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Polycultural Interactions

— Fuzzy Identity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design, Visual
Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

“Robin D.G. Kelley coined the term polyculturalism as an alternative to multiculturalism, ‘since the latter often implies that cultures are fixed, discrete entities that exist side by side—a kind of zoological approach to culture.’” [1]

Polyculturalism assumes the whole world’s cultures are interactive and fluid instead of independent and static, and individuals’ relationship to cultures are complex and cannot be categorized. Yet an individual constitutes multiple cultures, and individual identity embraces the various forms of culture in all aspects of one’s life.

My research examines how polyculturalism affects aspects of communications among people who hold a multiplicity of voices. It uses my personal experiences as the basis for work that expresses the effects of mistranslation and cultural mixing and seeks to communicate them to people of various cultural backgrounds.

Context

In this increasingly globalized world, as transnational interactions begin to dissolve fixed boundaries and moving populations require dynamic definitions of people’s identities, how do we define a nation today?

Multiculturalism, which celebrates cultural plurality, can be traced historically back to the 1950s in the United States. However multiculturalism has been argued and reconsidered increasingly frequently in recent years with another term—polyculturalism.

Cultural critic Vijay Prashad argues that multiculturalism is divisive and advocates for “polyculturalism,” which views the world as “constituted by the interchange of cultural forms.” [2]

[1] Wilkins Catanese, Brandi. *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, June 2011. Print.

[2] Prashad, Vijay. *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001. Print.

Introduction

In the age of social media, and global networks, inter-cultural communication is becoming increasingly evident all over the world. Identities are no longer being solely defined by factors such as place, nationality or blood heritage. Today, the sources of cultural expression and identity are no longer so localized. The languages we speak, the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the music we enjoy come from much wider and diverse sources. Cultures are becoming more diffused and less homogeneous.

Since birth, I perceived my cultural identity to be purely Chinese. After coming to study in the United States, my life experiences have changed my understanding about self-identity and its relationship to culture(s).

When living in China, I had been exposed to “American Culture” by watching American dramas and wearing American branded clothing. Now immersed in an American cultural environment, I have even more adapted to various American habits. I eat hamburgers, fries and iced coke, wear hoodies and Vans shoes; and I walk across the campus every day listening to Hip Hop music with earphones while holding a cup of Starbucks’ coffee. Sometimes, I am surprised to see there is a small line of “Made in China” text on the bottom of the products I use. I have developed an understanding about American people and American society by observing American lives and communicating with my new friends and acquaintances. In turn, I have also shared a number of Chinese decorations, foods and television shows with people here. For example, “The Voice of China,” a Chinese reality talent show, has another version in the United States called “The Voice,” and this has given me a lot to talk about with my American friends. Through these cross-cultural engagements, we are influencing and being influenced by each other at the same time.

Since being apart from my parents and friends in China, I have now become adjusted to the long distance relationships with them thanks to social media and other Internet technologies. When something good or bad happens to me, I text my parents using iMessage; when my friends and I would like a face-to-face chat, it is easy to open Skype; and, when I am curious about interesting things happening in their lives, I will stalk their Lime or WeChat.

Problem Statement

We live in an era where interconnectivity between nations has tended to erase lines between countries, resulting in increased linkages between diverse cultures. People across the world are becoming increasingly polycultural because the flow of ideas and goods crisscross the globe. The "native" cultures we cling to are fading—or perhaps morphing before our very eyes.

The intensity of communications among people is made possible by the spread of newspapers, publications and a variety of online applications that cross borders, leading to an increasingly decentralized and less hierarchical order of information exchange. The world's culture is becoming an exotic stew, where people from every part of the globe have access to the visions, sounds and opinions of others regardless of their physical location.

The field of graphic design, a major player in this revolution, has itself been greatly affected by this manifestation. Functioning within an image-saturated culture generated by the industries and machines of media, graphic designers are now challenged with the task of identifying meaningful information from this morass and finding ways to give it greater value. With the emergence of the global marketplace, consumers are confronted with poorly written manuals for new products, unfriendly user interfaces and confusing signage, all attempting to communicate to an increasingly diffuse audience. Graphic designers are forced to play the role of facilitator, communicating a wide range of information to audiences that can no longer be assumed to be of their own culture or to speak their own language. These audiences may also perceive certain formal elements used in visual communication design to have completely different and surprising connotations. Another challenge graphic designers encounter is to reach people with common purposes but, coming from different places and having different linguistic and cultural preferences, have difficulty in connecting with each other. Graphic designers need to have certain knowledge about what specific symbols and signs mean in various cultures, what language to use and how to involve language in it, what kind of forms would most appropriately transfer the meaning, etc. To achieve this they must do a variety of research, for example getting certain knowledge online, making surveys from groups of people and asking someone with relative experience for advice, as well as collaborate with people who speak in a multiplicity of voices.

When design products are distributed internationally, they may be misinterpreted or found to be offensive by customers who may have a very different perspective of beliefs, traditions, preferences, attitudes or values. People are used to deciphering messages based upon their own cultural expectations. In the early 1990s, when the American car rental company, Hertz, sent mail containing membership information to its customers, it used black envelopes, which were intended to connote seriousness and sophistication—a clear message from an American perspective. However, in Japan, such a missive in black signified the death of a close family member. Japanese customers were very disappointed on receiving the mail to find out it was simply membership materials from Hertz. The outcome of the campaign was successful in Europe and United States but a clear failure in Japan. ^[3]

Conversely, the designers of a website for IKEA carefully considered local sensibilities and norms by having different versions of the site for different countries. According to a marketing research by Sajan (website), the Japanese IKEA homepage, featured a group of funny and colorful animal graphics, while the Netherland's homepage seemed much more sedate, with only single individuals appearing on the page. According to a culture-based communication framework set up by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall who said: "The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context," ^[4] cultural expectations of various countries can be divided into two categories,

high-context culture and *low-context culture*, with Japan situated in the first, and the Netherlands in the second. This distinction affected IKEA's strategies for addressing the consumers of each country. The Japanese audience responded well to the website that included a variety of live elements. This audience appreciated interactivity and reported a feeling of being drawn into an experience.

Tailoring communications to particular cultures may be possible in certain cases, by considering such things as color choice and the use of images. But these strategies assume in some part that these cultures are fixed and not influenced by pervasive effects of globalization and network communications.

In my experience, while these cultural distinctions are very real, the larger issue is how cultures need to be perceived not by their differences, but in how they appreciate and understand the similarities and increasing overlaps that are unavoidable in today's world. Culture (polyculture) today is, in many ways, a blending of concepts, artifacts and behaviors expressed through a local lens.

[3] McCarron, Carolyn. "Expanding our field of vision: Globalization and the changing landscape of visual communications." *Communication Arts* March 2003: 16-23. Print.

[4] Hall, E. T., and M. R. Hall. "Understanding Cultural Differences." *Intercultural Press, Inc.* 1990. Print.

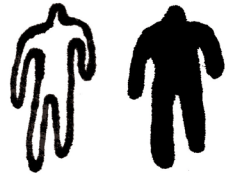
In my work, I have explored this polycultural perspective through an increasingly personal lens, trying to capture the actual experience of cultural displacement implied by these changes.

As I worked through my ideas, I advanced from working on purely formal encounters between eastern and western forms and styles, to projects in which these forms were more organically blended—in both formal and ideological terms. Rather than contrasting or depicting the clash of distinct cultures this work tried to capture the more subtle aspects of polycultural experience.

Process and Methodology



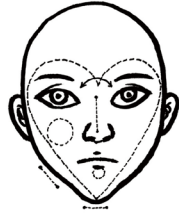
**Disorientation,
cultural slam,
polyculturalism,
mixed identity,
mistranslation?**



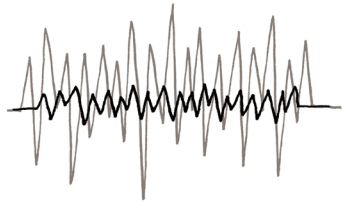
COMPLEXION



PROXEMICS



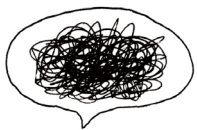
FACE RECOGNITION



DECIBEL



LANGUAGE



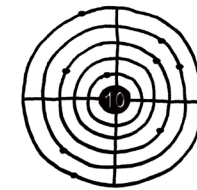
CONFUSION



FRUSTRATION



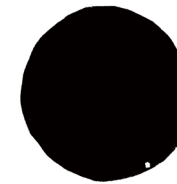
DISORIENTATION



CULTURAL RADIATION
core to margin



MARGINALIZATION



ISOLATION

Iconic Illustrations

In order to explore my own thoughts about being in another culture, I started to draw simple representations of various aspects of cultural difference by hand to see what could be made.

I collected concepts that related to cultural conflict and fusion that I found interesting, and then turned them into simple iconic illustrations. Examples include models of the culture of specific countries, and particular expressions of culture such as food, language, physiognomy and economics.



