

Mending Through Silk: Craft, Diaspora, and Reimagined Futures

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Abstract: What is the role of material considerations in informing us of the past, the present and a reimagined future within art education? In this paper, I mend my familial histories and diaspora, through the lens of intercultural learning and research-creation. The research examines a solo exhibition and a body of work about silk as a collaborative and cultural material through techniques of weaving, embroidery, and burning. By investigating the stories woven into silk, I address my question above and a second question; *Can silk inform us of the past, the present and a reimagined future?* alongside themes of craft, memory, and hybridity.

Keywords: Silk; Intercultural; Reconnections; Research-Creation; Chinese; Canadian; Identities

The groundwork of this paper is centred around a solo exhibition entitled *Silk Cocoon*, staged at Montréal's Centre Culturel Georges-Vanier (CCGV) from March 9th to April 16th of 2023. In this specific body of work, the materiality and production of silk alongside fractured histories and stories pertaining to my great-grandmother are explored through the methodology of research-creation and the lens of intercultural learning. Using these frameworks, the creation helped inform my identity as a Chinese-Canadian¹ educator, artist, and great-grandson, where I experience a deep connection to the material silk. Through a research-creation approach, this paper examines how material engagement with silk can function as a pedagogical site for exploring identity, cultural memory, and diasporic belonging. By positioning silk as both material and metaphor, this study contributes to art education scholarship on material inquiry, intercultural learning, and culturally responsive pedagogies. It argues that artistic making and material considerations can serve as a form of knowledge production that enables learners to engage critically with personal histories, inherited traditions, and questions of cultural hybridity.

To preface, the ideas alluding this project started when I moved to Montreal from Vancouver amidst the pandemic in 2021 for my MA in Art Education. Since the move, I've begun thinking about my sense of belonging and familial legacies. During this time, I recalled a childhood memory of my grandmother sharing a story about her mother and grandmother. In this memory, I was struggling on a weaving assignment from school, and my grandmother came in as a helping hand. She began telling me about her memories learning to weave and our family's lost legacy of embroidery. She revealed that my great-grandmother made most of her living by embroidering fine silk and was considered a master embroiderer in China. Her specialty was silk

¹ Throughout the text, I use both 'Chinese Canadian' and 'Chinese-Canadian'. However, I use 'Chinese Canadian' to emphasize the separateness of each identity rather than in conjunction.

butterflies. However, everything changed during the Cultural Revolution in China. Chairman Mao wanted to create a new and unified visual language (Vainker, 2004), resulting in many of the traditional arts to be either destroyed or suppressed (Zhang, 2013). This event caused my family to turn to weaving. Unfortunately, I was never allowed to inherit the familial expertise because I was a male; my two sisters and a few of my female cousins were given the opportunity. I began to wonder and imagine what my family's life would be like if my great-grandmother were to have passed down her embroidery knowledge. This inquiry led me to trace my family's history in Guangzhou, China, especially their involvement with textiles. Unfortunately, after multiple attempts on reaching out to family members and friends in China to reviewing available records it led me to more fragmented stories and questions. With all the sources I had, it led me to a body of work trying to make sense of it all.

Methodology

Research-Creation

In the article "Research-creation: Interventions, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances'", communication theorists Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk (2012) examine research-creation in depth through analyzing and dividing the method to four subcategories: *research-for-creation*, *research-from-creation*, *creative presentations of research*, and *creation-as-research*. They also express that the categories are not mutually exclusive but rather useful terms for elaborating different approaches to research-creation. For the objectives of my research, I used *creation-as-research*, the approach in which Chapman and Sawchuk define as "...the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge" (2012, p.19). In essence, it is about the balanced duality between the process of creation and the emergence of knowledge and research. Natalie Loveless's (2019) manifesto on research-creation, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, she brings forth inter- or trans-disciplinary perspective of research-creation and the way it encourages artists to consider the future. Research-creation blends artistic production and academic research together; meanwhile it trains researchers to think about how their practices and voices affect the how, where, and why of the future they're crafting. Upon reflecting on my own project, research-creation as a method resonates very much with my objectives. The concept of interconnection, the blend of different perspectives, and future considerations are all aspects that lie at the heart of my work. Considering Bhabha's (1994) concept of the *Third Space* (a site where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed) and Chapman and Sawchuk notes on creation-as-research, I approached these ideas parallel to each other. Both knowledge and making is negotiated and transformed, in the case of my work, cultural identity is part of the knowledge I bring forth.

