They are the Sweet Memories

by Silas Ng

B.F.A., Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2020

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

in the
School for the Contemporary Arts
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

© Silas Ng 2023 Simon Fraser University Spring 2023

Copyright in this work is held by the author. Please ensure that any reproduction Or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.

Declaration of Committee

Name: Silas Ng

Degree: Master of Fine Arts

Thesis Title: They are the Sweet Memories

Committee: Chair: Peter Dickinson

Professor, Contemporary Arts

Sabine Bitter

Co-Supervisor

Professor, Contemporary Arts

Kathy Slade

Co-Supervisor

Limited Term Lecturer, Contemporary Arts

Raymond Boisjoly

Committee Member

Assistant Professor, Contemporary Arts

Henry Tsang

Examiner

Associate Professor Emily Carr University

Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Defence Statement:	1
Works Cited	2
Project Documentation	3
Appendix A. The Language of Home	11
Introduction	11
The Analysis of Home Space with multisensory experience	12
Barrier of language and communication	15
Narrativization	16
Case of Study	17
Appendix B. Work Cited	20

Abstract

They are the Sweet Memories is a series of photographic collage works made with my parents' keepsakes such as old passports, a Chinese calligraphy manuscript, old textbooks, family photos, and an English-Chinese dictionary. The photographs depict my parents' journey from Hong Kong to Canada and also document their studies of English. My parents' souvenirs are further combined with childhood artworks I made such as an ink drawing and ceramic pots, and cyanotype prints I produced this year. These keepsakes link my memories and my parents' memories together and the combinations and compositions are intended to present my family's experience in a new way. Each item in the photographs contains and emits a sentimental aura of my parents' experience. They are the Sweet Memories is a retelling of my family's background, one that encourages new layers of understanding and bridges communication between the barriers of deafness and language through the genre of family storytelling.

Keywords: photography; cyanotype; still life; photo collage; nostalgic memories; storytelling

Dedication

To my family: Yin-Fun Chan, Tai-Kee Ng, Enoch Man-Lok Ng, and Matthew Man-Yau Ng for being willing to support my journey of navigation in my personal relationship with cultures and languages as the reflection of my connection with family through communication. Thank you also for having the patience to learn American Sign Language.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisors Sabine Bitter and Kathy Slade, and to committee member Raymond Boisjoly for supporting me with their amazing encouragement, insightful comments, and difficult questions. Their deep-thoughtful advice and creative brainstorming helped me to overcome my limited ability to communicate both regarding this writing and to the production of my art project. Thank you to Peter Dickinson for providing support throughout the program. I am grateful for your wonderful teaching and joyful discussion.

Thank you to friends for sharing your creativity and your wonderful companionship through my Master of Fine Art degree: Katie Kozak, Tin Gamboa, Jamie Reimer, Homa Khosravi, Matthew Toffoletto, Katayoon Yousefbigloo, and Barry Olusegun-Noble Despenza.

Defence Statement:

I am presenting my MFA Defense Statement in American Sign Language (ASL) via a video recording, which can be accessed at https://summit.sfu.ca/item/36026. You may be wondering why I am making this in ASL and why we are presenting a video instead of written text. As a deaf person, writing in English creates a barrier for me. It is much more effective to describe my artwork and express my critical thoughts and feelings in my first language, which is ASL. I can give my perspective through body language, through signs, and through facial expressions. Communicating in ASL allows you, the viewer, to see exactly what I'm saying. You are, in fact, capturing my experience as a deaf person. Through ASL I am able to explain myself in such a way that is not possible in written English. ASL is a much more expressive language and it was our consideration that it would be best to make this video in order to allow me to express and share my thinking and how my methodology evolved over the course of three art projects The Blue Room, The Home Language, and They Are Sweet Memories. These projects analyse my family's story through modes of translation and communication across three languages, English, Cantonese, and ASL. They deal directly with the themes of the barriers of language and of my deaf experience. This video enables me to describe and reflect on my work over the course of three years at the School for the Contemporary Arts in my own language and in my own style.

Access video presentation at https://summit.sfu.ca/item/36026.