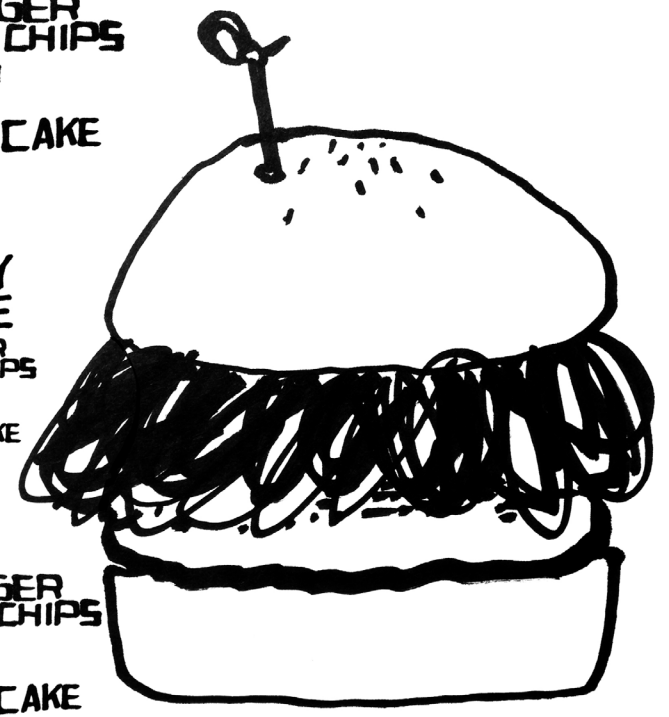
EASTERN blue and white porcelain
 +
 WESTERN violin
 =

EASTERN teapot
 +
 WESTERN Coca-Cola
 =





HAMBERGER
 POTATO CHIPS
 HOT DOG
 SALAD
 CHEESE CAKE
 PIZZA
 SODA
 TOAST
 TURKEY
 COFFEE
 HAMBERGER
 POTATO CHIPS
 HOT DOG
 SALAD
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 SODA
 TOAST
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 TURKEY
 COFFEE



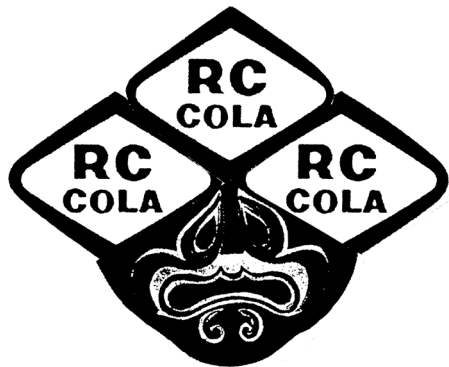
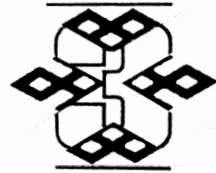
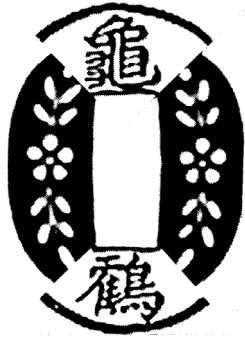


Interviews

In critiques and discussion of my work, it was suggested that I should begin to look outside of my own experiences and from other perspectives.

I interviewed some of my friends who have experienced living in foreign cultures for varying lengths of time. I asked them several questions, such as "What were the differences between the new environment and the place you came from?" and, "What specific cultural differences did you find interesting or challenging?" encouraging them to recall how they felt when they first encountered new and strange attitudes and ways of approaching life. I recorded all the interviews, transcribed them and then selected keywords from each, such as "food," "favor," "misunderstand," "measurement," "homesick," "accent," etc. To visualize these concepts, I created a series of small posters to tell the stories of interviewees' experiences.

The results were of varying success. The real experiences of interviewees exposed me to a broader range of issues to consider, but many of the pieces emphasized style more than substance. However, in a critique, my classmates felt that the results were a bit sterile and lacked the immediacy and character of my hand-drawn studies.



Cross-cultural Symbols



I collected some traditional Chinese forms that represent Asian culture, and continued a similar process in America. I then experimented by playing with these various forms to see what messages might be generated by their combination.

The work focused mainly on the formal languages existing in Asian and Western cultures, and how these formal systems might work together and produce formally interesting hybrids. I was also interested in what kind of messages might be made from exploring these two approaches, and what role different cultural mindsets play in their creation.

When I was making them, I searched for combinations that had a natural affinity. For example, the result of inserting the text "Coca" into a Chinese mask makes it look as if it were a part of the mask itself. Although the elements have been deconstructed, each works well with another and communicates a new message visually, like becoming a new logo carrying parts of the original meanings.

The process provided multiple possibilities in form, however, the way of combining the forms does not successfully communicate the elements being woven together into a new coherent message—I have expressed something about the two formal languages through studies, but have not made attempt to say anything at a semantic level.







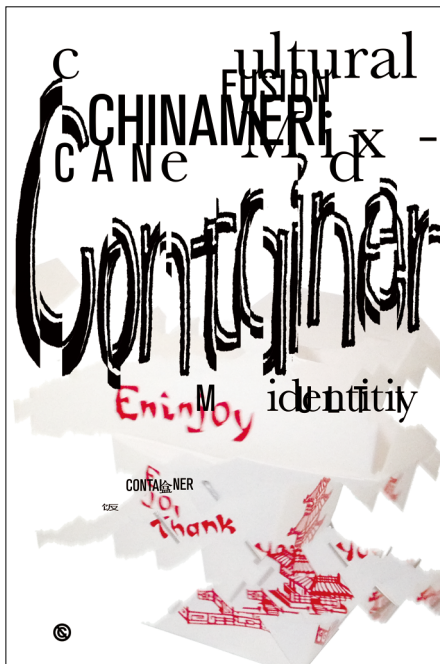
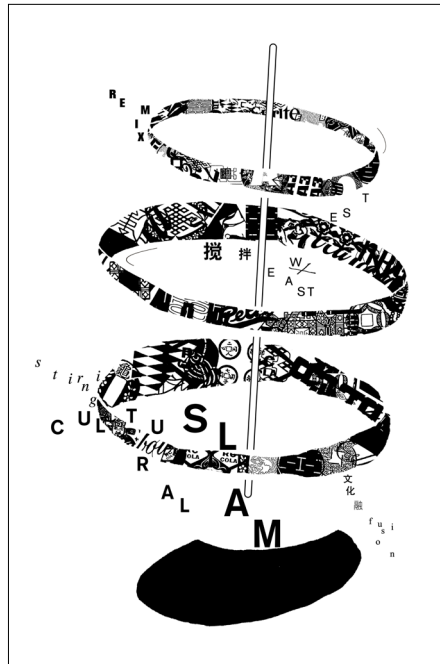
If you cannot under water

The form of this publication is an instructional manual teaching people how to swim. The publications were printed out by risograph printer and distributed on a book holder stand outside MoMA PS1 at the New York Art Book Fair 2015.

This piece is a metaphor of mistranslation between English and Chinese. It allowed me to practice visual storytelling and to see how the context could be delivered to audiences in visual forms.

The purpose of the book is to pursue interesting forms and to see what effects these forms might transfer in the process. The combinations of old-style magazine illustrations with poorly translated texts evoked the surreality of existing between cultures and misunderstanding the nuances of both forms and texts. The selection of thin, yellow paper and risograph printing also presented a curious and ambiguous tone, seeming both eastern and western at the same time.