Procedures

My inquiry for my solo exhibition started with the question: "Can silk inform us of the past, the present, and a reimagined future?", through the lens of silk, intercultural art education, and the methodology of research-creation. Silk is an endlessly rich subject for research, whether historical or material. Silk is a natural fibre that can be spun and woven into textiles, threads and yarn or used for felt making. The silk fibres are harvested through the filaments of the silkworm cocoons, specifically the mulberry silkworm (*Bombyx mori*). The best-known silk comes from the cocoons of mulberry silkworm larvae (Johnston & Hallett, 2022). There are many kinds of silkworms, and they can be found all around the world; however, the domestication of wild mulberry silkworms was first documented in China in 3500 BCE (Zhao, 2022). The origins of

sericulture started with wild caterpillars and Chinese cultivators who, over time, bred them into mulberry silkworms, from whose cocoons we extract filaments to make silk (Zhao, 2022). Over multiple and cross generations, the mulberry silkworm became dependent on human protection due to domestication (Zhao, 2022). The adult moth is flightless and lacks the camouflaging abilities to allow the insect to thrive in the wild. The demand for silk was one of the primary building blocks of the Silk Road, hence the name. These trade routes were a system on both land and sea covering multiple regions in Asia (South, Southeast, and Central), Russia's steppe, the Iranian and Anatolian plateaus, the Arabian Peninsula, Africa (North and Northeast), Tanzania, Morocco, Europe (Eastern and Southern), and the Iberian Peninsula (Frankopan, 2022). The Silk Road brought textiles, crafts, and artists together, resulting in the emergence and movements for new techniques and traditions to textiles. Considering the lens and definition of '*Intercultural*' – the occurring between or involving two or more cultures (Merriam-Webster, 2024) and Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories on the 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994), silk's history can be regarded as an intercultural material and a space of hybridity.

The artworks I created for the exhibition are focused on addressing my research question, where silk became my catalyst for collaborative connection and exchange, investigation, and my means for recovering my cultural and familial history. The initial concept of creation was informed by the known fragments of my family history, specifically my great-grandmother's work as a master embroiderer in China. I then gathered any new knowledge and perspectives about my great grandmother through oral stories of my family members. Eventually, I drew from my own experiences, memories, and reflections as a Chinese-Canadian educator and artist to answer these questions: What are the missing parts of my great-grandmother's narrative? How does connecting with her inform my identities and a new form of knowledge? Can weaving and embroidering silk make me closer to her?

As part of the research-creation process, I experimented and worked with a variety of silks (silk blends, bourette, raw, recycled and tussah silk) from all over the world through different methods of weaving and embroidery (specifically Yue embroidery), and an assortment of mediums and materials. As I take on a new method or material I would research the medium on its history, production, origins, symbolism, and its relations to me or other materials before incorporating to my work. Throughout the development of the artworks, reflective notes, material observations, and visual documentation were used to trace how questions concerning identity, cultural memory, and belonging evolved through engagement with silk. For my weaving pieces, I used frame looms, objects, and handmade warps to create the work. As for my embroidery pieces, I worked with a variety of fabrics from silk to mulberry papers through hand stitching and embroidery machines. Consistent with Chapman and Sawchuk's (2012) conception of creation-as-research, knowledge did not precede the artistic process but emerged through it. Insights were generated through iterative cycles of making, reflection, material experimentation, and exhibition. Using these skills of weaving and embroidery, the complexity and importance of silk and the concepts of diaspora and lost identities began to emerge.

After completing the body of work, I designed a workshop alongside the show. The exhibition and collaborative workshop further functioned as research sites where dialogue and collective participation contributed to the development of understanding. The objective of the workshop was to explore concepts of re-imagining futures, sustainability, and connections to the material of silk through making and needlework. The workshop was composed of 10 adults within the community of Sud-Ouest neighbourhoods local to the gallery (Saint-Henri, Little Burgundy, Griffintown, Point-Saint-Charles) and were invited to make a decorative silk moth. At

the end of the session, participants had the option to contribute to the group piece by installing their moth or to take them home.

