

# Position through Contextualising

## Line of Enquiry

In China, collectivism refers to the notion of everyone coexisting in a system or group and sharing a collective self. One of the illustrations is the concept of mother-child symbiosis. This project documents the stories of four new generations who had conflicts with their mothers when they were growing up, based on their own childhood experiences. It represents the various values of two generations in today's Chinese society and shows the unhealthy symbiotic relationship inside the family. Explore weaving and sewing techniques to demonstrate bonding and connection. I attempted to challenge two generations to reconsider the collectivism that underpins family authority.

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## Annotated Bibliography

### 1. The Country of 'Giant Babies': A Domestic Psychologist Examining the Chinese National Character

Wu, Z. (2016) *The Country of 'Giant Babies': A Domestic Psychologist Examining the Chinese National Character*. Huangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House.

The book analyses the current social problems in China, such as marriage, forced marriage, and filial piety. From the perspective of psychology, the author puts forward the notion of the "giant baby," which is deeply rooted in Chinese families. It is relatively radical to believe that for most adults in China, the psychological level is that of infants. The question that follows is: Am I a giant baby as well? In this book, the author proposed the symbiotic psychology of giant babies, which is expressed as looking for mothers everywhere, collectivism, unified thoughts, and against independence. There are no boundaries. This kind of symbiosis is the same person regardless of you and me. Those younger generations with strong self-awareness will resist and fight, so that there is a symbiosis of conflict. Such conflicts are common within Chinese-style families. It prompted me to have a process of collecting and recording conflicts and then translating them. The author's attitude is critical yet illuminating. Following his theory, I carried out the first set of iterations, intended to show the strong conflict and contradiction between mother and child, and amplify the oppression and rights within the family. But as the process went on, my understanding of the conflict became relatively mild.

### 2. Louise Bourgeois: Umbilical Cord

Bourgeois, L. (No date) *Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books*. Available at: [https://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/objbytag/objbytag\\_tag-vo98531.html](https://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/objbytag/objbytag_tag-vo98531.html) (Accessed: 21 May 2022)

In Louise's sculpture work, *Umbilical Cord*. A mother and child sewn together in pink coarse canvas fabrics are tightly connected by the umbilical cord, presenting a primitive symbiotic relationship. These remind me of my relationship with my mother and the conflicts we have when we get along through my growth. Her relationship with fabrics and weaving has been established from a very young age, which resonated with me. Her mother was a tapestry restorer and my mother was a tailor. I tried weaving, sewing by machine and hand sewing, adding different materials in the making process, showing the conflicts through vision and touch, and demonstrating the mother's strength. In the last week, inspired by garment pattern design, I used it as a visual form and made it into a publication. Louise's influence on me as I dug deeper into my own experience was tangible throughout the process.

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## Annotated Bibliography

### 3. Living a feminist life

Ahmed, S. (2017) *Living a feminist life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

This book's Sweaty Concept is quite enlightening. "A sweaty concept is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world... Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous and muscular activity. A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying." (Ahmed, 2017). There are two things to consider.

First, in the studio practice, to express the story of the new generations and the mother as they grow up in today's Chinese family, by attempting to weave and sew. Learning to weave and use sewing machines from scratch as my personal bodily experience, trying to communicate (understand, inquire) with this new knowledge and skills to achieve outcomes. I've developed an understanding of my mother, who is a tailor, and her complex sentiments through imitating her domestic sewing behaviour. This makes me realise I'm experiencing the feminist life on my own.

Second, if a body that is not at home in the world is placed in the family environment of two generations with conflicts in contemporary Chinese society. The body of the younger generation represented by me is not at home. We are on the path to self-awakening, and we need to struggle. It may take us a long time to understand and achieve balance in our family with our parents.