Works Cited

Anderson, Christina Z. Cyanotype: the Blueprint in Contemporary Practice / Christina Z. Anderson. Focal Press, 2019.

Biskas, Marios, et al. "A Prologue to Nostalgia: Savouring Creates Nostalgic Memories That Foster Optimism." *Cognition and Emotion*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2019, pp. 417–27

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Penguin Books Ltd, 2008.

Landgarten, Helen B. *Magazine Photo Collage: A Multicultural Assessment And Treatment Technique*. Taylor and Francis, 2017.

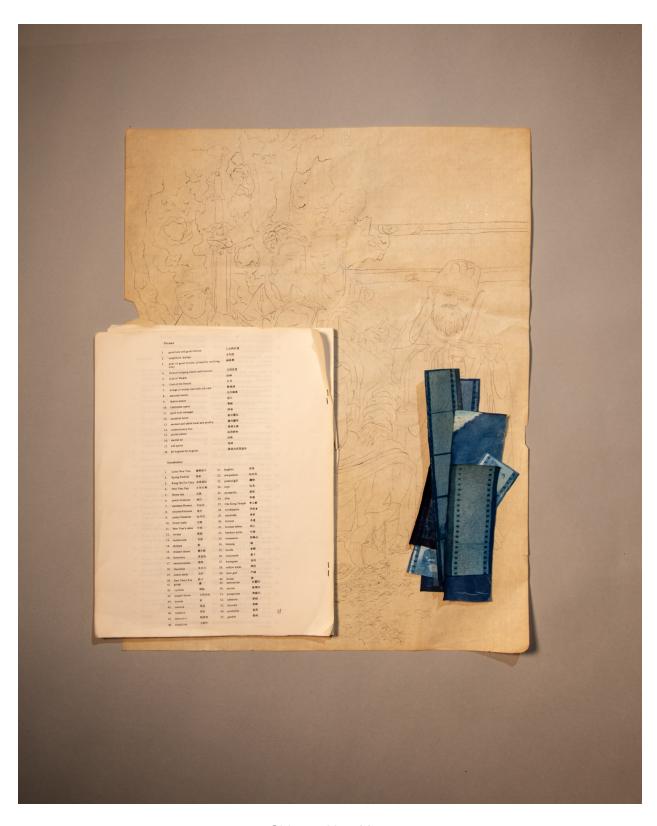
Mwangi, Wambui. "Re-Collections." *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.)*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2018, pp. 331–37

Suze, Adams. Picturing the Family: Media, Narrative, Memory: Visual Meditations: An Island in Time – (Re)interpreting Family Albums and Oral Histories / Edited by Silke Arnold-de Simine and Joanne Leal. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Project Documentation



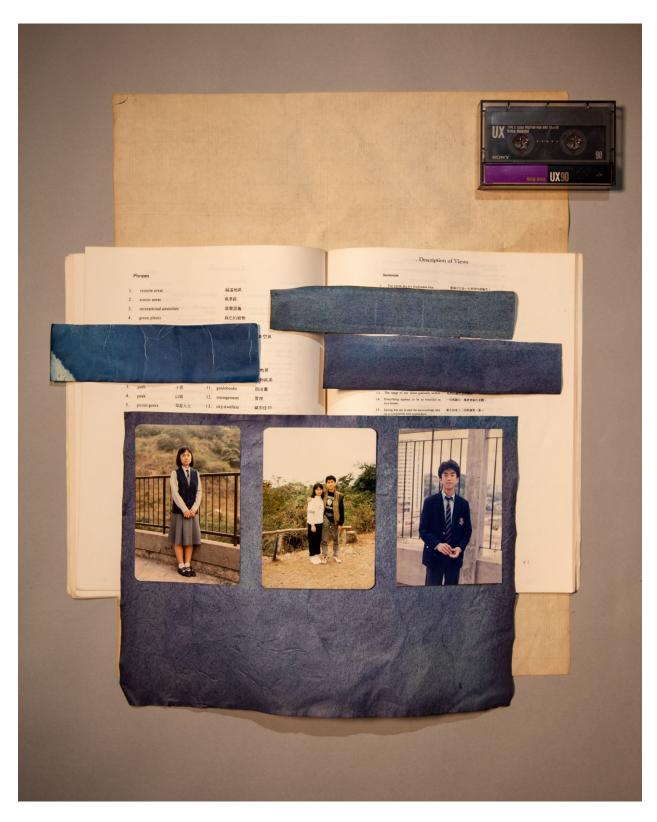
They are the Sweet Memories, installation view, Goldcorp Centre for the Arts