The Emerging and Analyzing

In total, I made 14 pieces for the exhibition, however I will be discussing 12 of the pieces as the other two pieces utilizes materials and techniques not addressed in the research. The style of silk embroidery I explored in my works is from one of the four famous embroidery schools in China called *Yue Embroidery*, believed to be the oldest embroidery school, whose origins are associated with the Guangdong province, where my family is from (Zheng, 2019). Yue embroidery is also known as Guangdong/Guang embroidery or Cantonese embroidery (Zheng, 2019). This embroidery style is generally rich and complex, with bright colours, gold and silver threads, and a wide range of themes, specifically auspicious motifs of dragons, phoenixes, birds, and fruits (Li & Zhang, 2017). It is described as visually similar to Western painting, compared to the other three embroidery schools (Zheng, 2019).

Figure 1

Silk Series



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Weaving with bourette silk, wool-alpaca-silk blend, mohair-silk blend, twine, merino-silk blend, silk, raw silk fibre on embroidery hoops, 15.24 cm x 15.24 cm (ea).

The first weavings I made were three small pieces, *Sĩ*, *Soie*, and *Silk* (which I call the Silk Series) (Figure 1) using various quality and blends of silks, with the bulk of silk acquired from my hometown, Vancouver, and some in Montreal imported from different parts of the world. The Silk series laid the foundation for the artworks I developed for this exhibition. I started the weavings with embroidery hoops as the frame of the warp as a call back to my great-

grandmother's origin story of embroidery, then eventually replaced by weaving. The juxtaposition of the weavings instead of embroideries in the hoops represented my familial story.

During the process of creating the pieces, I drew inspiration from the past and what I knew prior to the research, the pieces each take on distinct colourways. The first piece *Sī* utilizes auspicious and celebratory colours (reds, pinks, and yellows) in the Chinese culture, which are featured and seen during celebrations and festivals. *Sī* is woven with bourette silk (Denmark), wool, alpaca, silk blend (Japan) and mohair, silk blend (Italy). *Soie* is composed of merino-silk blend (Italy), silk (China & Switzerland), raw silk fibre (China) and mohair-silk blend (Italy) with a blend of gradient like whites, beiges, warm greys, and orange-yellow hues. The colourway of *Soie* acts as a transitional piece in between *Sī* and *Silk*. *Silk* on the other hand is devoid of colour with just white silk from China and Switzerland, representative of silk in its natural and lustre state. *Silk* also demonstrates different processes of silk, in the middle of the work unspun silk can be seen in the tapestry alongside more refined silk. Aside from the colour scheme, the mentions of where the silks were imported from added another depth to the cultural and geographical connections that formed a modern-day silk road. It was important to me to utilize different languages to name my works to represent my heritage and the journey of this project, the pieces are entitled 'silk' in Chinese, English and French. This series also takes on the symbolism of circle – as auspicious motif within Chinese culture and in many cultures the concept of the life cycle, unity, and divinity. (Zhang, 2021). For the works made for the exhibition, I will focus and discuss the body of work as three groups - paper, weaving, and embroidery for organizational purposes as the pieces emerged simultaneously and are all connected in some capacity, as I discuss below.

(paper)

