Smaller Children, Bigger Children:

Rethinking Intergenerational Role Reversal in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

Why does the prospect of becoming a parent feel unsettling? Beginning from this apparently personal yet widely resonant question, this research asks whether contemporary young people's resistance to parenthood stems only from economic pressure, emotional hesitation, and shifting social values, or whether it also reflects a deeper uncertainty toward the identities of both "parent" and "child". In the Chinese context, the study argues that parent-child relations are often marked by a profound asymmetry: love, indebtedness, and return can never be fully completed within a single lifetime. Parenthood is therefore approached not as a fixed identity, but as a fluid and reversible process of becoming. Through autoethnography, archival gathering, simulation, and installation-based practice, the project develops into an installation work that reframes parent-child relations as a fluid intergenerational field and reconsiders the figure of the parent beyond its conventional association with sacrifice, hierarchy, and fixed role obligation.

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Chapter 1 - The Beginning of the Inquiry

1.1 - Distance

At the age of eighteen, I was sent to Canada to begin a university foundation program. As an only child who had long been protected under my parents' care, I had never imagined that I `would one day be placed alone in a country so far from home. For me, still unequipped at the time for fully independent living, the decision came abruptly and with little emotional preparation. In the first years after my arrival, my parents contacted me almost every day. Their messages and phone calls often resembled the gentle supervision one gives a child: Had I eaten properly? Was I taking care of myself?

Then, almost without my noticing, six years passed, and I was already twenty-four.

Perhaps out of consideration for the constant demands of my studies and work, that once-intensive communication gradually became less frequent. My parents no longer called as often as before. The vast distance between us seemed to stretch and attenuate our connection, turning it into something like a delayed transmission. For them, this sense of remoteness appeared to produce a diffuse but persistent anxiety: that our lives were moving further and further apart, and that, in some sense, we were beginning to lose one another.

As a result, the conversations between us became increasingly abstract. Their concern for me remained, but it was no longer attached to the concrete details of everyday life. Once the ordinary routines of care had lost their immediate object, their anxiety and affection began, almost inevitably, to settle on what they understood as the major questions of my future. In a pattern that echoes the broader collective anxiety of many contemporary Chinese parents, they grew eager to intervene in—and even organize—my prospects for marriage and childbearing.

Through this most conventionally sanctioned and contract-like form of attachment, they seemed to be trying to fix in place a life that was unfolding far beyond their reach and gradually slipping out of their control.

1.2 - Marriage and Reproduction: The Logic Behind

In Chinese discourse, "hunyu" ("婚育") —literally "marriage and childbearing"—is often treated as a single, unified term, as though marriage and reproduction were naturally two components of the same life process. In practice, however, it consists of two related yet distinct stages: first come courtship and marriage, and only then childbearing and the continuation of the family line. With regard to the former, particularly in contemporary China, practices such as arranged marriage and the older doctrine of parental authority in matchmaking have long been denounced, within narratives of modernization and reform, as relics of a backward and oppressive social order. As a result, although many parents remain deeply invested in the qualifications of their children's partners, they usually avoid appearing overly direct in their involvement, wary of crossing a line that modern moral discourse has already marked as improper. In this sense, they make a tactical retreat. As Yan Yunxiang suggests, however, this retreat is better understood as a form of "transactional logic", one that conceals a deeper familial contract: "Parents often withdraw from the battlefield of courtship to maintain a harmonious relationship with their children, yet this withdrawal is predicated on an implicit understanding that the children will eventually fulfill their role in the family's reproduction" (Yan, 2003).

The question of whether to have children, and how to continue the family line, has therefore not been fully absorbed into the domain of individual choice. On the contrary, within many family value systems it continues to occupy a stubbornly central place in the preservation of traditional order: once a family has been formed, children are expected to follow, and the

trajectory of an individual life is ultimately drawn back into the logic of familial reproduction. As Yang Hu and Jacqueline Scott note, data from 2006 in China indicate that "one of the strongest popular commitments to 'patrilineal doctrine' is the continuation of the family bloodline (that is, having children) … this attitude of support for tradition … remains very strong and highly consistent across generations (Hu & Scott, 2016)." It is as though marriage, as an institution, has already been modernized once, while reproduction remains non-negotiable and continues to be governed by long-standing norms.

Within this logic of "selective modernization," childbearing is no longer understood as a natural turning point in an individual life course. It becomes, instead, a structurally produced object of collective concern. This pressure does not remain confined to the private interior of the family. It extends outward, taking shape through social opinion, kinship networks, and mass media, until it forms a dense and nearly inescapable web. What ought to belong to the private sphere of reproductive decision-making is thus repackaged, under the culturally sanctioned language of what seems "reasonable" or "proper," as a broader social imperative—one commonly experienced as pro-natalist pressure, and one that approaches coercion in its force.

This is not merely an isolated instance of intergenerational tension. It is a form of systemic encirclement experienced by a great many young adults of reproductive age. When the urgency carried over from traditional social order collides head-on with the independent will of the modern individual, muted friction finally gives way to open confrontation.

1.3 - The Cascading Pyramid of Reproductive Pressure

If we set aside, for the moment, the now-dominant view among younger generations that "pressure to have children" constitutes a serious violation of personal boundaries, and if we

temporarily suspend the standpoint of the individual, it becomes clear that such pressure is not only “normal,” but in sociological terms deeply structural—indeed, almost inevitable.

Childbearing has never been reducible to an individual biological choice. It has long been reshaped by multiple layers of social and ethical meaning. Drawing on the framework Fei develops in *The Institutions for Reproduction*; I would argue that the forces behind this pressure can be understood as three concentric layers of hidden propulsion.

The first is an institutional force operating at the broad level of society. I am inclined to understand it as a guarantee of productive continuity under the will of the state. As Fei notes, to secure both the continuation of the human population and the reproduction of productive capacity, society inevitably generates concepts such as “reproductive culture” and “reproductive institutions” to regulate individual behavior (Fei, 2018). At this macro level, the central concern is the demographic “metabolism” of the population. It functions like a massive weathervane, establishing the underlying direction of social operation. In this sense, it is also the institutional origin of all pro-natalist pressure.

The second layer comes from the level of the “social group”: a dense and intricate network made up of actual people and lived relationships. Borrowing Raymond Firth’s formulation, “the triangle in the social structure consists of children and their parents united by common sentiments” (Firth, 1958). Building on this, Fei argues that the center of the marriage contract lies not merely in the relation between the two sexes, but in two interdependent chains: that of “husband and wife” and that of “parent and child” (Fei, 2018). He describes this family dynamic through a strikingly kinetic image: “In ordinary cases, when a marriage contract is concluded, a line is drawn between two points of the triangle, while one point is left hanging in suspension, and the two remaining sides are still dotted lines … This suspended point is in the process of

being created, giving direction to the two points already there. But … this point may remain unrealized indefinitely. The triangle, during its creation, is a moving tendency, containing a force of tension and hesitation. At this moment, the man and woman … represent an unstable relationship" (Fei, 2018).

When a couple does not have a child for an extended period, the triangle's suspended point never settles into place, and the instability remains unresolved. To those within the surrounding relational web—relatives, friends, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances—this prolonged suspension appears as a deviation from the norm, something faintly but persistently "abnormal." The pressure generated by speculation, gossip, and social scrutiny can therefore become a powerful force pushing individuals to complete the triangle's closure.

The third, and for this chapter's second section the most crucial, is the driving force of the family itself. At the micro level of the family of origin, this force is often concentrated most directly in the parents. Fei's account here may initially sound familiar, but it identifies a profound psychological motive: "Children are the opportunity for people's ideal selves to be reborn once again" (Fei, 2018). The longing for the "next generation as a physical and spiritual continuation" (Fei, 2018) becomes especially intense in intergenerational relations. Erik H. Erikson offers a more critical account of this mechanism (Erikson & Erikson, 2013): when the older generation enters later life and confronts the bleak darkness cast by mortality, descendants—as biological replicas and extensions of the self—become a defensive strategy against aging and existential stagnation. The emergence of new life in the next generation offers elders a form of "symbolic immortality," one that appears to extend beyond the endpoint of the body. This is what gives familial pressure its most intimate, most stubborn, and most emotionally intractable force.

What must be stressed, however, is that these three forces do not operate as separate and unrelated causes. They form, rather, a cascading pyramid. The higher the level, the more abstract and difficult to dislodge it will become. This structure ensures that pressure travels downward, penetrating and intensifying at each stage: the state establishes the original code of social operation; the social network translates that code into everyday moral judgement and surveillance; and these accumulated pressures are finally imposed upon the family unit at the bottom.

The result of this cascading mechanism is that macro-level social will, as it moves into the micro sphere, ultimately collapses and erupts within the smallest unit of all: the family.

Verbal conflict between parents and children may appear to be a disagreement between two individuals, but in fact it marks the point of stress at the base of the entire pyramid. Parents become, often unconsciously, the executors and inheritors of a broader social will, while children become the terminal nodes upon which the weight of every level comes to rest. This is why conflicts over reproductive pressure appear most frequently, and most violently, within the family: it is here that external forces converge and are finally converted into personal pain.

Certainly, one could continue tracing the internal structure of this “pyramid” indefinitely — upward toward the origins of civilization or biological instinct, or downward into ever finer layers of cultural subconsciousness. But that is not the aim of this chapter. My concern here is not to exhaust the full explanatory range of sociology, but to sketch, in broad terms, the real gravitational force that presses steadily upon the individual. With that, this discussion of structural pressure may, for now, come to a provisional close.

1.4 - Resistance

By contrast, a substantial number of younger people now at childbearing age seem unwilling to respond positively to this form of moral and duty-bound "coercion"; many are openly repelled by it. Survey-based research on changing attitudes toward marriage and childbearing among contemporary youth has identified a range of persuasive explanations, but most of them can be broadly grouped into three categories. The first is material pressure: economic strain, professional competition, and the rising cost of living. The second is emotional concern: anxieties surrounding intimacy, the stability of marriage, and the lingering influence of the family of origin. The third is a shift in values: more and more young people now place freedom, autonomy, and self-realization ahead of marriage and parenthood (Ai & Zhang, 2025).

These categories are, of course, only a provisional way of organizing an issue far more complex than any short summary can capture, and I will not linger on them here. On closer examination, each of these dimensions opens onto countless further arguments, many of them grounded in immediate and recognizable realities. Whichever level one begins from, the underlying logic appears remarkably coherent, rational, and well suited to the strategic conditions of modern life. Taken together, these overlapping factors have produced a narrative that is, at least on the level of reason, exceedingly difficult to dislodge.

Under the conditions of the internet, such rational modes of thinking have circulated with extraordinary speed. More than that, they have gradually taken on the force of a collective slogan, one associated with an awakening of resistance. Repeated, exchanged, and amplified among younger generations, they have gathered into a resilient force capable of unsettling tradition itself. In this near carnival of "propaganda", complex realities are often compressed into sharply legible positions. Some arguments do, undeniably, strike at the defining pressures ofthe present moment with real precision; others become less objective as they are radicalized through circulation. Yet

whatever their internal differences, this narrative has already become one of the most durable defensive formations available to contemporary youth.

1.5 - The Crisis of Lineage

The effects of this resistance to pro-natalist pressure are difficult to ignore. China's falling birth rate reads almost like a form of collective, silent retaliation, one that has taken shape as a steep and seemingly irreversible decline. According to the Communiqué of the Seventh National Population Census released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the country's total fertility rate (TFR) in 2020 stood at just 1.3—already below the internationally recognized warning threshold of 1.5 (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2020). This figure signals not only a serious weakening of the capacity for population replacement, but also the emergence of what may become an ultra-low fertility trap.

An even deeper structural shift can be seen in the shrinking size of the household itself. Data from Communiqué No. 5 show that, among approximately 494 million households nationwide, "the average household size was 2.62 persons, a decrease of 0.48 from 3.10 in 2010" (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2020). Once the average household falls below the benchmark of three persons, the implications are no longer merely statistical. It suggests that single-person households, DINK families, and miniaturized nuclear families have displaced more traditional formations and become the dominant social pattern of the present. What appears, at first glance, to be a routine demographic adjustment in fact points to a much deeper cultural crisis.

This matters because, as one source puts it, "Confucianism is the core of China's socio-cultural tradition … and this traditional Confucian society is family-centered" (Li, 2022). In China, and more broadly across East Asia, kinship structures have long possessed a stronger centripetal

force than in many other cultural settings, sustained by an almost religious attachment to the continuation of the bloodline. The anthropologist Hsu referred to an idealized model of family life: the flourishing lineage (“望族”). Such a model signifies not only the accumulation of wealth through an expansive family estate, but, more fundamentally, the value of a “thriving population” (Hsu, 1975). For centuries, the image of multiple generations living together, and of a lineage rich in descendants, has served as one of the highest measures of both social accomplishment and familial vitality.

Seen from this perspective, the figure of “2.62 persons per household” is no longer just a cold demographic indicator. It effectively announces that the long-standing Chinese ideal of the multi-generational household is beginning to come apart. At the micro level, this trend amounts to a visible and unprecedented confrontation with the core values of traditional culture. Once the family shrinks to a scale too small to sustain the grand narrative of lineage, the social foundations ofthe traditional Confucian order begin to tremble as well.

1.6 - Beyond Rhetoric

In my everyday life, these macro-level narratives no longer feel novel. They circulate everywhere—from newspaper headlines to algorithmically curated social media feeds. Even the children of relatives a full generation younger than I am can now speak with ease about low fertility and individualism. The widespread circulation of such discourse has equipped me with what feels like an almost weaponized capacity for argument. Over the course of countless transoceanic phone calls, whenever my parents tentatively begin projecting fantasies about my “future children,” I can immediately summon this seemingly airtight body of theory in self-defense. Sometimes, all it takes is a single sharp piece of borrowed argument—something I once encountered on social media—to leave them momentarily speechless on the other end of the line.

And so, more often than not, these confrontations end in silence. My parents cannot easily find a way through the logic; at times, they even seem briefly persuaded by it, as though reason alone might lead them toward a momentary resignation or compromise. But the ceasefire never lasts. Theory does not take root in them. Once one conversation has passed, the next begins again soon enough. The pattern simply repeats itself.

Yet once I strip away this academic and sociological armor, I am compelled to confront something more honest about myself. As someone who had only just turned twenty-three, who had not yet fully entered social life, and who had never seriously invested in population questions at the level of the nation-state, I should not, in principle, have felt any deep personal pressure from such grand narratives. Although I could deploy this knowledge skillfully as a shield in my conflicts with my parents, it always felt to me like a form of "borrowed rhetoric." What truly unsettled me was something deeper and more inward turning: a resistance that was harder to name. It did not arise entirely from fear of any tangible reality. It felt closer to an instinctive unwillingness.

That realization forced me to look more carefully at myself, and at other young people in circumstances like my own. Beneath this apparent refusal of childbearing, what, precisely, were we rejecting? At this stage in my thinking, my attention began to shift—from the question of "bearing children" to the question of "becoming parents." Perhaps what we fear most is not the labour of raising a concrete new life, but the prospect of being inserted into the role of "parent" itself. This sensitivity to a kind of identity dislocation, and this refusal of a pre-scripted role already marked by sacrifice, became the first point of entry for my research. If rational argument cannot account for such embodied resistance, then the answer may lie elsewhere: in those more private, more irrational forms of psychic refuge.

Chapter 2 - Research and Background Analysis

2.1 - The Nonexistent Epilogue

My decision to begin from this angle may seem somewhat oblique. It grew out of a peculiar sensation that had lingered in me through years of immersion in anime. When one enters the narrative forest of contemporary Japanese anime and popular games, one of the first things one notices is a strange combination of dissonance and freedom. Again and again, what makes these worlds feel so unbound is the collective disappearance of "parents" as both biological and sociological coordinates. In such stories, adolescent protagonists live alone in half-empty apartments, form secret societies, or move freely through other worlds that require no permission and no explanation. Even when parents are mentioned, they tend to appear only as narrative devices: permanently away on business, dead for unspecified reasons, or otherwise reduced to the background. Their function is minimal—to provide a home, some pocket money, or, more structurally, to justify the enforced removal of parental authority from the story. In literary discourse, this pattern has been precisely identified as the phenomenon of "functional orphans" (Ingalls, 2010).