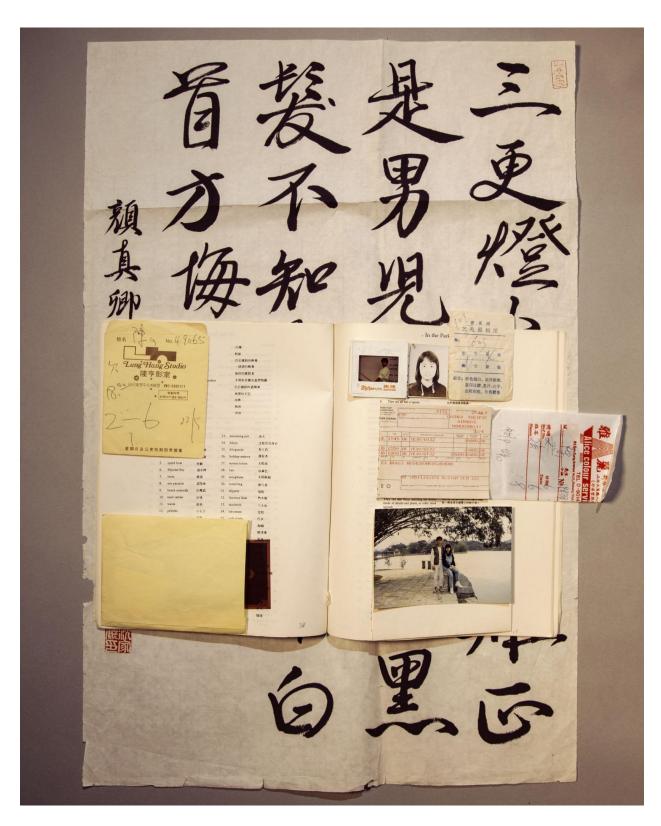
Chinese New Year



At the Beach



Description of the Views



In the Park



Spring



A Crowded Street



Vancouver

Appendix A. The Language of Home

Introduction

How does a family establish its own unique language despite generational, cultural, and physical communication barriers? How does such a unique language or a gesture translate within a family to evoke meaning and memory connected to a family's immigrant culture? How can one's family history be accessed in such circumstances? These questions introduce some of the issues faced by those of us who were raised in a family who are immersed in multiple cultures and languages within the home space. While every home space contains the compounding barriers of time and generational shifts in language and different perspectives of value in cultures about how much more difficult it is with the additional barrier of being deaf in the mix. Over the course of my life, my family and I have developed methods to overcome these barriers, and with this paper I intend to reveal how I have managed to access my family's history. My hope is that my experiences combined with my research will help to strengthen the sense of value and shared history between people and their home spaces.

I will introduce the concept of *home language*, a term that shows how languages can transform and shape a family's vocabulary and gestures to create a specific communication style. For instance, the use of three different languages results in the merging of words, which then become the family's new phrases and terms to be shared in their home and community. The translation between the languages offers the potential to study a family's personal connection with their cultures and languages through artistic visual technology. This would allow *home language* to be developed into a story about a family's experience living in North America. This essay will draw from the experiences of North American writers of Asian descent who have been raised by their immigrant families and their perspective of the relationships between two cultures at home through their *home language*. Additionally, I will draw from the ideas of Italian writer, Pablo Boccagni, who studies migration and sociology and the idea of immigrant people's houses as two cultures meeting in one place. *The study of home language as a mode of*

communication will reveal a more intimate way of sharing stories about a family's way of life and foster a greater appreciation and understanding of the home space.

