itself functions as a memory-space that viewers revisit through their own projections during each exhibition experience. We project individual memories onto things and construct individual memory-spaces around objects. Each individual's memory-space differs, as our lived experience varies; each re-entry will not be the same, as our lived experience is in the 'durée' of time.[14] That is to say, memory is not stored in the object and left behind in the attic; it is reproduced through each encounter in the present.

Another key contribution to this theoretical field is Joan Gibbons' 2007 book *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*.[15] Gibbons examines enactment and re-enactment in relation to episodic memory, understood as personal, experiential and situated, in contrast to the more generalised structures of semantic memory. She discusses the *Urban Tapestries* project in central London (2002–2004), a participatory form of subjective mapping based on psychogeography, led by Alice Angus and Giles Lane. Through mobile software that enables participants to map and share "their own sense of place," memory emerges at specific times and locations and unfolds through encounters, weaving a shared social fabric.[16] In this framework, memory is understood as relational, transitional, temporal, personal, episodic, situational, phenomenal, interpersonal, psychogeographical, interactional and participative. A sense of collectivity is redeemed and remapped through intersubjective exchange within the data bank of episodic memories in a reproduced psychogeographical space.[17]

We have established that memory emerges through spatial encounters. Artworks themselves do not contain memory; they generate a memory-space through the encounters and interactions of viewers (participants). Within "their own sense of place," individuals map out a sense of being that is archived in personal memories. Collectively, a new memory-space is reproduced, and the re-created 'lieu' is distinct from the history.

2. MIGRANT SPACE BETWEEN FRIED BUNS AND POPSICLE

What we call cultural memory is a condensed silhouette of social practices, a composite of many overlapping individual memories that form a relatively shared sense of the past. It is collective yet distanced from the everyday; it is generational: transmitted through narratives, media, literature, poetry, oral traditions, customs, art, social activities, behaviour, morals and judgements.[18] It is historical.

Cultural memory reproduces social space, simultaneously generating culture and cultural identity with shared communities. When I describe the taste of the fried buns, the gap between our memories makes it difficult for you (if you did not grow up in China) to truly understand them, even with vivid imagination. Likewise, when you describe the kind of popsicle nearly every child you grew up with enjoyed, I cannot fully imagine its flavour or the happiness it carried, which only you and your childhood friends share. As a first-generation immigrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand for twelve years, I have learned to adapt to the current cultural environment. But the question remains: how can I make you realise that our differences are not limited to skin colour, and that I hold a memory of fried buns rather than a popsicle?

German cultural scholar Jan Assmann used Nietzsche's concept of the 'horizon' to refer to the boundary between what is remembered and what is left behind. It constitutes the limit; without such limits, the past would overwhelm the present and identity would lose coherence. Assmann argues that cultural memory has fixed horizon points through which the crystallised group identity—"concretion of identity"—finds meaning between who belongs and who does not, as cultural memory is objectified in linguistic, pictorial or ritual formations.[19] It is a form of institution; therefore, it is selective, and its boundaries must be constantly maintained.[20]

Here, between the fried buns and the popsicle, draw a horizon line between two different memories—not between two individuals but between two cultures. It is a fixed line to separate two cultural groups in order to maintain the "concretion of identity." When we speak about our autobiographical memories, we are already speaking about the relations between the individual and the collective, and the relations to the space cultural memory produces and reproduces; that is to say, ultimately, we are exploring the spatial relationship between the individual and collective in time.

For migrants, this relationship becomes unstable. When one relocates, the inherited memory-space no longer aligns with the new lived space. The familiar sensory markers, such as language, food, art and historical references, which concretise one's identity, no longer serve as shared frameworks; what remains is an ontological instability that creates loneliness, alienation and displacement. Migrants are forced to make choices to adapt in order to reconstruct a sense of collectivity, inevitably crossing the horizon line between two cultures—between what is to remember in one culture and what is to forget in another. However, one's cultural memory, particularly for first-generation immigrants, is deeply embedded and constitutive of identity; it cannot be erased.

Migrants exist in this migrant space, where the horizon line is not fixed but relational, and cultural identity is unstable across different cultural memories. It is a space of in-betweenness, where inherited and present cultural frameworks coexist without fully aligning.