From the perspective of heroic narrative in virtual worlds, this is not only understandable; it is close to a structural necessity. As Joseph Campbell writes in his well-known metaphor: "One is bound in by the walls of childhood; the father and mother stand as threshold guardians, and the timorous soul, fearful of some punishment, fails to make the passage through the door and come to birth in the world without" (Cambell, 2008).

Unless the parental role is removed, the protagonist cannot shed the pre-given identity of being simply "their parents' child," and cannot enter a narrative that properly belongs to the self.

Bruno Bettelheim, in his study of fairy tales, makes a closely related point: Many fairy stories begin with the death of a mother or father; in these tales the death of the parent creates the most agonizing problems, as it (or the fear of it) does in real life. Other stories tell about an aging parent who decides that the time has come to let the new generation take over (Bettelheim & Doyle, 2017).

To marginalize parents—or remove them altogether—is, in narrative terms, to take away the umbrella of protection above the protagonist's head. This strategy creates not only a psychological blank space and a productive tension within the plot. More importantly, it forces the protagonist into direct contact with the rules of the social world, compelling a transition from the protected figure to the acting subject.

However, contemporary narrative introduces an even more striking deviation: once adolescent heroes have completed their Adventures, their adult selves remain absent. The story tends to stop abruptly at the very moment the adventure ends.

There seems to be a tacit pact between creators and audiences alike. To "become a parent," or simply to "enter middle age," is implicitly treated as the beginning of ordinariness; and within the logic of subculture, ordinariness is tantamount to narrative death. The moment a character becomes absorbed by the mundane demands of daily life and the work of raising children, that luminous privilege of being a "protagonist" appears to vanish. What remains is a descent into repetitive, unremarkable routine. For this reason, characters are permanently fixed at the threshold between fourteen and eighteen: an age charged with limitless possibility, yet still exempt from the responsibilities of social reproduction.

This marks a narrative logic fundamentally different from that of classical literature. In the traditional Bildungsroman (Brown, 2024), the protagonist's psychological and moral

development must ultimately lead toward a form of "return." Franco Moretti describes this classical sense of fulfillment as follows: For the plot sequence to stop, therefore, a 'merging' of the protagonist with his new world is necessary. It is a further variant of the metaphorical field of 'closure': the happy acceptance of bonds; 'meaningful' life as a tightly-closed ring; the stability of social connections as the foundation of the text's meaning (Moretti, 1985).

In classical narrative, the turbulence of youth is eventually absorbed into the stability of social order. Only when individual freedom is reinserted into social contracts—family, profession, class—does the narrative achieve "closure" in any full sense.

Contemporary anime narratives, by contrast, especially those oriented toward adolescent audiences, tend to mythologies the figure of youth itself. Through a fantasy of near-omnipotence, they construct a space purified of patriarchal control, a space that feels unbounded and exempt from prohibition. This corresponds closely to the eternal, suspended worldview described by Eiji Otsuka: "a society of only youth" (Otsuka, 2021).

It is hard to deny that this narrative configuration serves the consumable logic of subculture remarkably well. It offers audiences a way out of reality, a psychic route of escape.

Yet prolonged immersion in this imaginative landscape seems to leave behind a quieter aftereffect. As fantasies of omnipotence continue to swell, the frame of reference called "parents" remains suspended in a strange vacuum.

These cultural texts never really teach us how to become parents. Nor do they offer us a mature model to inhabit or emulate. On the contrary, because their narrative logic consistently excludes the figure of the "ordinary middle-aged adult," we begin, at a subconscious level, to resent the prospect of our own marginalization in real life. From there, an instinctive refusal of

the role of "parent" begins to take shape. In this sense, the fixation on "remaining forever young" is, at its core, a collective flight from the narrative endpoint called adult society.

It is important to add, however, that these observations about a "paternal vacuum" and a "refusal to grow up" are directed chiefly at the dominant subcultural paradigm that shaped the past several decades. That narrative logic forms one of the deepest underlying tones in the psychic landscape of our generation.

Narrative, of course, has never stood still. In some of the more forward-looking works emerging today, one can already detect a subtle shift. Creators have begun to dismantle the fantasy of absolute omnipotence, turning instead toward careful depictions ofthe familial textures once dismissed as dull, trivial, or meaningless. Rather than treating everyday life as something to be escaped, these works attempt to rediscover within its ordinary rhythms a different kind of tension, and a different kind of vitality.

Even so, for many young adults of childbearing age—especially those caught in the anxieties of identity transition, and trying to use subcultural imagination as a defense against the pressures of reality—the earlier "stagnant forest" remains the most familiar psychic refuge.

Stripped of parental coordinates and built almost entirely out of adolescent intensity, it is still the place where they most instinctively come to rest. It is this historical inertia in narrative form that leaves us, when confronted with the heavy role of "parent" in real life, without an adequate psychological language: a language capable of translating that role, and perhaps of loosening its force.

2.2 - The Value Shift in Modern China

If contemporary subcultural narratives conduct a kind of experiment in "depaternalisation" by mythologizing youth and weakening the role of parents, then this displacement of the value axis had already begun to resonate within the cultural context of modern China. During this period, children were no longer understood merely as appendages of the family; they were redefined as "future citizens," as the very hope of national renewal (Zhang, 2021).

This form of "child-centrism," however, was by no means an ancient or natural condition. As noted earlier, Confucian thought, as the core of China's social and cultural tradition, is fundamentally structured around a hierarchical ethics in which elders and juniors, superiors and inferiors, each remain properly within their ordained relation (Li, 2022). Within such an order, the old and the young were never equal. Elders were dignified, authoritative, and endowed with will; the young were subordinate and expected to obey. This dominant orientation—one that privileged the authority of age (Zhang, 2021)—kept children in a marginal and vulnerable position for centuries.

To understand this shift more precisely, I turn to the child-rearing models proposed by the anthropologist David Lancy in *The Anthropology of Childhood*. He suggests that a society's understanding of children falls along a continuum stretching from centrality to marginality, and identifies three broad models (Lancy, 2022).

Cherubs: children are treated as the centre of family life. Parents invest extraordinary amounts of time, money, and emotional energy in them, producing an intensely protective logic of care.

Chattel: children are regarded as household assets and sources of labour. They are expected to share the burdens of family life, reflecting a distinctly functional logic of child-rearing.

Changelings: an extreme mode rooted in folklore and fear. When children are disabled, deviant, or unable to satisfy parental expectations, parents may unconsciously feel that “this is not really my child,” which can give rise to rejection or even abandonment.

What confronts the child is not a world arranged for the child’s convenience, but a space organized for the convenience of adults … Insofar as the forms of social life to which children must adapt are established without consulting them, or even considering whether they consent, those who undertake to educate them may be said to be undemocratic (Fei, 1980).

Within this model, children were required to cut back and discipline their own will in order to adapt to a social framework already prescribed by their elders—a framework that was, in Fei’s words, “undemocratic”.

It was not until the late Qing, under the impact of modern thought, that “child-centrism” began to produce a historic transformation in the Chinese intellectual world: “the child became the centre, and all other measures revolved around it” (Zhang, 2021). In this shift, children underwent a conceptual migration from Chattel to Cherubs. No longer merely objects of discipline within the kinship order, they were elevated into the point of departure for social reconstruction, and cast as bearers ofthe future.

In this reorientation of thought, Lu Xun—one of the most decisive critical writers in modern Chinese literary and intellectual history—played a pivotal role (Beijing Lu Xun Museum [Beijing New Culture Movement Memorial Hall], 2014). His reflections on “the young” and on “the future” were never merely about education. They amounted, more profoundly, to a devastating critique of the elder-centered morality embedded in the old ethical order.

In Lu Xun's formulation, the child is a form of life not yet contaminated by the world, the germ of the fully human (Wu, 2020). Accordingly, the legitimacy of parents and elders no longer derives from naturalized authority. It must instead be justified through an ethic of yielding downward. In *What Are We to Do as Fathers Today*, he states this with striking clarity: "Life that comes later is always more meaningful than life that came before; it is closer to completion, and therefore more valuable, more deserving of our treasure. The earlier life ought to sacrifice itself for it" (Lu, 1919).

By demanding that parents "sacrifice themselves, so that the future life of the child may set out upon the long road of development," Lu Xun casts the child as a being whose growth must be secured through adult self-compression, even through a form of sacrifice.

More importantly still, this ethic implies a higher and more demanding mode of moral relation. For Lu Xun, ideal parental love should approximate Agape (White, 2019): a form of love that exceeds blood ties and breaks with the logic ofutility and exchange. As he writes: One should wish for the child to live; further still, one should wish for the child to become better than oneself… It is this love, severed from exchange and from calculations of interest, that forms the thread of human relations (Lu, 1919).

I call this "Agape" because, in my reading, such "parental love" does not end with kinship. In its ideal form, it points instead toward a more universal mode of care: a commitment through which the adult world as a whole extends its concern toward the world of children. This means that, within this modern narrative, parents are required not only to sacrifice, but to relinquish any claim to return. They are expected to give, and to give without resentment, without accounting, and without exchange.

The value system established by Lu Xun and other major intellectual figures quickly penetrated and reshaped modern Chinese ideas of child-rearing. In doing so, it firmly anchored the role of the parent within the coordinates of the giver and the one who steps aside.

2.3 - Intensive Parenting

Within the dominant child-rearing discourse of contemporary China, the Lu Xunian ethic of yielding downward has by no means disappeared. It has instead been reformulated, in a more refined and technocratic form, as what is now widely described as intensive parenting. This model is not marginal. It has become deeply normative, even atmospheric, in everyday life, as though any decision that makes parenting easier for adults must necessarily come at the child's expense (Moyer, 2023). If adult sacrifice in the modern period still carried the rhetoric of enlightenment and historical mission, then in the present it has been broken down into an endless series of measurable, comparable, and optimizable tasks. As Sharon Hays famously describes it, the dominant ideology of child-rearing now demands a mode of care that is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1998). In other words, adults are no longer asked merely, in principle, to make way for the young. They are expected, in practice, to convert their time, emotions, attention, and even the structure of their everyday lives into resources for the child's development. In this sense, intensive parenting both extends and intensifies the cherub logic discussed earlier: the child is treated as supremely precious, vulnerable, and worthy of total investment, while parents—especially mothers—are expected, selflessly, to "…make a tremendous investment in their child" (Verniers et al., 2022).

Placed within a broader sociological frame, this structure also resonates with Fei's insight that reproduction is not simply a natural extension of emotion or sexual desire, but part of an institutional arrangement bound up with the continuation of society, and therefore inherently

marked by a structure of self-loss for the sake of others (Fei, 2018). Under such conditions, the question of whether or not to have a child carries an unspoken subtext: whether one is willing to surrender, on an ongoing basis, one's centre of gravity in life—one's time, one's psychic space, one's organizing priorities—in order to preserve the precedence of another life. At some level, this is profoundly anti-human.

More than that, the consequences of intensive parenting are not limited to the visible expenditure of time, money, and emotional labour. Over time, they can also produce a subtler transformation of subjectivity. Adults who enter the parental role may gradually learn, through years of adjustment, how to marginalize themselves. They learn a kind of self-exile.

I have seen traces of this in everyday life, often in moments so slight that they might easily be overlooked, and yet so sharp that they remain difficult to forget. One such moment took place when MBTI personality tests had just begun circulating widely online. At the time, I was amused by them, almost compulsively collecting personality labels for the people around me. So one day I handed my phone to my mother and invited her to try the test for herself. At first, she seemed genuinely interested. She read the situational questions, thought about them carefully, and selected her answers one by one. But after only a few questions—perhaps five or six—something in her seemed to shift. She suddenly handed the phone back to me and said, in effect, that this was not the sort of thing someone her age should be doing; it belonged to young people, and she did not need to know such things about herself.

I remember the discomfort of that moment very clearly. Perhaps it had something to do with her age—she was already fifty-eight at the time. Perhaps it was simply part of her temperament; she has always been introverted, timid, and gentle. But what I felt, instinctively and before I could fully explain it, was something more specific: she seemed no longer to need, or no longer

to permit herself to want, new knowledge about herself. It struck me as a quiet but painful renunciation.

What begins to happen, then, is that adults start to classify certain forms of experience as no longer belonging to them. Under the prolonged discipline of role expectation, exploration, rest, self-discovery, even minor curiosities may be recoded as rights belonging to "children" or "the young," rather than as experiences that adults—and especially parents—may still legitimately claim for themselves.

For younger people who place a high value on personal experience, creative freedom, and the integrity of the self, this structure of parenthood can generate a powerful anticipatory dread. Through the relentless circulation of parenting content on social media, through watching peers disappear into the demands of childcare, and through the repeated fatigue, sacrifice, and loss of self registered in the older generation, many have come to recognize that the cost of parenthood is not only economic. It is also existential; it is a cost borne at the level of subjectivity itself. In this sense, the resistance provoked by the modern parental contract does not stem from some inherent refusal of responsibility on the part of the younger generation. It emerges because parenthood is so often understood as a deep intrusion into adult subject-life: once one acquires the identity of parent, one no longer seems permitted to exist first as oneself, but must instead exist primarily as the provider, sustainer, and support system of another life (Hays, 1998).

2.4 - The Inner Child

At this point, I want to question the principle that adults must endlessly yield downward to children and sacrifice themselves on their behalf. This is not an argument against caring for children; care is obviously necessary. The problem lies elsewhere: in the possibility that the corrective has gone too far. In contemporary China, a broadly diffused form of "neontocracy"—a

cultural structure in which the youngest members are granted the highest symbolic value (Lancy, 2022)—has produced effects that are unfair not only to adults, but in a deeper sense to human beings as such. The pressures of intensive parenting, the compression of adult identity, the marginalization and even self-exile of the parent—all of this rests on an assumption I want to challenge. Perhaps the human subject remains, throughout life, marked by a certain childlikeness. If so, then a person who continues to carry this inner child should not be treated as though that dimension of the self must simply be surrendered.

One often encounters the claim, especially on social media, that what we call "maturity" may in fact be little more than a polished adult performance: a learned imitation of adulthood, mastered under social pressure and enacted in the name of responsibility. This seems to me an entirely plausible observation.

As Erik Erikson writes, "the fact that human conscience remains partially infantile throughout life is the core of human tragedy" (Erikson, 2014). What I mean here by childlikeness is not immaturity of mind, nor infantile behavior. It refers instead to a more primary and irreducible vital drive: the impulse to explore, to play, and to enter into purposeless interaction with the world.

An important distinction is necessary here. In psychological and trauma-based discourse, the idea that "part of the adult has not grown up" is often interpreted in pathological terms: early trauma, neglect, or interrupted development may leave certain emotional functions frozen at an earlier stage, producing emotional dysregulation, chronic insecurity, unstable relationships, and related symptoms (Gregorowski & Seedat, 2013). This is close to what is described as developmental trauma or developmental arrest. That condition is not what I am discussing here. Pathological not-growing-up refers to development that has been interrupted by trauma or

deprivation, leading to stagnation in emotional integration, separation–individuation, trust, or stability of self (Moon & Bahn, 2016). Its "childlikeness" is not vitality or openness, but a form of retained vulnerability, a stuckness one did not choose. The question of separation–individuation, in particular, will be discussed in greater detail later.

What I mean is something quite different. To borrow Winnicott's well-known formulation, "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality" (Winnicott, 2005). Play, in other words, is not merely an accessory of childhood. It is a necessary condition through which both children and adults sustain creativity and mobilize the whole self. From this perspective, adulthood should not require the total loss of those impulses that remain close to the childlike.

And yet contemporary culture grants "the child" an exceptionally high moral privilege, treating children as the embodiment of purity and futurity. Once that privilege is tied exclusively to biological age, however, the childlike dimension in adults is easily recoded as failure: a failure to perform one's role properly, a failure of social seriousness, even a kind of irresponsibility.

Adults are expected to be composed, steady, and decisively beyond childishness.

Huizinga offers a powerful counterpoint to this view. If "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play," then civilization is not founded on the overcoming of playfulness, but unfolds precisely through it (Huizinga, 1960). Seen from this angle, adult childlikeness should not be dismissed as regression or dereliction. On the contrary, when someone resists being fully installed in the role of "parent," "provider," or "sacrifice," that resistance may express something more than an evasion of duty. It may be a defense of one's remaining capacity for creativity, play, and subjective presence.

