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福壽/Full Circle

by

Hang Zhang

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester NY
April 25, 2019

Signature Page

Christine Shank

Date

Director of MFA in Photography & Related Media
School of Photographic Arts and Science

Roberley Bell

Date

Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Science

Abstract

福壽/Full Circle

BA, English literature, University of International Relations, Beijing, China, 2017

MFA, Photography and Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, 2019

This body of work “福壽”/“Full Circle” explores my grandparents’ experiences and aspirations, generational relationships in a traditional Chinese family, and my process of re-establishing a connection with my family. “福壽” is a group of multimedia works composed of photographs, videos, and sculpture. My grandparents’ experiences with the Cultural Revolution, coupled with my memories and desire to rekindle a connection with my family, inspired this project from a personal and cultural point of view. In this work, I aim to showcase for the viewer the history and current situation of the Chinese elderly while highlighting the importance for members of my generation to forge their own identity within the family.

Extended Artist Statement

福寿 / Full Circle is a body of work composed of photographs, a video, installations, and a book.

It contains the stories of elderly members of my family who experienced the Cultural Revolution and had aspirations when they were young. Through rebuilding their dreams and visualizing them in art form, I aimed to explore how human relationships (e.g., family and social relationships) affect people's dreams. This work also afforded me an opportunity to rebuild connections between me and my family.

Having been raised in a typical Chinese family¹, I am not a person who expresses myself very well. As I grew up, my school life did not allow me to return home frequently. Like many people my age, I felt psychological distance between myself and my relatives; I was gradually losing communication with them. However, many people are unaware of such a loss of connection. I was not aware of it either until the day my grandmother fell ill in 2018. She was diagnosed with cancer and, according to the doctor, had only six months to live. After that, everyone in our family started focusing on taking care of her. As for me, I finally got the chance to spend time with her and have conversations I had rarely had with other members of my family, especially my grandmother. I hoped to make up for the time I lost and re-establish connections with my relatives by talking with them and understanding their experiences, which I had never attempted to do in the past.

¹ Gloppe, Donald R. De. *Chinese Family and Kinship*. HUGH D. R. BAKER. *American Ethnologist*9, no. 3 (1982): 618. doi:10.1525/ae.1982.9.3.02a00430.

Chinese families have large family trees, and there was no specific birth control policy² in the era of my grandparents' childhood. Therefore, my grandmother has many brothers and sisters, all of whom I call my grandparents. They lived together, grew up together, suffered together, and rejoiced together. Their stories and experiences occupied nearly every conversation between me and my grandmother. I was interested in hearing more because it would help me better understand this family—my family. What I discovered is that they were born in a turbulent time, and their life experiences were crueler than I had initially thought. This served as the starting point for the art work I set out to make for them.

I tried to contact and interview as many of my grandparents as possible. During our conversations, I collected voice recordings along with many old photos and objects that held memories from the houses in which my relatives once lived. The recording file became my primary source of stories on which to focus my art work. During this process, I tried to avoid stories with incomplete memories and instead selected those that were more organized.

“I really wanted to go. I had already arrived at the station, and the train was going to arrive soon. But my parents and his parents went straight to the station and pulled me back. There would be no chance after that.”

– the story of JINXI

² Chen, Pi-Chao. *Birth Control Methods and Organisation in China*. China's One-Child Family Policy, 1985, 135-48. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-17900-8_5.

The first story is about Jin Xi, one of my grandmothers. I once bicycled 3600 km on a mountain road from my hometown to Tibet, and she had the same wish. In the story, however, she was tied up by family obligations. Jin Xi was passionate about traveling and exploring. Going to Tibet was her life's dream, but once she was on the road, her parents forcibly took her home and forced her to marry a stranger in an arranged marriage. Because of the social turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, it was imperative to marry into a family with better social standing.³

“JINXI” is a small installation work displayed in the corner. I bundled a bicycle with red strings and wove the strings to form several layers of dense net. In the background is a photo of a map of China; the red strings on the map delineate the route from my grandmother's hometown to Tibet. The strings do not touch the photo of the map, and the viewer can only see the map through dense red lines. The gaps between the red lines and the bicycle represent the unreachability of Tibet to my grandmother.

