

# TO RETRIEVE A POSSIBLE HEIRLOOM

SUPPORTING WRITTEN THESIS DOCUMENT

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# ABSTRACT

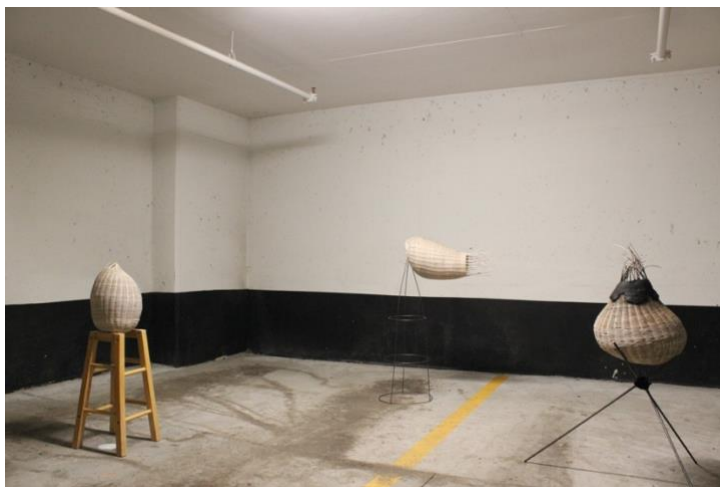
*To retrieve a possible heirloom* investigates the familial inter-generational loss of knowledge, the process of retrieving the loss and creating the heirloom. Starting with the basket, a skill slowly dwindling away in my father's village intrigued me to start learning. A basket, a carrier of narratives and ideas has exposed ways of learning traditions through digital media and unorthodox methods of sourcing materials. In continuation with the carrier concept of narratives, the decision to create a deer instead of a utilitarian, functional object was more important in supporting the legacy of my maternal great-grandfather. His way of devising innovation is to "*synthesize the East and West, blending the old and new.*" As his great-granddaughter, my views on innovation are not looking towards the West, but more towards technology. With our contrasting perspectives, comes collaboration. Knowing there are many archives, images and articles regarding my family's lineage can create more possibilities in our legacy.

# INTRO

An heirloom, a memento to keep a legacy alive. Passed down from one generation to another through words and objects, these are the gestures that provide us historical archives to carry knowledge. Nevertheless, immigration, mass – industrialization, colonialism, hierarchal structures, and technological advancement has disrupted many individuals' abilities to pass down certain legacies and narratives. A product of my ancestors, this has left me to wonder how does one retrieve the loss of inter-generational knowledge and create a possible heirloom.

It all started with a basket, a carrier of not only items but a carrier of narratives, culture, and systems bestowed from our predecessors. *"Before you know it, the men and women in the wild oat patch and their kids and etc, are all part of it, have been all pressed into the service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his."* (Le Guin, 150). The carrier is an entanglement of narratives, both good and messy with no heroes, or victories. It is a system of story-telling, the passing of inter-generational knowledge that provides our culture, landscape, history, and identity. The skill of basketry tells a familial story, a craft practice slowly diminishing in the hands of our contemporary world. In the scope of the modern era and COVID-19, the ways of retrieving knowledge contrast against the traditions of learning from an elder. Thus, with no weavers in my immediate family have alluded me towards digital platforms such as Vimeo, watching *My Father's Tools*; simultaneously creating and learning.

*Baskets Blighted (Fig.1)* is a triptych variation of hand-made baskets that conveys the loss of inter-generational knowledge and narratives. The increase of global migration and mass production has resulted in basketry slowly dwindling away in my father's hometown of Shouning, Fujian. A village that is slowly transforming into a bustling town. As the advancement of technology increases, labor-intensive practices such as basketry are less appealing to obtain. Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer indicates how members of the community believe that the prices of birch bark baskets should justify the craft and labour intrinsic to their making, "People think it's just basket weaving, but 80 percent of the work comes long before you weave. With finding the tree, pounding and pulling [at the birch bark] and all, you barely make minimum wage." This spoke to me, as the whole process of me learning this craft tradition of sourcing nature was an irony. Purchasing ready-made reed from *Commonwealth Baskets* and other ready-made objects juxtaposes the concept of using your resources to create materials.