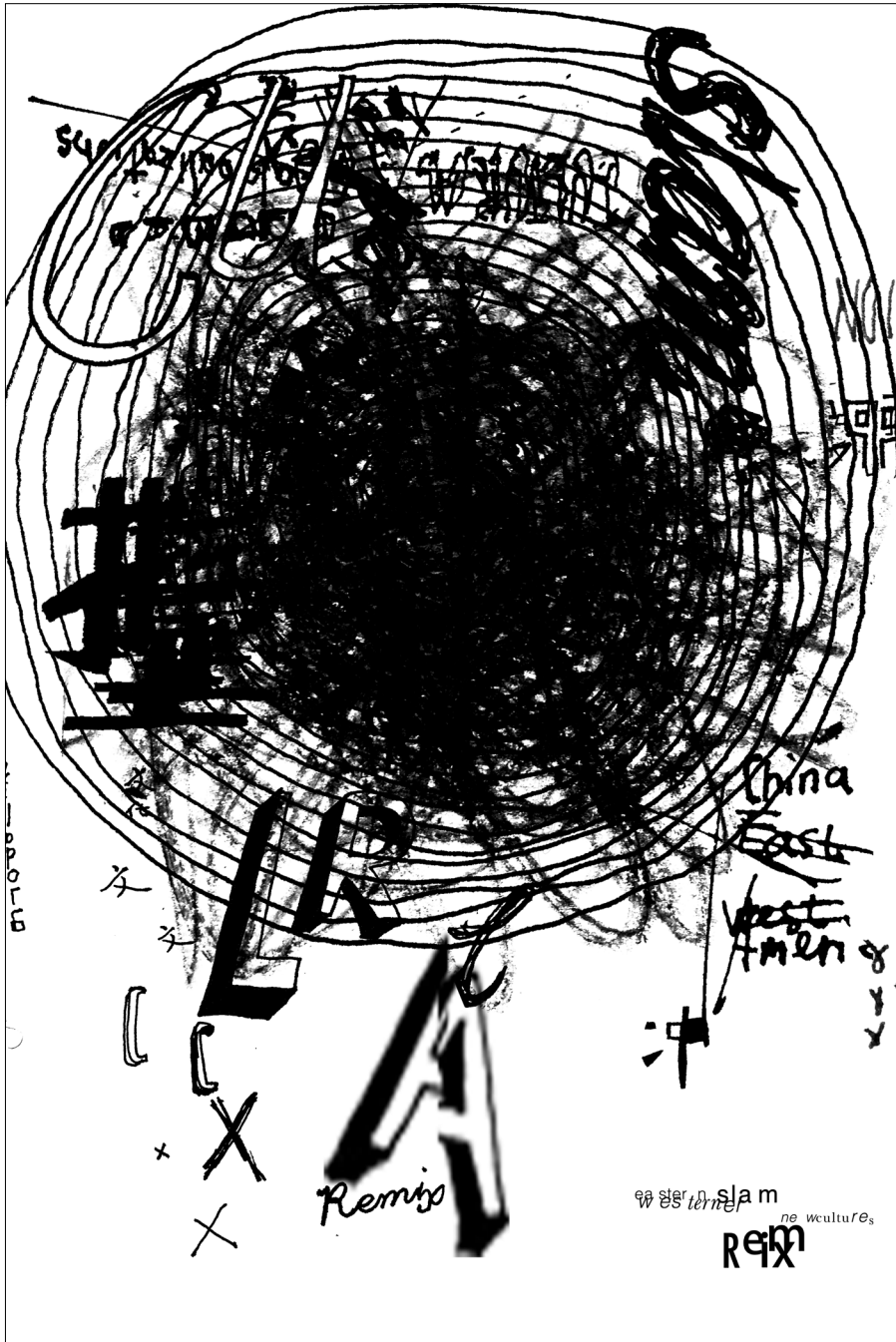


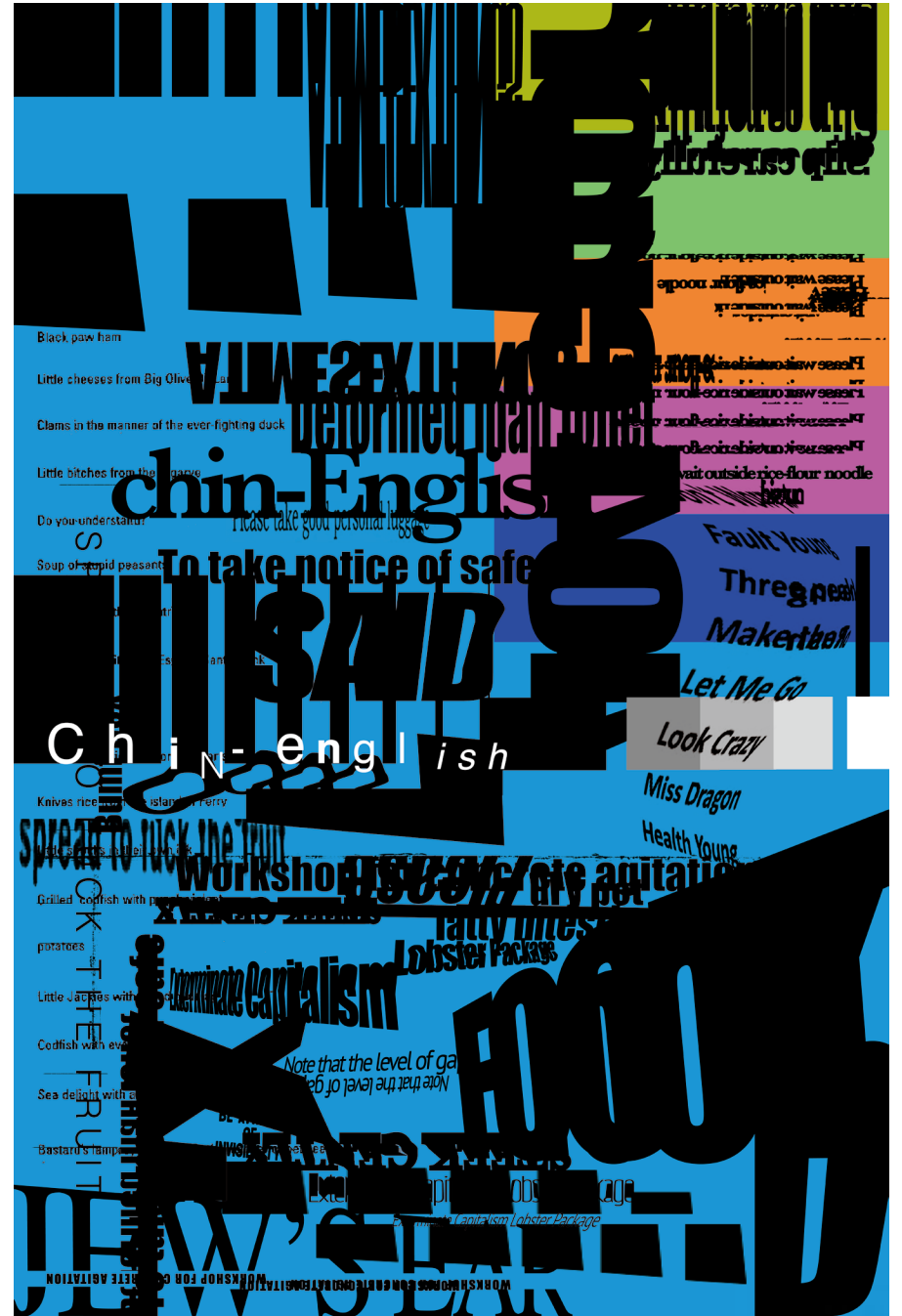
Cultural Remixing

To communicate the idea of cultural remixing and polycultural interactions, I used different media methods to deconstruct and defamiliarize cultural symbols, such as Chinese Qilin and American Coke logos, and made several posters by adjusting those graphics with context.

When I was creating those posters, one question kept arising—what were these posters about? The form of the posters expressed cultural collision and alluded to polyculturalism, but the verbal content was either arbitrary or superficial. After my Third Semester Review, I was advised to dig deeper on the topics, and to think about my personal experiences as a way to generate content.

In response, I came up with two other posters. One of them focuses on Converse shoes which both American and Chinese teenagers wear to express their awareness of current fashion trends and to communicate a mixed identity of polycultural objects that are designed in the United States, made in China and desired by people from both countries (see page 33). The second poster is talking about Chinglish—a mixed language of English and Chinese (see page 34).



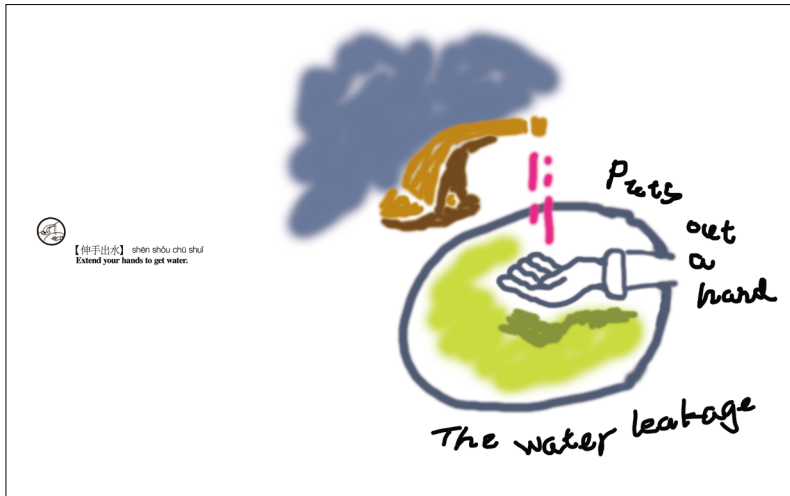




Following the Signs

These compositions were created as response to the widespread "chinglish" signs found throughout China. I selected the text of a few of these signs and drew them in loose-style to express the idea of mistranslation and mixed language. I also presented the Chinglish texts beside the illustrations set in the style of a dictionary definition, serving as a metaphor of teaching people to better understand the meaning of the phrases.

To expand upon this idea, I then considered how these ideas might be applied to a narrative rather than simply representing found texts.



(narrative)

My hair is growing slowly and silently. Its growth doesn't attract my notice until it's getting too long.

I have not had my hair cut since coming to the US because I'm not sure how American hair stylists would treat Asian hair.

I love my hair, and I can imagine how ugly I would be without it. This doesn't mean I spend much time or effort on it. I feel comfortable to just let it be however it grows.

American girls like disheveling their hair a lot; it looks pretty, free and in accordance with American values. It also saves them a lot of time.

One day a question came to me that made me really confused – Where does hair come from?

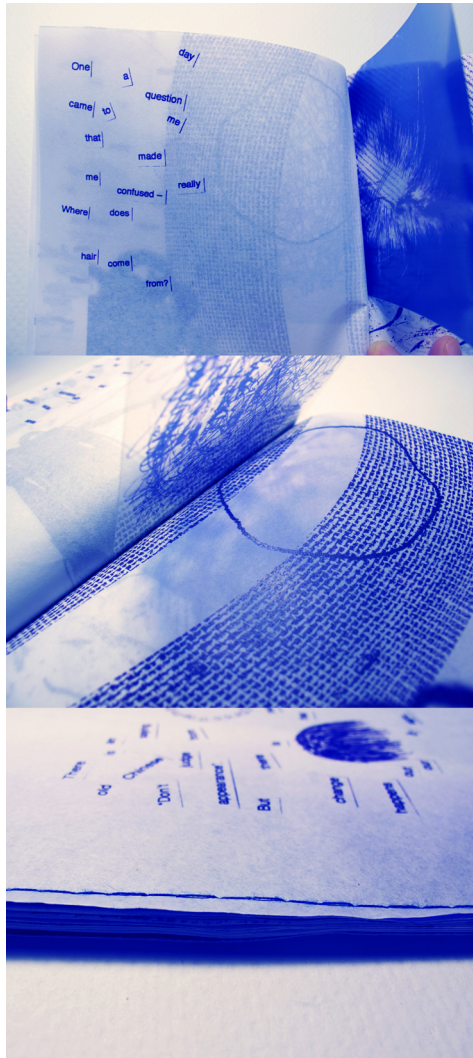
First of all, it's easy to say ends of my hair are from China while the hair closer to the roots are from US.