Chiharu Shiota is a Japanese artist who works with red string. When she was a child, she witnessed a fire at a neighbor's house. She has said she can still clearly recall the sound of a piano falling in the fire. Later, she tried to translate this poignant memory into a visible form. She filled a room with countless cotton threads, from floor to ceiling to wall, and wrapped everything in them, including a piano. To her, red symbolized the color of blood: “Red symbolizes the blood of the human body, which connects everyone together.”⁴

³ Gao, Mobo. *The Cultural Revolution: Class, Culture and Revolution*. Handbook on Class and Social Stratification in China: 44-58. doi:10.4337/9781783470648.00011.

⁴ Shiota, Chiharu. *Stille*. *Ästhetik Des Fadens*. doi:10.14361/9783839408001-018.

A Chinese artist, Zhu Yiyong, also works with red string. In his work “Memories”⁵, he used red string to symbolize the connections of people’s memories to the past. In China, the color red represents happiness. Chinese people often celebrate festivals with the color red⁶, such as the spring festival and the Lunar New Year. These festivals are an important time of year for family reunions. Therefore, red also symbolizes relationships between people, especially family members. However, in “JINXI”, the red strings wrapping the bicycle are more ironic because they symbolize my grandmother’s relatives. These people should have been the most supportive of her, but in fact they prevented her from achieving her dreams. To me, the red string represents relationships between people but also denotes bondage and inevitability.

“We have no choice. Only with work like this can we get a better life, not for me or my husband, for my two children.”

– the story of PEIXUAN

Pei Xuan, another of my grandmothers, once worked in a clothing factory. To afford to take care of their two children, she and her husband had to work longer days than others in different locations while their relatives helped look after their children. The couple hardly had a chance to see each other. The spring festival was Pei Xuan’s favorite time of year because she could be with her family and finally get some rest.

⁵ Monde, Zhu Yiyong 朱毅勇, *The Realm of the Heart* 心境, Issue, 9 December 2016, issuu.com/galeriedumonde/docs/zhuyiyong_2016/27.

⁶ Perry, Anna. *Chinese Red in Spring*. 2017. doi:10.31274/itaa_proceedings-180814-240.

In “PEIXUAN”, I used red strings to stitch together archival photos of Pei Xuan’s four family members who lived apart. I also found some old cloth my grandmother once made, and I cut and sewed pieces of the cloth to cover the clothing the individuals were wearing in the photos. The only thing each member of her family shared was stitched clothes made by my grandmother. I ensured the holes and stitched edges of each picture remained visible in this work to show the disconnection. As time passes, when the red string finally begins to wear out, the pictures will start falling apart again.

During conversations with my grandparents, a main point of discussion was the Cultural Revolution. My grandparents were all born between 1945 and 1950 and experienced the political era of the Cultural Revolution, which occurred from 1966 to 1976 in China. It was launched under the command of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman Mao Zedong, who wished to renew the spirit of the Communist revolution and root out those he considered ‘bourgeois’ infiltrators⁷. In effect, he sought to eliminate some CCP colleagues who were advocating a path toward economic recovery that differed from Mao’s vision. The Cultural Revolution was thus declared, with an initial focus on educational institutions⁸.

At first, Mao pursued his goals via the Red Guard, groups of the country’s urban youths created through mass mobilization efforts. They were directed to weed out members of the country’s

⁷ Xiaoli, Zhao. *History, Culture, Revolution, and Chinese Constitutionalism*. The Constitution of Ancient China, 2018, 198-208. doi:10.23943/princeton/9780691171593.003.0009.

⁸ Son, Seunghoi. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution and The Research of the Ultra Left*. Institute of History and Culture Hankuk University of Foreign Studies 68 (2018): 235-76. doi:10.18347/hufshis.2018.68.235.

population who were not ‘sufficiently revolutionary’ and those suspected of being ‘bourgeois.’ The Red Guard had little oversight, and their actions led to anarchy and terror. The individuals they deemed ‘suspects’ (e.g., traditionalists, educators, and intellectuals) were persecuted and killed. The revolution ended in the fall of 1976 after Mao’s death that September, leaving millions of people dead (estimates range from 500,000 to 2,000,000) and displaced⁹. It also completely disrupted the country’s economy.

The Cultural Revolution truly changed my grandparents’ lives and is a major inspiration behind my work. My grandparents still remember the aspirations they did not realize and the regret with which they live. For them, these memories are precious; for me, their unfulfilled dreams are shining diamonds that emerged from the shadow of the revolution. I never noticed these dreams until this collection of works started.

“I have so many notes on every book I read, they are all in there. They are part of myself and cannot be replaced by anything new.”