*Fig 1. Baskets Blighted, Kristi Chen, (Round + Flat Reed, Tomato Supporter, Beech Stool, Silicone, Incense Mix (Coal Powder, Cinnamon, Gum Arabic, Canola Oil), Bluetooth Speaker, Metal Rods, Black Nylon Cord) 21" x 8" x 44", 8.5" x 9" x 35", 38" x 38" x 39" 2020*

# RESEARCH PROCESS

The forms of the baskets created in *Basket Blighted* are different from traditional baskets seen in my father's village. Laufer mentions that there is a big difference between baskets in Northern China compared to baskets in the South. The southern regions had more gilded decorations with crafted handles for storing delicate plants like flowers, tea leaves, etc (fig 2). The northern regions of China have rugged terrain, therefore the baskets are more durable for harsher climate and agricultural work (Laufer, 4). My father's village is located in the regions of Southern China, specifically Fujian province. Viewing the images of baskets hand-crafted from the Fujian province allowed me to see the origins of traditional structures, forms and shapes. This drove me to think about what would these baskets look like in the age of digital media, synthetics and hybridity.



*Fig 2. Left, old cylindrical basket, twined and checkered woven (bamboo strips, bamboo), 8" x 7", Putian, Fujian Province*

*Right, Madame Ku of Li Men, twilled (bamboo strips), 11" x 11", Putian, Fujian Province*

*Basket Blighted* is not intended to master or mimic the works of Fujian-style baskets. The installation touches upon the conversation of my making process using ancestral and digital archives. Using silicone, incense paste and a tomato planter, unorthodox methods of combining basketry with other materials was a way of communicating the complexity of identity, systems and landscape we see in our present world. The forms in *Basket Blighted* are organic, non-functional and gourd-like in contrast to the traditional utilitarian baskets from Fujian.

The concept of a basket/carrier containing narratives and pieces of knowledge has led me to use basket weaving to mend different ideologies together. As this is a familial body of work, my paternal research started to connect with my maternal ancestors. My great-grandfather Ho Chat Yuen/He Qiyuan was a Lingnan Style Chinese painter (1888-1970) who lived through a lifetime of success and turmoil. His intention with his work is to "*synthesize the East and West, blending the old and new.*" He tirelessly enriching traditions by merging western principles and real landscape themes. This made me start to question, why is the west a source of innovation?

*White Deer Under Autumn Leaves* (Fig 3) is one of He's paintings that prompt me towards a scene of the fable by Aesop, *the stag and the pool* (Fig 4). The deer looking at its own reflection in a pond and the deer wading in water in He's painting seemed like two visual tropes that could manifest

into an installation. The idea of weaving the deer with reed stems from *basket blighted*, using basketry in its ways of communicating a narrative rather than a utilitarian, functional object. The woven deer is a metaphor for survival, in the context of collaboration. “*Collaboration means working across differences, which leads to contamination. Without collaboration, we all die.*” (Tsing, 28). Not honing He’s masterful skill of Chinese water-colour and instead of using sculpture/installation can be considered contamination to his legacy for some. As his great-granddaughter, my experiences and environment very much differ from my great-grandfather’s. Therefore there is no need or point to replicate his skill or work, as we are two different entities that happen to be in the same lineage. All we need is to collaborate to keep his and my narrative alive.



*Fig.3 White deer under autumn leaves*  
秋光白鹿, He Qiyuan, 132 x 53.5 cm 1961



*Fig.4 The stag and the pool, Kristi Chen (flat + round maple reed, carved branches, steel-coated deer armature, peptol bismol) 34" x 8" x 29" 2020*

## THESIS DEVELOPMENT

Analyzing the question of whether the introduction of the Western perspectives represents “innovation” was an interesting proposition. In our digital age, innovation is now fabricated through technology and artificial intelligence. In my great-grandfather’s era living through two world wars and after, the West had a great amount of influence on many countries including China and Hong Kong due to colonization. At the same time, the great power that the Western world holds has shaped many societies around the world to view the adoption of Eurocentric methods as the start of something new. As his great-granddaughter, however, I don’t view innovation to be necessarily correlated with the West. To innovate, for me, sometimes involves seeking the past to look forward using the resources around me and my experiences.

After thinking about what it means to devise for innovation, the concept of technology, synthetics and hybridity interested me to further collaborate with my great-grandfather. *Nine Fishes* (Fig.5) is an observational painting based on a small school of Koi fish created by He. Inspired by the Pepto-Bismol pothole created in *the stag and the pool*, the pink pothole in the installation was a commentary on our Anthropocene landscape and ecological footprint that has created these strange, bizarre environments that are no longer natural. Due to no potholes in the gallery space, this prompted me to create an artificial koi pond.