Slow Burn, *Mùrè I (Mulberry I, 木熱 I)* and *Mùrè II (Mulberry II, 木熱 II)* are handmade papers made from the fibre of mulberry leaves that silkworms consume. The paper used in *Slow Burn* (Figure 2) is Kizuki Somegami, a thin, high quality Kozo paper, made with 100% Chinese Kozo, the white inner bark or 'bast' of the paper mulberry tree. The paper used in *Mùrè I (Mulberry I, 木熱 I)* (Figure 3) and *Mùrè II (Mulberry II, 木熱 II)* (Figure 4) are Usukuchi, an extra heavy mulberry blended paper. All three artwork feature charred marks made on the papers using a wood burner to replicate the bite marks of silkworms on mulberry leaves and the immolation of silkworms during silk harvest. During China's Cultural Revolution, burning was a tactic employed to destroy works of art, literature, and other items from the 'old' visual culture that Mao disapproved of. Burning paper is another prevalent practice in Chinese culture, known as joss money (Chung & Li, 2017), which is offered to the gods and ancestral worship on festivals or special occasions. In addition to representing lost knowledge of burned book pages, my use of burning is also intended to symbolize the lost legacy of my great-grandmother and to be in remembrance of her. These paper-based works *Mùrè I (Mulberry I, 木熱 I)* and *Mùrè II (Mulberry II, 木熱 II)* attempt to mirror each other as a way connect (Figure 5), as I felt constantly while making my pieces for the show. Like the Silk Series, *Mùrè I (Mulberry I, 木熱 I)* and *Mùrè II (Mulberry II, 木熱 II)* use a combination or a blend of English, Chinese, and French in the titles. For instance, in French the word *mulberry* is *mûre* and if you separate the

words and add an accent grave (or in pinyin Chinese, the 4th tone) to the *u* and the *e*, it makes the Chinese pinyin of 木熱 (*mù rè*), translating to English to *wood burn*.

When naming the pieces, I was fascinated to see how translation and language can act as a space of relation and similarities. In my case the translations directly highlight my process, the *wood* being the paper and the *burn* my manipulation. Using the theoretical lens of intercultural art education (Burnard et al., 2016) the medium of mulberry paper can be regarded as an intercultural material created by combining various plant fibres and processes from Japan and China. For instance, the bark in *Slow Burn* originates from China, while the technique to make the paper is from Japan. The process combines and layers many fibres together to create the paper, which I see as a metaphor for interculturality. The missing marks or sections are what give these artworks their identity; without the negative space the works are just mulberry papers, however the burnt parts present the intention, the lost, and narration. In a sense, the paper contains the story, and the holes represent the voice of the story, inviting the viewer to comprehend or search for the missing. For these works, the holes and paper are both seen as important facets that make up the identity of the pieces.

Figure 2

Slow Burn



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Kizuki Somegami, mulberry paper, 27.9 cm x 21.6 cm.

Figure 3

Mùrè I (Mulberry I, 木热 I)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Extra heavy mulberry paper, 99.7 cm x 66 cm.

Figure 4

Mùrè II (Mulberry II, 木热 II)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Extra heavy mulberry paper, 99.7 cm x 66 cm.

Figure 5

Installation of *Mùrè I* (Mulberry I, 木热 I) and *Mùrè I* (Mulberry I, 木热 I)



Note. Lo, J. (2023). Digital photograph.

(weaving)

In the exhibition, *The Third Space* and *Pùpà* (Pupe, 铺帕) are weavings that explore networks, connections, and identities. Entitled *The Third Space* (Figure 7), the work references Bhabha's postcolonial theories on culture and the 'third space' (1994). As Bhabha offers the concept of hybridity in which re-imagining of identities of self can occur, weaving can be seen as a pedagogy for intercultural relations as threads (an allegory for cultures) are interlaced together to form textiles. Similarly to *The Silk Series*, it was imperative for me to find out where the source of the threads came from to illustrate the global impact silk still has in a modern context. The tapestry is made up of three different weavings woven together with extra or left over weft thread of each piece. Each weaving within the tapestry represents my three identities - Chinese, Canadian, and the hybrid of the two. I first started with the middle weaving as the in-between

space of the piece, it is a blend of various hues, fibres, and silk qualities. The middle piece contains a blend of Merino silk blend (Italy), silk (China, France), bourette silk (Denmark), wool alpaca and silk blend (Japan), mohair silk blend (Italy), wool (China) and twine (China). Similar to *S7*, the central section has an auspicious colour scheme that pays homage to the Canadian flag's colours as well as the rich reds, purples, pinks, yellows, and whites associated with Chinese culture.