However, both parts have the same in color, texture, thickness, and softness since they originate from the same DNA which I inherited from my parents in China.

I then think whether other factors come into play. Would the nutrition that feeds the hair and encourages its growth be affected as daily habits shift from Chinese to American?

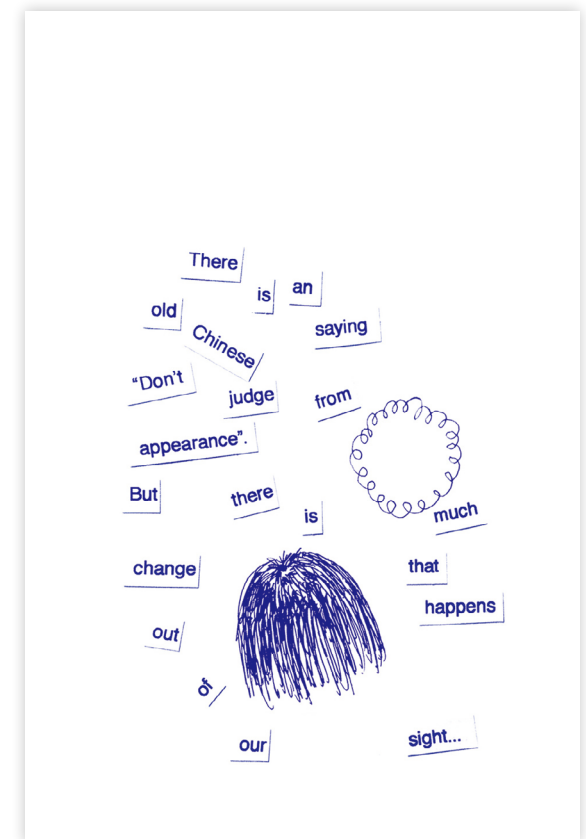
What about hair shampoo, cloth fabric, air, the weather, the water and food...?

There is an old Chinese saying "Don't judge from appearance". But there is much change that happens out of our sight...

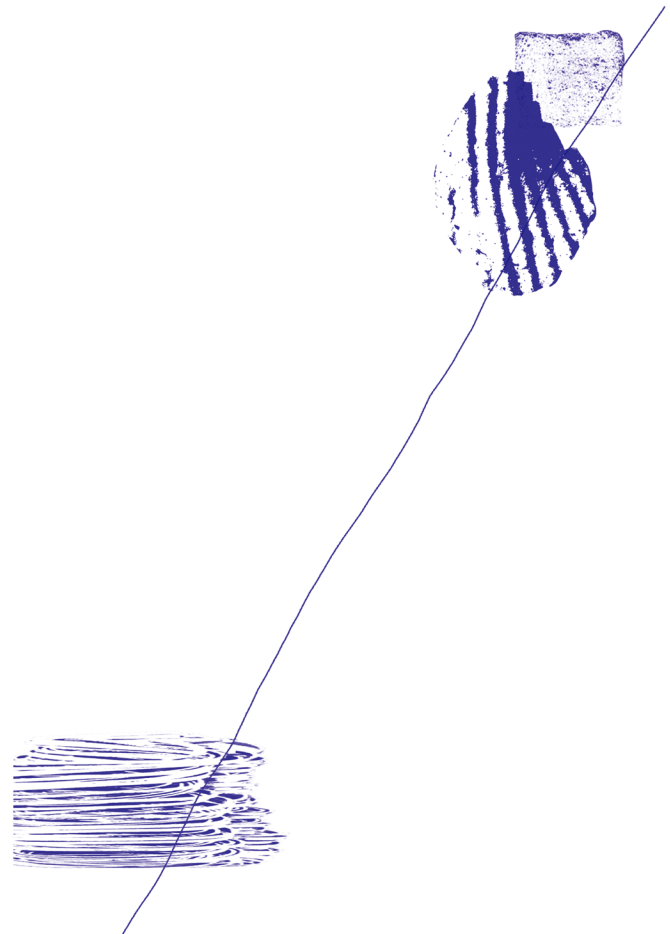
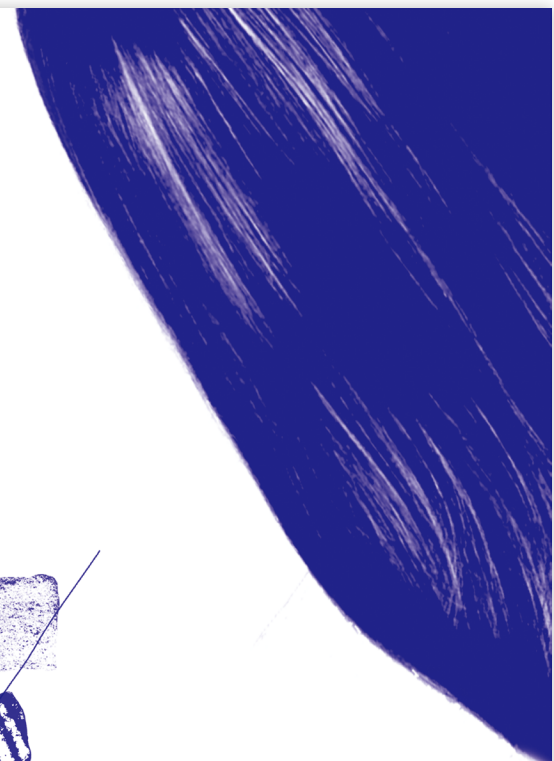
*Hair*

I wrote a narrative analyzing the identity of my hair and its transformation since I had traveled from China to the U.S. The story considered various perspectives on the biology and cultural significance of one's hair. I then used the narrative as a basis of visualizing the story.

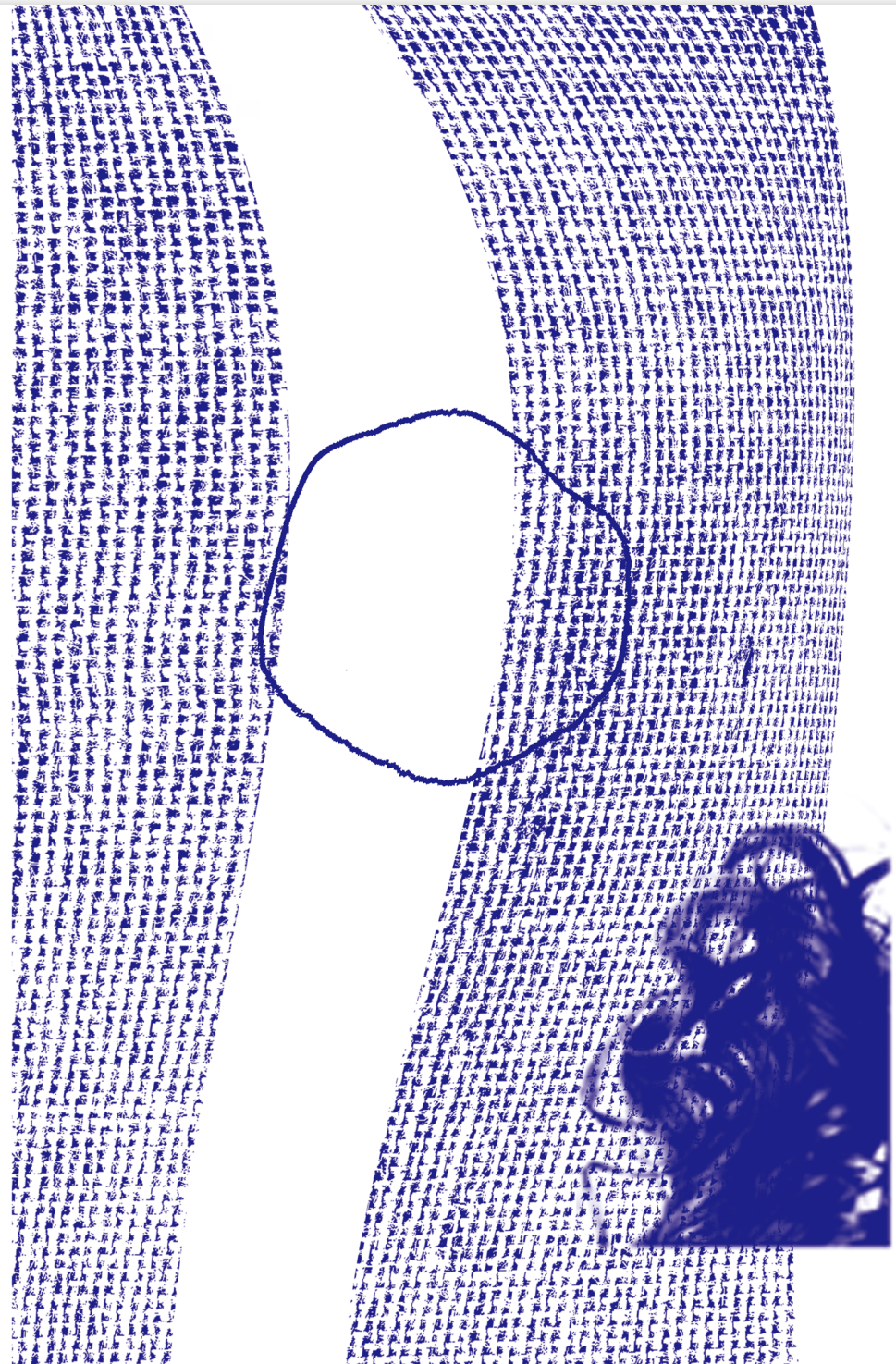
Compared to other projects, the content of this piece is more detailed and closely connected to my feeling that the "true" cultural identity of my hair is blurred.