In their 2007 book, *At Home in the Chinese Diaspora*, editors Andrew Davidson and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce argue: "The process of selection is a personalised choice for individuals and a collective choice for the community as a whole, depending on which cultural elements are viewed as key to the survival of their identity."[21] However, whilst cultural memory stabilises the individual and the community, it also carries ideological force, particularly through the façade of stability associated with national identities, within an ingrained understanding of what is deemed "natural." In other words, remembering is selective. Communities actively decide which elements of culture, history or experience should be preserved and transmitted; at the same time, other elements may be forgotten or intentionally excluded.

Migrants may retain or relinquish their cultural memory in order to adapt in a new environment ("Have you tried our popsicle?" "Yes, I have tried your popsicle, and I like it!"). Simultaneously, there can also be uncertainty in the exchange of cultural material, especially for people who have always lived within a certain context where their fixed cultural memory horizons have not yet been interrupted by other cultures ("I haven't tried your fried buns yet, but I think I will like them (or not)!"). In both cases, cultural identity is continuously reshaped through ongoing acts of selection in choice-making and situational judgments.

Migrant space holds unfixed horizon lines relationally between both migrants' and host populations' lived experiences, tried or yet to have, the fried buns and popsicle. Navigating between two cultures is a new experience that disrupts already established fixed horizons; for each side, remembering and forgetting are therefore ongoing processes through which memory continues to renew and eventually settles as a sense of identity.

The differences between us are not limited to skin colour; I remember fried buns rather than a popsicle. However, once again, if migrants cannot be fully accepted by the community because each side (migrants and host population) chooses to remain within a fixed horizon of inherited cultural memories, the distance between cultural spaces widens. Migrant space is a 'lieu' where alienation and belonging coexist, continuously reproducing a sense of loneliness and displacement.

3. GUY NGAN AND THE HISTORY OF CHINESE ART IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Dunedin's history and Chinese culture have been intertwined ever since the first batch of Chinese settlers arrived during the gold rush in the 1860s. However, reading the history of the migration of Chinese people and Chinese art in Aotearoa New Zealand has been emotionally difficult for me, as it appears to be a silhouette of my own migration experience.

Following the impact of the two Opium Wars (1839–1942; 1856–1860), China was left fractured, with people struggling to survive. Driven by the economic incentives of the gold rush, the Otago region accepted its first group of Chinese miners in 1865. Under the logic of colonial interests, they were initially regarded as "qualified by industrious and skilful habits to become valuable servants."[22] By 1871, the number of Chinese miners had grown to approximately 4,000. These individuals were primarily farmers from the Pearl River Delta, fighting for survival. Within the long-standing hierarchical structure of Chinese art history, ordinary peasants had virtually no access to artistic education.

Over the following decades, with successive shifts in immigration policy targeting Chinese migrants, their conditions deteriorated sharply. Defined as "sojourners," they endured overlapping conditions of survival crisis, racial discrimination, spatial segregation, family separation and an enduring inability to integrate into local society. At the same time, New Zealand hosted its first exhibition of Chinese art curated by Capt. George Humphreys-Davies —the *Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art* (1935) at Durham Street Art Gallery, Christchurch—presenting Chinese ceramics from the Han (202 BC – 220 AD) and Tang (618 – 907CE) dynasties to the Song (960 – 1279CE) dynasty. This marked the first moment Chinese art was formally seen within New Zealand. Shortly after, the extensive *Loan Exhibition of Chinese Art: 2500BC to 1800AD* (1937), also curated by Humphreys-Davies, toured Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin, generating widespread attention and reflecting a growing national interest in so-called "Oriental art."[23]

During World War II, shifting geopolitical alliances led to changes in New Zealand's immigration policy. From 1938, Chinese miners' families, particularly women, were permitted entry. This moment enabled Chinese migrants to begin establishing roots and forming family structures in New Zealand.[24] However, the subsequent development of second- and third-generation migrants, limited access to education and language barriers meant that life remained oriented toward labour and survival. At the same time, exclusion from social integration persisted within a racially stratified cultural environment.