The flow of the weaving came naturally, however shifts in tension caused the piece to form a natural wavy pattern, which I leaned into. The bottom weaving, which is made of natural and hand-painted silk from China, France, and Switzerland, is symbolic of my Chinese identity. It has a superior quality silk that is thinner and finer, requiring the longer weaving time of the two. The higher quality silk also showcases the beauty and artisanal heritage of silk. The last weaving is the top piece which is representative of my Canadian identity, composed of mainly recycled silk from India and hints of silk from China and France and raw silk fibre from China. Its top section is structured with uniform lines as the design due to using a denser silk thread made from recycled fibres. The recycled silk in the weaving references the first yard of woven silk produced in Canada in 1922 by the Montreal-based Bruck Silk Mills at their Cowansville location (Digital Museums Canada, n.d.); I imagine the silks made by mill are now being recycled or upcycled. Together the three weavings demonstrate the pedagogy of intercultural arts research through the selection of threads from various global sources, as well as a personal perspective through the meticulous blending of materials and colours, with each area of the tapestry depicting a facet of my identity.

In reference to Bhabha, this piece provides a framework for understanding artistic making as a site of cultural negotiation. Through material engagement with silk, personal and collective histories become intertwined, allowing identity to be explored not as fixed inheritance but as an ongoing process of translation, transformation, and becoming. This piece celebrates the convergence of cultural and personal histories to produce a dynamic, multifaceted portrayal of identity.

Pùpà (*Pupe*, 铺帕) (Figure 8) on the other hand, focuses more on lineage and networks. The work began with my surname and its meaning. When my father immigrated to Canada, he was given the last name *Lo* based on the phonetics of how he said it, however in Chinese pinyin it is *Luó* and when written it is 罗 (simplified) or 羅 (traditional). When I translated my surname in Google Translate from Chinese to English a series of verbs and nouns came up, such as *collect*, *display*, *net*, *shift*, and to my surprise *silk*. Taking these words as a starting point, it became evident that the word *net* resonated with me in the context of weaving and fishing as well as the concepts surrounding catching and (*net*)works. Through the process of translating my last name, I began to search for nets or webbing as an object to weave with.

Eventually, I stumbled across a bamboo lampshade reminiscent of traditional fishing baskets and cocoons. I began weaving the lampshade using a variety of silks (fibres, recycled, and tussah) and wool from China, France, Switzerland, India, Iceland, and Italy. The weaving took many layers of overlapping and underlapping to create the piece, which contributed to a butterfly effect as an emerging whole. When all the silks and wool are threaded together, they create a metaphor of intricate networks strung together, where the viewer cannot tell where each begins or ends (Figure 6). This layered weaving process symbolizes the complex networks that connect many cultural elements together, creating a metaphor for interconnectedness in which the origins and endings of cultural influences are indistinguishable. Like many of my pieces,

Pùpà (*Pupe*, 铺帕) also uses a combination or a blend of English, Chinese, and French in the title. However, with *Pùpà* (*Pupe*, 铺帕) the Chinese pinyin is based on with the English word *Pupa* the stage in which the silkworm is inside the cocoon. If you dissect the word into two and add an accent grave (or in Chinese pinyin, the 4th tone) to the *u* and the *a*, it becomes 铺帕 (*pù pà*) – meaning to store or a shop of a wrap or handkerchiefs. These series of words reminded me of the Silk Road and the life cycle of silkworms and their metamorphosis to a moth. Collectively, these artworks highlight the strength of intercultural arts research, illustrating how cultural and personal narratives can be interwoven to form complex and interconnected weavings.

Figure 6

Pùpà (*Pupe*, 铺帕). (a)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Close up photograph of *Pùpà* (*Pupe*, 铺帕), digital photograph.

Figure 7

The Third Space



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Weaving with merino-silk blend, silk, raw silk fibre, bourette silk, hand painted silk, wool-alpaca-silk blend, mohair-silk blend, recycled silk, wool, twine, 25.4 cm x 99.06 cm.

Figure 8

Pùpà (Pupe, 铺帕). (b)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Sculpture, weaving with bamboo, silk, silk fibres, recycled silk, tussah silk, wool, 114.3 cm x 68.6 cm.