Fabricating *Nine Fishes* (Fig.6) helped emphasize the concept of computerized technology such as using a CNC router to build the structure. With the addition of the battery-powered fish, *Nine Fishes* (Fig.5) reflects on our present-day landscape Meining describes as “*Landscape is related to, but not identical with, nature...the idea of landscape runs counter to the recognition of any simple binary relationship between culture and nature.*” The pond shaped by a computerized drawing, robotic fish eerily tapping against the structure, the foamy layer of water all are elements of our human behaviour altering our natural environment and bodies.

In terms of gallery install, the wall space will have an image of my great-grandfather’s works and a few images of baskets from the Fujian province to inform the audience where the works come from. Initially, the deer would be placed right next to the koi pond as it was looking at its own reflection. However, the deer is not intended to look like a stage prop, therefore this would be a matter of placement and what the deer interacts with. Another concern to look out for is how the audience will move around the gallery in a small room, making space for the audience to create a less frustrating experience.



*Fig.5 Nine Fishes 九如圖, He Qiyuan, 95.5 x 41.5 cm*



*Fig.6 Nine Fishes, Kristi Chen (Baltic birch plywood, pepto-bimsol, flex seal almond, robotic fish) 22" x 55" x 6 3/4" 2021*

## SUMMARY

The journey of this humble basket manifested into a plethora of familial and historical archives that have made many variations of a possible heirloom. Exploring both my maternal and paternal side of my family has revealed a loss of inter-generational knowledge, however, they also showed strength. The narratives passed down to me about my father’s basket weaving experiences and my great-grandfather’s resilience in his art career motivated me to create possibilities. During times of COVID-19, there were many unconventional ways of receiving archives and the limitations drove me to create a process and work that is unorthodox. Researching and analyzing my ancestors made me more aware of how different my perspective is in comparison to them. This has allowed me to be more transparent, stating that my works are not intended to be mastered, mimicked, or replicated by the archives. With so

many paintings, images and readings that I may or may not have discovered yet leaves room for the potential to continue sharing the knowledge of my ancestors.

# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Le Guin , Ursula K, and Donna Haraway . *The Carrier Bag Theory Of Fiction* . Vol. 1, Ignota Books, 2019.**

Ursula Le Guin's theory *Carrier Bag of Fiction* claims that the carrier/container is a way of viewing the start of civilization by holding, gathering, sharing, rather than a competition of defeat and victories. She argues that the carrier would be the earliest tool compared to the spear, which reflects the linear narrative of a singular protagonist and antagonist. When it comes to the design of a spear, its used for killing and hurting others. In Le Guin's perspective, it does not align with the origins of humane behavior, as it doesn't seem human to kill others. The carrier is not only designed as a utilitarian and functional object, but a carrier of narratives and legacies from our past history.

**Mobile, Wapikoni. "My Father's Tools." Vimeo, 28 Nov. 2017, [vimeo.com/244882764](https://vimeo.com/244882764).**

*My Father's Tools* is a small film by Heather Condo presenting Stephen Jerome, a craftsman continuing his father's legacy by constructing Mi'kmaq baskets. Stephen toured through the traditional process of feeling the right tree, cutting it down, pulling the outer layers, using hand tools to make strips, and weave the basket. To me, it reminds me of the chapter Black Ash Basket from Braiding Sweetgrass, when John teaches us the process of making a basket from an ash tree. Listening to Stephen's commentary and process work in the film made me think about the idea of the sourcing inter-generational knowledge through digital archives. Using this video platform to understand one's tradition, culture and skills maybe a way to retrieve and create a possible heirloom. Observing Stephen's dedication, honing his father's legacy with every pull, it be great to see this carry on in the future generation of Indigenous people and culture.

**Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *BRAIDING SWEETGRASS: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. PENGUIN BOOKS, 2020.**

Braiding Sweetgrass critiques the relationship between Western empirical perspectives and Indigenous wisdom. Kimmerer claims that the Western counterpart starts from the settler's point of view; looking at nature and humankind as separate entities. Indigenous philosophy, however, conveys the view that nature is a unity, as it is seen as a gift that connects and sustains us all on this earth. A specific chapter, Wisgaak Gokpenagen: The Black Ash basket speaks about an elder John Pigeon, a basket craftsmen whom creates everything by hand including sourcing materials. "80 percent of the work comes long before you weave. With finding the tree, pounding and pulling and all, you barely make minimum wage." The whole process of learning a craft tradition by sourcing nature is ironic to my practice as it involves ready-made reed from *Commonwealth Baskets* with zero sourcing.