It was not until the 1970s, alongside the Māori Renaissance, that some Chinese migrant families began to recognise education as a pathway toward social acceptance. As increasing numbers of third-generation Chinese New Zealanders entered professional fields such as medicine, eventually artists such as Denise Kum (born 1968) and Yuk King Tan emerged in the New Zealand art scene. Chinese art began, for the first time, to take root within the cultural soil of New Zealand.

Parallel to this history, Guy Ngan (Ngan Kwok Guy, 顏国鍇, 1926–2017) was a special case. Yiyan Wang's 2024 article on Ngan offers a broad view of history, documenting the life and work of the first Chinese immigrant artist in Aotearoa New Zealand to receive national and international recognition, even if that recognition arrived belatedly.[25] I believe that although Ngan identified himself as Pacific-Chinese, and although our lived time and space are separated by nearly a century and unfold within vastly different historical and cultural contexts, we have grappled with much the same kinds of questions about being and becoming Chinese migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand. We have experienced similar struggles, harboured similar artistic ideals and aspirations and explored similar cultural boundaries that span nations. It feels as though history has drawn a circle, repeating itself a century later. I want to understand why.

Although there is limited documentation about Ngan, I read the evidence available as a lifelong pattern of negotiation and persistence, an ongoing struggle with stability in cultural identity. As an artist, he completed what was then the most authoritative internationally recognised art education in the United Kingdom on a scholarship at Goldsmiths and the Royal Academy, worked tirelessly to return to Aotearoa New Zealand and continued to create and experiment throughout his life. Yet, he was not fully recognised by the Western—and specifically Aotearoa New Zealand—art world. This, of course, might be said of many accomplished and interesting artists. I cannot help but wonder, though, had he been European or carried a European surname, might he have been written into Western art history half a century earlier?[26] And was Ngan's work difficult to appraise because of a lack of alignment between the recognisably Chinese characteristics in his art and the dominant forms of both European modernism and New Zealand's 'nationalised' version of it?

Ngan's art practice never departed from an intimate dialogue with cultural identity. Whether through carved seals, jade stones, wood, ink, watercolour, acrylic, Chinese mythological symbols or Māori motifs, he consistently sought a space capable of holding all these elements together, a space that could accommodate his hybridity among Chinese, Aotearoa New Zealand and (self-recognised) Pasifika identities.[27]

His visual style was strongly influenced by early twentieth-century modernism, highly rational and formal, at times echoing the graphic sensibilities of the Bauhaus. However, he didn't imitate Bauhaus examples. Instead, he attempted to relocate cultural meanings through lines and forms within the works. He also wrote about his understanding of the relationship between art and the community in his text "Visual Arts and Daily Bread."[28] He wasn't an artist who led or revolutionised art history. Still, he was certainly not one who should be overlooked for nearly a century of dedication in Aotearoa New Zealand's art community; at the very least, he was the first significant artist to hold both Chinese and Aotearoa New Zealand cultural identities, and therefore the first to explore, through art practice, the spatial and cultural interactions between China and Aotearoa.

My art practice reflects my migration experience and my migration experience mirrors the history of Chinese art in New Zealand. As Jung Eun Lee observes in her thesis about Chinese New Zealand artists: "In a multicultural society where diversity is said to be celebrated, but

without truly knowing where the diversity lies, the appreciation of cultural achievement remains superficial."[29] Although the contemporary cultural environment differs significantly from that of 160 years ago—becoming more open and diverse—these challenges have not disappeared.

4. ONTOLOGICAL LONELINESS AND NEGOTIATED HORIZON

I understand my migrant identity requires an ongoing negotiation of the 'horizons' in migrant space that I do not fully reconcile within myself, leaving ontological instability as a lasting condition. In the context of migration, ontology is a relevant term because migration does not just change language or culture at the surface level. It shifts the ground, interrupting the fixed horizon that used to stabilise my identity; my past cannot be erased from my existing cultural memory of my upbringing in China, and the present on the other side of the threshold has been laid with new cultural memories of living in Aotearoa. Negotiating between what is remembered and what is forgotten in everyday practice is inevitable, in order to maintain a sense of identity; this destabilisation produces what I describe as an ontological loneliness condition.