(embroidery)

There are three embroidery pieces in the exhibition that share similar sentiments with the paper and weaving works discussed above. The work *Sī Rue (Silk Road)* (Figure 9) outlines the historic land route of the Silk Road overlayed by the route my parents took to settle in Vancouver and my route coming to Montreal. The textile used in the piece is a blend of alpaca and silk that is made in China and again features colours found favourable in the Chinese culture. The piece emphasizes the Silk Road's extensive history of interactions with other nations and cultures, as well as its impact on society, culture, geography, and globalization. Similar to the other pieces, *Sī Rue (Silk Road)* explores the ideas of blending materials (alpaca and silk) and layering different maps to represent the influences that create the whole piece demonstrating interculturality. The piece also takes on considerations of glocalization by documenting the global map of the Silk Road to the localized personal project where the piece was made (Montreal). *Sī Rue (Silk Road)* also uses a blend of English, Chinese, and French in the title. As mentioned before *sī* is silk in Chinese and the French word for road is *rue*, together they make silk road.

1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back (Figure 10) is my most personal piece and it features hand embroidered work on printed Japanese mulberry paper that convey the ideas of struggle and discovery. In this piece there are three embroidered moths, like the other pieces above, the three moths represent the three identities. For me the motif of the silk moth is the manifestation of possibilities and potentiality, not only does it make silk (an intercultural material), but it also manages to survive immolation and lead an ethically sound existence. The moth and butterfly in Chinese folklore (*The Butterfly Lovers*) is believed to be spirits of recently deceased relatives (Sax, 2001), which symbolizes the re-connection with and potential of my great grandmother. The triangular formation of the moths and the title suggest an internal struggle, a negotiation, a constant push and pull, the complexity of needing to choose, and questioning whether my identities are holding me back or propelling me forward.

Reflecting on Bhabha's sentiments on hybridity and the Third Space, this piece acts as a visual intersection where two cultures or identities meet; a space where real and imaginary spaces intersect. The print on the mulberry paper took resemblance to the core principles of Yue embroidery, which feature a rich and complex floral design with bright and gold colours (Li & Zhang, 2017). The thin black silk threads used to create the moths are delicate and depending on the light may be only visible up close. The visibility of the moths is a reflection on the constant struggle in my mind: it may not be apparent, but it is there. I spent the most time making this piece, due to the fragility of the mulberry paper and meticulous planning for constant puncturing back and forth of the needle. This process was a struggle and required a level of perfection which mirrored the personal struggles I experienced on what it means to be Canadian and the social roles growing up with my two older sisters. The three moths also serve as an allegory for my two sisters and me, symbolizing the experiences of my childhood alongside them. This allegory highlights the persistent comparisons between genders and the societal expectations placed upon us in relation to our familial history with craft.

Like a Moth to a Flame (飞蛾扑火) has a very similar composition to *1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back*, and both share many sentiments and ideas surrounding the potentiality of the moth. The biggest piece in the exhibition, *Like a Moth to a Flame* (飞蛾扑火) (Figure 11) features three machine embroidered moths on mulberry silk charmeuse. The moths on the silk portray a sense of hope and demonstrates what they would have looked like if they had lived to tell the

story. The moths are embroidered by the Tajima embroidery machine and explores the dichotomy of machine- versus hand stitched embroidery, showcasing the potential of new technologies within the industry. The title is a metaphor for my irresistible attraction towards silk and my familial past even though it may lead me to nothing; like a moth to a flame, it also illustrates the process of silk making with the silk being the flame we are attracted to. Interestingly this common saying could be found in Chinese and in English, represented in the title. The three embroidery pieces —*Sī Rue (Silk Road)*, *1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back*, and *Like a Moth to a Flame* (飞蛾扑火)— both honour the complex historical and cultural importance of silk and contemplate the individual and shared experiences that influence one's identity, while showcasing a combination of traditional artistry with modern creativity.

Figure 9

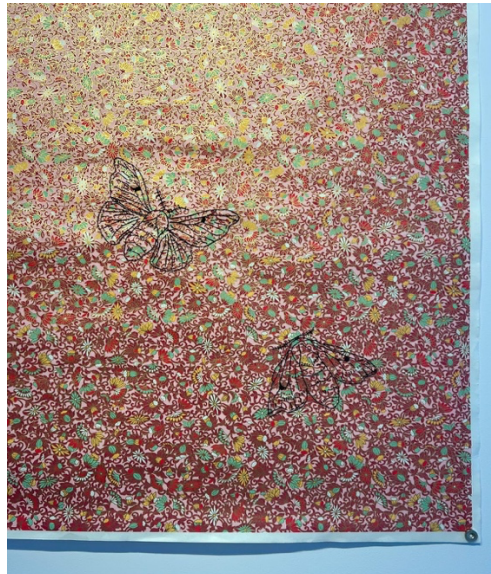
Sī Rue (Silk Road)



Note: Lo, J.(2023). Alpaca and silk woven fabric, silk embroidery. 165.1 cm x 69.6 cm.