**Laufer, Berthold. "CHINESE BASKETS." *Anthropology Design Series*, no. 3, 1925, pp. 1–4. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/41481972](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41481972).**

Laufer claims that Chinese basketry compared to New Zealand, Philippines and Hawaii has been studied the least. Yet in early civilization in China, baskets hold a prominent position in everyday life. He describes the different usage of baskets from bridal ceremonies to farming purposes. Laufer later explains the difference between baskets from the Northern and Southern regions of China, how both regions terrain and climate affect the formation of the baskets. Northern region baskets are mainly used for agricultural purposes, while the south are dedicated to more artistic baskets for flowers. My father coming from the Southern region, specifically Fujian province and seeing the designs and forms gave me a sense of where my lineage lies.

**He Qiyuan. *An Inheritance of Virtuosity: Donated Chinese Paintings of Ho Chat Yuen*. Kang Le Ji Wen Hua Shi Wu Shu, 2007.**

A biography showcasing a series of Lingnan style paintings by my great-grandfather He Qiyuan/Ho Chat Yuen. Lingnan is a term that is rooted from the painting schools in the Guangdong or Lingnan region of China. Incorporating essential traditions and Western elements to further improve techniques while retaining a contemporary approach were apparent in many Lingnan paintings. My great grandfather's primary intention is to focus on "*synthesize the East and West, blending the old and new*" to devise innovation. Researching my great-grandfather's biographical timeline, he has gone through periods of turmoil and success. As his great-granddaughter critiquing and observing his paintings and content, this made me question is the West really a source of innovation?

"*White Deer Under Autumn Leaves*" is a painting inspired by two artists' works, Gao Qifeng's typical autumn scene and Bao Shaoyou *Two Deer In Snow* (Tang, 79). My great grand-father illustrates the deer wading in water in an ornamental composition. The mystical pale murky water against the pink flower petals and the exaggerated skinniness of the deer orchestrates a narrative of the Anthropocene. Tainted waters, climate change, destruction of ecosystems can result towards starvation of animals are all present in this painting. A work that unintentionally speaks to our contemporary era.

"*Nine Fishes*" is an observational work that was intended to perpetuate the Lingnan tradition. Embracing western elements and pushing the orthodox, this was the reform taking place in Chinese art. The painting of the muddy, opaque water with the school of koi peaking towards the surface of the water made me think of what that would look like in a synthetic, digital era of today.

**Hammond, Jason. *The School Record* . Vol. 5, The University Of Michigan , 1897.**

The school record is a journal and textbook with various fables and stories created in 1897. It is used for students to improve their language and written skills. The main intention of this source is it contains the fable of *the stag and the pool*. The fable start with the deer drinking at a clear pool. While drinking, the deer sees its own reflection. The deer admired its antler, but despised the looks of its ungraceful legs. As the deer sees the hunter approach him, the deer uses its legs to run as fast as it can. However, its horns were entangled in the branches, therefore the deer was shot. Undervaluing the greatest potential. In the fable, the scene of the deer drinking water drew my attention to reinterpret *White Deer Under Autumn Leaves*.

**Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.**

Through the lens of the matsutake, Tsing examines our landscape in relation towards capitalist destruction and collaborative survival. She articulates how the rise of capitalism has entangled us in the name of progression, but in reality has further divided society and identities. Tsing further questions the word Anthropocene, how us as a species should reorientate our perspectives. She mentioned that the neglect of our cultural landscape has resulted from modern commercial foraging that exist today. "These livelihoods make worlds too – and they show us how to look around rather than ahead." (Tsing, 22). World-making projects invasive or not, are made up of many entities; Tsing later allude towards how contamination can be seen as collaboration and vice versa. She further clarifies that purity is not possible and everyone has a history of contamination to sustain livelihood.

**Meinig, D.W. *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. Oxford University Press, 1979.**

Meinig's introductory chapter poetically theorizes a landscape as an ideology instead of a physical environment. Landscapes and environments are related but not the same. The area, geographical location or region all correlate, but not necessarily identical to the landscape. His exploration consists of treating the landscape as a reflection of social history, how the concepts of landscapes are based on interpretations rather than the physical area. In a matter of time, things can switch from one landscape to another established by our point of view. Segments from the introduction chapter had some correlation Anne Tsing's views. Our perspectives and position as an individual can alter and shape our geographical landscape. This introductory poem has made a significant impact on the making process and concept of *Nine Fishes*.