– the story of JIHAO

“JIHAO” is one of my photo works. In the image, a surviving book lies on the ground, surrounded by burned ash. There are some words on the book’s pages, but they are barely recognizable. My grandfather, Ji Hao, was born to an educated family. There was a large shelf full of books in his house, which were ultimately destroyed by a fire set by the Red Guard. In this image, the viewer can still see some sparks, and the mess and scattered ash exemplify the environment during that

⁹ Gregor Benton, *Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2008).

period. The only book that survived the chaos symbolized my grandfather's hope: fire can destroy objects of the past and the knowledge these objects carried, but it cannot extinguish an individual's thoughts and aspirations.

“There is no money at home. I can't practice calligraphy at home all day. Many people used to praise me for my work, but now no one can see it, let alone purchase it. I can't ruin my family for my own interests.”

– the story of XUNGUO

“XUNGUO” is the story of my grandfather, Xun Guo, who wanted to become a calligrapher. He never achieved this dream because of the Cultural Revolution's restrictions on traditional art and his family's financial situation. I wanted to express his desire for calligraphy and explore its relation to the social environment of that time. In this photography work, there are two photos layered together. The underlying picture is a family photo; the person standing in the bottom right is Xun Guo. This photo conveys a strange feeling because no one is smiling; instead, everyone is gazing seriously at the camera. Their somber expressions were due to the family's strict rules. Yet for me, the photo conveys a sense of destiny—these people knew that what would happen in their society would make them suffer.

The upper photo is printed on a transparent material. I captured the moment when the ink was poured into the water and formed an obscured shape. The material of calligraphy ink symbolizes the art of calligraphy. The scene of ink in the water also expresses my understanding of the social environment at that time. The heavy black ink evokes a serious feeling, much like the uneasiness

and limitations imposed by society at the time. People's lives were similar to the ink in the water, floating without purpose.

The Cultural Revolution changed people's lives. People were forced to live in a tightly controlled environment. Wang Qingsong was born in 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution broke out. He was only a child at that time, and even though the Cultural Revolution ended more than 40 years ago, he feels that China remains in the shadow of this event. He stated, "We still tend to go to extremes: we must obey someone, we are so educated, and it is the same in all areas of life: work, education, economy, all work like this."¹⁰

My grandmother Juan remembers when her father was shot during the Cultural Revolution. She spent the rest of her life with her brother and sister. Their lives were restricted to a small circle because of their father's experiences with his previous political party. For people like her, even the desire to go to school was not indulged during that era. Therefore, Juan's wish was always to have a family and to learn.

"I was blindfolded by my mother. I knew nothing but the sound of a gunshot."

– the story of JUAN

In my work "JUAN", I collected archived newspaper articles about the Cultural Revolution and assembled a photo collage. The newspapers were torn and then layered together to depict the

¹⁰ Qingsong Wang and Christopher Phillips, *Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2011).

violence and massive number of lives lost during the Cultural Revolution. One item not covered by the torn newspapers is an archive family photo of three young siblings. The blood color on the edge of the newspaper, the holes with scorched edges, and a family photo on the bottom right all tell the audience the story that has unfolded. No one in this social environment could predict what would happen next, which made people feel helpless and hopeless.

I gradually rekindled lost connections through the process of conversation and creating these works—or, I want to say, I had never lost it. But this connection revealed a personal struggle: I began to consider how I fit into this work. China's one-child policy was initiated in 1979 by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping as a way to slow population growth. Under this policy, members of the largest ethnic group (the Han Chinese) were permitted to bear only one child¹¹. I was born under the one-child policy and thus have no siblings, which also means I will face more pressure compared with prior generations if I wish to support my family. Moreover, during conversations with my elderly family members, I found that some were seemingly obsessed with their dreams and hoped their children would accomplish their unrealized plans. This has in some ways become wishful thinking for them. Few of the elderly asked about their children's own dreams or whether they wanted to fulfill their parents' plans.

¹¹ Susan Scutti, *One-Child Policy Is One Big Problem for China*, Newsweek, 14 Feb. 2016, www.newsweek.com/2014/01/24/one-child-policy-one-big-problem-china-245118.html.

“At that time, I sang every day, and I loved to copy lyrics. I was so excited when I knew that I had a piano teacher to study with. But I still haven’t learned. My family couldn’t buy me a piano. But Hang, you have to learn piano.”