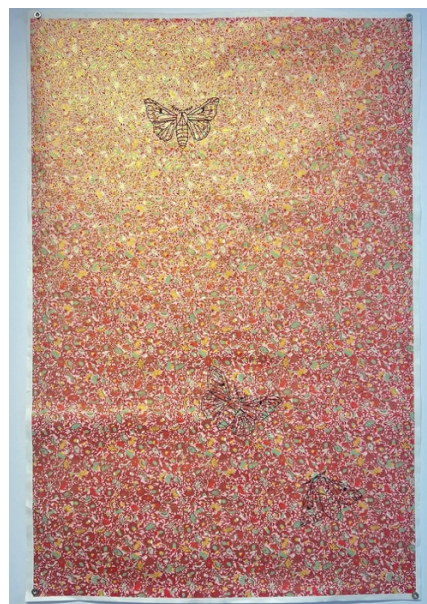
Figure 10 (a)

1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back. (a)



Note: Photo by Lo, J. (2023). Close up photograph, digital Photograph.

Figure 10 (b)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). Japanese printed mulberry extra heavy paper, silk embroidery, 99.7 cm x 66 cm.

Figure 11

I Like a Moth to a Flame (飞蛾扑火).



Note: Lo. J. (2023). Silk, polyester embroidery, wooden dowel, 208.3 cm x 76.2 cm.

(group work)

The final work I will discuss in the show, entitled *Mori (Bombyx mori)* is made up of 24 decorative silk moths, 12 from the participants in the collaborative art-making workshop and 12 made by me (Figure 12). In the workshop I had a total of 10 participants, from young adults who were students to retired folks living in various parts of Montréal. All the attendees agreed to participate in the show. Each participant during the workshop made at least one silk moth with some even making a second one. At the end of the session, when participants had the option to contribute to the exhibition by installing their moth(s) or to take them home, all of them decided to install their piece(s). All the moths are composed of cotton stuffing and recycled silk fabrics, mainly from ties found in second hand stores and from donations, as well as beads for embellishments.

Akin to *1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back*, and *Like a Moth to a Flame* (飞蛾扑火) the symbolism of the moth used in this piece is a metaphor for potentiality, the re-imagined second life, and the sense of hope. At the same time, the title uses the Latin word *Mori* – meaning death to suggest the reality of most silk moths that produce silk, and is a word also found in the scientific name – *Bombyx mori*. I chose to use the silk fabric of ties to play with the ideas of masculinity, femininity, and expected social roles, referencing the western masculine history of ties (one of men’s wardrobe staples) to needlework, generally referred to as women’s work specifically in Chinese culture.

As part of this process of reimagining, I sought to repossess and reshape narratives surrounding gender and textile practice through collaborative making. The use of silk ties alongside needlework created a site of negotiation between gendered and cultural material histories. Rather than reinforcing these distinctions, the collaborative process blurred them, inviting participants to engage with silk through shared acts of making. Through this gesture, the work opened a space where participants could connect with the material beyond prescribed cultural or gendered expectations, allowing new meanings and relationships to emerge. The collaborative effort in the piece serves as the manifestation of interculturality and potential connections as participants are exchanging dialogue while making the pieces. By working with hands-on materials, participants undoubtedly shared stories and formed bonds that go beyond the workshop, giving them an opportunity to witness firsthand how the arts can foster a sense of community and encourage the inclusion of people with varied backgrounds.

Figure 12 (a)

Mori (Bombyx Mori)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). *Mori (Bombyx Mori)* on left wall. Installation with recycled silks, cotton, beads.

Figure 12 (b)



Note: Lo, J. (2023). *Mori (Bombyx Mori)* on right wall. Installation with recycled silks, cotton, beads.