Taken together with the arguments developed earlier, this suggests that when we resist being placed in the parental role, what we are ultimately defending is this most basic inner drive. We resist becoming a vessel for another life because the child within us has not yet exhausted its own desire to live. It still wants to breathe as the protagonist of its own world, rather than existing merely as sustenance for the next generation.

So I return to the point raised at the beginning of this section. What truly deserves scrutiny is not care for children itself, but the ethical structure that makes "the future" and "purity" the exclusive property of children, and on that basis demands that adults yield, sacrifice, deplete, and hollow themselves out in a single direction.

2.5 - A Memory: Seeing the Child in the Parent

At this point, it is important to clarify that, the terms I have used throughout—"children," "the young," "younger people"—do not refer strictly to biological age. They refer, more fundamentally, to a relational position: the position of being someone's child. Understood in this way, the subject of this chapter extends beyond minors in the sociological sense. It includes all those who remain situated within intergenerational relations, all those who still occupy the place of the later-born.

In fact, my first intuition behind the hypothesis proposed at the beginning of this chapter — that adults retain within themselves some childlike core—did not come from reading. It came from an early observation, one I could scarcely explain even to myself. I must have been seven or eight years old. What I noticed, dimly but persistently, was that even adults who were already parents would sometimes, in unguarded moments, reveal something light, vivid, and unmistakably childlike. Whenever such moments appeared, they stirred in me a feeling I had no

language for. It was not simply intimacy, nor surprise, nor even happiness. It felt more like an accidental encounter with some deeper truth.

The earliest memory I can trace is this. One Qingming Festival, my family went to visit my grandparents' graves. On the way back, we stopped by a riverbank because the weather was so fine. My father, who must have been around forty-five at the time, noticed that the willow trees had just begun to bud. He suddenly said that: "This was exactly the right color and season for making willow whistles!" Then he snapped off a small willow branch and began, slowly and deftly, to strip away its tender yellow-green bark, leaving just enough of the moist inner wood beneath. He cut a small opening into it and fashioned a crude whistle. He handed one to me first, but I did not know how to play it. I could only hold it awkwardly between my lips and try, unsuccessfully, to make a sound. So he made another one for himself, lifted it to his mouth, and adjusted the pitch by drawing out the thin wooden core inside, trying as he did so to teach me. I never learned.

What remains with me now is not the technique of making the whistle. It is the strange shift in perspective that took place as I watched him. As I looked at my father blowing that willow whistle, I suddenly felt as though I were looking at another child. Stranger still, it seemed for a moment that my own point of view had slipped away from the child I was. I felt as though I had been lifted, briefly, to some higher and more distant vantage point, from which I was gazing at them with something close to tenderness. Even now, I cannot name that feeling precisely. It was something like affection, and something like understanding, but there was sadness in it too. For years I have been trying to find language for that feeling. In a sense, this entire chapter is part of that attempt.

2.6 - Affinity, Reincarnation, and Rotating Positions

If I am to explain more fully where this feeling of misaligned perspective comes from, then personal memory alone is no longer enough. For me, that strange experience—of momentarily entering my parents' position, while my parents themselves seemed to take on a kind of childlikeness—also emerged from the larger familial culture in which I grew up. That background was marked, quite distinctly, by Buddhism.

By "Buddhism," however, I do not mean a rigorous, doctrinal religious practice, nor a devout faith centred on discipline and cultivation. What I mean is something much more diffuse: a vernacular Buddhist atmosphere embedded in ordinary life. In my family, practices such as copying sutras, wearing Buddhist charms, burning incense and praying at festivals, or formally taking refuge in temples were never unusual. These acts were not usually grounded in systematic study of Buddhist teachings. More often, they offered something softer and more immediate: a sense of inner steadiness, a form of protection, or simply a spiritual language through which one could place oneself within the uncertainties of life.

In the Chinese context, this kind of Buddhism is not exceptional. Through its long process of localization, Buddhism has become deeply entangled with Confucian ethics, kinship order, and everyday social life. It can gesture toward transcendence while remaining fully embedded in worldly family practice. Nowhere is this overlap more visible than in parent-child relations. Confucianism stresses filial piety, and Buddhism does not deny the weight of parental grace. As the *Śāriputra Inquiry Sutra* puts it: "For those living in the household, to serve one's parents filially at their knees cannot equal repaying the grace of giving birth and raising. Because the grace of bearing and nurturing is so profound, it is called great" . What matters here is the implication: because the grace of giving birth and raising is so deep, the child's response is not

merely emotional but ethical. Repayment is no longer optional. It becomes a demand and obligation.

What concerns me, however, is not simply filial piety itself, but the tragic contradiction hidden within it. A familiar Chinese line says: “The tree longs for stillness, but the wind will not cease; the child longs to care for the parent, but the parent is no longer there.” It carries something almost prophetic. Parents’ grace is immense, but children are rarely able to respond to it in time or in full. By the time they are capable of understanding, bearing, and repaying that debt, their parents have often already grown old—or died. In this sense, the parent-child relation appears to be marked from the outset by a constitutive gap. Grace arrives first; response is always delayed, partial, or impossible. What binds parent and child, then, is not simply love in the modern sense, nor an equal relation of exchange, but a form of indebtedness that cannot be fully settled.

It may be precisely because of this that vernacular Buddhist imagination so often attaches ideas such as affinity, next life, and reincarnation to parent-child relations. I am not speaking here from formal doctrinal study, but from a common imaginative structure I absorbed through everyday life. People believe that encounters in this life are not accidental, but extensions ofties formed in a previous one. By the same logic, grace left unrepaid, obligations left unfinished, and attachments left unresolved do not simply end with death; they may continue into another life. What cannot be completed here is transferred into a longer, cyclical frame of time.

I once saw a video on social media in which a middle-aged man, burying his dead cat, held it and wept, saying that he hoped it would be reborn as a human in the next life and become his daughter, so that they could remain together for a long time. In the Chinese context, such scenes are not rare, and yet they remain strikingly affecting. In moments of grief, terms like “next life,”

"affinity," and "reincarnation" cease to be abstract beliefs and become emotionally real mechanisms of compensation. They allow people to imagine that once two lives have crossed, that crossing need not end; that if grace has not yet been repaid, or a relationship not yet fulfilled, there will be another chance. In this way, relations no longer seem capable of reaching a true end. People are bound together across repeated encounters, separations, reversals, and returns.

It mmosphere that I came, from a very early age, to feel that parent-child relations were never entirely linear. Parents were not simply stable as "parents," and children were not merely "children." The positions between them seemed capable of shifting, reversing, and returning.

This imagination of affinity, future lives, and rotating positions did not remain only a vague background structure. It entered, quite directly, into the conversations between my parents and me. On one of my rare visits home from Canada, my father—slightly drunk at a family dinner—spoke in this register with unusual solemnity. He told me that having me as a daughter in this life had brought him deep happiness, and that he had no regrets at all. Perhaps, he said, I had once been their parent in a previous life, and this life was therefore their chance to repay me. That was why giving me the best things was only natural. He added that if I were one day able to build a life abroad, I need not worry too much about them. Perhaps, in the next life, the positions would reverse again, and they would become my children.

Even now, I find it difficult to repeat these words calmly. What moved me was not only the love they contained, but the form in which that love appeared. It was not expressed through the modern familial language of duty, sacrifice, obligation, or investment. It was articulated instead through a longer, cyclical narrative: what is given in this life is not a one-way act of care, but a response to a relation already in motion long before; likewise, the positions of parent and child are not fixed, but may rotate and reverse again.

This brings me back to that man telling his dead pet, “Come back in the next life as my daughter.” His words and my father’s now seem to me profoundly similar. Both reveal the structure of a wish. Such speech feels almost like a supernatural contract, binding people together not merely through blood, but through the belief that relationships can cross time, recur, and begin again. It is perhaps for this reason that, somewhere deep inside, I find myself wanting to believe that one day I, too, might have the chance to become their parent.

If the earlier moment of watching my father blow a willow whistle only gave me a faint intuition that my parents still carried something childlike within them, then this conversation made something else clear for the first time: within the familial world I know, parent-child relations are less a fixed hierarchy than a structure of ongoing rotation, displacement, and continuation. It is within such a structure that the thought of “my parents becoming children, and I becoming the parent” ceases to be merely poetic metaphor and becomes, instead, a real way of understanding family itself.

2.7 - Smaller Children, Bigger Children

If one returns, from this feeling, to the arguments developed earlier in the chapter, then the intergenerational conflict I first described—around reproduction, pro-natalist pressure, parenthood, and the sacralization of childhood—may need to be understood differently. It is not simply a conflict between “parents” and “children” as two opposing generations. At a deeper level, it may be a struggle between bigger children and smaller children. The smaller children embody their untamed impulses more directly: they want to play, to be free, to remain at the centre of the stage, to live first and foremost as themselves. The bigger children, after a longer immersion in socialization, transform these same desires into a more elaborate form. They long

for new life, new possibility; they seek, through what is newly emerging before them, some compensation for what remained incomplete in themselves.

Seen from this angle, the triangle Fei introduced earlier as a figure for family dynamic— the triangle formed by points and lines—also begins to come apart. The lines once assumed to hold naturally no longer seem secure: the line between parents and child, the line between the parents themselves, and the line of futurity extending toward the next generation. Once those lines disappear, what remains are simply three points, arranged on the same plane. They no longer automatically form an order, nor do they necessarily point toward inheritance or fulfillment. They simply face one another. At last, we seem to stand on the same ground.

And yet even within this newly level relation, one difference remains. My parents have actually lived through the experience of becoming parents. I, so far, have only approached it through theory and observation. For that reason, this chapter may also mark a turn. It may now be time to shift my gaze toward them—not only to understand them as my "parents," but to try, from within their perspective, to trace their own narratives: the stories that existed before they became parents, while they were becoming parents, and after they had already become them.

Chapter 3 - Reading My Parents: A Concluding Reflection

3.1 - From Chattel to Cherub: As a Transitional Generation

To speak about my father and mother, I have to begin by returning to the narratives of my own family—to the stories of who they were before they became parents in any concrete sense. Beijing, 2001: the first year of the new millennium. It was a moment when the currents of the age seemed to be carrying China upward—economically, technologically, culturally—with unusual force. It was also in that year, in the final phase before the end of the one-child policy era, that I was born. I am my parents' only daughter. By the standards of both then and now, mine was almost a textbook three-person household, so typical as to seem nearly beyond criticism: both of my parents worked in state institutions, lived stable lives, conducted themselves properly, and carried something of that generation's restrained, almost ascetic sensibility. But if one looks a little further back, it becomes clear that they belonged to what might be called a transitional generation.

When they themselves were children, children in Chinese society had not yet come to occupy the cherished position they would later assume. Family planning policies had not yet taken hold, and both of my parents grew up with multiple siblings. Their childhood was shaped by a largely unsupervised environment, one much closer to the chattel logic I discussed earlier. As my grandparents used to say, in those years a child might not even survive to adulthood; if one could have children, one had more, because if even one of them eventually succeeded, the entire family might be lifted out of hardship. In this sense, their generation's reproductive logic resembled what biology would call "R-selection": success through the quantity of offspring rather than concentrated investment in any one child (Pianka, 1970). In the word "reproduction," the emphasis fell overwhelmingly on birth, not on nurture.

And yet when my parents themselves became parents, their child—that is, me—was expected, under the one-child policy, to be raised as a cherub: cherished, protected, and carefully cultivated. Here a conspicuous rupture appears. My parents had not themselves been raised under such conditions of concentrated care, and yet they were suddenly expected to provide exactly that for the next generation. In other words, they had to learn how to become parents without ever having been parented in that way themselves.

3.2 - Before the Story Begins

My parents were forty-two when I was born. Even now, that would be considered relatively late; at the time, it was late enough to draw genuine surprise. To this day, I do not really know what should count as early or late in relation to childbirth. I only know that, growing up, I heard older people mention it often enough that I absorbed it as a fact. My parents, by contrast, seemed acutely aware of it. Surrounded by younger, more visibly youthful parents, they often appeared awkward, even shy, about their age. They never liked telling me their exact birth years. Whenever I asked, they would respond evasively: the date on the ID card was probably inaccurate anyway; in those days people often reported themselves as older, because being older could help one enter a work unit earlier or enlist sooner, and perhaps my grandparents had intentionally added two or three years. Then, as if worried I might read too much into it, they would end with a joke: had they known, they should have changed it back, so they would not always seem so old.

But what interests me now is not really the question of their age itself. What interests me is another question: why did they have me so late? Or rather, why did they choose to become parents at that stage of life at all? Whenever I have asked them, they have never given me a clear

answer. It does not seem to be concealment. They simply do not know. Perhaps this is one of those experiences that cannot be fully narrated, even by the people who lived through it.

And so I find myself imagining—perhaps romantically or retrospectively—that as children once themselves, they may have resisted the momentum of their era, however briefly, and tried to preserve for themselves some fragment of time and space in which their own subjectivity could continue to breathe. Most likely this is only my projection. Yet it is precisely this projection that renders their story more complex, and more enigmatic, to me. When I place them in the position I described earlier—that of the inwardly driven child—I feel again that unnameable emotion I once felt while watching my father make a willow whistle: the strange sensation of being an already existing child who turns back to look at two parents who do not yet exist, meaning the two of them before they became parents. Because I am looking backward with hindsight, and with answers half-formed in advance, I paradoxically acquire a curious kind of priority.

3.3 - Birth, Separation and Return

In that slightly warped instant, as I experience it, the positions of child and parent seem briefly to reverse. Because I already exist, I am able to look back. They, though they lived before me, had not yet been born as my parents. Intergenerational relation, in this light, no longer appears as a simple one-way transmission. It looks more like a Möbius strip: something that folds, loops, reverses, and can be overwritten. In such a structure, who counts as child and who counts as parent is no longer determined solely by age or bloodline. It becomes, instead, a shifting position of perception.

This reminds me of texts I have read in which parents address children not yet born: they write letters to them, tell them about the world, project hopes onto them, and express love before

the child has even arrived. Reading such texts, I realized for the first time that dialogue does not need to occur within the same moment in time. Someone not yet in existence can still be loved in advance, imagined in advance, called into relation in advance. If that is so, then perhaps the reverse is also possible: perhaps a child who already exists can speak across time to parents who have not yet become parents.

This brings me to Margaret Mahler's theory of Separation-Individuation. Mahler's use of the word "hatching" is especially suggestive here, describing the gradual process by which self and other begin to separate (Mahler et al., 2008). If we return this idea to the experience of parenthood, then the birth of a child and the making of parents both mark a movement from fusion toward separation—and crucially, this movement occurs for both sides at once. The child moves from unborn to born; the mother moves from never having given birth to being postpartum; and the parents, in that same instant, are displaced from their prior position and pushed into an identity that did not previously exist: that of parent. Put more simply, children are born—but parents, too, are born. The difference is that the moment parents are born as parents is rarely witnessed, and even more rarely examined.

Chapter 4 - Research Questions

By this point, the original question of this research has already begun to change. At the outset, I was asking a relatively direct question: why do we resist becoming parents? The preceding discussion has, to some extent, already pointed toward an answer. Yet once the inquiry turns toward the figure of the parent, the question itself expands. What is at issue is no longer only resistance to childbearing, but the meaning, formation, and emotional structure of parenthood itself.

The project therefore crystallizes around three related questions. First, how might parenthood be understood beyond dominant narratives of self-sacrifice, identity loss, and rigid social expectation, and instead as a more relational and unstable process of becoming? Second, how might such a reframing allow younger people to imagine parenthood otherwise—not simply as fear, refusal, or the foreclosure of their own subjectivity? Third, how can artistic practice reopen parent-child relations as a more equal, responsive, and intergenerational field of relation?

Taken together, these questions do not simply ask whether parenthood should be accepted or refused. They ask how the parental role comes into being, how it is sustained by cultural and emotional structures, and whether it can be reimagined through another relational framework. In this sense, the project is concerned not only with the child's resistance to becoming a parent, but also with the possibility of approaching parents themselves as subjects who have been made, shaped, and displaced by parenthood.

In the practical work that follows, I attempt a reverse movement through time and causality. Through observation, co-presence, translation, simulation, and embodied making, I try to approach those two "parents" who, before my birth, did not yet exist.