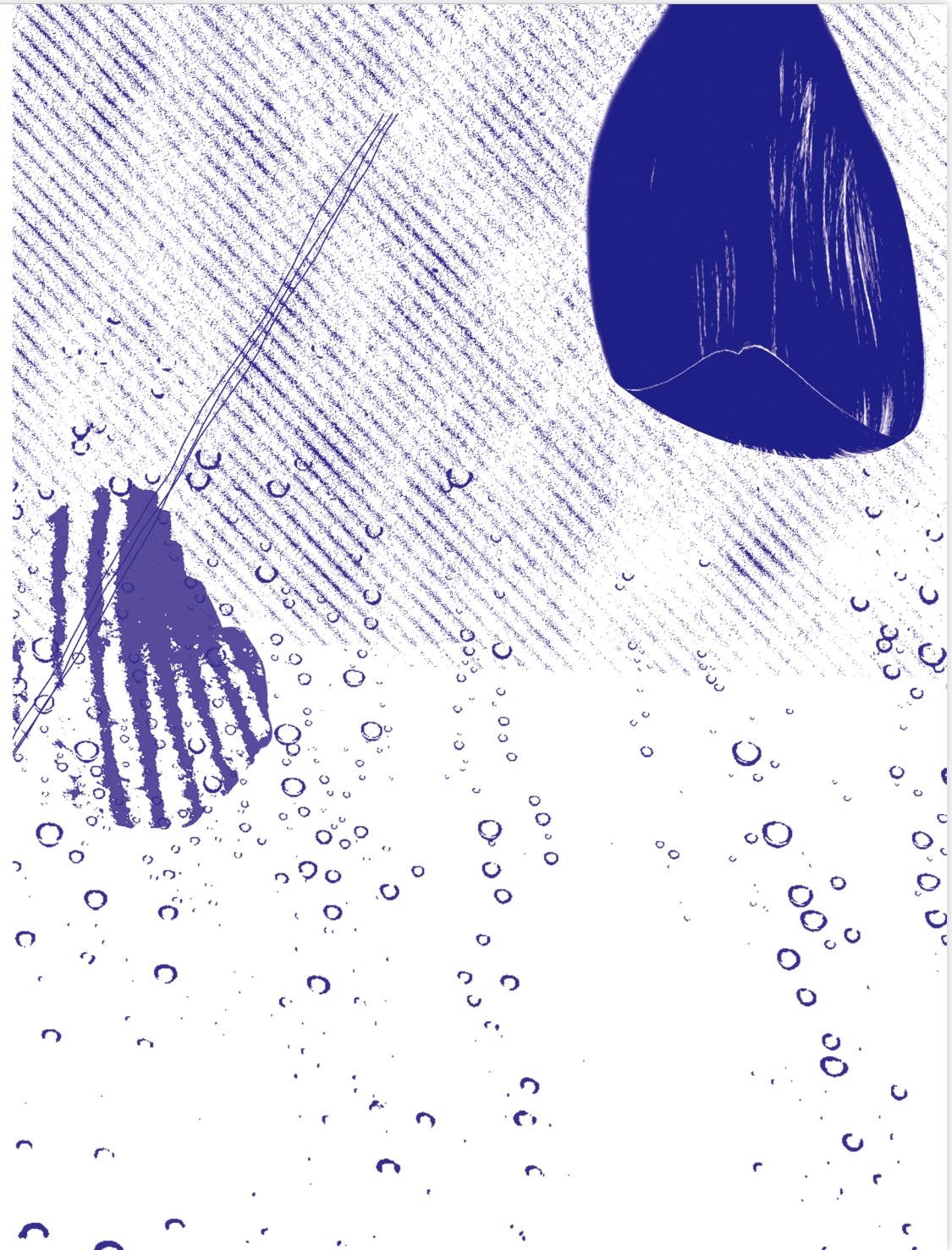
My hair
is growing
slowly and
silently.
Its growth
doesn't
attract
My notice
until
it's getting
too
long.

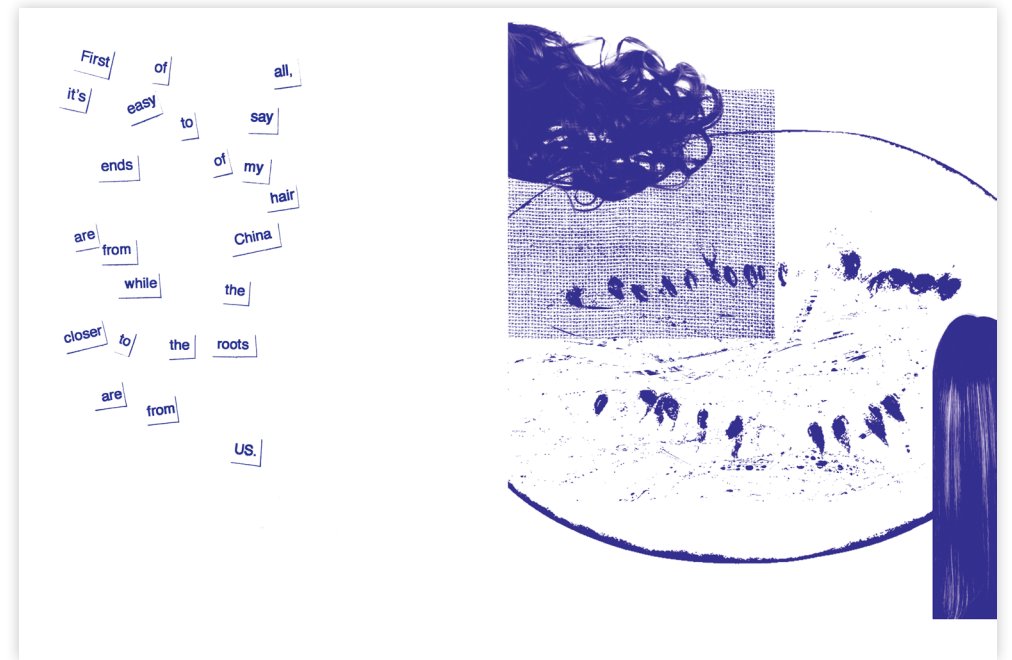
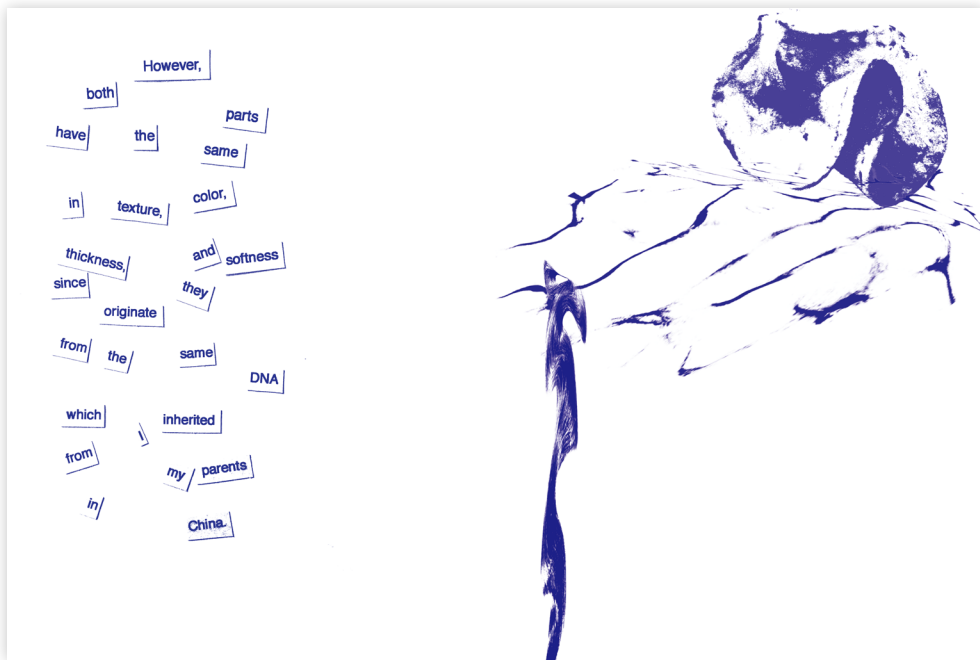
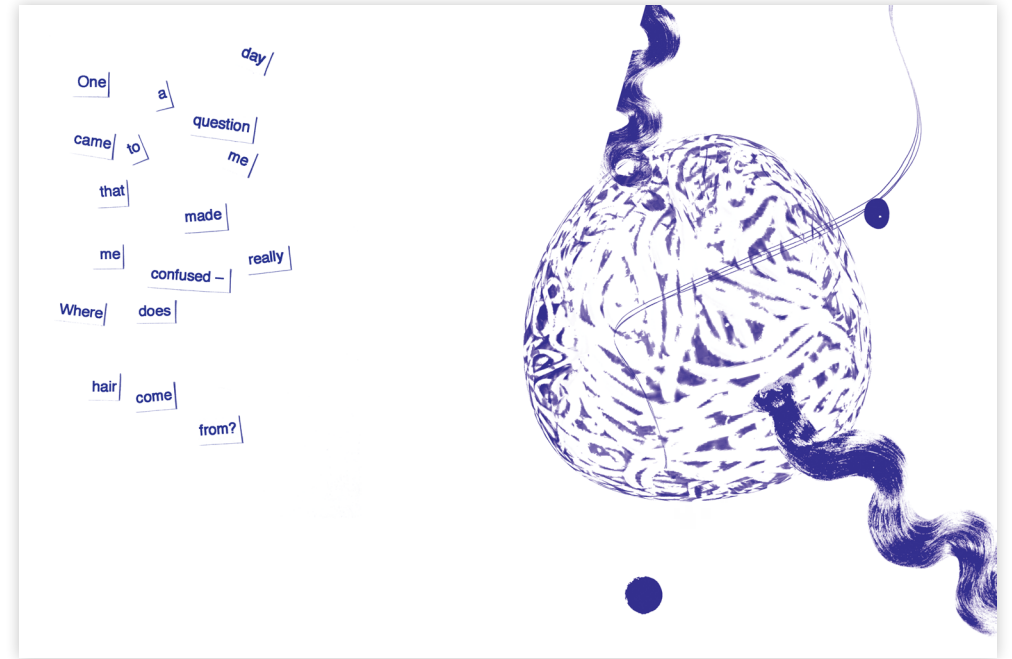
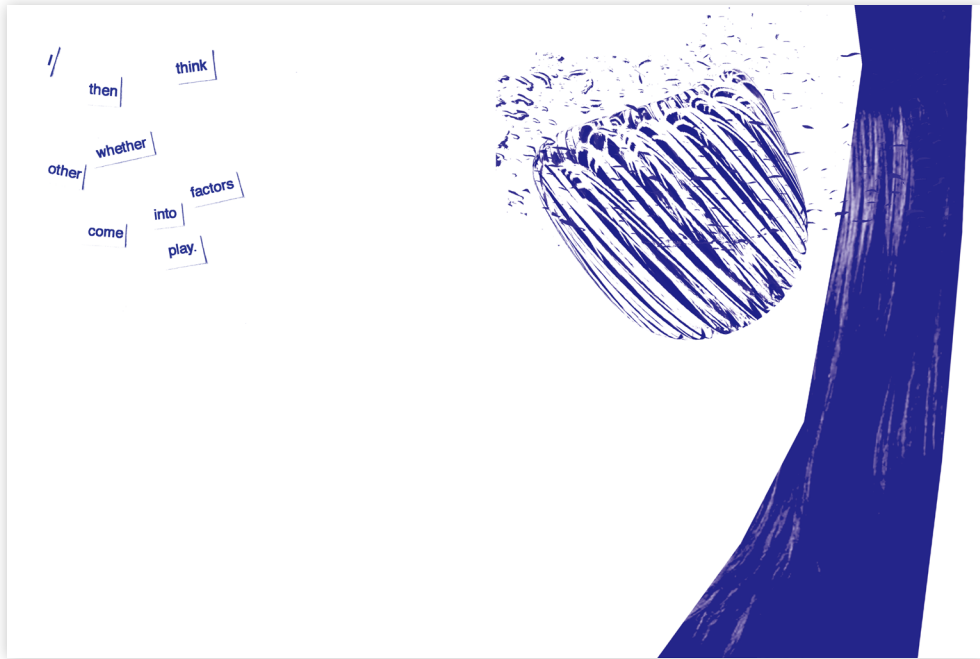