### 4. How to Mend: Motherhood and Its Ghost

Mersal, I. (2018) *How to Mend: Motherhood and Its Ghost*. Translated from the Arabic by R. Moger. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

The book is very poetic, uncharacteristically out of the grand narrative of motherhood, and instead focuses on showing the selfishness and guilt that the mother harbored. The book mentioned, "Biological speaking, the fetus is an alien body in the mother's body, a parasitic creature." The mother needs to constantly struggle with the child during the birth process, and the uterus is the product of the mother's protection from the fetus. The placenta is the manifestation of the fetus's victory in the fight. It shows a kind of mutual survival while reflecting the aggression and heterogeneity of children, which is very thought-provoking. In my presentation of the conflict, initially, I tried to show the extreme power of oppression and attack from the mother. But during fetus growth, the mother seems to be the weaker party who is oppressed and violated. Prompting me to consider, is showing conflict also a form of attacking the mother? Allow me to shift the narrative tone from the fierce disputes in childhood to the partial understanding and relief after growing up.

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## Annotated Bibliography

### 5. Lisa Kokin: SEWN FOUND PHOTOS

Kokin, L. (No date) *Lisa Kokin artist*. Available at: <http://www.lisakokin.com/sewn-found-photos01.html>. (Accessed: 21 May 2022)

Kokin's work captures other people's memories by sewing together other people's photos. As a result, people's resonance is amplified, and nostalgic feelings are evoked. It's also a memory and a historical archive. Stitching, as well as the thread itself, binds individuals together, inspiring me. When practising weaving, I cut out my mother's photo and my registration photo for the piano certificate and weave them together. After starting to sew, I attempted to integrate the black thread as a metaphor for shackles. Print what my mother said in words, and sewed them together with wool, mesh, and other composite materials to demonstrate the dominant mother. However, since the overall visual elements are relatively abstract and rely on the material itself, it is more like simple textile work. The main element is text. Unlike inherently emotional portrait photos, they imply information, and the power of conveying information will be diminished.

### 6. Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation

Jencks, C. and Silver, N (1970) *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

The bulk of the book explores the innovative manipulation of limited resources immediately to hand for the resolution of present needs. After its launch in the 1970s, once as a way to oppose existing curing systems. This purposeful but loose creation, like a collage, seems interesting to me. In the last week of iteration, to visualise the story of the conflict between mother and child, I found existing fabrics in the fashion studio, some of which are directional or memory-related in the pattern or colour, and some have material-specific characteristics (elastic, smooth, or rough). After touching the material, the image was constructed in my mind. These previously separated parts are brought together to take on new meanings and can continue to be improved, bringing a heterogeneous style. Such an approach, which follows individual wishes, is also regarded as feminist.

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## Extended analyses

### 1. The Country of 'Giant Babies': A Domestic Psychologist Examining the Chinese National Character

From a psychological standpoint, “Giant Baby Country” examines current social issues in China, such as marriage, forced marriage, and filial piety, and offers a notion of the “giant baby.” It caused controversy after its release in 2016. Because of the book’s core theme, which had a significant impact on traditional Chinese filial piety, many people were outraged after reading it. In the same year, it was a major hit, with various media people recommending it. However, it was withdrawn the following year, in 2017, as though it had become a forbidden book. Why isn’t it available anymore? Is it as a result of being brutally attacked? I believe the book’s tone is a touch extreme or one-sided, however, debates of collectivism, filial piety, and even patriarchy have significant social implications.

The book refers to “Among them, The big family of collectivism in China can be understood in this way, that is, everyone coexists in a system and group, thus constructing a psychological community and sharing a collective self, in which there is no ‘I’, but only ‘We’.” (Wu, 2016)

To elaborate, under such collectivism, people think that since we belong to a community, then I can arbitrarily make decisions for the roles of relatives around me, which is a kind of self-centeredness to a certain extent. This kind of self-psychology is the performance of the first 6 months of the baby. Both parents and children are big babies, according to the author, who believes that children are governed from childhood and that parents make decisions for them. In such a growth environment, children will continue to rely on their parents, developing a symbiotic relationship. In such a symbiotic relationship, if one party’s psychological development level exceeds that of an infant, it will pay more attention to setting boundaries and respecting that each person is an independent individual, and then contradictions and conflicts will arise.