Chapter 5 - Artistic Research and Methodological Directions

In artistic representations of parent-child relations, many works remain confined to a deeply private register of feeling—either celebratory or accusatory, intimate to the point of enclosure. Mary Kelly's landmark work Post-Partum Document (1973–1979) offers a striking alternative. Its force lies precisely in the almost austere distance with which it refuses that familiar frame.

Comprising 135 items, Post-Partum Document records six years of interaction between the artist and her infant son. Its most radical gesture is the near-total absence of conventional visual representation. There are no portraits of either mother or child. In their place appear traces and records: diaper stains, notations of first speech, scribbles, and Lacanian diagrams. What is presented, in other words, is not maternal intimacy as image, but motherhood as a process of inscription, observation, and interpretation.

What matters here is that Kelly's analytic, almost scientific mode of presentation is not meant to display maternal warmth. On the contrary, it strips away the emotional surface of an experience that is otherwise soft, contingent, and difficult to stabilize, in order to expose a longer structural process: the gradual production of identity itself. Through this cold perspective, what might otherwise remain a private and affective narrative is transformed into a public archive—legible, reproducible, and methodologically rigorous. This, for me, is what makes the work such an important point of reference.

My reason for turning to Kelly lies above all in her ability to move personal narrative beyond a merely affective register. She does not stop at describing what it feels like to be a mother; she examines how motherhood is produced within a symbolic order. This gives the work a crucial double structure: it is intimate, because it emerges from embodied co-presence, yet

detached, because it takes shape through the objectifying logic of the archive. That combination is especially important to my own project. In approaching the narrative between my parents and myself, such archival distance offers a way of resisting simplified moral judgement. More importantly, it makes it possible to approach “the parent” not only as an ethical role, but as an identity gradually made, organised, and inhabited.

Kelly’s work is therefore significant to me not only as an artistic reference, but also as a methodological precedent. From her practice, I derive five core movements that now structure my own project: observation, co-presence, translation, simulation, and embodied making. These are not merely technical procedures, but distinct ways of moving toward my parents’ experience. They involve reconstructing historical and cultural context through reading, conducting field-like observation through shared time, recording and simulating behaviours and rhythms of labour, and finally translating these accumulated experiences into installation. In this sense, artistic practice becomes not simply a means of representation, but a way of investigating how parenthood takes form.

Chapter 6 - Methodologies and Unfolding the Initial Design Framework

6.1 - Family Ethnography: Our Story

6.1.1 - Observation: Overview of Familial Ethnography

The project did not begin as an auto-ethnography. Its original methodological orientation was ethnographic, grounded in an attempt to understand how parenthood, intergenerational obligation, and family ethics are shaped within the broader social and cultural context of China.

As the research developed, however, it became increasingly clear to me that analysis at the level of "culture" alone could not fully sustain the project. The intimate, affective, and often inarticulate experiences that structure family life do not easily submit to macro-level explanation. On the contrary, broad cultural narratives can sometimes flatten the very complexity they seek to explain, making it harder rather than easier to account for the density of lived experience. It was for this reason that the methodology gradually shifted toward auto-ethnography.

To borrow Reed-Danahay's formulation, auto-ethnography may be understood as a "study of the self," but what makes it especially significant here is that the researcher is at once both investigator and subject. As the literature further suggests, auto-ethnography brings together ethnography, self-study, and narrative inquiry (Reed-Danahay, 1997) . For me, this shift meant that the research could no longer remain at the level of observing external cultural phenomena alone. It had to proceed through the sustained sorting of my own experience, my family relationships, and the narratives through which those relationships have been lived and remembered. Only by moving through those materials was it possible to approach layers of experience that resist direct articulation.

At the same time, I drew on a research pathway that combines the “common world” approach with a multi-method strategy, treating it as a framework that allows heterogeneous materials to enter the research together (Boddy et al., 2021). In this project, visual media, material objects, and narrative do not exist as separate domains. They are constantly entangled: photographs carry stories, textiles retain the sediment of labour and feeling, and hand-making itself becomes part of the research process. For that reason, the later stages of material gathering and analysis were not organized according to rigid distinctions between media. Instead, they developed through the juxtaposition and layering of multiple forms, gradually producing a more integrated understanding of family experience.

6.1.2 - Family Album asArchive

The first materials I gathered were photographs. More precisely, they were not photographs I could now hold in my hands while living far away in another country, but photographs I remembered having once held. One of my earliest memories is of a thick old family album in our home. As I grew older, it grew thicker too. Eventually, the plastic sleeves inside could no longer contain all the prints, and newer photographs were simply tucked loosely between the pages. Most of them were images of my own childhood, along with a number of photographs of my parents when they were young. There were very few printed after 2009. By then, photographs had largely ceased to be developed, even though digital images had become abundant. But digital files, for all their quantity, do not carry the same texture or sense of presence as photographs that can actually be held. For that reason, I chose to include these printed images in the archive, as a way of bringing a more tangible narrative quality into the final work.

Alongside the photographs of the three of us were even older family images. Some showed my grandparents, already old in the way I remember them. Others contained faces I could not

identify: older elders, younger adults, perhaps relatives from a generation further back, my grandparents in youth, or my parents' siblings. Some of these photographs were black and white, and all of them carried a strong historical atmosphere.

Among the photographs related to me, the largest number depict me as a small child in my parents' arms. The settings are mostly domestic or near-domestic spaces that still remain familiar to me now: inside the home, on patches of lawn, beside flowerbeds, in small parks, and in a few more distant places I can still recognize. The compositions repeat themselves with striking consistency. My parents are either standing or crouching, but always holding me. I remain at the centre, supported and displayed, while they appear around me as the ones who hold, steady, and protect.

What mattered even more to me, however, were the solo photographs of my mother and father taken before I was born. In my memory, they looked astonishingly young. These images feel especially important because, for a brief moment, they release my parents from the later identity of "parents" and allow me to glimpse a version ofthem I never actually knew: youthful, bright, and still unformed in my eyes. At the same time, they also function as evidence that such versions of them once truly existed.

One photograph of my mother remains especially vivid in my mind. She wore two long braids and held a white cat in her arms. The border of the photograph had been cut into a decorative wheat-ear pattern. I later called my mother to ask about it. She seemed to search for it for quite a while—or perhaps simply did not want to sort through that accumulation of old family relics—and eventually told me that it had been lost. I found that genuinely regrettable.

When I look back at these photographs, I cannot help imagining the process by which they were once selected: out of so many images, these were the ones chosen as worth printing and

preserving. They also retain the social habits of their time. Taking a photograph then still seemed to require a certain ceremony: one had to stand still, straighten one's clothes, arrange one's posture, compose one's face, and even make the cat look toward the camera before pressing the shutter. There is something stiff, awkward, and faintly comic in all this. And yet beneath that stiffness, one can still feel the sincerity of the emotions being recorded.

6.1.3 - Knitted Textiles as Archive

Alongside the visual and material traces that now exist for me only through memory, there are also objects that remain physically close at hand: the wool scarves and knitted hats my mother has made. In recent years, as she has grown older and gone out less, sewing and knitting have gradually become among the few everyday practices through which she passes time at home. They are not simply hobbies in the casual sense, but one of the few forms of routine activity she has continued to sustain.

What she makes most often are scarves and knitted hats. Perhaps, for her, they allow the act of passing time to take on a more tangible sense of purpose. Yet within our household these objects have limited practical use. She has made so many that there are far more than any of us can realistically wear, and most of them are eventually folded away and left unused. Even so, she continues with undiminished enthusiasm. From time to time, during our phone calls, she will tell me about a new stitch she has learned, or a particularly beautiful yarn she has found. Then she will ask, again, whether I might want another hat or another scarf, and what colours or styles I prefer. Over the years I have received many scarves from her, each different in colour, thickness, and form. I try to wear them in turn, but there are still more than I can make use of.

I chose to include these textiles in the archive for two reasons. First, they directly informed my decision to work with textile-based materials and techniques in the final installation. More

importantly, however, their significance lies not primarily in the finished objects themselves, but in the process of their making: the repetition of stitches, the time- intensive labour of the hand, and the quiet accumulation of work over time. To me, these qualities register something essential about parenthood. They suggest a form of giving that continues without any clearly defined endpoint—an ongoing, unceasing labour of devotion directed toward the child.

6.1.4 - Copied Sutras as Archive

As noted earlier, the Buddhist atmosphere within my family was never doctrinally strict so much as diffused, vernacular, and woven into everyday life. What mattered was less theological precision than the way certain gestures—copying scriptures, burning incense, praying for blessings, dedicating merit—became part of an ordinary moral and emotional vocabulary. It is within this broader familial atmosphere that one of my parents' most habitual forms of everyday leisure becomes legible: copying Buddhist scriptures by hand.

My father usually writes with a brush. My mother can do the same, but she finds the preparation of paper, felt, and ink too cumbersome, so she more often uses a pen. She has copied a great deal, and yet she almost always copies the same text—the Heart Sutra. She writes it over and over, filling notebook after notebook, so that at first glance they almost resemble compositions or diaries.

Once, by accident, I opened one of these notebooks while looking for a blank page on which to jot something down. In the lower right corner I found the words: "Dedicated to my precious daughter," followed by my name. I understood, more or less immediately, that this was a form of blessing—that she was directing the merit generated by copying the sutra toward me. And yet my first response was not gratitude. It was a kind of disbelief, almost irritation. The

gesture struck me as futile, even absurd. I remember thinking that it might be more useful for her simply to read a book, or come speak to me instead. I never said this aloud.

Only later did I begin to understand what that act might have meant. Since I entered university, my parents have almost stopped offering direct opinions about my studies or the conduct of my life. When I was younger, if I stayed up too late, they would urge me to sleep, sometimes even scold me. Now, even ifI remain awake until morning, my mother merely cooks porridge for me, makes tea, and tells me not to exhaust myself. It is as though, in their eyes, I have crossed a threshold: I am now old enough that they can no longer easily regulate me, and at the same time distant enough that they are no longer certain how to help. I know more than they do in some areas; I am occupied with things they regard as important but cannot fully understand. Perhaps this is why they turn toward quieter and more indirect forms of care. If I had never opened that notebook, I might never have known that such silent concern existed at all. My parents are, in this sense, profoundly reticent.

For that reason, I included these copied scriptures within the material archive of the project and treated them as part ofits auto-ethnographic framework. They offered not only a new set of motifs associated with Buddhism, but also further confirmation of something that had already begun to emerge elsewhere in the research: that repetition, duration, and accumulation are among the forms through which parenthood is expressed. Here, however, another quality becomes unmistakable. This care is not only repetitive. It is also indirect, deferred, and silent.

6.1.5 - A "Small Tree" as Archive

The final object I chose to include in this archive is a small tree. "Tree" may sound too grand for it—it is not especially tall or imposing—but it sits in a celadon pot and was brought home one day by my father. For him, this was slightly out of character. He has never been

someone who likes keeping living things indoors. In his view, it is already enough work simply to keep oneself in order; why add further obligations by tending plants that might make it inconvenient to be away from home for too long? So when he brought this one back, my mother and I were both a little surprised. At the same time, we found it lovely: a small, unexpected presence of living nature in the house. And so it stayed.

Over time, the tree grew, and my father eventually moved it into a larger pot. Once, I happened to remark on how beautifully it had been kept. He responded with a trace of unmistakable pride, saying that what had first attracted him was the glossy sheen of its leaves. Then the seller told him its name was “Fulutong”—a name that evokes blessing, good fortune, and prosperity—and that, too, made him like it even more. My mother immediately laughed and teased him: “Fulutong? You only bought it because of that last syllable, tong.” We all laughed with her.

She was not wrong. The final syllable of the plant’s name, tong, is the same as the final syllable of my own name, and refers to the phoenix tree. The preceding syllables, fulu, carry auspicious associations of happiness and prosperity in Chinese. Its botanical name is actually Polyscias fruticosa; “Fulutong” is simply a more felicitous commercial name, one that sounds easier to cherish. Even so, I cannot help imagining that at the moment of purchase my father was responding to precisely that overlap: the possibility of placing those auspicious wishes in front of my own name, as though this small tree might stand, in some displaced way, for my safety, happiness, and flourishing. Even now, it remains carefully kept on the windowsill in my parents’ living room, the very place where they sit most often.

It is difficult for me not to wonder what this arrangement means when I am far away in another country. The tree, sharing part of my name and standing almost as a quiet proxy for me,

remains close beside them. In caring for it, they seem also to be tending to feelings that have nowhere else to go: concern, attachment, longing. Perhaps, for them, this is not only an ordinary household habit. It is also a displaced form of expression, a way of sustaining emotional contact without having to speak it directly.

This object returns me once again to something that has surfaced elsewhere in this project: in my family, parental care often takes indirect and displaced forms. My parents are not people who speak easily or openly about emotion. To ask them to articulate parental love in explicit terms would be almost impossible. It is easier, perhaps, to let that feeling settle onto a tree that carries part of my name than to say it aloud. For that reason, I chose to include it as part of this auto-ethnographic record.

6.2 - Methodology in Practice

6.2.1 - Co-presence: Overview of Fieldwork

This section is grounded in a research trip I took with my parents during the summer of 2025. For my family, the journey also meant something more personal: it felt like the fulfilment of a long-delayed promise. Throughout my childhood, we had travelled together almost every winter and summer holiday. Those trips left some of my most vivid memories and shaped me through sensory, intellectual, and embodied experience. After I moved abroad for university, however, such journeys all but disappeared. The last time the three of us travelled together as a family must have been seven or eight years ago. Taking advantage of the summer break and my return to China, I planned a fifteen-day trip and used it as a field of observation through which I could encounter my parents again in an ordinary, shared state of co-presence.

Methodologically, the trip functioned almost like a single-blind experiment. Although it served the purposes of my research, my parents did not understand it as part of an observational study; to them, it was simply a journey of companionship and travel. There was also a practical reason for this. I had little doubt that, had I explicitly told them I wanted to bring Buddhist elements into my graduation project, they would have objected strongly—not out of hostility, but because they would have considered it irreverent toward the Buddha. So, at the end of June, we set out from Beijing and travelled southwest toward Shanxi, one of the major heartlands of Chinese Buddhism.

Shanxi was one of the earliest regions in which Buddhism took root after entering the Central Plains during the Eastern Jin. In terms of both the density of Buddhist sites and the richness of surviving material remains, it remains one of the most significant regions in China. Over the course of fifteen days, we drove through seven cities, moving continuously through mountains, streets, rain, temples, museums, and ancestral halls. I can no longer reconstruct the itinerary in full. What remains instead is a dense accumulation of impressions: twenty or thirty temples visited in near-constant rain, fragments of local architecture, ritual objects, museum displays, and a succession of visual and material details that I found myself compelled to record. Throughout the journey, I gathered photographs and notes—not only as documentation, but as a way of tracing the forms, textures, and spatial cues that would later shape the work.

What this period of co-presence did not produce was a set of neatly framed, research- driven conversations. I did not arrange formal interviews, nor did I obtain from my parents any clear verbal account that directly answered my questions. What I gained instead were things less easily captured in language: their habits while travelling, the ways they cared for one another and for me, and the small but repeated emotional and behavioural details that surfaced almost

incidentally. These did not yield straightforward conclusions, but they became crucial in shaping the atmosphere of the later work. While attending to their responses to religious and local cultural environments, I was also following the materials, forms, and spatial imaginaries that would continue to inform the project's formal development.

From this journey, four key threads eventually emerged: the mandala, the patchwork robe, the staged process of making Buddhist sculpture, and the museum display of roof tiles.

Each of these will be taken up in turn in the sections that follow, where I consider how they gradually entered the project as formal, material, and conceptual guides.

6.2.2 - Simulation as Method: Mandala

From the outset of this project, I was preoccupied with simulation as a method. I kept asking whether it might be possible, however briefly, to suspend my own position as a child and cross the generational boundaries of time and age in order to approach that part of my parents' experience which existed before they became "parents," or which still persists beneath the role of parenthood itself. For me, this was never simply a matter of empathy or perspective-taking. It was an attempt to release both "parent" and "child" from their fixed vertical positions and to place them, if only temporarily, on the same plane—so that I could ask how these identities come into being, how they endure, and how they leave traces within one another.