Ontological loneliness here does not describe an emotional state; it is a condition in which one's multiple identities across multiple cultural frameworks remain in unresolved negotiation. Forgotten has yet to be completed; at the same time, new memories have yet to stabilise. Communication is disrupted, halting the reproduction of collective memory and rendering re-entry into the community impossible; as a result, the cultural spaces widen. As a migrant living in Aotearoa New Zealand for twelve years, I contribute to the materialisation of overlapping yet non-coincident fields of memory, where different cultural frameworks remain partially aligned yet not fully integrated, sustaining this condition of ontological loneliness.

Initially, this negotiation takes the form of communication with my environment—a horizon between me carrying original cultural memories and the newly adapted cultural space. It is often deliberate and demanding. This stage resembles a process of learning and accepting local culture, mediated primarily through improving language acquisition. As my English proficiency improved, communication with my surroundings became more effective; however, this did not resolve the question of identity instability.

I then enter a second stage of communication, negotiating a horizon within myself that involves reflection and decisions between what must be remembered and what must be forgotten.[30] This stage is often difficult and requires the courage to confront one's own choices, rather than resorting to uncritical compromise or appeasement of the host culture. Unselective abandonment risks stripping me of my original cultural identity, stretching and distorting it, and intensifying my sense of misplacement.

If this second stage of self-negotiation is successful, I move to a third stage of communication—a horizon between the lived space of Aotearoa New Zealand and me, carrying newly produced memories and identities shaped through subjective selection. Ideally, this process constructs a stabilised identity space—one that does not demand compromise or appeasement from participants of different cultural backgrounds. Instead, it allows diverse perspectives to coexist and collide. However, this negotiation is not always effective. At times, I am unable to enter the second stage, which requires confronting significant psychological work. Remaining in the first phase only exacerbates the instability of my cultural identity. Meanwhile, for those with whom I attempt to communicate, an inability to recognise my transition between these stages

simultaneously impedes negotiation; as I mentioned before, there is a horizon line between fried buns and popsicles.

However, British social scientist Doreen Massey argues that space is relational, mobile and open, constructed through flows of people's memories and movements.[31] Immigration reshapes the meaning of place where multiple cultural frameworks intersect, horizons overlap, landscapes remap and memories reproduce. Horizons shift over time through negotiation, not only within migrants' own culture but also between different cultural groups.

My intention is not to divide communities; rather, it arises from the experiences of divisions and boundaries already present in the community's spatial configurations. The question for my research, therefore, becomes: How can art function as a space where differing memory horizons encounter one another without collapsing into erasure or assimilation?

I consider art my primary medium of communication. Through my MFA studies, I have examined a range of mediums to articulate the ongoing negotiation of my identity, which I will detail in the next chapter. My research also focuses on artists with hybrid cultural identities that resonate closely with my own, particularly at the intersection of race and cultural memory in a relocated migrant space. For artists who have experienced and are continuously experiencing ongoing processes of negotiating identity instability across cultural and spatial boundaries, their various artworks embody this ontological condition and constitute a form of identity-stability and 'becoming.' Accordingly, rather than focusing on any single artwork, I argue that only by attending to multiple works and seeing an artist's transformation more broadly can one fully understand the process of negotiating migrant identities.

Xu Bing's life is closely intertwined with the turbulent history of contemporary Chinese art, particularly during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent period of social transformation. Growing up in China, he was the son of a historian at Peking University and experienced the harsh conditions of the Cultural Revolution. He later trained in printmaking and completed his MFA at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in 1987. Following the political events of 1989, he left China for the United States, bringing with him his then-controversial and widely criticised *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), which later became one of his most recognised works.[32] In later years, he returned to China to serve as president of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, before subsequently returning to the United States to continue his art practice. His work often engages in profound reflections on identity, shaped directly by his long-term living across different cultural environments.