I have not
had my hair cut
since to the US coming
because I'm not
sure how
hair American stylists
would
treat
Asian hair.

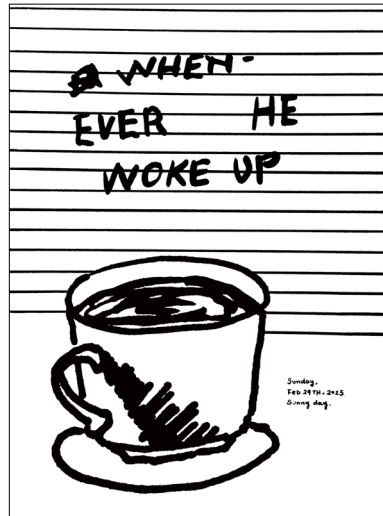


American like their hair pretty, and
 girls disheveling a lot; looks
 like a lot; looks
 their hair pretty, and
 it/ free in accordance with
 American values.
 It also saves
 them a lot
 of time.





Diary Poem



(translated poem)

Sunshine bathed quietly quilt,
Is hungry stomach cried out,
No alarm clock in your hospitality,
Whenever he woke up Sunday before.

Roll out of bed excited entrainment dizziness,
Open music, open a good mood,
Brushing side to side mirror and smile,
Hide skin glowing red eyes bleary.

Open the fridge and see what there is,
To make their own unique brunch meal,
Do not turn out the instant microwave oven,
Also refused to be sent no nutritional snacks.

Eggs cooked half points, oil roasted bacon,
Stove crushing sound, flying fragrant,
Win all the food convenience stores,
Enjoy their craft fresh and pleasant.

Satiate the most joy,
Roll up their sleeves and do housework,
Did not seem to me to clean up the dishes
demonstrations,
Usually become lazy Sunday troubles.

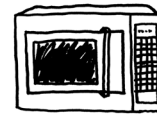
Self-adjusting most unique coffee,
After a cup of sweat later,
Warm sunshine from the eyes of fans,
In the secret of coffee on the addiction.

No alarm clock in your hospitality,
Whenever he woke up Sunday before.

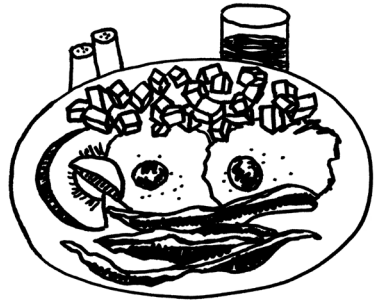
This piece featured a poem that I wrote in Chinese. The content was simple—relating the routine of getting up and having breakfast on a Sunday morning. The poem was then put through Google Translate and came out with many strange twists. The translated text served as a metaphor for polycultural language, and communicated a blurred dialogue with illustrations that I created to accompany the text.

In critique, it was felt that the illustrations were too literal and failed to communicate the same imprecision and confusion as the text. And another relevant recommendation was to complicate the translation further by running it back and forth in Google Translate after the first initial translation, to see where the text arrive as a result of multiple processes.

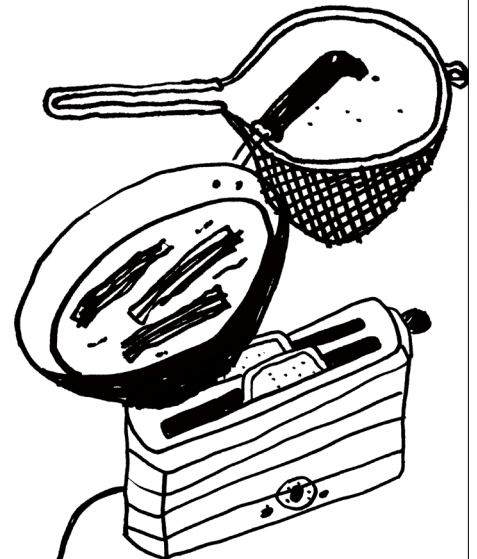
Roll out of bed excited entrainment dizziness,
 Open music, open a good mood,
 Brushing side to side mirror and smile,
 Hide skin glowing red eyes bleary.



Open the fridge and what there is.
 To make their own unique **brunch** meal,
 Do not turn out the instant microwave oven,
 Also refused to be sent no nutritional snacks.