With this in mind, the first method that came to me was the sandtray—by which I mean the therapeutic sandtray used in psychotherapy, rather than an ordinary tray of sand. What drew me to it was not only its association with the projection of unconscious material, but also the way it allows difficult, still-forming emotional experience to be organised through arrangement, substitution, scene-making, and narrative. It offers, in other words, not a correct answer, but a

way of approaching latent relational structures: how a home is imagined, how one places oneself among kin, and how lines are unconsciously drawn between care, dependence, protection, and power.

As I continued thinking through this method, two related forms helped me understand why it mattered so much: the dollhouse and the mandala. The dollhouse is a space in which children rehearse adulthood. It miniaturises domesticity, role, and relation, allowing care, hierarchy, and intimacy to be tried out in play. The sandtray, by contrast, can be used by both children and adults. It enables hidden tensions and feelings to take physical form, sometimes before they can be fully articulated in language. The mandala, as I came to understand it during fieldwork, seemed unexpectedly close to both.

It was during that journey that I first encountered the mandala, which became one of the most important clues in the project. In religious practice, the mandala is likewise a structure of arrangement, organisation, and spatial construction through which imagination is held and activated. Compared to the therapeutic sandtray, however, its form is more overtly ritualistic and symbolic. The field note and visual record below mark the point at which my thinking began to shift.

At first, I did not know what this device—sealed inside a crystal case and resembling a model fortress—actually was. I was only attracted by its name: Tan Cheng (“坛城”）—a small city for the performance of ritual. Towers and circular platforms, layered one upon another and decorated with gold leaf, jewels, coral, agate, and turquoise, formed a dense axisymmetric structure; everywhere stood tiny human figures no larger than a fingertip. The central axis rose level by level until it reached a parasol canopy at the very top, beneath which sat a Buddha so

small as to be almost invisible, as if receiving the prostrations and worship of the figures below (Figure. 1).

Forgive the irreverence, but at the time I did not understand its specific function. I only felt that it resembled the most extravagant, innocent, and devout dollhouse I could imagine—as though its maker were arranging an ideal Western Pure Land, placing onto it one by one the figures, buildings, and ornaments of their faith, and thereby constructing a complete and sacred cosmic order.

Later I learned that it was a mandala, related to the same cosmological form found in thangka painting and sand mandalas, except that this was a three-dimensional version. It is used for visualisation—a practice somewhere between meditation and image-thinking. By imagining themselves within this sacred palace, practitioners move step by step toward the Buddha at its centre, carrying out an inward pilgrimage. At that moment, I suddenly realised that this, too, was a form of sand-play.

The mandala, the dollhouse, and the sandtray are not identical in form, but they share a crucial logic. All three involve the imaginative construction of a world through careful placement and organisation. All three produce a space that can be entered—through play, projection, or contemplation. What they make possible is not simply representation, but rehearsal: the testing of relations, positions, desires, and meanings within a constructed world.

This was precisely what made the mandala so useful for my project. Traditionally, it is a meditative or spiritual structure, a world one enters imaginatively in order to approach sacred figures or deeper meanings. But when I place it alongside the dollhouse and the therapeutic sandtray, it becomes something broader: a way of constructing an imagined space that can be inhabited by both adults and children. What matters is not whether one enters it as a child, a

parent, or simply as a human being. What matters is that one imagines a world, arranges it intentionally, and in doing so begins to perceive the hidden structure of one's own relations within it.

There is, however, an important difference. The mandala is not primarily meant to be interpreted from the outside; it is meant to be entered and experienced from within. Its significance lies in enabling those who engage with it to construct themselves, immerse themselves, and, in some sense, complete themselves within it. In this respect, it offered me a way of understanding simulation not merely as imitation, but as a mode of relational entry.

Rather than standing outside my parents' experience and simply analysing it, I began to imagine a form through which I might enter, rehearse, and spatially reconstruct a world of intergenerational relation. In that sense, the mandala also suggested a provisional space in which parent and child might be released from their fixed vertical order and encountered on the same plane.

Figure 1

Tan Cheng (“坛城”): A Three-Dimensional Mandala

Note. Photograph of a mandala enclosed in a glass case. Captured by the author on June 27, 2025.

6.2.3 - Incompleteness and the Making of Form

The second clue emerged from a museum display I encountered locally, one that explained the process by which Buddhist sculptures are made (Figure. 2). The display consisted of a series

of models showing the traditional stages of construction: a crude inner armature is first assembled from bamboo, straw, wooden strips, and clay; only then does the figure gradually take shape through repeated filling, modeling, drying, coloring, and ornamentation, until it assumes the sacred exterior suitable for display within a temple hall.

Figure 2

Armature of a Buddhist Statue

Note. Photograph of the process of how Buddhist sculptures are made. 1/5. Captured by the author on June 27, 2025.

What this process returned me to was the recurring keyword of the project: the unfinished. Here, “unfinishedness” does not simply signify lack, absence, or defect. It suggests something still in the process of becoming. A form that is later regarded as complete, stable, and authoritative is in fact built upon an inner structure that was once provisional, fragile, and unresolved. For me, this bears a subtle but powerful resemblance to the formation of the parental role. Adults do not necessarily enter parenthood only once they have achieved full maturity or a finished sense of self. On the contrary, becoming a parent may itself be understood as a process of gradual shaping, repeated covering-over, and social recognition. And even then, the role may remain incomplete—and perhaps that is not a failure at all. More than that, one might ask whether such a process ever truly reaches completion in the first place.

In this sense, the museum diagram of Buddhist statue-making offered me an important metaphor. It not only clarified the conceptual role of incompleteness within the project, but also began to shape my imagination of the final work at the level of material, form, and detail.

6.2.4 - The Patchwork Robe as Metaphor

The third clue emerged through the patchwork robe. My first encounter with it was not as an actual textile garment, but as a motif sculpted onto Buddhist figures and articulated through glaze, colour, and pattern. Although it lacked the softness of real cloth, its visual logic immediately drew me in: a garment composed of many distinct fragments, held together through colour, ornament, and repetition (Figure. 3). Only later, through further reading, did I begin to understand its origin and significance. The word na means to mend or patch, while baina suggests something repeatedly repaired, something made through many acts of stitching. As the English phrase patchwork robe implies, it refers to a monastic robe assembled from many separate pieces of

cloth. Its lineage can be traced back to Buddhist practices of making robes from discarded fabric scraps—a tradition shaped by frugality and the careful use of material things (Zhang & Ji, 2021).

Figure 3

Bainayi (百纳衣): Patchwork Robe on a Sculpture

Note. Photograph of the sculpted patchwork robe. Captured by the author on June 29, 2025.

What mattered to me, however, was not only the robe's form, but the set of meanings and metaphors it carried. In the temple narratives I encountered, the patchwork robe was often linked to offering, vow-fulfilment, and the accumulation of merit. Pieces of fabric in different colours, materials, and sizes are donated by different devotees, each carrying its own intention, prayer, and emotional investment. These fragments are then stitched into a larger whole, eventually becoming a complete garment offered to a highly respected monk. In this sense, the robe takes shape through the gathering of many partial contributions into a single body. That structure immediately brought me back to the repetitive forms of labour and accumulated devotion I had already observed in my parents' lives: knitting, sewing, copying sutras, and other such practices. These acts do not belong to the same religious framework as the patchwork robe, yet they share an important logic. Through handwork, care, time, and intention are gradually deposited into material form until labour itself becomes object.

By coincidence, I encountered a related image again later during a summer school program in Canada. In a class on plant-dye techniques, I noticed an older woman who was also attending as a learner. What first caught my attention was the intricate textile she was sewing: a surface made from many hexagonal pieces of fabric, each with its own pattern (Figure. 4). As we spoke, I learned that she was making a patchwork quilt for her daughter's newborn child. When I told her how much I admired the work and asked whether I might photograph it for documentation, she kindly agreed, and even shared some of the paper templates she used in constructing the quilt. After I later modified and adapted them, those templates became one of the key tools in my own making process.

At the time, I did not immediately recognise the quiet resonance between this encounter and the patchwork robe I had seen earlier. Looking back now, however, they seem to point toward the

same gesture: through the slow accumulation, arrangement, and stitching together of small pieces of fabric, people sew themselves into a larger narrative of devotion.

Figure 4

Hexagonal Patchwork Component

Note. Photograph of the Hexagon Quilt Work from Haliburton summer school, by an artist unknown to the author. Captured by the author on August 14, 2025.

6.2.5 - Blessing as Norm

The final clue I want to discuss did not arise from a single object so much as from a bodily response I experienced while looking. During the trip, I visited several very small folk craft exhibition spaces. Unlike formal museums, they did not follow any strict institutional order of display. They felt more like local accumulations of vernacular craft: paper-cutting, sculpture, textile work, and other forms of folk making distributed across a series of small rooms. The space that stayed with me most strongly was one filled with decorative architectural fragments associated with local traditional building practices—roof beams, eave ornaments, roof-end tiles, woodcarvings, glazed elements—each densely covered with intricate motifs such as peonies, phoenixes, lions, and goldfish.

A loudspeaker in the room played a looping explanation of the exhibits. What it repeated, over and over, was the "auspicious meaning" of each decorative pattern: many children and many blessings, wealth and prosperity, harmony between husband and wife, fullness, good fortune, completion. One sentence in particular has stayed with me ever since, partly because of how absolute it sounded: "Every pattern we make has a meaning, and every meaning must be beautiful." There was nothing obviously wrong with this explanation, and yet it produced in me an unexpectedly strong discomfort. Every ornament, it seemed, was required to carry a clear and affirmative meaning, and all those meanings were ultimately absorbed into one vast image of happiness—an image unified in advance, though never fully known or actually lived by anyone. The symbolism felt overdetermined. Decorations that might otherwise have remained open to sensation or ambiguity had been saturated with pre-assigned values, leaving almost no room for hesitation, drift, or alternative reading. In that moment, these so-called auspicious symbols began

to seem less like blessings than like quiet instructions about what kind of happiness one ought to believe in.

For reasons I could not immediately explain, this also recalled Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's installation *If I Died* (Figure. 5). In that work, an elder's imagination of the afterlife is transformed into a vividly staged scene: their mother believed that good people go to heaven, and hoped that after death she might become an angel, holding a flower garland and flying toward paradise in the company of birds and fishes, figures that evoke abundance and worldly plenty (Sun & Peng, 2013).

Figure 5

If I Died, by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu

Note. Documentation of the work *If I Died*, by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. 2013. Retrieved from sunyuanpengyu.com.

To me, that work seemed to share a hidden logic with the imagery of fulfillment embedded in these folk motifs. In the Chinese context, happiness that can actually be attained in life often feels partial, fragile, and conditional. By contrast, happiness that is allowed to expand without limit is frequently displaced elsewhere—to a realm beyond immediate life.

It is therefore postponed into the future: after marriage, after children, after filial duty has been fulfilled, after success has been achieved. Or else it is deferred even further, onto the other shore: heaven, rebirth, the Pure Land. At that point, “happiness” ceases to be a tangible mode of lived experience and becomes instead an overly full, and therefore strangely unreal, fiction.

Precisely because it remains unreachable—because no one can fully inhabit it or narrate it from within—it is imagined as especially light, abundant, and beautiful. But that same distance also produces estrangement. And once this logic encounters death, it can even become unsettling, or faintly terrifying.

This experience led me to reconsider cultural terms such as “happiness” and “fulfillment,” which are so widely accepted that they often pass unquestioned. They appear warm, benign, even celebratory. Yet they may also function, in deeply ordinary ways, as instruments that discipline what people are expected to desire, pursue, and accept. In this form, particular ideals of family, reproduction, and completeness are packaged as self-evident answers. For me, this overdetermined visual language bears an indirect but persistent relation to the questions of parenthood and family ethics running throughout the project. Many social expectations around parents, children, and the “happy family” may be transmitted precisely in this guise: appearing as blessing, while operating as norm.

6.3 - From Poetic Image to Spatial Construction

In this section, the material I want to examine is a poem I once encountered by chance on social media. What first drew me to it was not the poem itself, but the exaggerated packaging often used online to attract attention: the sort of deliberately unhinged title, full of emotional excess and collapsing logic, that young people now sometimes refer to as crazy literature. Yet when I opened the post, there was almost no explanation at all—only a untitled modern Chinese poem. It was addressed to an elderly grandfather, and what it confronted was the figure of an old man whose body and mind were both entering a state of regression, almost as though he were returning to childhood. What made the poem unforgettable for me was that it gave shape to a scene that had already existed, indistinctly, somewhere in my mind, but had never before become fully clear. Since the original poem was written in Chinese, I translated it here into a form that loosely follows the logic of English rhyme. Some nuances may therefore have shifted, or been lost, in the process. Even so, I tried to preserve as much of the original atmosphere and cadence as possible, and I remain broadly satisfied with the result. What follows is the passage that mattered most to me:

Children

my clearest ones,

my old children, bright as glass—

when spring river water starts to stir and pass,

when the dead skin of smoke and cloud

falls from your bodies at last,

then you will be born again

in the first white innocence of dawn.

You will swim far off

to the wild grasslands beyond,

where no one asks your age,

your name,

what you have done,

or where you belong.

There, the spring wind

is just beginning its song.

There, fruit is almost ripe,

the boughs almost strong.

There, waste does not matter.

There, nothing is wrong.

Go on then—

feast, squander, revel long.

(Unknown author, "Children", RedNote, accessed 2025)

What matters here is not only the surface image of the elderly becoming children again, but the dreamlike space the poem constructs: the wild grassland. In this imagined place, no one needs to declare a name, an age, or an identity. People are no longer fixed within the roles

assigned to them by social life, but enter a wider world in a lighter, more transparent, less burdened state. It seems almost like an afterlife, and yet it is not the same as a traditional Pure Land. It feels neither overtly sorrowful nor overtly joyful. In a certain sense, this gave concrete form to the "suspended space" I had earlier been trying to imagine through the mandala.

It allowed me to picture a field in which those long enclosed within the roles of adult, parent, or elder might briefly loosen their attachment to those identities and return to a more original, more open, and less prescribed mode of being. This, again, resonated clearly with the problem of identity rotation that has recurred throughout the project. If one of the earlier conclusions ofthe research was that parents are not naturally complete as parents—that they are continually pushed into that role while still carrying unfinished, vulnerable, and childlike parts of themselves—then this poem suggested something further: identity is not simply linear. It does not move only from child to adult to parent. It can also loosen, return, stop, leap, or temporarily cease to function altogether. For me, the scene constructed by the poem therefore became a space either before a role has fully arrived, or after it has begun to fall away. It is a space into which I want to place them, and myself as well.

It is in this sense that the poem became a crucial point in the project's movement from language and image toward final form. Its metaphoric writing allowed me to gather together feelings that had previously remained scattered across different moments of fieldwork, and to shape them into an imagined place: ideal, unreal, perhaps impossible, yet nonetheless necessary. This place belongs neither entirely to this world nor clearly to another. It is not governed by obligation or order, but nor does it resemble any conventional religious destination. In my imagination, it is simply a place of suspension—still, quiet, and yet not empty.

At this point, the image also began to connect back to my earlier thinking about the mandala. In a sense, this is what my imagined mandala would look like. At the same time, I do not want to reproduce that scene directly. What I want instead is to evoke a similar sense of clarity and lightness through an analogous spatial logic and metaphorical structure. For that reason, the poem became one of the key materials through which I developed visual semiotics and metaphor construction within the project.

It is worth noting that the poem currently remains, in a sense, unclaimed. As I mentioned above, I first encountered it on social media and copied it into my notes so that I could return to it more easily. But when I recently tried to locate the original post and identify the author, I found that the saved record had disappeared. The most likely explanation is that the original post was deleted. For now, then, I can only refer to it, with appropriate academic caution, as a poem circulating on social media by an unknown author, while continuing to search for its original source so that a fuller citation may be added in a later version.

Chapter 7 - Studio Process

7.1 - Preliminary Plan: Toward Final Installation

This section outlines a preliminary plan for the final studio making process. At this stage, the work continues to develop from the imagined mandala-space evoked earlier in the project, especially the one suggested by the poem and its image of the wild grassland.