The Analysis of Home Space with multisensory experience

The home language helps people to illustrate their personal connections and emotions with their home environment and learn their history. The household is a meeting place where the two cultures merge together, and through this merger a feeling of connection to everyday objects, languages, and foods is created. The home language has a different way of defining the atmosphere of the place through nostalgic memories. It is a bridge between the different languages used in the home and has its own unique vocabulary. In a multilingual home, personal belongings such as medicine, paintings, and antique furniture go by many names and definitions depending on how each family member experiences them. For example, the Chinese medicinal rub Tiger Balm would be referred to as "hu gao" along with the gesture of rubbing hands or describing the smell if we were unable to recall its name. This unique combination translates easily between all family members, and in this way, we overcome the language barrier. These descriptions and gestures may not be well known outside of a particular family's home, and it is what makes them unique. The home language pays attention to the names of objects with different names and gestures to reveal the story of our way of life.

The analysis of the Chinese medicinal rub offers another level of interpretation, the sense of smell, which can further help us communicate with each other through the shared memories of smell. I will use Byung-Chul Han's concept of time from his philosophical essay to analyze his research about how the sense of smell plays out in his concept of time by bringing together the Western and Eastern interpretations of time. In Han's writing, he introduces the ancient Chinese term *incense clock*, called *hsiang yin*. It is interpreted as a seal of fragrance in English words. Han describes *hsiang yin* as an incense box with carved Chinese symbols that are associated with philosophical and poetic writing such as luck and flowers. The term *hsiang yin* is used to fill the environment with the fragrance to bring a narrative connected with the place (Han 56-57). This is where Han uses the smell as medium to define a room's space with pleasant smell to create the imaginary of place from the perspective of Ancient China's philosophy.

Han establishes the perspective of Ancient China to combine with Western notions of time allowing him to define time in space and create memories. Han states that the European perspective of incense is perceived as a measurement of time, and it is a duration of time and specific event. At the same time, the smell of incense burning does not retain time; he argues hsiang yin can be interpreted as a fragrance of time because incense has a duration of burning and can therefore be understood as a measurement of time itself (Han 57). The incense demonstrates the process of transformation from the incense burning turn into ash then fills a room with the smell of organic materials like wood and flowers. Han establishes the idea that incense can be perceived with both smelling and seeing – an observation of the place and the fragrance as a specific time and event.

Finally, Han notes the incense fills a place with the smell of wood to influence people's minds and help them to see a "clear image" in their heads, explaining that the incense "tells the hour through the fragrant fluidity of time, which neither flows nor trickles away" (Han 57). The term fragrant fluidity of time is interpreted as the time of the event becoming trapped by our memories through the sense of smell. Thus, we are able to perceive the incense burning as an atmospheric narrative of Chinese culture and religion by following the performance of ritual through the home space perceived through the memory of place and time. Han's fragrance of time demonstrates his approach of thinking by bringing the two different interpretations of the Western and Eastern cultures and languages creating his own interpretation of incense. Additionally, Han demonstrates incense as a medium to help people to attune their imagination and memories to create emotion.

The personal belongings can be perceived by different generations of family members to transform the objects into the bridge of connection between cultures. I will create an example to analyze our perspective and draw from the sense of smelling and Han's fragrance of time. My grandparents use incense to perform their daily ritual and special ceremony as a form of respect to our ancestors. But the incense serves an additional purpose: to evoke nostalgic memories through the sense of smell from the perspective of the younger generation of my family. For instance, my grandmother attempted to tell me about incense with her gesture by using her hands as if she was doing her daily ritual of praying. It helps me to understand what she tried to tell me. Also, the interpretation of incense is perceived as the unique scent of my grandparents' home space and part of their identity. The *home language* affects people to develop their own interpretation of home space.