Book from the Sky was created in China during the post-Cultural Revolution period, within the context of the 1985 New Wave avant-garde movement, and was first exhibited as Xu Bing's solo exhibition at the China National Gallery in Beijing in 1989, where it was met with considerable misunderstanding and ridicule.[33] The work comprises over 4,000 invented pseudo-Chinese characters, hand-carved as woodblocks and printed onto paper as scrolls and bound books by using traditional techniques. For Xu, it was an examination of the semantic propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, reproducing a 'meaningless' monument to a period of 'meaningless' Chinese history.

Compared with *Book from the Sky*, Xu's later text-based work, *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–96), appears more dynamic and socially playful.[34] This project came after he crossed national and cultural borders, where adapting to another language became inevitable for communication. In this work, he reconfigured two linguistic systems, Chinese and English, into a square compositional structure that appears, at first glance, to be Chinese calligraphy but becomes legible as English upon closer reading.

I have more than once thought about this similar issue myself through the years of migrant experience: Is there a better way to learn English? Why do we have to communicate only in English? Would they struggle to learn Chinese just as I do to adapt to their language? With all these questions, the moment I saw this body of work, I completely understood Xu's ontological struggles and poetic imagination.

If *Book from the Sky* can be understood as a prelude to the artist's negotiation of destabilised identity during the breakdown of a single cultural framework, then *Square Word Calligraphy* reflects Xu's ongoing negotiation between two cultural frameworks in migrant space, where his identity has become further destabilised. The work invites participants to learn a 'new' language in the installation scene of a traditional Chinese classroom. Viewers (participants) must adapt their reading habits and negotiate between unfamiliar visual forms of the alphabet. Although the artwork functions as a deconstruction of inherited cultural memories that appear as misreadings, it also offers a space to re-enter what is remembered in order to adopt a new way of seeing—not representing cultural differences but enacting the artist's ontological process of becoming in juxtaposition with the complexities of multiple cultural identities. As the horizon shifts while perspective changes, the artwork stimulates negotiation within.

Xu's negotiation doesn't stop with language systems. He continues the conversation in his *Background Story* series (started in 2004). This body of work consists of lightbox installations resembling traditional Chinese landscape ink paintings, featuring a wide range of found objects collaged behind the lightboxes. Through lighting projection, these materials construct the visual illusion of classical ink landscapes on the surface. The term 'background' is itself significant, as it metaphorically points to the deeper layers of Xu's cultural identity. Yet, in the work, the background is placed in the foreground, while simultaneously what has been locally collected in Xu's lived experience becomes the background that constitutes the image.

The experience of living abroad as a migrant is precisely such a process of internal and external transformation. Over time, my ongoing adaptation to and collection of local 'material' is gradually internalised, while the blueprint racial and cultural background becomes a surface. In *Background Story*, I see Xu directly exposing the process of his reconstruction of cultural identity through visual cultural symbols that articulate the complexity of the negotiation between the inherited and the adapted. While the embedded cultural memory of the Chinese landscape cannot be erased, it is no longer produced in its original material conditions.

5. THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHINESE *SHANSHUI*

From Guy Ngan to Xu Bing: I resonate with their migration experiences as I enter my art practice through a unique perspective. My generation's cultural memory has been institutionalised through diversity and inclusion, which differs from previous generations. However, structural asymmetries remain. Ngan's presence confirms that migrant ontology in Aotearoa is historically layered; my practice does not begin anew, but enters an ongoing continuum.

My aluminium mesh landscape body of work emerges from a perspective related to Xu's, affirming that cultural memory does not dissolve in migration; it becomes recontextualised within a new migrant space. Xu's work articulates how identity remains structured even when its ground shifts, which closely aligns with my negotiation of cultural memory horizons.

There is another contemporary artist whose work is relevant to my mesh sculptures. Last year, during a visit to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, upon entering the building and turning a corner on the upper level, I encountered Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *North Wall* (2005).[35] The suspended, neon-green, translucent fabric structure reconstructs a section of the north wall and roofline of Suh's father's house, while suggesting the outline of a traditional Korean house with an elevated scholar's roof. Variations of stilted or elevated roof structures appear across many Asian architectural histories, often signifying hierarchy and cultural authority.