– the story of ZHIXIAN

I am the eldest among my generation. Their love for me and the pressure they placed on me undoubtedly influenced me. To express my feelings, I created the video work, “ZHIXIAN”, in which a young man is forced to play the piano surrounded by his family members. Typically, the lessons Chinese children learn are forced upon them by their elders; children are not genuinely interested in what they are learning. Zhi Xian is one of my grandfathers; he wanted to be a pianist when he was young, but his parents could not afford a piano. He told me to play the piano when I was only five. I do not fully remember my thoughts at the time; however, I know I am not interested in playing the piano today. Playing the piano was his dream. I feel that this group of people who were changed by their life circumstances are now coercing me and guiding my life. It makes me uncomfortable, and I would like to escape the pressure, but I cannot. I think this is truly where my feeling of disconnection comes from: I have lost the power to make my own choices.

Book is also an important part in this group of works. In my family, there is always a big part in the shelf containing all the family albums that we have. Those photos influence me a lot in my childhood and in the process of making works. This is also one of the inspirations for me to make a book with archive family photos. And another inspiration for me to make this book is my free writing in my note book. For most of the time I can’t express myself very well. So writing becomes an important way for me to convey my emotion and keep my memories. I write those words that I

have no chance or courage to say to others, also, there are some words for my family. The book is only about 4x6 inches, and displayed on a pedestal in my space. in the book, I combine the archive family photo and text to lead viewers closer to each story and my family member behind. This book could be unfolded to a long paper. The viewer could find the voice recording text of each story in my work and the related family photo. Those photos are choices of my grandparents. I asked them to choose a most memorable picture in their mind and related to the story they told me. I cut the portraits in those photos and make them dark without detail because I want them to show the feeling of disconnection I had when I first heard those stories from my grandparents. And The text in the book could compose a poem I wrote to them which is my free writing in my notebook. On the back side of this book is the collection of family photos I selected. I choose those photos which I think are more influential to me during the process of making works. This side of photos will be hide inside the book when it is folded. But when the viewer finish reading the story and the poem, they will find those photos inside this book.

To me, it is a way to show the process of re-establish my connection with my family. The family photo I selected on the back of this book represents my deepest feeling to my family members. I named this book emotionless to show the struggle of losing connection with my family. when I finish making their stories to this art work, I also come to the end of this book, and there is no more emotionless.

During the exhibition, these pieces will be displayed in a darkened environment, and each will have its own lighting scheme. The dreams of the elderly will look like stars shining in the night sky. The work requiring the light box will be installed on one wall, and another wall will have a

video projector and works that need a single light. The blackened walls will give the viewer a sense of oppression, as if he/she feels such depression personally. But the light from the work will break the dark environment and illuminate this space. In my opinion, although the times my elders experienced were painful, the dreams they hide in their hearts are flashes that cannot be extinguished in the dark. However, their obsessions with their dreams are being passed on to others inadvertently. Therefore, the light of the work illuminates this space and shines on everyone who enters it.

福寿/Full Circle is also a body of work expressing the complicated emotions from my heart—the emotions I feel toward my family, my grandparents, and other members of my generation. In Chinese, “福”¹² means happiness, and “寿” means longevity. “福” also has a pronunciation similar to that of “Full Circle.” To my grandparents, who experienced and suffered greatly in their lives, “福寿” communicates the best wishes I have for them. However, I believe that no matter what the elderly have lost during their lives, people in my generation should make their own decisions and continue moving forward rather than living according to other people’s directions; only then can we live life full circle.

¹² Fong, Mary H. *The Iconography of the Popular Gods of Happiness, Emolument, and Longevity (Fu Lu Shou)*. *Artibus Asiae* 44, no. 2/3 (1983): 159. doi:10.2307/3249596.