When I first began thinking about that image, what appeared in my mind almost immediately was a small calf standing in the grass. I decided to follow that instinctive picture and allow it to structure the larger scenario of the work. In this sense, the process remains consistent with the methods I have discussed earlier in relation to the sand tray and the mandala: both rely on intuitive placement and arrangement in order to generate a scene. The installation will therefore be built around two primary elements—the calf and the grassland—which will also become the two central components of the making process.

The first concerns the making of the calf as a figure. This element will carry many of the concepts that have recurred throughout the project: the inner drive of childlikeness, the unfinished role, the instability of identity, and a condition that is at once non-human and partially released from social definition. Materially, I intend to draw on the early construction logic of Buddhist sculpture by working with natural materials such as bamboo strips, bamboo splints, and wood. Through weaving, I will establish only the basic outline of the form, rather than closing it into a fully realistic or complete animal body. This allows the figure to remain in a state of incompletion—still forming, not yet resolved, and not yet fixed within a single identity.

The second component is the making of the wild grassland. This part will draw more heavily on the project's textile-based threads: fabric, patchwork, the logic of the robe, quilting,

and soft material construction. My intention is to sew together pieces of cloth by hand, producing a textile ground that recalls the structure of a patchwork surface or patchwork robe, and to use that field as a metaphorical substitute for the grassland. Its function is not to imitate grass literally, but to reconstruct a spatial surface through the language of textiles—a surface shaped by repetition, slow accumulation, and the sedimentation of relationship. Like the labour from which it emerges, it should carry a sense of extension without a clear endpoint.

For me, the making of these two elements also carries methodological significance.

Whether weaving bamboo or stitching together fabric, both processes require me to enter into a mode of repetitive manual labour. This is important precisely because repetition, slowness, and care-inflected work are among the forms of labour I have repeatedly identified in relation to my parents. In that sense, the making process is not merely a matter of execution. It also becomes a practice through which my own position begins to shift slightly. By engaging in slow, repetitive, and care-oriented labour, I attempt—however partially—to move toward their perspective, and to encounter parenthood not simply as a social role but as a lived and materially structured experience.

Once these two parts are brought into the same space, a central relationship begins to emerge. The unfinished and not-yet-fixed figure of life will stand upon a ground slowly stitched into being through repetitive labour—a ground that, for me, comes to function as a kind of material proof of parental identity. That relation carries both emotional force and conceptual tension, even if it is ultimately rendered in a deliberately blurred and metaphorical way.

Formally, the result will indeed come close to an installation work. Even so, I continue to understand its operation as closely connected to discursive design. The work is not intended to solve a functional problem, nor simply to externalize private feeling. Instead, through the

organization of material, form, latent narrative, and spatial relation, it seeks to make perceptible —and public—a proposition about parenthood, the rotation of identity, and the loosening of fixed roles. What it offers the viewer is not a single conclusion, but a pathway of perception: one through which they may begin to rethink their relationship with their parents, their own position as both child and possible parent, and the meanings and links that bind these roles together.

7.2 - Part One: The Figure of Cow

Before turning to the making process itself, I need to explain why I ultimately chose the figure of the cow. As noted earlier, this was not an arbitrary formal decision, but one that gradually emerged through a process of dehumanizing translation. It arose from the image of the wild grassland to which I have repeatedly returned: an imagined space that feels open, remote, and yet full of vitality and wandering life. Within such a field, the human body began to seem too determinate—too socialized, too easily fixed within preassigned roles. Only by releasing the figure from recognizably human form could it begin to loosen itself from the weight of identities such as "parent," "elder," or "adult," and enter a mode of being that felt lighter, more primary, and more open to renewed perception.

For me, however, the choice of this figure also had a deeper source. Because my thinking throughout the project was shaped by a mandala-like imagination of space, the form never existed in my mind merely as an abstract animal body. From the beginning, it carried—however faintly—the image of my parents. As I have discussed earlier, within the Buddhist-inflected relational imagination familiar to me, parent-child relations are not always understood as a one-directional or one-time structure of birth and care. They are imagined instead as a chain of relations that may extend across past and future lives, turning, reversing, and exchanging

positions. In that sense, when I began to conceive this figure, I was also responding to a sentence my father once said to me: that perhaps in another life, they might become my children.

Seen from this perspective, the making of this figure ceased to be simply a matter of giving shape to an animal. In my mind, it became something closer to the making of a body for them. I was trying to construct, within this space, a form in which those two people who exist in reality under the enduring identity of "parents" might be temporarily placed, sheltered, and seen again. This was neither their original body nor the body compressed by role and responsibility within human society, but a gentler and more open embodiment produced through translation. In this sense, the figure does more than symbolize. It functions almost as a summons within space: an attempt to let them reappear in another state of life, and to give visible form, within this constructed field, to a relationship that is difficult to articulate in ordinary life.

This turn toward the animal also has to do with the way I experience my parents. They have always been profoundly inarticulate people. Many emotions—especially parental love—are never spoken directly; indeed, the more directly one asks, the less likely one is to receive a direct answer. Their feelings do not manifest primarily through language, but through habitual actions, silent labour, and a quiet form of presence. It was precisely this strong non-verbal quality that gradually led me to imagine them in terms closer to animal existence. This is not because the animal signifies lack or inferiority, but because a mode of being grounded in silence, restraint, bodily action, and labour feels, to me, closer to the way their love is actually lived.

Why, then, a cow, rather than some other animal? There are several reasons. The first is intuitive. Once the image of the wild grassland had taken shape in my thinking, a free, grass-eating animal seemed the most natural inhabitant ofthat field. A cow standing on open ground carries a particular quietness—gentle, unhurried, unregulated—which suited the kind of

existence I wanted to evoke: a life not yet fully captured by social function, one still able simply to remain and to move. At the same time, I did not want the animal to appear fully grown. I wanted it to retain the form of a calf. Within agricultural and productive culture, the adult cow is immediately bound to labour, reproduction, utility, and bodily value. The calf, by contrast, has not yet entered those clearly assigned functions. It remains closer to the "child" of the poem: not yet responsible, not yet burdened, still able simply to exist.

At the same time, the cow carries a denser cultural resonance in the Chinese context. It is often associated with diligence, endurance, silence, and a willingness to labour without complaint. Yet it is also a creature used to the fullest possible extent: while living, it ploughs, carries, and produces; after death, skin, bone, horn, and flesh are all put to use. In this sense, the cow is a deeply contradictory figure. It can signify purity, labour, and even a kind of sacred patience, while also being inseparable from histories of use, exhaustion, and sacrifice. For that very reason, it felt right to me. On the one hand, it retains the gentleness and openness I needed. On the other, it faintly echoes the condition I recognize in my parents: silent work, continual expenditure of the self, and a life rarely articulated in its own terms.

The way the cow is made also matters. In formal terms, this structure extends the logic of an earlier project in which I built a horse-like installation from woven bamboo to evoke uncertainty and a state between presence and absence. The cow is related to that earlier work, but I changed the material approach significantly. Instead of the softer, more pliable rod-like material I had used before, I chose harder peeled bamboo splints that resist shaping and must be bent forcefully, repeatedly, and with great care. Such bamboo is commonly used in Chinese folk crafts such as lanterns and baskets. Unlike more flexible materials, it cannot simply be formed and

fixed at once. It demands slowness, repetition, and pressure before it will take on the necessary curvature without breaking.

This labour-intensive method became part of the work's meaning. Each strip of bamboo had to be bent and re-bent by hand, held in position, and gradually assembled into relation with the others. At each joint, I inserted coarse cloth to increase friction and resistance, then secured the structure with glue and repeated wire binding. In this single work alone, such twisting and fastening were repeated thousands of times (Figure. 6). The cow, then, did not emerge through a quick act of sculptural shaping. It came into being slowly, through mechanical, exhausting, repetitive labour. For me, this making process forms a direct resonance with the repetitive labour of parenthood discussed earlier in the project. The cow does not only symbolize the parents; its very mode of construction compels me into a bodily condition akin to care, maintenance, and sustained work.

Figure 6

Close-Up of the Bamboo Weaving and Joining Method

Note. Photograph of the bamboo-splint-woven cow's head. Captured by the author on January 27, 2026.

However, this resonance did not remain, for me, at the level of abstract analogy. The making process itself was intensely tedious, painful, and at times genuinely depleting.

Repeatedly bending bamboo strips, securing the frame, twisting copper wire, and working through each individual joint—none of these actions involved any real ease. More often than not, they produced only a kind of mechanical exhaustion. And yet, each time I reminded myself that I was not merely constructing the skeleton of an animal, but trying to make a body for my parents

—a body through which they might reappear within this space, be placed there, and be gently held—the quality of that labour began to change. It took on a different emotional charge.

For that reason, I found it increasingly difficult to treat the figure casually during the making process. On the contrary, I felt almost instinctively compelled to make it steadier, more complete, and closer to the form that, in my mind, might truly be able to hold them. The feeling is difficult to name precisely, but it clearly carried elements of gratitude, tenderness, and even something like a caregiving impulse: as though only by repeatedly adjusting it, reinforcing it, and bringing it closer to completion could I begin to answer, in some limited way, what they had once given me. In this sense, the making process became a genuinely embodied experience. My body was not simply manipulating materials from the outside; through repetition, fatigue, and persistence, it was gradually drawn into a condition closer to care, maintenance, and protection.

It is for this reason, too, that even though the work already consists of hundreds of bamboo strips and roughly thirty metres of copper wire, it still remains, for me, open to further refinement. This is not simply because it is “not yet good enough” in any technical sense. Rather, it is because, at the level of inner experience, the impulse to keep repairing it, caring for it, and drawing it toward a greater wholeness has never fully come to rest.

One final development proved especially important. When the bamboo cow had reached a semi-finished stage, I showed it to my parents. Their response surprised me. To them, it looked strikingly similar to the paper animals used in Chinese funerary culture. This was not part of my original intention, and yet their reading opened another significant interpretive path. In Chinese funerary practice, paper figures—animals, people, domestic objects—serve as substitutes sent into another world, there to accompany, serve, or make up for what reality could not provide.

Their interpretation unexpectedly connected the work back to the imagined other world that has surfaced elsewhere in the project, as well as to the desire to continue living beyond the limits of ordinary reality. In this light, the cow ceased to be only a free creature standing in grass. It also acquired a suspended quality between this world and another: at once a life not yet fully assigned to a role, and a being already released from one, sent onward toward some quieter elsewhere.

7.3 - Part Two: The Patchwork

Corresponding to the cow figure, the second major component of the work—the wild grassland—is constructed primarily through sewing and patchwork. At the level of method, this part draws quite directly on the logic of the patchwork robe: a whole is built through the repeated stitching, joining, and accumulation of many small textile fragments. At the same time, I also incorporated the quilting technique I had previously learned from an older classmate during summer school. Working from the paper templates she gave me, I developed a unit structure that sits somewhere between a diamond and a four-pointed star and used this as the basic module for the grassland.

Each unit is composed of two layers. The lower layer is a stiffer interfacing fabric, while the upper layer is made from a lighter decorative textile. As a result, each fragment already contains a doubled sense of color and materiality, producing a more layered visual surface even before the pieces are joined. I initially attempted to make these units entirely by hand but quickly realized that this method demanded too much time and physical energy. Only after switching to a sewing machine did the pace improve slightly. Even then, the work remained slow: on average, I could complete no more than about ten pieces a day. To build a wild grassland large enough to occupy

the intended space, I need to produce hundreds of these units and then connect them corner to corner into a continuously expanding surface.

The material logic of the work is equally important. For the lower layer, I mainly use plain-weave cotton dyed with natural pigments. The colors include plant-based dyes I first encountered during my summer study experience: the bright yellow and deep green of sumac, the dark and pale blues of indigo, and the reds and pinks produced through beetroot dyeing.

Some later additions in other colors were made from purchased fabric, but I still tried, as far as possible, to remain within the broader range of naturally dyed textiles. For me, this lower layer functions as a quiet structural ground. It is modest, subdued, and closer to a surface shaped slowly by plant matter and time.

The upper layer, by contrast, carries a very different symbolic weight. Here I chose brocade, silk satin, and in part pongee as the primary materials. This was not simply a decorative decision. These fabrics already carry within them an entire system of auspicious imagery specific to the Chinese cultural context. Lions, butterflies, gourds, pomegranates, and other woven motifs are almost always assigned explicit meanings: many blessings, many descendants, wealth, reunion, and so on. In this sense, they return directly to the discomfort I described earlier in the folk exhibition hall. These visually rich and beautiful surfaces are never merely ornamental; they also repeat, in an overly determined way, fictional visions of happiness, fulfillment, and auspiciousness. By deliberately incorporating such textiles into the work, I wanted this grassland to cease being simply a natural field and become instead a ground stitched together from cultural desire, auspicious imagery, and socially prescribed ideals ofthe good life.

At first glance, this choice of materials might seem to introduce a tension. If I am trying to construct a space that is sacred, expansive, and somehow akin to a Pure Land, do these dazzling

patterns—with their almost fluorescent intensity—and these motifs of phoenixes, qilin, and other exuberant signs not disrupt that atmosphere? For me, the answer is precisely no. Their luxuriance is not external to the sacredness of this space; it is part of what makes that sacredness imaginable.

As I noted earlier, within the Chinese cultural context, motifs that appear excessively blissful, prosperous, auspicious, and flourishing—so perfect that they verge on unreality—do not really belong to ordinary life itself. They operate instead as projected wish-forms, attached to an idealized realm beyond the limitations of reality. Their visual excess derives precisely from the fact that they cannot be easily possessed in everyday life. They function as imaginative compensation for a more ultimate form of beauty, abundance, and completeness. In this sense, such images already carry something close to the quality of a “next life”: not necessarily an afterlife in any strict doctrinal sense, but a space imagined as more plentiful, more fulfilled, and nearer to ideality than the world as it is.

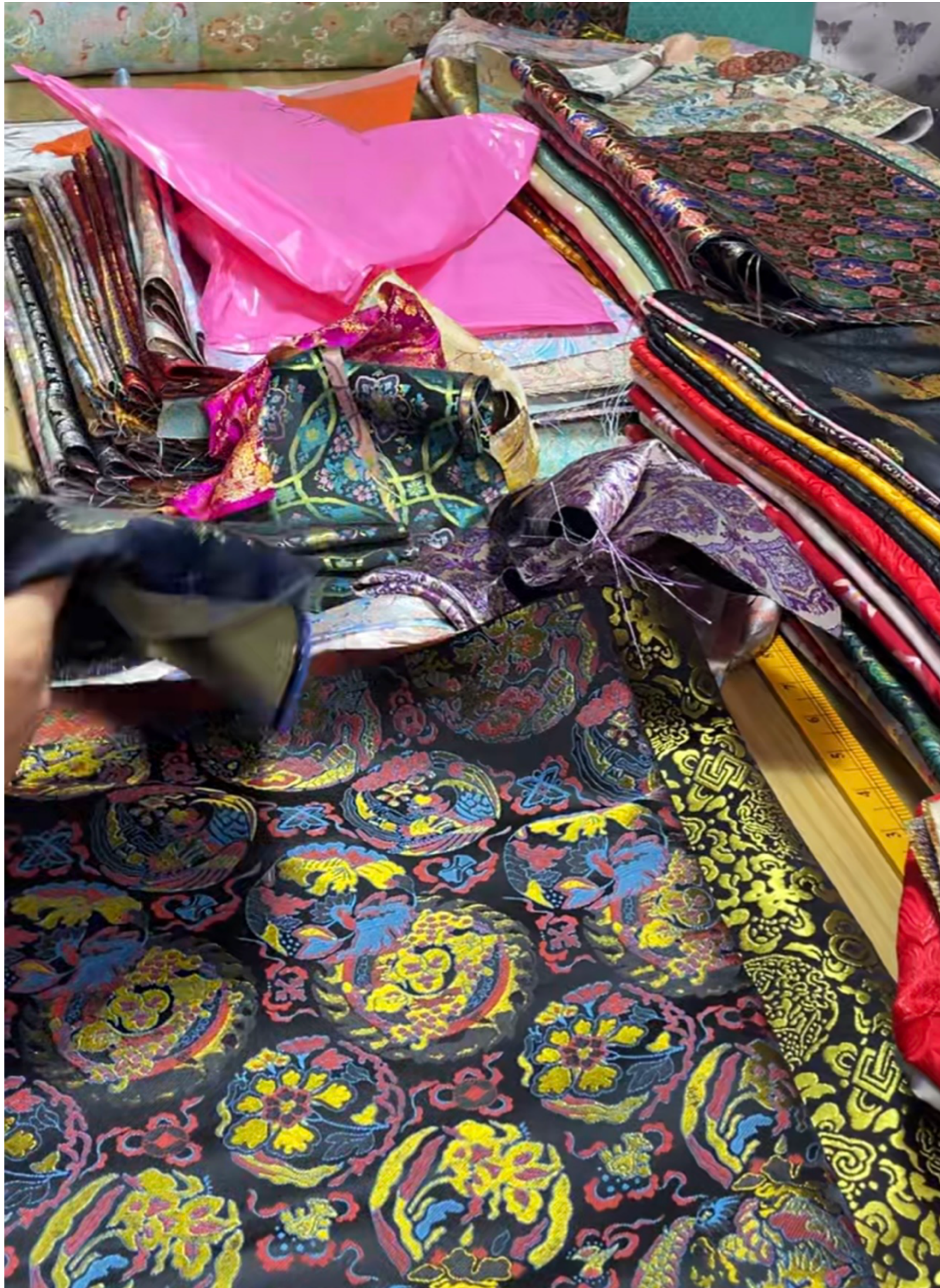
I do not want to define the space of this work explicitly as a “next life,” nor as a world beyond death. And yet I do want those who inhabit it to be surrounded, within this constructed and touchable field, by the most vivid, lush, and abundant things I can imagine—even if those things can only appear in the form of flattened pattern and material metaphor. Precisely because what can be given in ordinary life is always limited, delayed, and marked by forms of incompletion that cannot be fully resolved, I feel an even stronger impulse, within this made space, to place into it all those almost excessive forms of beauty.