What I saw was one roof placed beneath another, one home contained within another, one identity included inside another. Standing beneath the house and looking upward, I felt an overwhelming emotional response, a powerful sense of displacement. The work stages a collision of the contemporary Western gallery/museum structure with the traditional Eastern house form; a dominant Western exhibition context contrasts with an evocation of East Asian domestic memory. As I approached the work, my memory was instantly drawn back to the past with a sense of familiarity. I, too, grew up in traditional tiled houses with extended eaves—though not of the elite scholar's status that Suh references. The images of such houses at the ends of alleyways, in preserved heritage sites and in historical television dramas are cultural memories from which comes familiarity; deeply ingrained memories that are triggered and recalled upon encountering Suh's *North Wall*.

However, this recognition was immediately fractured by awareness of standing within the Toi o Tāmaki, in the space of Aotearoa New Zealand, in the time of Spring 2025. Familiarity collapsed into dislocation. Is this not displacement? I found myself suspended in a state of being almost at home yet not at home, momentarily wishing that this wall might function as a portal; if I could step inside it, might I return home?

There is also a palpable pressure of cultural interruption, where a non-Western traditional domestic form is inserted into a space coded as 'European' and 'modern.' Despite the apparent delicateness of the structure, this insertion is not gentle; it is confrontational. Positioned at the physical centre of the gallery, the house also occupies the centre of the viewer's memory space, disrupting the expected visual and cultural order of the scene. The original expected memory environment becomes unstable and montage-like, exaggerating this contradiction, hesitation and in-between state.

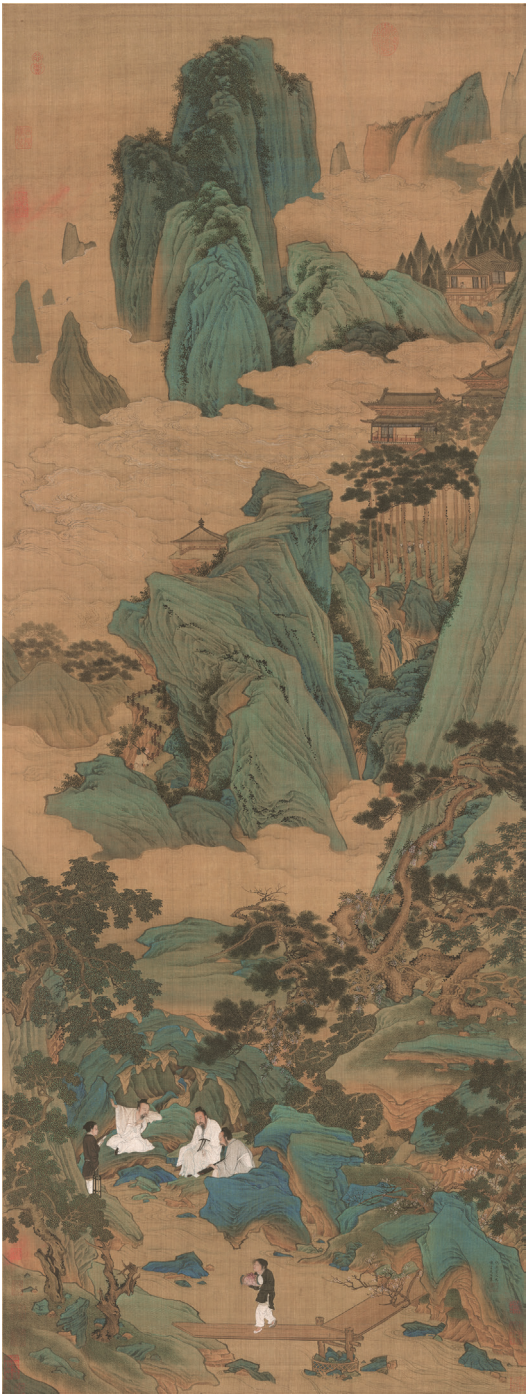
Do Ho Suh was born in South Korea in 1962. His father was a renowned painter, and he grew up in a family house architecturally designed and well-preserved. After completing a Master's degree in Korean Painting, he trained in sculpture in the United States and is currently living and working in the United Kingdom. Suh's lived experiences shape his sustained investigation into memory, cultural identity and the vulnerability of migrant subjectivity. His work constantly addresses the instability of belonging, the fragility of identity and the experience of living between cultural frameworks connected to a sense of 'home.' As Suh has said, "the concept of home didn't exist; it only started to exist when I left home and went elsewhere."[36]