The function of personal belongings offers many ways to interpret their purpose through our sensory experience and create a memory to increase the sense of personal connection. I will draw from Pablo Boccagni's insight of immigrant homes reveals that the household is not limited to the purposes of the physical structure, and that the function of the house can be repurposed to manifest the "meanings, emotions, and functions" of the evolving family (Boccagni 2). From my understanding, the home is a space containing nostalgic memories that, if accessed, could create a distant connection to the family's homeland and culture. The perception of household items can be created from the individual or family members' perspective since Boccagni's writing suggests that the function of these items can be changed by the different perception from each family members' generation. Boccagni defines the home as a material world where people are allowed to create emotional connections with materials and the place as a social gathering to interact with people to create memories (Boccagni 4). The two notations of emotional connection and social gathering strengthen the home space to bring the experience of everyday life. Boccoagni explains home space helps people who revisit the place to create a special connection with their personal feelings. It is because the nostalgic memories of a place are produced by partners, family members, kin, friends, and neighbours (Boccagni 4). He also considers the function of home space to be a psychological environment whereby personal belongings are the containers of people's memories. As Boccagni argues, the environment of home is contributing to social theory and research that has its own practical and analytical value (Boccagni 4). The function of objects is the approach of analysis in home space to capture people's perspective of their relationship with the objects to evoke an emotion.

The unique language applies to the analysis of home space to create a mode of communication between objects and story. They help viewers develop a sense of value in the connection between objects and story and they help to bring the experience of personal connection with family into the story. Thus, everyday objects from home can produce more than one kind of interpretation depending on a family's first and second language. The idea of *home language* has different ways to depict our way of life through the experience of communication with different languages, however, the languages are part of the interpretation of home space which reveal the relationship between family members and their personal belongings. A new interpretation of the home space can be studied with the concept of home language through a multi-sensory experience. The immigrant culture still maintains a presence in the physical objects such as personal belongings, cultural, or antique furniture and kitchenware.

Barrier of language and communication

The communication of the unique language between the family members has their own story to tell about their background experience with language as social status. The experience of frustration in language barrier prevents us from accessing the cultural root and history of family. I will draw from Shigenori Tanaka's concept of "My English" to learn about how the international language of English has deeply affected his personal perception of language where it influences his culture and livelihood. Tanaka coined the term "My English," defined as a sense of separation between fluent and "perfect" English in the perspective of psychology. As his writing notes, people who learn English as a second language develop a form of alienation from people who speak English as a first language. The second language creates a separation between their English and fluent English (Tanaka 53). Fluent English is a label for someone who studies a language other than their primary language and it is also perceived as a lesser English language from the perspective of an immigrant family. As Tanaka notes, the learner who studies English is forced to discard their concept of national language and their consciousness as "Japanese". They are part of their identity whereby they accommodate their first language while the second language influences them to see they are different from the English speaker (Tanaka 48-49). The separation of English and My English affects the communication between parents and children to create a barrier language. This prevents them from being able to communicate with parents and grandparents, however, the language barrier helps to capture people's way of life through their everyday interaction.

Tanaka's My English can be applied to the unique language because it helps to capture the relationship between family members as social status. The unique language is an experience of struggling to communicate with English as their second language. As Tanaka states, a standard language in a country is perceived as a social fact for people to learn a perfect language skill to create a sense of superiority. It affected people to feel obliged to teach and learn the "correct" language (Tanaka 48). His insight offers how the immigrant family encourages teaching the next generation with dominant language and at the same time, the language affects them by separating themselves according to their language barriers. Also, the language detaches them from their family's cultural roots. Fluent English helps to capture how the family members communicate with each other by paying attention to their both spoken and

body language such as phases, sounds, and gestures. Each word associates the identity of the family members and their background illustrating how they use them to define their way of life. Tanaka's *My English* encourages the next generation of immigrant families to study their family's home space through research and artworks as an attempt to reconnect to their cultural roots.