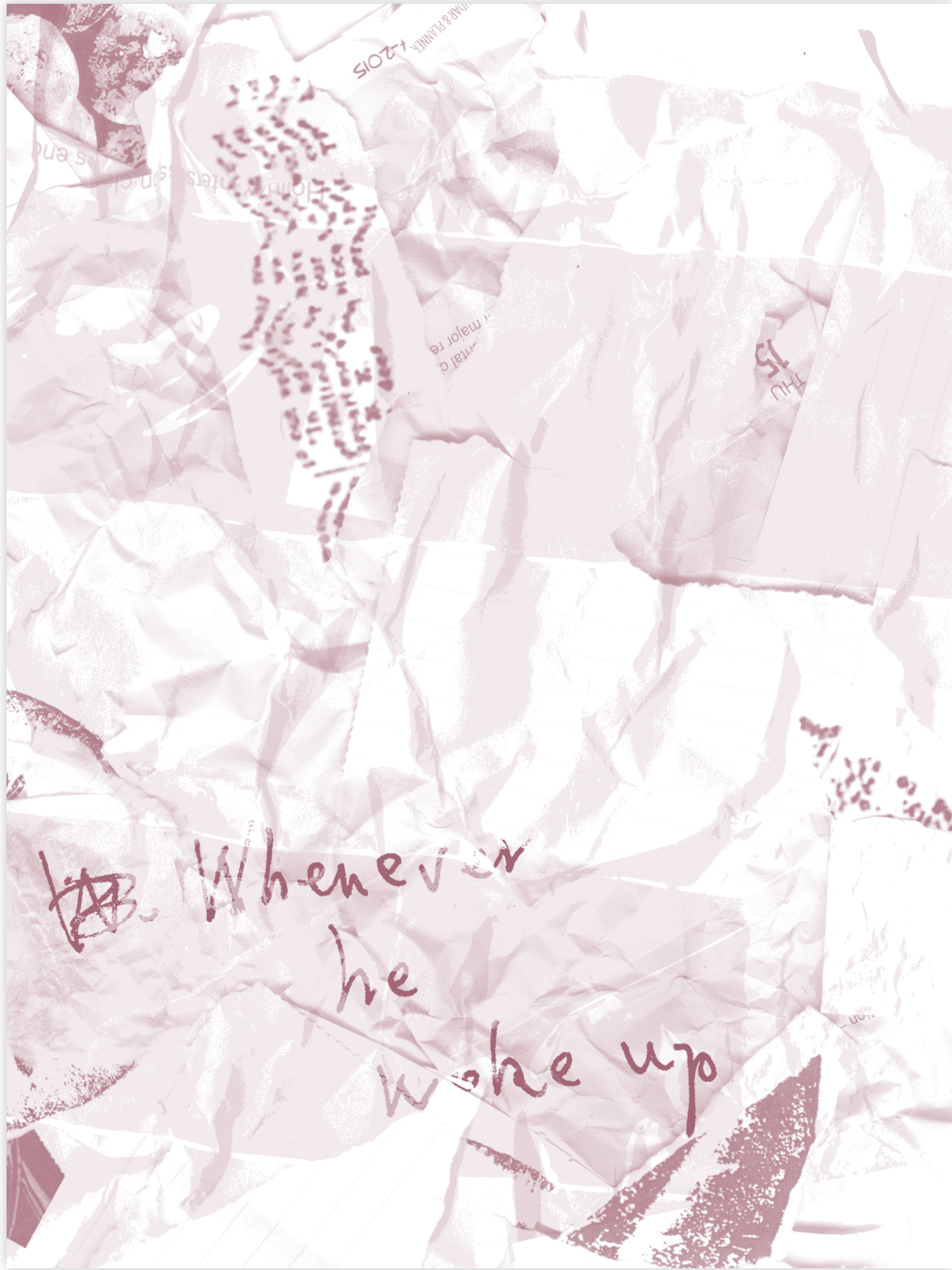


Eggs cooked half points, oil roasted bacon,
 Stove crushing sound, flying fragrant,
 Will eat all the food convenience stores.
 Enjoy Enjoy their craft fresh and pleasant.





Satisfy the most joy,
 Did not seem to me
 Roll up their ~~stove~~ sleeves and
 do housework,
 to clean up the dishes and demonstrations.
 Usually become lazy Sunday troubles.

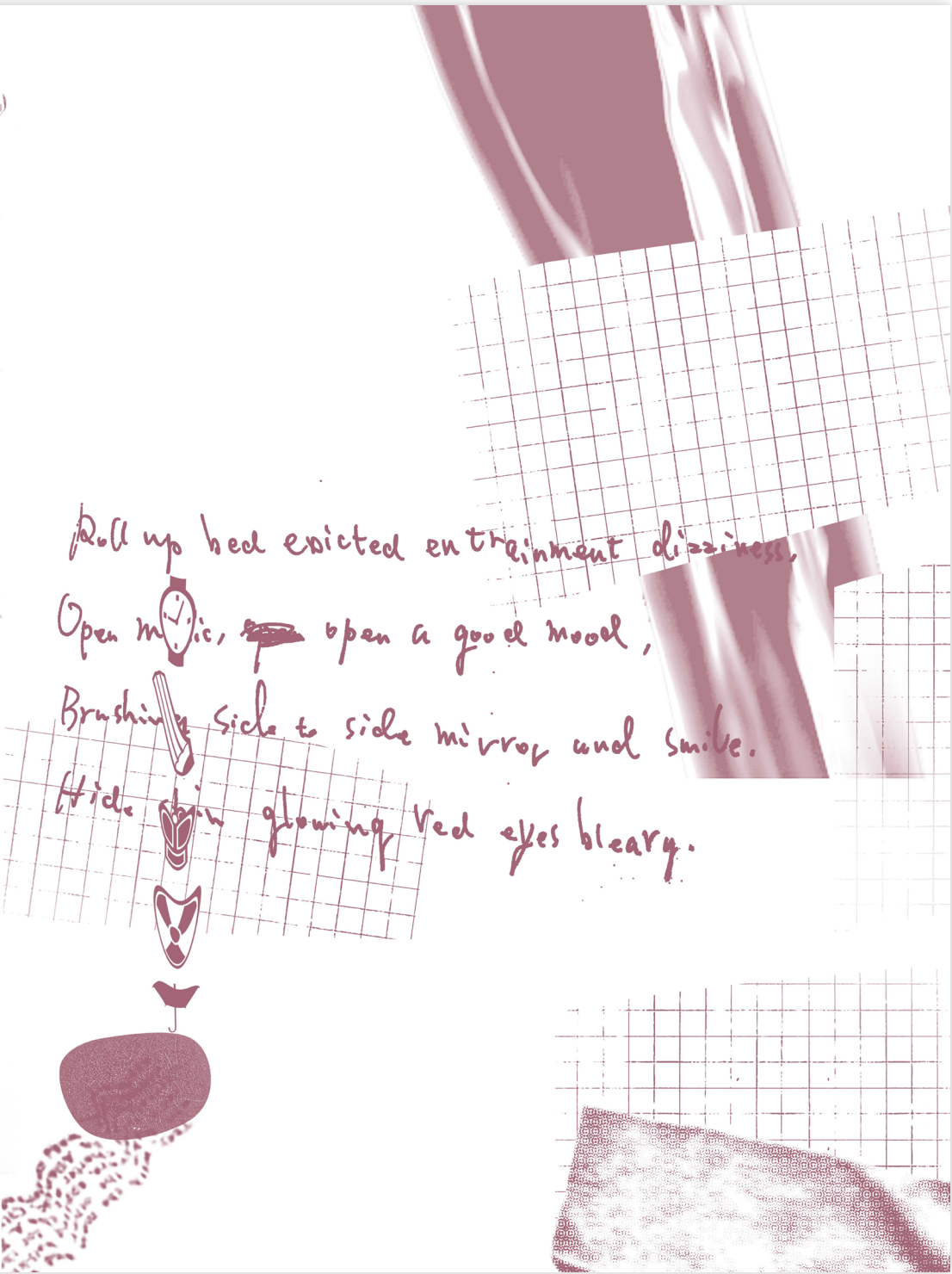


Whenever He Woke up

To communicate the idea in a way that visually responded to the content, I looked for a way to incorporate the text with images more naturally and loosely. I experimented with the scanner to deconstruct and layering some of the images, and then used digital tools to collage them with the handwritten text. The misusing of such media and incomplete control of the processes resulted in a lot of surprising outcomes which itself exemplified the fluidity and subtlety of the concept of cultural identity.

The images were picked to represent some of the universal products people from around the world would encounter in the morning, such as coffee, a spoon, paper napkins and a shower head. The narrative talked about my personal experience with such common things on an ordinary morning whether it was in China or the United States, which represented the notion of polycultural phenomena in both societies.

I started with a process of collage combining distinct elements, but I then used digital processing to adjust the individual elements until they became blended to the point that they became new forms—their parts no longer distinguishable. The result is a series of compositions that exhibit a strange and ambiguous reality, where the familiar and unfamiliar merge.