Materially, *North Wall* embodies fragility and transparency. Unlike the solid architectural references of his other works, such as *Fallen Star* (2012) and *Bridging Home* (2010), Suh constructs this piece from translucent coloured polyester fabric supported by stainless-steel frames, forming part of his 'portable home' series, which began with the first fabric home artwork, *Seoul Home*, in 1999. The material communicates a sense of impermanence and uncertainty; most significantly, it



Figure 3. Hand-stitched aluminium Chinese ink painting landscape,
with a pipe-cleaner-wired tree, installation photograph at Dunedin School of Art. (2025).

Figure 4. Qiu Ying (1482 - 1559),
Fairyland of Peach Blossom.
Ming Dynasty, Ink and colours on silk,
1750x667mm. Tianjin Museum, China.



communicates exposure. A house, which is supposed to be a site of privacy and protection, here becomes transparent; it exposes itself by being porous to the surrounding environment.

This transparency resonates strongly with my experience as a migrant. In moments of social awkwardness—when language fails, when cultural references cannot be accessed, when attention is directed towards me, and I am unable to respond—I feel like a transparent house myself, instinctively seeking retreat, yet finding myself exposed to public scrutiny. In those moments, my memory and Suh's house collapse into a single space—suspended.

Suh's work also creates a sense of spatial and volumetric pressure. The wall is at a one-to-one scale, preserving the architectural volume of his father's Korean home. This physical accuracy sets up a meaningful relationship with the gallery space: the imbalance between an individual migrant's identity and the larger, more powerful cultural environment. Adding to the spectral, immaterial quality, the suspended house appears isolated and unsupported.

In my sculpture *En Route, Finding My One Tree Hill* (2026), I hand-stitched an aluminium-mesh *shanshui* terrain that viewers can physically walk through. The material choice is deliberate. Drawing on the inspiration of Do Ho Suh's portable house, the aluminium mesh I used to make *shanshui* translates landscape into lightness and permeability, forming a skeletal topography that recalls the gestural strokes of ink painting as a suggestion but not replication. Simultaneously, it addresses the sense of belonging and longing, reconfiguring cultural memories into structure.

Traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting does not rely on a technique of perspective that stabilises vision through a single, fixed vanishing point, but unfolds across shifting viewpoints over time. The viewer's eye travels through the scroll—moving from the foreground to the distance, inhabiting multiple horizons rather than standing before a single unified scene.

Horizon in *shanshui* is a relational threshold that continuously changes as the viewer moves. My aluminium landscape translates this logic into three-dimensional space. As viewers walk through the mesh terrain, their bodily movement generates changing sightlines and dissolving contours. There is no single authoritative vantage point. The horizon shifts with each step. This materialisation of a moving perspective reflects both my perception as lived experience and my understanding of migrant ontology: identity is not stabilised through a singular cultural viewpoint; it is continuously negotiated across overlapping spatial frameworks.

The three-dimensional *shanshui* is therefore, I believe, a 'lieu,' where my cultural memory and current living space remain in dialogue. It sustains the relational motion through which negotiation between different cultures also continues. I hope to activate this memory-space where multiple horizons coexist in relation. Through viewers' bodily movements and continuously shifting points of view, the landscape refuses a singular perspective. Although the work is installed on the floor level and there is a certain fixedness suggested by the physical gallery space, within viewers' walking experience the unfixed horizon terrain is reproduced through encounter—shaped by the interaction between my memories and the viewers'. In this shared negotiation, new memories emerge, not belonging solely to the migrant nor to the host population, but arising within the space between.

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1 This article is partially excerpted from my MFA dissertation.

2 Teh Cheong Chang, "Place, Memory and Identity: Imagining 'New Asia.'" *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46, no. 3 (2005), 247–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2005.00286.x.

3 This relates to artworks I have made in the BVA third year and the BVA Honours at Dunedin School of Art.

4 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 7–24.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 57–123.