The sense of disconnection from people's cultural roots allows people to perceive the home language as both a nostalgic memory and a spiritual connection. The nostalgic memories help people to use each of their personal belongings to create a story about family members and relearn their culture. Walter Benjamin's writing, The Storyteller, investigates the difference of sharing story through spoken and written language and how they affect the audience's experience of listening to a story. Benjamin's analysis of storytellers reveals the oral storyteller draws their experience of communication to convince the audience to join the storyteller. This allows them to feel an experience from the story and spoken language helps to create a connection with people and as a community place. While the written language or printing text that can be found in novels, newspapers, and articles. These written stories give the reader an experience of isolation to separate from their physical world (Benjamin 3). Benjamin's insight demonstrates the audience's experience of listening can influence the value of storytelling. Also, his insight notes the two ways to improve the experience of stories: the value of historical places and the local people themselves. They can help strengthen a connection between the story and audience. This gives the audience a sense of importance to connect between place and people to bring the audience and speaker to understand. The value of place and people can be applied to the concept of home language to analyze both unique language, home space, and family members to help us to learn about their way of life. However, the experience of language barrier prevents us from being able to access a story from family members to create a strong connection of history and value. This is where Tanaka's My English establishes the idea of the generational barrier affected by the language barrier.

Narrativization

"This narrative perspective guides me consciously and unconsciously to the narrativized telling of the day-to-day and moment-to-moment life fragments captured in my inquiry" (Xu 23).

Tanaka's concept of "My English" applies to Shijing Xu's approach of studies in crossculture to learn about his experience in a Chinese immigrant family. In Xu's writing from "In Search of Home in Times of Transition", he introduces his term, narrativization, defined as an approach of analysis to guide him to rethink about his relationship with his family, community, and education. It allows him to analyze his family and he notices each of his family shares the value of knowledge, society, and usefulness from the three different perspectives of philosophy, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist. Xu believes the Chinese philosophies play a big role in his generation's parents who were raised in China or pass down the value of knowledge to the next generation. People who are raised with two different cultures and languages allow them to gain an insight of the difference value of education in western and eastern perspectives (Xu 6). He learns how the Chinese parents' past, and present are tied by their home space and the place represents parents searching for hope for a home and western education system for their future generation. Xu's methodology of narration helps him to develop his understanding about his relationship with his family and how his family's past affects him today. In the following quote, "Narrativization helps to avoid telling a single story by itself and helps to prevent interpreting or retelling a story in defined terms and categories" (Xu 22). In this sense, Xu's narrativization is a method to help him study his family's background through their perspective of value in education is the reflection of the family's story. His methodology helps him to capture his family's story of way of life and how it affects him to interact his relationship between two cultures. Xu's narrativization will develop as a mode of communication to apply the unique language to reveal how the language emerges in the first place and create a tool to study home space to create a sense of connection with the story.

Case of Study

The research paper introduces the three feature artists and their works as the object of study to learn their personal connection with two cultures through their home's place. The theme of Asian diaspora offers for artists to relearn about themselves, and their cultures and it has the potential of creating the direction of storytelling from personal experience of communication with home language as the alternative of storytelling about personal livelihood. Additionally, this paper explores my personal experience of living with three cultures and languages to develop the narration of the home space with an approach of multi-sensory. It offers the paper to relearn the perspective of home space. In my own experience, I was taught that the three languages

from my family are American Sign Language, Cantonese, and English. All these personal experiences offer the object of study to learn about the home language and how it can be used in research methods or a tool for art practice.

The two featured artists who established the central theme of Asian Diaspora are Gloria Wong and Stephanie Shih. Their artworks allow them to take the approach of relearning about their household and family as the meeting place where Asian is assimilated into Western cultures together through the photographic series of still lifes. Wong suggests the household has the presence of "cultural fault line" (Wong 1) to show Asian culture immigrants from their homeland to Canada still have influence in Western culture in visual technology. Gloria Wong's photographic work, "sik teng mm sik gong ("pardon my Chinese"), depicts home space with the atmosphere of mundane and everyday life. However, each image captures some of personal belongings to help to establish a hint of a story about her family's way of life merging with the western culture in one place.

One of her photographic images depicts a cupboard with some personal belongings such as a family member portrait, glassware, and Chinese calligraphy writing. To analyse her photographic work, I will draw from Boccagni and Xu's theoretical approaches to reveal the narration of the home space. The function of each piece is a container of nostalgic memories for someone who shares the mutual experience in lifestyle. As Boccagni defines someone who revisits their family's home and creates a special connection with personal belongings through the memories of their family. Additionally, Xu's concept of Narrativization affects the analysis of Wong's photographic images to perceive the image as a visual story of family's relationship of past and present. Both Boccagni and Xu's methods help to attune the memories of home space and bring the story experience to transform the place as a storyteller to inform people about the family's way of life.