This knowledge helped me realise that I was already struggling with a similar issue in my own family. My mother, who compelled me to learn piano when I was six years old, made a decision for me under the guise of “making me more competitive in society in the future.” I considered why I had to listen to my parents, respect their authority, and live in such a hierarchy. As a response, I compiled four stories of mother-child conflicts, including myself as an example. They include being forced to learn piano as a child, deciding a career after passing a college entrance exam, promoting marriage, and being spied at home. These stories depict our generation’s personal experiences, as well as the differences in views between the two generations.

In my opinion, it is difficult to completely change the attitude of the older generation. The symbiotic relationship between mother and child will last forever. From this stage, by exhibiting a morbid symbiosis, from the perspective of the younger generation, a preliminary revolt and even a revolution. My purpose is to arouse the older generation to reflect and rethink their current beliefs.

Personally, the role of graphic design in this, is a form of self-analysis and expression in this way. Graphic design provides value and meaning, articulates, simplifies, and communicates a point of view, and is a carrier of that point of view in a larger context.

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## Extended analyses

### 2. Louise Bourgeois: *Ode à l'Oubli* (English translation: "Ode to Forgetting")

The legendary artist Louise Bourgeois specialised in works with fabrics and textiles. Much of her work is based on her own childhood memories, and the subject is her own struggles with attachment to her parents. And her connection to fabric dates back to her childhood, with her mother, a tapestry restorer, helping out in the family's studio since she was a child. Weaving and sewing skills are evident in her work, with the act of sewing and symbolic restoration intertwined throughout her work in an attempt to repair the damage her childhood had inflicted on personal relationships.

Her illustrated book *Ode à l'Oubli* (English translation: "Ode to Forgetting"), is a new sort of publication, differ from her previous large-scale textile works. She used various fabrics and lithography printing, collage, abstract pattern creation, and sewing machine stitches.

The fabric replaces the paper of the traditional book, which has been used in this work. It is more visually and tactilely appealing due to the fabric's characteristics (canvas, lace, silk). Similarly, the fabric's skin-friendly characteristics built a delicate but powerful feeling.

The dominance and authority in the family are manifested in the conflicts between the mother and the child. I began iterating by mimicking her weaving techniques and creating carpet samples out of yarn, wool, and iron wire. In my initial experiments, the dark red wool represented the mother, and the thin yellow-green thread represented the child. Through materials and patterns, the aggressive side of the mother is shown. At the same time, I tried to integrate graphic elements that were relevant to the story in order to induce a memory. Encourage audiences to derive implicit meaning from images.

After trying weaving myself, I was recalled to the image my mother used to sew at home when I was a kid. Then I started my journey in sewing and fabrics. I used yarn, wool, and plastic mesh to merge mixed media with the printed conflict stories. Using black sewing thread to depict the mother's constraints. During my exploration of the sewing machine, the image of my mother stitching became even more vivid in my mind. In my heart, conflicts and struggles have become slightly calmer. It also reminded me of the one-piece dress my mother made for me when I was two years old. The garment pattern served as inspiration. Following further investigation, it was noticed that a 1-2 cm allowance for stitching was left while cutting the garment. Every garment is made to measure, and I aim to use the metaphor of the mother-child relationship and the relationship between pattern and fabric. The fabric is cut and sewn according to the pattern, but the allowance is left during cutting. This appears to be the boundary the mother set and uncertainty as the child grows up.

So I decided to remake and redesign my 2-year-old garment, and Louise guided me through visualising conflicts, which resulted in the concept of abstract graphics. The difference is that she plans ahead of time for the fabric she needs and then sews it, whereas I use what I have on hand. I used Riso printing to print the mothers' comments on the pattern, then composed the child's words as a response and handwrote them in the allowance on the fabric. Upon maturing, the tone of the child's statements shifted to one of comprehension and relief. Those garments were finally held together with clips as a publication.

During the unfolding process, the audience can interact with the publication by unfolding, flipping, feeling, and folding it again. At the same time, such a process can be viewed as ongoing activity, and the symbiotic relationship can be debated continuously.