Seen in this way, my attitude toward the patchwork grassland is actually very close to the dollhouse logic I discussed earlier. When people decorate a dollhouse, they often want instinctively to make that miniature world as beautiful as possible, filling it with everything fine and desirable they can imagine, so that those who “live” there may inhabit a world that is

carefully prepared and abundantly provided for. The construction of this grassland carries a similar impulse. I want to place into it, as fully as possible, those forms of beauty that cannot always be given, or fully realized, in ordinary life. At the same time, this impulse overlaps with a familiar psychology within the Chinese context of raising children: the desire to give them "the best," to surround them with the most beautiful, auspicious, and abundant things, is never only an aesthetic preference. It is also a logic of care. For that reason, these seemingly over-ornate, almost unreal patterns become, within the work, a vision stitched into space: an ideal ground pieced together from blessing, projection, cultural desire, and the impulse to care.

Figure 7

Brocade Fabrics in the Tailoring Shop



Note. Photograph of my grandmother's tailoring shop, and textiles. Captured by author's family member, on February 15, 2026.

The provenance of these materials deepens their connection to family experience. A considerable portion of the Song brocade and brocade satin I use was not purchased specifically for the project but came from my grandmother's long-running tailoring shop (Fig. 7). Located in a semi-rural, not especially developed area, the shop had for years made padded jackets, children's clothing, and other everyday garments for residents, and in the process accumulated large quantities of patterned traditional fabrics and cutting remnants. Similar textiles had also appeared in my own childhood clothing: a thick purple brocade jacket, for example, or the red satin outerwear I wore during New Year celebrations. In preparing the work, I selected and sorted a batch of these older fabrics from my grandmother, then combined them with scraps I had collected myself over time. In this way, the patchwork grassland gathers not only the visual grammar of Chinese textile tradition, but also a more concrete chain of familial labour: cloth once used to make garments worn on the body is now being stitched back into the work in another form.

Technically, the process begins by using templates to cut one large and one small square in proportion. Fabrics of different colors are then placed face to face, fixed together, and shaped with sewing adhesive and heat so that four curved symmetrical lines gradually produce a form somewhere between a star and a flower. Each unit is then stitched around its edges and pressed flat. Eventually, these modules will be joined corner to corner into a larger expanding field.

Visually, the resulting pattern carries a continuity and ornamentally not unlike the repeating logic of the traditional Chinese coin motif (Figure. 8).

For me, however, the significance of this part lies not only in its visual result, but in the mode of labour it demands. Cutting, gluing, ironing, stitching, and finally connecting the units at scale all require me, once again, to enter a form of slow, repetitive, and physically demanding

handwork. In that sense, the grassland is not simply "laid out." It is accumulated through countless repeated gestures and minute decisions. That very process forms a direct resonance with the parental labour, structures of care, and emotional sedimentation that have run throughout this project.

Figure 8

Patchwork Components

Note. Photograph of the patchwork pieces I made. Captured by the author on February 19, 2026.

Chapter 8 - Exhibition Planning and Documentation

8.1 - Spatial Configuration of the exhibition space

For the final installation, *My Baby Little Calfy*, I was assigned a typical white-cube gallery: a narrow rectangular room measuring approximately four meters by eight, with the entrance positioned at the center of one of its longer sides. Multiple beams across the ceiling also made suspension possible. Although such a space appears neutral and open, its proportions and existing structure required much more careful negotiation than that neutrality might initially suggest.

Because the work was conceived as a single integrated environment rather than a set of dispersed components, placing it in the middle of the room would have made it feel abrupt and isolated, as though it had simply been dropped into an empty container. Positioning it at either end would have produced the opposite problem, leaving too much of the surrounding space vacant and weakening the work's atmospheric and spatial coherence.

It was in response to these conditions that I introduced suspended semi-translucent gauze curtains into the gallery. The choice of material itself came after repeated comparison. I considered heavier, more opaque fabrics, as well as lighter ones that were nearly transparent, before settling on this textile. Its surface was neither blank nor neutral: it carried a regular rhythm of cut rectangular forms, overlaid with embroidered circular floral motifs. What made it feel right to me was not only its ability to create a soft and partial veil, but also its faint resemblance to certain domestic fabrics from my family home in China—especially the old-fashioned cloth cover draped over the washing machine, an object both mundane and quietly intimate. For that reason, the curtains also carried a subtle relation to family space, allowing the enclosing structure they created to take on a texture that was, in a small but significant way, closer to that of home.

Figure 9

Distant View: My Baby Little Calfy

Note. Documentation of the installation as a whole from the “entrance”. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

These curtains reshaped the viewer's movement through the room, dividing the otherwise open space into two zones: an outer passage and an inner enclosure. The outer area functioned as a narrow path of circulation, while the interior formed an oval chamber with both an entrance and an exit. Within this enclosed space, I placed the bamboo-woven structure together with the sewn textile elements, allowing the installation to acquire a stronger sense of privacy, interiority, and protection (Figure. 9).

At the same time, this intervention responded to the fact that the gallery itself was far from ideal. Although it offered useful structural features such as ceiling beams for suspension, its overall condition was rather rough. Both walls and floor were visibly marked and easily soiled, and the floor seemed to share the same painted material logic as the walls, making dust, stains, and accumulated traces of use especially difficult to ignore. This stood in sharp conflict with the cleansed, almost sacred atmosphere I hoped to construct. For that reason, I repainted nearly the entire room—from floor to walls and upward toward the ceiling—to reduce the sense of wear, disorder, and residue already embedded in the site.

The room also contained several intrusive technical remnants from its function as an Experimental Media Space: wall-mounted speakers, projection equipment, a large black metal box, exposed pipes, and other functional devices that felt visually abrupt and fundamentally at odds with the environment I wanted to create. In a multimedia installation, such elements might have been entirely appropriate. In my work, however, they produced a constant visual interference, repeatedly returning the viewer to the room's identity as a technical display site rather than allowing it to be experienced as a more self-contained world.

In this sense, the curtains did more than guide circulation, generate an inside and an outside, or soften the visual atmosphere. They also performed the practical work of concealment and

filtering. By reorganizing the viewer's field of vision, they screened out the gallery's more discordant and cluttered elements and redirected attention toward the enclosed interior. In other words, the curtains were not an ornamental addition, but a way of editing the space itself. They allowed me to transform an imperfect white cube into something closer to a habitat, while also enabling the viewer, upon entering, to withdraw temporarily from the technical and functional reality of the exhibition room and attend more fully to the inner world that had been enclosed, protected, and restructured there.

This arrangement was not made only to direct circulation or refine the conditions of viewing. More fundamentally, throughout both the making of the work and its installation, I approached it less as a static object than as something closer to a living presence. For that reason, I did not want simply to place it in the gallery as an exhibited thing. I wanted instead to construct a setting that could function more like a habitat: a space capable of holding its presence, responding to its condition, and perhaps even offering it a sense of ease. The suspended curtains, the enclosing spatial structure, and the controlled manner of entry all emerged from this way of thinking.

8.2 - The Placement of the Bamboo-Woven Cow Figure

Within the overall spatial composition, the bamboo-woven cow functioned as the central visual focus of the installation. I positioned it at some distance from the intended entrance and suspended it in mid-air with transparent fishing line, at roughly the height of the viewer's gaze (Figure. 10). This placement not only reinforced its presence within the space, but also allowed viewers, once they entered the inner area, to encounter it in a more immediate and frontal way.

Figure 10

Front View: My Baby Little Calfy

Note. Documentation of the installation as a whole from the front. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

Although the cow was constructed with movable joints and could, in theory, assume a range of different poses, I ultimately fixed it in a single state for the exhibition. That state, however, was not determined in advance. It emerged only through repeated adjustment during installation. At first, the legs remained fully connected, and I experimented with several possibilities: suspending the entire body in the air or allowing the figure to stand on the ground while retaining only a few lines of suspension so that it seemed gently lifted rather than fully grounded. After comparing these options, I chose to preserve the connection between the torso and the upper legs, suspending this main structure while allowing the lower legs and hooves to rest separately on the ground. The result is the current condition, in which the upper body remains raised while the lower body still belongs to the floor.

This decision was never merely formal. It was inseparable from the way I wanted the figure to meet the viewer. For me, the cow was not meant to function simply as an object of display, but to encounter the entering viewer at something closer to eye level. Although it has no clearly defined eyes, I still wanted it to produce a frontal relation, one in which the two stand facing one another. The initial problem was that, when the structure remained fully connected and stood on its own, it was slightly too low. Standing beside it, I could feel clearly that it fell beneath my own line of sight, which made it read more as an exhibited object than as a figure genuinely sharing the same plane as my body.

This ran directly against the way I understood it. As I have discussed earlier, the cow carries, in some sense, the image of my parents. At the same time, it is not something I wished to look down upon, dominate, or explain from above. It needed to occupy a position more equal to my own. For that reason, I wanted this condition of being “on the same plane” to exist not only conceptually, but physically. To achieve that, I made further adjustments. I inserted two small

plinths beneath the front hooves, slightly lifting the front of the body. I also separated the legs at their midpoint, allowing the lower sections to stand independently on the ground while the upper sections could be raised further by the suspension system. This gave both height and posture greater flexibility, bringing the figure closer to the condition I wanted: tentative, approaching, and not yet fully settled.

As a result, when viewers moved past the gauze curtains and entered the enclosed space, what they encountered was not a distant or static object, but something closer to a face-to-face meeting. Although the cow has no articulated eyes, it still seems, in some sense, to return the viewer's gaze (Figure. 9). More precisely, what takes shape here is not literal eye contact, but a direct frontal encounter. Precisely because the figure lacks a fully defined ocular structure, the exchange never resolves into a stable or fully anthropomorphic relation. Instead, it preserves a degree of indeterminacy: the figure appears to approach the viewer while remaining impossible to fully confirm or definitively grasp (Figure. 11).

The decision not to reconnect the legs completely intensified this effect. The main body is suspended in the air by transparent fishing line, while the four lower legs and hooves rest on the ground as separate elements, without forming a fully closed or stable structure. This not only allowed me to adjust the hooves individually—subtly shifting the impression between standing, hesitating, and approaching—but also made its mode of presence more ambiguous. The cow no longer reads simply as a realistic animal, nor merely as a fabricated object. Instead, it occupies an unstable zone between living creature, material thing, and absence (Figure. 12).

Figure 11

Close-Up of the Calf Figure

Note. Documentation of the installation, detail of the front of the cow. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

Figure 12

Close-Up of the Calf's Leg

Note. Documentation: Detail view of the bamboo-woven cow's legs. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

This suspension between presence and non-presence also echoes the metaphors ofthe "afterlife" and "Neverland" discussed earlier in the thesis. The cow appears at once like a trace of life recalled into visibility and like a form not yet fully arrived in this world. It is present, but never entirely anchored in the space it inhabits. It is through precisely this ambiguity and incompletion that the figure becomes the emotional and symbolic centre of the installation.

8.3 - The Sewn Element as a Symbolic World-Model

In contrast to the bamboo-woven cow suspended in mid-air, the sewn element was installed on the floor, unfolding in a flatter and more approachable manner and introducing another spatial register within the work (Figure. 13). It was composed of numerous four-pointed, star-shaped fabric units, each joined to the next at the corners so that they gradually extended into a continuous pattern. This method of connection gave the structure something of the appearance of a puzzle, while also producing a gridded yet organic sense of expansion, as though a planar system were slowly opening outward.

Figure 13

Patchwork Components: My Baby Little Calfy

Note. Documentation: The sewn component positioned in front of the bamboo-woven cow. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

When gathered, the varied silk patterns on these fabric pieces formed a flat and abstract symbolic model of the universe. Landscapes, human figures, animals, vegetation, mountains, and rivers did not appear as part of a single coherent narrative. Instead, they emerged in fragmentary and symbolic form, each occupying a different section of the pattern, as though separate corners of an ideal world had been compressed, folded, and placed alongside one another within the same visual structure. It resembled at once a map, a partially unreadable star chart, and a kind of terrain model, suggesting through its flatness a world that could be imagined, explored, and rearranged (Figure. 14).

Figure 14

Detail of the Patchwork Components: Patterns

Note. Documentation: Close-up view of the sewn component. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

To help the fabric arrangement maintain its overall shape during installation, I placed a circular layer of light-colored patterned sheer fabric beneath it as a base. This sheer layer served a practical purpose by supporting the structure and preventing the individual pieces from shifting or becoming distorted, but it also played a visual role by giving the assembled surface a softer and more unified ground. For me, this pale circular base also subtly evoked the texture of white sand in therapeutic sand-play, giving this part of the installation a faint sandtray-like quality. As a result, this part of the installation no longer appeared like a set of textile fragments laid out on the floor, but more like a gently held field: a surface capable of hosting small, unfolding narratives.

Figure 15

Detail of the Patchwork Components: Cat-Themed Scenario

Note. Documentation: Close-up view of the sewn component, miniature scenario of a small cat model looking toward a rabbit motif in the fabric pattern. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

Across this flat arrangement, I placed small beads and miniature animal figures to generate a series of vivid micro-scenarios. These did not aim to reproduce reality directly but instead introduced a playful and imaginative form of mimetic staging: A small cat appeared to be gazing at a rabbit woven into the silk pattern (Figure. 15); a deer seemed to run across a fabric piece marked by hill-like imagery; a crab appeared to clasp a three-dimensional white bead……

Through these small but deliberate placements, the otherwise abstract pattern was activated as a miniature landscape charged with narrative suggestion, inviting closer looking and imaginative association.

Figure 16

Audience Engagement with the Patchwork Components

Note. Documentation: Viewer interaction with the sewn pieces and beads. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

The presence of these miniature elements also meant that this section took on a more participatory character. Viewers could bend down to observe it closely and, within a limited range, could also touch, move, and rearrange some of the small objects, thereby entering the temporary construction of this world in a light yet direct way (Figure. 16). In this sense, the sewn component also echoed the functions of the mandala and sand-play discussed earlier in the thesis. It operated both as a symbolic world-model and as a spatial interface through which emotional projection, positional experimentation, and the arrangement of relationships could take place. Through this arrangement, the sewn element was no longer merely the ground surrounding the

bamboo-woven figure but became another important point of entry into the work: a gentler, denser imaginative field that encouraged viewers to pause, observe, and engage (Figure. 17).