The second artist, Stephanie Shih and her sculptural and photographic works is called "Same Same". Her works are the theme of Asian diaspora to capture her relationship with Asian grocery stores and foods to evoke nostalgic memories. Her work, "Same Same" depicts two different photographic images of ceramic pieces and old images of her family members. As Leah Bhabha states, her works aim to draw her audience's memories through ingredient foods as part of the Asian American culinary identity (Leah 3). Each food has another purpose: to attune the audience's memories of their family and their identity to create the story of their way

of life. The observation of the images reveals the ceramic pieces have the shape of Asian sauce bottle with the label in both Chinese and English text. Both text languages can be implied for audiences who access either language. Also, the next image of ceramic bottle sauce depicts the old image of a child, and another image has family members with colour washout. Both ceramic pieces and family images have a bridge to connect each other through the memories and experience. These artists, Wong, and Shih, aim to not only share their own experience but they attempt to capture the experience of connection with their family through home space and foods which everyone shares the mutual feeling with.

The third featured artist whose specialization in study of the reinterpretation of ancient languages and gesture language is Hyung-Min Yoon. Her pieces share their insight of every language and body languages have a common ground are part of our instinct and sharing our consciousness. One of her works is called Magic *Hands* and it depicts images of hand gestures in different forms and shapes on antique papers. Yoon states the gesture language is a combination of written and spoken language. However, her experience as a mother helped her to build a relationship with her kid through gesture and language. It helps Yoon to realize the invented or secret language is a perspective of a child's memory to connect the experience of senses and languages together. It creates a unique language to connect children's memories of the new world (Low 5). *Magic Hands* is a realization of gesture language that is the reflection of people's memory of their lifestyle through different languages and senses to create their own unique language. It helps to bring a visual communication to learn each notation of culture and language that affects people to create their own language as part of their lifestyle. Each of the artists' works share the mutual feeling of nostalgic memories and it helps them to capture their experience through artworks.

Each of the theoretical approaches of narrativization, languages, and multisensory experience help to analyze the home space, personal belongings, and languages. They have contributed to the home language to change how we define our relationship and experience in home space as the story of our way of life. The *home language* is a mode of communication to overcome barriers of time and generational shifts in language. The unique language improves the communication between family members with unique language to reveal the nostalgic memories in home space and personal belongings.

Appendix B. Work Cited

Alagiah, Matt. Gloria Wong Photography, *It's Nice That*, https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/gloria-wong-the-graduates-2020-photography-170820, 17 August 2020. Accessed 18, October 2021

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflection on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." Translated by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

https://arl.human.cornell.edu/linked%20docs/Walter%20Benjamin%20Storyteller.pdf. Accessed 18, October 2021

Bhabha, Leah. For Ceramist Stephanie H. Shih, There's no such Things as Art without Activism. *Healthyish*. https://www.bonappetit.com/story/stephanie-shih-ceramist, Apr 1, 2021. Accessed Nov 20, 2021

Boccagni, P. (2016). *Migration and the Search for Home*. Palgrave Macmillan US. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057%2F978-1-137-58802-9. Accessed 18 October 2021

Han Byung Chul. "The Scent of Time: Fragrant Clock: A Short Excursus on Ancient China" Polity Press 2017. pp 50-55

Low, Joni. Hyung-Min Yoon, *Vie des arts*. https://viedesarts.com/en/profiles-en/hyung-min-yoon/ 8 Apr 2020. Accessed Nov 10, 2021

Tanaka, Shigenori. "English and Multiculturalism— from the Language User's Perspective." *RELC Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, Sage Publications, 2006, pp. 47–66, https://journals-sagepubcom.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/doi/abs/10.1177/0033688206063473. Accessed October 18, 2021

Xu, S. (2017). *Cross-Cultural Schooling Experiences of Chinese Immigrant Families*. Springer International Publishing AG. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-46103-8_1. Accessed 18 October 2021