6 *Shanshui*, 山水, literally "mountain-water", refers to Chinese traditional landscape painting and its broader aesthetic philosophy. *Shanshui* appears first at the fourth century CE, slowly developed into an independent pictorial genre during the Five Dynasties period (907–960) and reached its classical form in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), where shifting viewpoints within the landscape became defining characteristics. *Shanshui* also refers to philosophical understandings of the relationship between human and nature, drawing particularly on Daoism.

7 *Hutong* (胡同): traditional narrow alleyways in northern Chinese cities, typically lined with single-storey courtyard houses, forming interconnected communities and shared living spaces.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (Harper & Row, 1980), 139–140.

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991), 39.

10 Jan Assmann, "Memory Culture," *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15–69.

11 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 9.

12 *Shābāo* (沙包): refers to a small, hand-sewn fabric pouch traditionally filled with rice, beans, corn, wheat or sand, common in Chinese childhood play. *Shābāo*, in the context of my artwork, are used both as throwing objects in games and as tactile, weighted items such as stones and memories.

13 Louise Bliss, "Containers of Remembering: The Creative Practices of Collecting Memory Objects" (PhD dissertation, University of Portsmouth, 2014), 37.

14 See Henri Bergson's theory of 'duration,' which refers to time as a lived whole of our inner experience that differs from absolute time; in duration, memory is continuously becoming as a subjective flow.

15 Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (I.B. Tauris, 2007).

16 Ibid, [page].

17 Ibid.

18 Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, no.65 (1995), 125–33.

19 Ibid, 128.

20 Ibid.

21 Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Andrew P. Davidson, *At Home in the Chinese Diaspora: Memories, Identities and Belongings* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

22 Manying Ip, "Chinese New Zealanders: Old Settlers and New Immigrants," in *Immigration and National Identity in New Zealand*, ed. Stuart Greif (Dunmore Press, 1995), 162.

23 James Beattie and Louise Stevenson, "'[W]hat beauty in oriental art means': Asian Arts, Soft Diplomacy, and New Zealand cultural Nationalism—The Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art, Christchurch, 1935," *Museum Worlds* 7, no. 1, (2019): 58–70.

24 Manying Ip, "Redefining Chinese Female Migration: From Exclusion to Transnationalism," in *Shifting Centres: Women and Migration in New Zealand History*, ed. Lyndon Fraser and Katie Pickles (University of Otago Press, 2002), 149–165.

25 Yiyan Wang, "Guy Ngan: His Art, Life and Pacific-Chinese Aesthetics," *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. NS38 (2024): 195–216.

26 Two articles in 1972 and 1982 make particular mention of Ngan's work; both publications were in design and craft industry journals. He was first recognised in 2006 by Heather Galbraith as "a significant contributor to New Zealand's visual culture." See Wang, "Guy Ngan," 213.

27 From today's perspective, this may be read as problematic, though at the time Ngan used Māori motifs to articulate a Pacific identity rather than treating Māori culture as 'Other.'

28 Guy Ngan, "Visual Art and Daily Bread," unpublished speech as Director, New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, March 1983.

29 Jung Eun Lee, "Tracing the Rise of Chinese New Zealand Artists: Guy Ngan, Denise Kum, Yuk King Tan" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Canterbury, 2005).

30 Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2008), 97–107.

31 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

32 Xu Bing, *Book From the Sky*, 1987–1991, water-based ink on bamboo maobian paper, dyed paper covers, walnut box with leather and ivory clasps; book leaves printed from hand-carved moveable pear-wood type, traditional Chinese thread binding.

33 China National Gallery has been renamed China Art Gallery.

34 Xu Bing, *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 1994-1996, water-based ink on paper, camphorwood box and boards, Hand-printed woodblock and ink rubbing, calligraphy and butterfly binding.

35 Do Ho Suh, *North Wall*, polyester, stainless-steel armature and cable, Auckland Art Gallery, 26 July 2025–23 March 2026.

36 "Janice Kerbel Talks to Do Ho Suh," *Home Sweet Home*, 20 March 2025, https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-65-spring-2025/home-sweet-home.