Conclusion

Moths are seen as spiritual messengers from the past guiding humans through change and transitions. Throughout this whole process, I have found that the silk moth has been my guide and collaborator especially in my research-creation journey. In my discussion, the motif of the moth has been revered as a sense of hope, possibilities, potentiality, and my great-grandmother, and now it is a profound symbol of transformation. The process of the moth's metamorphosis from egg to adulthood is a captivating story of development, self-reflection, and renewal. It was important for me as educator, artist, and great-grandson to know and reconnect to the past as I believe it informs the future. In my case, it was the personal struggles I had with my Chinese and Canadian identities and the lost legacy of my family.

This research demonstrates how material inquiry can function as a pedagogical approach within art education, enabling students to investigate identity, memory, migration, and belonging through embodied acts of making. Materials are never neutral; they carry histories, cultural associations, labour, and stories that connect individuals across time and place. By engaging deeply with a culturally embedded material such as silk, students can develop a greater awareness of how personal narratives intersect with broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. Research-creation offers a framework through which knowledge emerges through making, allowing students, educators, and artists to explore complex questions that may not be accessible through language alone.

The approach of interculturality in (re)discovering and embracing heritage and cultures permeates all aspects of my life, especially with materials, and I believe interculturality should be implemented at the heart of art education. To revisit my research question: *Can silk inform us of the past, the present, and a re-imagined future?* As the silkworm undergoes significant changes to reach its final form, each stage can be read as the past, present and future. The first phase where the worm hatches out of the egg exists as a state of potential capacity for learning and limitless growth. Its large appetite and desire to eat parallels my pursuit of knowledge for the past and the lost histories of my great-grandmother, ready to be uncovered with an outlook of possibilities.

The second stage is the pupa (cocoon), representing the present moment of introspection and change, reflecting my research-creation process, specifically, creation-as-research, as Chapman and Sawchuk put it "...where creation is required in order for research to emerge" (2012, p.19). The act of creating enabled the emergence of knowledge and connections. Through this process, I was able to respectfully reconstruct my great-grandmother's narrative while simultaneously uncovering the sense of liminality I experienced as a first-generation Canadian. It felt freeing to let the making come first and for the art to exist without any expectations or pressure to look or mean a certain way. I was able to freely explore the material of silk in an effort to better understand my great-grandmother's profession. The material itself became a site of inquiry and an intercultural third space where personal histories, family memories, cultural traditions, and contemporary artistic practice intersected. Rather than arriving at a single definitive narrative, the process revealed multiple possible stories and futures. Silk allowed me to conjure possibilities and futures of what could be. I believe that the act of re-imagining holds significant influence, particularly during a period with heightened global tensions and the looming threat of climate change to our ecosystems and wildlife. Re-imagining allows a space to reflect and create better futures. Like the cocooning phase, the silk became the space for contemplation and self-reflection as well as an intercultural thread that ties me to the public of Montréal.

The third stage exists in two intertwined realities, one is the adult moth and the other, in most cases, the legacy of their silk. These trajectories signify the future of emergence and renewal, the actualization of potential of the moth and silk. This stage reflects the moments within *Silk Cocoon* where I embrace collaborative exchange with the local communities of Montréal, generated new perspectives, relationships, and understandings. It also speaks to my own transformation through the project, emerging with a renewed relationship to my family history, cultural identity, and artistic practice.

Thinking about the future, this inquiry has contributed to intercultural art education and research-creation by demonstrating how intersections of material histories, family histories, and cultural histories can be brought into dialogue through artistic practice. *Silk Cocoon* is an example of collective understanding established through vulnerability, love, and empathy. At the core of this project is an ode and act of love to my great-grandmother, the master embroiderer I never had the opportunity to meet. Through the care and affection expressed in the exhibition, workshop and artworks, the project embodies interculturality by building empathy, positionality, and connection through the sharing of stories and finding similarities within each other.

Silk has been the perfect medium and metaphor for connection: structurally, it is one seamless single strand desired and appreciated by all, in which tangled or woven, silk serves as a continuous bond; whether you perceive it or not, the link will always remain. My hope is that this material exploration encourage others to deeply engage with a material, learn about it, listen and connect to it and see what it tells you.

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