Figure 17

Top View of the Patchwork Components

Note. Documentation: Overall view of the sewn component. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

Chapter 9 - Feedback and Reflection

9.1 - Feedback on the Suspended Gauze Curtains

During the exhibition, the suspended gauze curtains generated the most polarized responses. For some viewers, they diminished the work's visual impact and made the installation harder to grasp. For others, it was precisely this semi-translucent layer of concealment that produced a mode of looking that felt dreamlike, delayed, and even faintly organic. To me, that divergence was itself significant, because it revealed the curtains' double function within the work: they were at once atmosphere-builders and regulators of the viewing relation.

The more critical responses tended to focus on two points. First, the curtains made the work feel somewhat confusing and reduced the clarity of the central figure. For some viewers, this enclosing structure did not intensify the cow's presence so much as obstruct it, making the figure harder to read and more difficult to approach. Second, when seen from outside, the circular arrangement of curtains created a palpable sense of resistance, as though the work itself were withholding entry. From the threshold, one could not immediately see into the space but only catch blurred suggestions of forms behind the fabric, giving the installation an atmosphere that felt not fully open and, in some sense, faintly exclusionary.

From the perspective of conventional exhibition logic, such reactions are understandable. Whether as sculpture or installation, a work is often expected to be viewable from a relatively open and coherent vantage point, so that its structure, details, and spatial relations can be apprehended more or less clearly. If the central figure is partially enclosed or positioned in a way that makes the viewer hesitate to move closer, it can easily appear constrained, as though pushed backward and prevented from fully unfolding itself. In that sense, the curtains did indeed impose a certain limit on visibility.

For me, however, that limitation was precisely part of their value. In designing the installation, I was not thinking only about how to arrange a gallery for viewers, but about how to construct a habitat for the cow. As I have discussed earlier, I understood the bamboo-woven cow not simply as a made object, but as something closer to a living presence. For that reason, the space was never conceived as one governed entirely by human-centered looking. It was, first, creature-centered: a space meant to surround, support, and protect the figure—a space in which it might be held, rather than fully exposed.

Seen in this light, the viewers' sense that the cow was "difficult to approach" in some ways confirmed the validity of that spatial judgment. Because the figure appeared at a scale close to that of the human body, viewers did not automatically assume that they could move around it without hesitation, pass freely behind it, or enter every surrounding area at will. Since the cow's body was positioned close to the curtains and the area behind it was not directly opened, the arrangement naturally produced uncertainty about whether one should lift the curtain and continue further. To me, that hesitation did not indicate failure. It registered a bodily caution that felt appropriate: when confronted with a figure nearly equal to one's own height, and one that still retains something of an animal's scale, one does not casually step into the space behind it. In this respect, the cow ceased to function simply as an artwork available for unrestricted viewing and control and came closer to a genuine creature.

In fact, I had not neglected the viewer's path through the work. The suspended curtains formed an oval enclosure with two openings: a larger entrance facing the cow's front, and a smaller exit near its rear (Fig. 18). My intention was that viewers would enter through the larger opening and leave through the smaller one. In this way, upon turning back after exiting, they might briefly see the space from the cow's side of the encounter. In other words, I wanted to

offer a moment in which the viewer would not only look at the cow but also experience—however briefly—the enclosed and protective interior from the cow's position. For that reason, I did not want the installation to be fully transparent or immediately legible from the outset. It was meant to be entered, explored, and discovered gradually.

Figure 18

Rear-Side View: My Baby Little Calfy

Note. Documentation: Overview of the installation from the rear. Photograph by Feifan Yang on April 10, 2026.

For similar reasons, the sense of being "kept out" while standing outside the installation did not feel entirely negative to me. If the scene to which the cow belonged was not a farm, not a display case, but an open never-land—a grassland belonging to the creature itself—then it should

not be wholly visible immediately from the doorway. Such immediate legibility would still imply a kind of visual dominance: the assumption that one has the right to see and possess it at once.

What I wanted, instead, was not to simply see it, but to find it. The viewer first encounters a ring of suspended curtains and only dimly senses that some presence exists within. Curiosity is stirred; one chooses to move inward; and only then, at a particular moment, does the figure appear face to face. Without the curtains, this sequence of discovery would not have taken shape, and the final moment of encounter—almost like eye contact—would have been fundamentally altered.

The curtains also produced another effect that I only fully recognized during installation: they reorganized light. Because the fabric was pale and semi-translucent, it did not merely absorb or block illumination. Instead, it worked almost like a soft reflective membrane, gathering light and returning it toward the central oval area. This reminded me of the white facial framing used in Kathakali performance in India, which traditionally helps reflect and concentrate light so that the performer's face remains visible even under dim conditions. In a comparable way, the curtains in my installation gently concentrated light within the central zone, giving the cow's body and the patchwork floor a stronger sense of visibility and presence. This was not a function I had fully anticipated, but it became a significant gain.

At the same time, the curtains generated a different mode of looking that some viewers described as dreamlike. Compared with the frontal encounter inside the enclosure, viewing from outside produced a delayed and softened visual condition. One could not see the interior clearly, but only catch partial glimpses ofthe cow's hooves, the patchwork ground, shadows of people speaking, or even hear muted voices through the gauze. Under these conditions, the space no longer appeared fully real, nor like a scene completely exposed and explained, but rather like

something slowly emerging from obscurity, as in a dream. This mattered to me because it meant that the installation could be not only entered but also contemplated from a distance. It produced not only encounter, but imagination.

Seen in this way, the polarized responses to the curtains do not necessarily cancel one another out. On the contrary, taken together they reveal the curtains' actual function within the work. They did introduce concealment, resistance, and partial inaccessibility—but it was precisely through these qualities that the installation acquired its interiority, boundary, concentration of light, and dreamlike atmosphere. Through concealment, orientation, scale, and the organization of movement, it retained a measure of distance, hesitation, and a mode of viewing that could never be fully possessed. At the same time, I also came to recognize that, while this spatial judgment remained highly consistent with the "creature-centered" logic of the work, it did in practice compress some of the openness that sculpture or installation might otherwise be expected to offer. In a cleaner and more ideal exhibition space—one less burdened by technical interference—this enclosing structure might have been handled with greater subtlety, preserving its protectiveness and dreamlike quality without making the viewer's first approach quite so difficult.

9.2 - Feedback on the Vertical Separation within the Installation

Another recurring strand of feedback concerned the height relationship between the two main components of the installation. Some viewers remarked that the bamboo-woven cow and the patchwork ground each functioned well on their own, yet the connection between them did not always feel immediately legible. When standing before the cow, viewers encountered its head almost at eye level, which produced a face-to-face relation. The patchwork, by contrast, was laid entirely on the floor. Anyone wishing to examine its patterns closely, identify its miniature

elements, or touch and move the beads and small objects often had to bend down, squat, or even sit directly on the ground. This feedback was entirely reasonable. The difference in height did indeed produce two distinct modes of viewing, and at first glance it could make the relation between the two parts seem less direct.

Looking back, I can see that this response does reveal a limitation in how I considered the scale of interaction. If accessibility alone had been the guiding concern, a floor-based element intended for gentle interaction might have been raised or otherwise arranged so that the body could enter into it more easily. At the same time, however, I gradually came to understand that this apparent inconvenience also disclosed a deeper logic within the work. As viewers moved through the installation, they were not simply shifting from one component to another. They were also, almost unconsciously, undergoing a change in posture. And that bodily shift, in turn, enacted—at the level of lived experience—the reversible and recursive relation between parent and child that I have discussed earlier in the thesis.

When viewers stood before the cow, they remained roughly at the same height as the figure. At that moment, although the structure was not small in scale, it nevertheless came closer to the condition of something calf-like: without horns, with a rounded belly, and carrying an air of curiosity, shyness, and tentative approach. In facing it, the viewer was not only a spectator but could more easily slip into a bodily position closer to that of a caregiver. The cow appeared smaller, more vulnerable, and more in need of being looked after.

When viewers then turned toward the patchwork on the ground and bent down, squatted, or sat to enter its details, their bodily condition shifted accordingly. Their height was deliberately lowered, and their posture came closer to that of a child not yet fully upright: crouched near the floor, absorbed in handling small things. At the same time, the patchwork, which from a standing

perspective had read simply as “ground,” began to transform into a world- model that could be viewed, touched, entered, and rearranged. The mountains, flowers, birds, animals, human figures, beads, and miniature objects no longer appeared merely as decorative surface, but as a compressed and flattened universe whose playful quality emerged only once the body had descended toward it. In other words, when the viewer crouched down, the relation subtly rotated. The cow, which had previously seemed smaller and more fragile, could now more easily take on a protective quality—as though watching over, enclosing, and even sheltering the person on the ground who was interacting with this miniature world.

This oscillation of posture is especially significant to me. It suggests that within the installation, “parent” and “child” are not fixed roles permanently assigned to one image or another, but positions that may be temporarily occupied while viewing and interaction. When standing, the viewer moves closer to the position of the caregiver; when crouching down and entering the patchwork world, the viewer returns to a more childlike condition. In this sense, although the difference in height does create a degree of formal separation, it also reveals—through bodily experience—the intergenerational relation I have repeatedly explored elsewhere in the project: parents and children are not absolutely vertical or stable identities, but positions capable of rotation, reversal, and momentary coexistence within the same person.

The patchwork element also mattered to me for another reason. It was never only a ground surface; over the course of the exhibition, it gradually took on something closer to a dialogic function. Here, “dialogue” does not primarily depend on language, but refers instead to a shared and playful form of resonance. In my understanding, the patchwork was always a symbolic model of the universe: its surface gathers landscapes, flowers, birds, animals, human figures, and other worldly elements into a single compressed plane. When I explained to viewers that the

beads and miniature objects could be lightly handled, rearranged, or even played with— like marbles moving across the surface—I noticed that both younger and older viewers tended, almost instinctively, to assume strikingly similar postures. They crouched down, leaned in, touched the fabric, moved the beads, and experimented with miniature scenarios. In that moment, age, identity, and social role all seemed to loosen briefly; everyone returned, in some sense, to a posture closer to that of a child.

What moves me most about this interaction is precisely its lack of fixed purpose. People were not touching these elements to complete a task. They were engaging instead in a form of nearly purposeless play, a non-utilitarian way of entering relation with the world. As Erikson suggests earlier in the thesis, this points toward a more primary and irreducible vital impulse: the impulse to explore, to play, and to interact with the world without a clearly defined purpose (Erikson, 2014). In this sense, the patchwork ground is not simply the lower level of the installation, but a field in which viewers may briefly release their own inner child. And it is also in this sense that dialogue takes place here: not through explicit verbal exchange, but through the shared lowering of the body, the shared entry into play, and the shared inhabiting of a compressed little universe, producing a silent form of resonance.

Seen from this perspective, the feedback on the height difference did more than point out a weakness in the relation between the two parts of the installation. It also helped me see more clearly the potential carried by the structure itself. Certainly, it exposed a formal limitation: between the upper encounter and the lower interaction, there remained a lack of a more legible mediating layer. Yet it also revealed something I had not fully recognised during the making process—namely, that it is precisely through these shifts in height and posture that viewers are able, within a single space, to move briefly between caregiver and child, protector and protected.

This bodily experience of rotation may be one of the points at which the work comes closest to intergenerational reversal itself.

9.3 - Reflection: Limitations and Contributions

9.3.1 - Limitations

Taken as a whole, the project still has several clear limitations at its current stage. The most immediate is one of scale. In particular, the patchwork ground remains too limited in extent. In my original conception, this stitched "grassland" was meant to spread much further through the space, approaching something closer to an actual field and ideally covering at least half the room. Although the current version already consists of more than one hundred patchwork units, the area it occupies is still relatively modest. In future iterations, I hope to continue producing additional units so that this element can expand more fully into an environment—something closer to a surface, a terrain, or even a landscape.

A second limitation is that the conceptual framework of the work does not readily become legible through the installation alone. Upon entering the space, viewers tend first to register its beauty, its atmosphere, or its natural and slightly enigmatic spatial effect. Without further explanation, however, they do not necessarily perceive that the work is engaging not only pastoral imagery, but also deeper structures such as the sandtray, the dollhouse, and a reimagined intergenerational field. Many viewers understandably read the installation through associations with farms, grasslands, or natural scenery. Such readings are visually reasonable, but they do not automatically lead toward the emotional and conceptual logic that matters most to me. More often, it is only after conversation that aspects related to parenthood, relational reversal, and the inner child begin to come into view.

For this reason, I have been considering whether future versions of the work should make that framework more visible. At present, however, I do not think this is a problem that can be resolved in any simple way. Greater clarity might indeed help more viewers enter the work more quickly. At the same time, this project remains highly inward and deeply personal. In that sense, the fact that it cannot be immediately understood by everyone may simply be part ofits present condition. For now, I do not see this ambiguity as an entirely negative flaw. Rather, I understand it as a sign that the work has not yet fully unfolded—that it still contains something that can only emerge gradually, through lingering, conversation, and repeated looking.

9.3.2 - Contributions

Even with the limitations discussed above, I still believe that this project makes a relatively clear contribution. At the conceptual level, it challenges a traditional and deeply rooted logic of family structure: a parent-child order grounded in hierarchy, sacrifice, and fixed distributions of role. By rethinking parenthood as a fluid, reversible, and perceptually unstable process of becoming, the project seeks to loosen the existing framework in which “parent” and “child” are treated as vertical identities.

At the level of emotion and relation, I hope the project offers people like myself—and others of my generation—a different way of understanding our parents, as well as a different way of imagining the possibility of future parenthood. It does not simply encourage viewers to criticize their parents, nor does it frame resistance to parenthood in purely negative terms.

Rather, it attempts to open a new relational imagination: one that makes it possible to perceive those parts of our parents that remain not yet fully covered by the identity of “parent,” before, within, and beyond their becoming of it; and one that allows parenthood itself to be imagined as something more than self-sacrifice, identity loss, and fixed obligation.

For me, however, the project's most important contribution may ultimately lie in its power to provoke. It does not aim to deliver a closed answer, but to make another way of thinking possible. If someone encounters this work and later finds themselves thinking differently about their parents, about a future child, or even simply looking at their parents more carefully, listening to them differently, or speaking to them in another tone, then the work has already done something meaningful. For me, that is not a minor effect. It is the point. If the project can open even a small shift in perception—if it can create a new angle, a new emotional possibility, or a moment in which the given structure of family relation no longer feels entirely fixed—then it has already begun to matter.

Conclusion

This study asks not only why many contemporary young people resist becoming parents, but also how the figure of the parent is imagined, demanded, and brought into being. By tracing the intersecting pressures of reproduction, child-centered discourse, intensive parenting, subcultural narrative, and intergenerational ethics, it argues that parenthood becomes unsettling not simply because it entails responsibility, labour, or material burden, but because it is often tied to a deeper compression of subjectivity. Adults are expected to yield, sustain, and gradually recede, until they function less as selves than as the supporting structure for another life.

At the same time, this research suggests that parents are never simply complete as "parents," just as children are never merely passive recipients of care. Both remain unfinished, and both retain traces of desire, playfulness, vulnerability, and childlikeness. From this perspective, the parent- child relation cannot be reduced to a stable hierarchy or a one-way ethical transmission. It is better understood as a shifting field of relation, shaped by reversal, return, misrecognition, and misalignment. Once this complexity is overlooked, "the parent" is easily flattened into a functional role, while the parent's own process of becoming remains largely invisible.

Within the Chinese context in particular, this project further argues that parent-child relations are often structured by a profound asymmetry between care and return. They are shaped by forms of love, indebtedness, and obligation that cannot be fully answered or completed within a single lifetime. For this reason, the study calls not only for continued concern for children, but also for renewed attention to those who bear parental functions. If adults are repeatedly expected to yield without their subjective experience, psychological structure, and process of becoming being taken seriously, then parenthood risks being inherited merely as a moral burden, rather

than lived as a relation that can be understood, negotiated, and reimagined. The question, then, is not only how children should be loved, but also whether those who become parents have themselves been seen, understood, and allowed to remain unfinished.

In this sense, the project does not seek simply to affirm or reject parenthood. Rather, it attempts to loosen the figure of the parent from a role that has become overly familiar, morally overdetermined, and socially rigid. It also seeks to create, within a relation that may never be fully reciprocal or fully resolved, a space in which such incompleteness can be held more gently, and in which both parents and children may become more emotionally legible to one another.

Perhaps only when we recognize that parents, too, come into being—rather than arriving fully formed—can parent-child relations be imagined as something more fluid, more responsive, and more open to being seen anew.

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