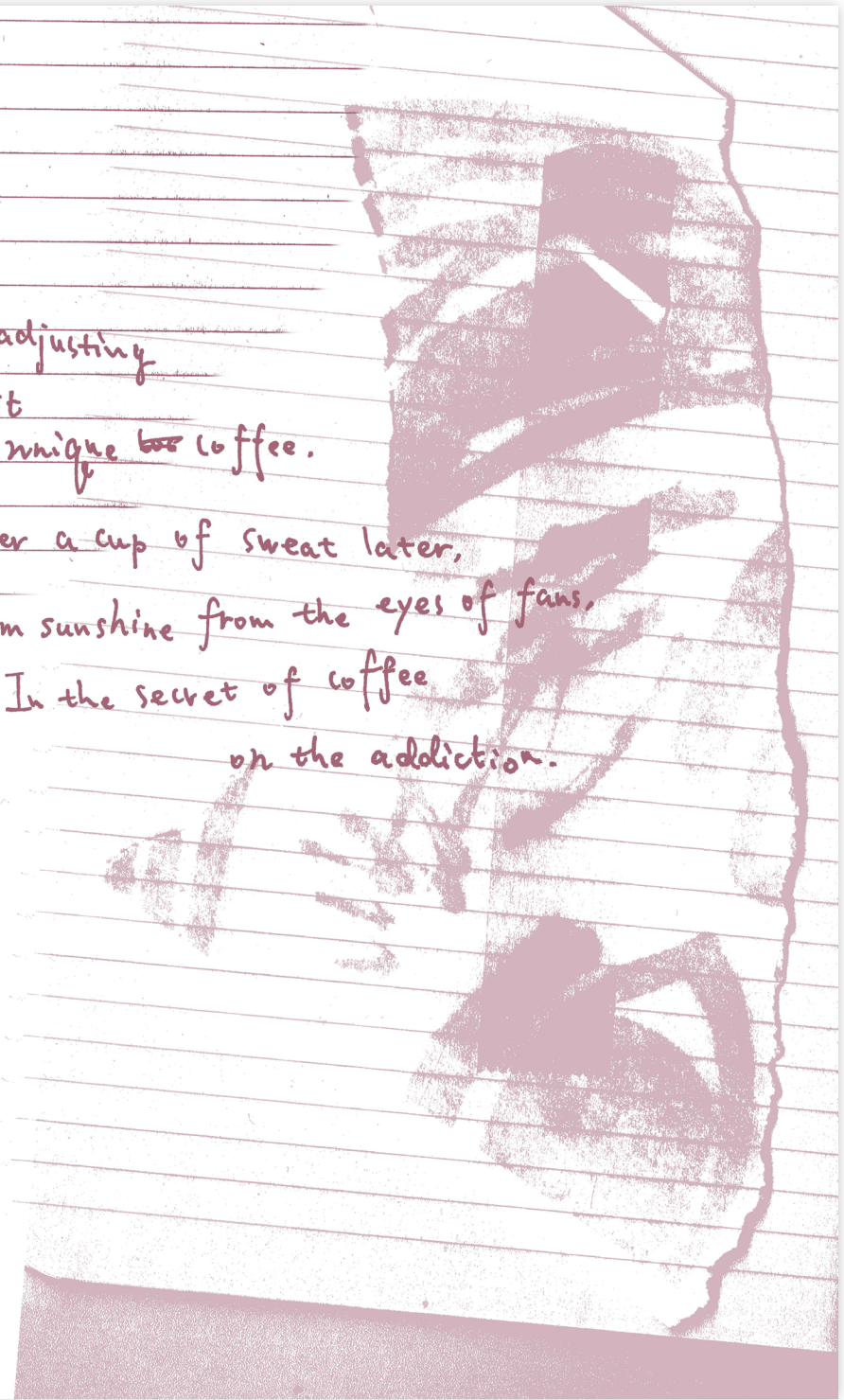


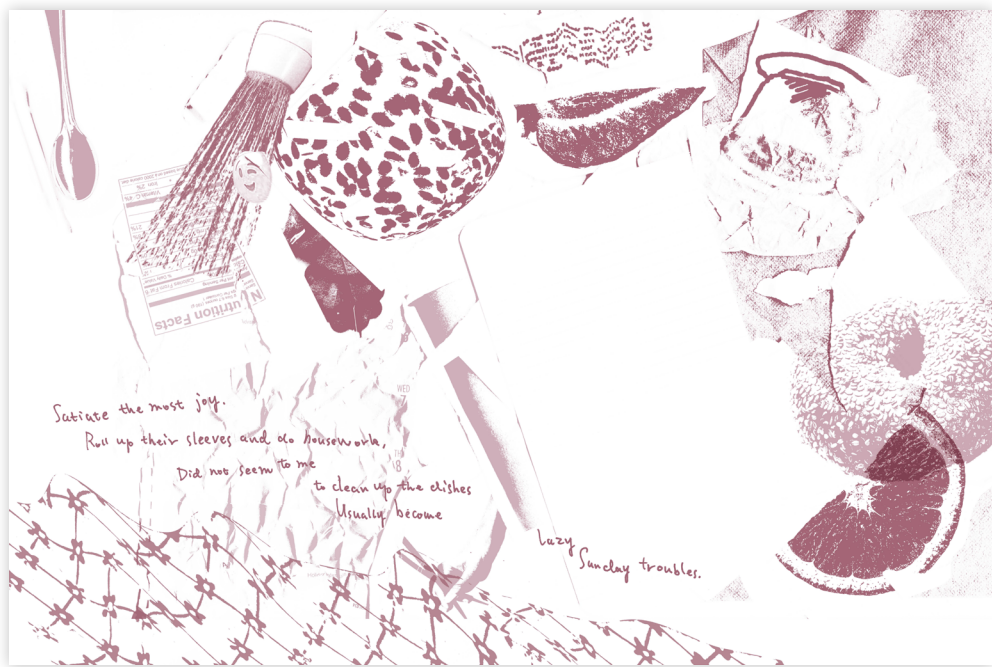
Roll up bed excited entertainment dizziness,
 Open mic, ~~pen~~ open a good mood,
 Brushing side to side mirror and smile.
 Hide skin glowing red eyes bleary.



Self-adjusting
most
unique coffee.

After a cup of sweat later,
Warm sunshine from the eyes of fans,
In the secret of coffee
on the addiction.







Evaluation

My interest in exemplifying how various cultural artifacts and behaviors affected and expanded my life experiences grew significantly since I came to the U.S. My two years of exploration and research has deepened my understanding about cultural differences and has revealed to me that cultures are not as distinct as one might suppose. They are, in fact, fluid and continuously evolving, and mixed in amazing and subtle ways.

My thesis project investigates an interest in polycultural interactions between different cultural identities. By putting my own experiences into the work, by generating both form and content, I show a range of approaches to illustrating polycultural experience and also set up questions for audiences to think about polycultural identities, such as “What is the importance of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world?,” “How static or how fluid are cultural identities today?,” and, “What are the advantages and disadvantages of an increasingly polycultural world where the distinctions between cultures are diminishing?”

While the idea of breaking down cultural barriers and biases appeals to me as a way to promote understanding between diverse people, the process also implies the loss of cultural diversity and distinctiveness. There is an almost ecological dimension to the process where the cultural DNA of the world is becoming less diverse and possibly less healthy in the long run.

The forces that have given rise to polycultural experience have also generated unprecedented economic and political side effects, posing serious problems for the ideal of equal opportunity and societal stability.

I hope that my work will play the role of visualizing these questions to inspire people's curiosity and thinking about those issues. I also would like to know people's opinions about polycultural interactions and to explore how it will affect our lives in the future.

Having done research, creative work, and being in dialogue with my thesis committee members, I have come to understand polyculturalism as a much more complex subject. It is not simply a debate about advantages and disadvantages but instead the understanding that polyculturalism is a dynamic cultural force that is connected to power structures of race, class, gender, geography, perceptions of First World/Third World, Developed/Developing nations, migration, trade agreements, cost of labor, corporate profit and a myriad other factors that play into the concept of polyculturalism. As a result, I am also beginning to see my own privileged position of being a woman who has had access to education in the United States that so many women in China do not and cannot have. I recognize that the "even playing field" that Thomas Friedman refers to in his book does not quite exist and that polyculturalism does not exist in a vacuum. It is constantly shifting and evolving with these politically charged power dynamics in play. Therefore the need for personal expression and a variety of voices becomes even more pressing when one connects polyculturalism to the field of Graphic Design. It is no longer a question about "How Chinese or how American my hair is?" but instead about the possibility and the fact that I can even pose such a question.





Selected Bibliography

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The author writes about his own polycultural background and in the process illustrates the function of identities in real-life as opposed to rigid categorizations.

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The author describes how the world is becoming increasingly flatter which is a metaphor for viewing the world as an even playing field where all competitors have an equal opportunity for trade and commerce. Historical and geographical distinctions are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the current global economy.

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This book dismantles the common premise of pitting white majority with people of color. Prashad presents historical evidence of Black and Asians in which they have exchanged and appropriated cultural symbols in order to achieve political change.

Hara, Kenya. *Designing Design*. Jinan: Shandong Publishers, 2006. Print.

In his book, Hara illustrates the importance of emptiness in both the visual and philosophical traditions of Japanese culture, and uses a number of his works as examples of its applications.

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The author discusses how, since the early nineties, an ever increasing number of artworks have been created based on preexisting works, which seems to respond to the proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age.

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Appadurai describes the role of imagination as a social force and speaks of how multiculturalism, popular culture and self representation can intersect inventively.

***Joseph Cornell: Worlds in a Box*. Dir. Mark Stokes. BBC documentary 1991. Television.**

A film looking at Joseph Cornell's handmade boxes. The connotations of the objects within the boxes interact to produce psychological moods and strange representations of culture, which inspires my work to be formally connected to the readers' emotions.

Murakami, Haruki. *Yagate Kanashiki Gaikokugo*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994. Print.

The author mainly writes about his experiences of the conflict between American and Japanese culture and politics. The way of writing shows a sense of humor which influences my work to communicate in a loose style that is easily approached by audiences.

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The author examines the question, "Are we a multicultural nation, or a colorblind one?" in American culture by focusing on black performance in theater, film, and television.

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The filmmaker explores her journey into India's call centers that service U.S. corporations demonstrating complex issues resulting from the intersection between cultural identity and global capitalism.

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