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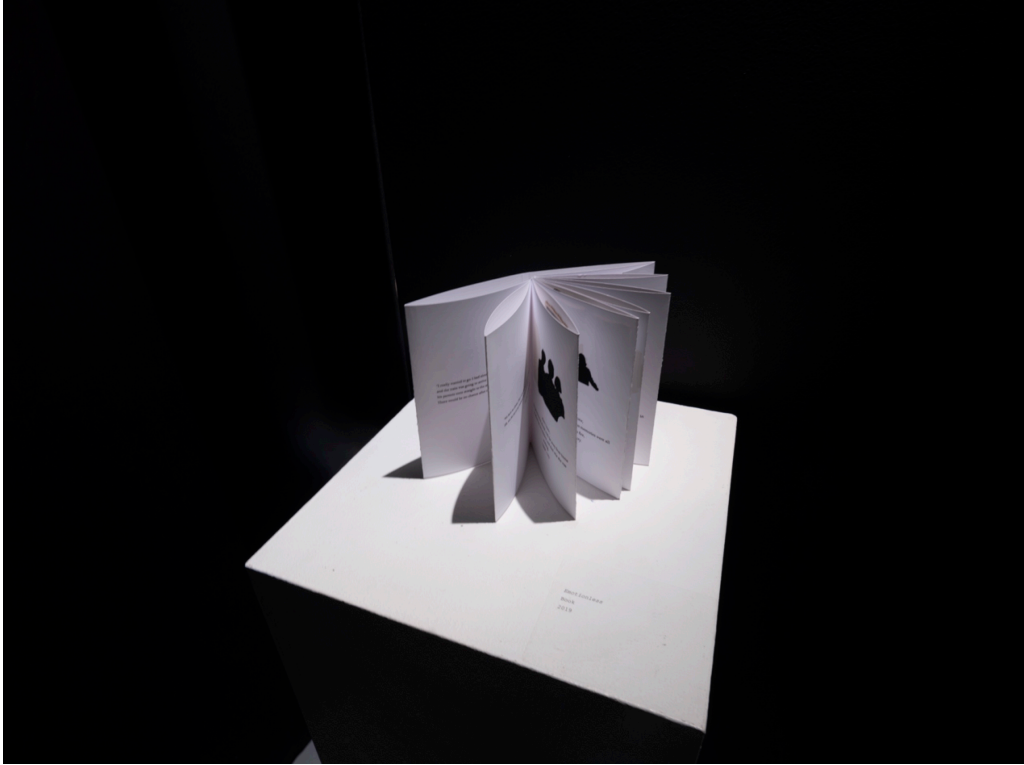
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Full Circle exhibition documentation in William Harris Gallery, 2019



Exhibition photo in William Harris Gallery, 2019



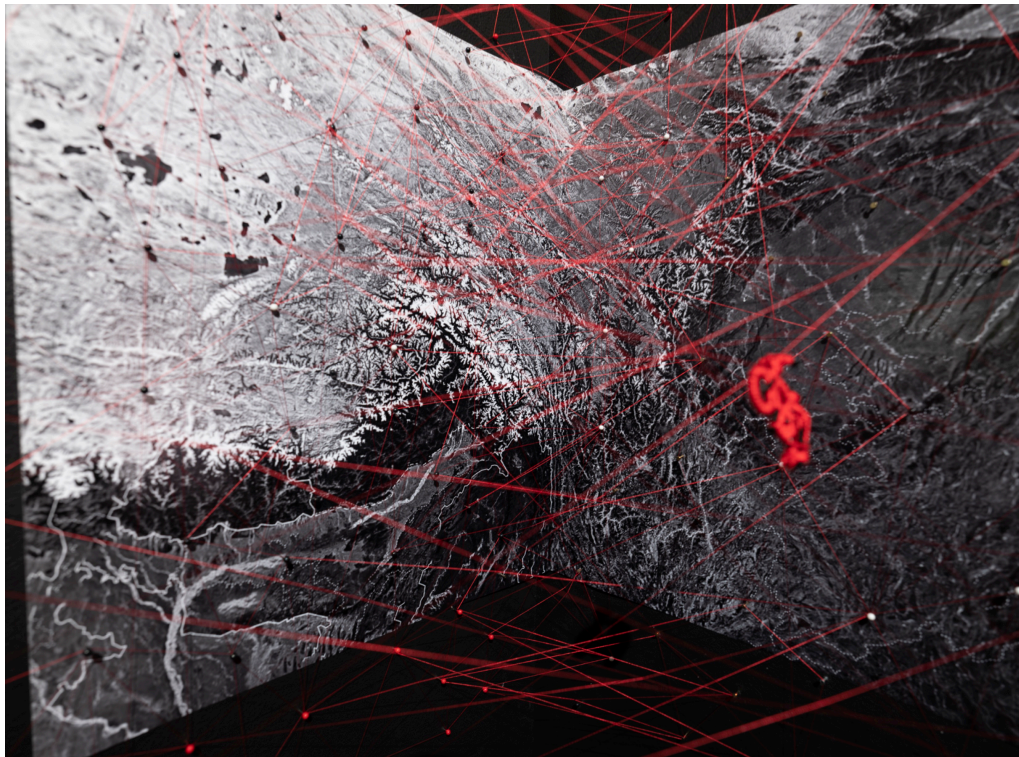
Emotionless, hand-made book, 2019



Emotionless, hand-made book, 2019



Exhibition photo in William Harris Gallery, 2019



JINXI, inkjet print with red strings, 2019