



**Final Project: Parallels between Pottery and
My Identity as a Second-Generation Chinese
Growing Up in Canada**

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ACAM 320B: Health of Asian Diaspora in Canada

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April 16, 2023

Artist Statement

My brother and I were born two years apart. We were raised in the same household by the same parents and took part in a lot of the same activities growing up. Yet we are so clearly different, inside and out. Just as these two vases were thrown from the same clay body, one after the other, bisqued in the same firing, dipped into the same glaze, and oxidation fired in the same kiln. So why does each tell such a different story? As you first glance at them, your eyes gravitate more to one than the other. You can choose a favourite, that's okay. There is more of an elegance to one and a gaucheness to the other. I won't explicitly disclose here which one represents myself and which one represents my brother, but I will tell you now, I am the other.



The Inspiration & What These Two Vases Represent

I was inspired to incorporate my pottery into this final paper, as the more I explore this craft, the more I discover parallels to my own life, specifically, my identity, which something of focus in this course. Growing up in Canada as a second-generation kid, I have always walked the line between two worlds, stumbling between the two and never really fitting into either. My brother, on the other hand, fit in his whole life, perfectly balancing being Chinese and Canadian, no one would question him otherwise. This isn't about his success or our sibling rivalry, but rather, about the shadow he cast in his presence - the one I call home. When I share these vases with you, I hope you see beyond the clay and the glaze, and realize that these two vases share nothing more than the same foundation.

The Creation of the Vases and Cultural Expectations

In planning this project, I was set on creating a traditional Chinese ceramic vase form and discussing the influence of Chinese ceramics in modern North American art. Upon research, I learned they are notoriously difficult, taking months and years of consistent practice and dedication - something that would be impossible to commit to in the span of a month. After discussing this project and my vision with a trusted pottery teacher- who is also Asian and grew up in Canada - I decided to go with a style that I felt comfortable with, ultimately, presenting these two vases.

Having to admit that I only wanted to mimic a form because of its cultural meaning racks me with guilt, as if I was attempting to appropriate my own culture because I am not Chinese enough to create an authentically traditional form. While I am so grateful to have a mentor who saw through my tunnel vision and guided me away from that, this stems back to an expectation to perform and share "my" culture, Chinese culture, through art. As a child, I first experienced imposter syndrome walking

between two worlds, a common phenomenon among racialized minority groups that links back to underrepresentation in respective fields (Chakraverty, 2022; Bannerjee-Stevens, 2009). I tried to fit into whichever environment I was in, yet I was still seen as an “other” (too Chinese or not Chinese enough) by those around me. Teachers wanted me to share my culture through art, food, and music with my peers, yet my peers thought I was weird because I wasn’t like them. I figured, clearly, I didn’t do a good enough job of fitting into whichever dominant culture of the immediate space I was in. It’s exhausting, trying to figure out which side I tone up or down in order to fit into this expectation (McGee et al., 2017). Being seen as the stereotypes of my culture instead of who I am as an individual, was the reason I hated making art growing up.

Identity Formation

Identity formation is the most prominent parallel between my life and pottery. The coolest part about starting a new hobby is all the different realms within the said hobby. Over time, artists tend to gravitate towards certain styles, techniques, etc, thus creating an identity through their artwork. I don’t think I’m there yet. It’s hard to just land on one style and stick with it. I do know, however, that a lot of my current practice is a mix of artists and teachers I admire, whether it is conscious or not. I’m still developing an identity, perhaps in the moratorium stage, with high exploration and low commitment (B. Cheung, Class Lecture, Week 3).

Using Marcia’s model to explain my identity formation in real-life, until I was around 15 (around the time I started pottery), I didn’t really see a point in exploring my identity, struggling with identity diffusion (B. Cheung, Class Lecture, Week 3). Growing up in the shadow of my brother who fit the identity created for him, I didn’t bother creating an identity because I knew even if I created an identity in my other world, I

would eventually have to come back to the identity I was expected to be at home, something Marcia's model describes as foreclosure (B. Cheung, Class Lecture, Week 3). Now, having learned about Marcia's model, I am able to understand these phases, and recognize that in a way, exploring my identity in both my life and pottery is a good thing, that I will find my identity eventually and I need to explore both spheres to do so.

The Model Minority Myth and Art

The familial pressures of being a second-generation Canadian meant I was constantly surrounded by reminders of the sacrifices made for me and therefore my duty to live up to expectations as a repayment of sorts. The model minority (myth), which dehumanizes Asian Canadians with the stereotype that they are driven by success and are inherently obedient and hardworking, played a strong hand in my upbringing (Kim & Kirpalani, 2022). My parents felt it was the key to our success as Chinese Canadians, and therefore we should take advantage of this. While I know it is a myth, the stereotypes were internalized into my behaviours and impacted my life experience growing up. I wasn't supposed to have problems growing up, because everything was supposed to be perfect if I work hard, take on traditional roles, and stayed invisible if I was less than the best at something.

According to the myth, Asian students who aren't academically inclined and excel in every aspect don't even exist (Wing, 2007). So on one end of the spectrum, I had to be the best and achieve all of my parents' wishes. On the other end, if I strayed from the path that the myth dictates, I become non-existent. The invisibilization of not being a model of the model minority myth feels isolating, furthering the challenge of identity formation. Being an artist isn't part of the myth, but being invisible also allows me to take comfort in hiding behind my art, or feeling safe in the shadow of my brother. It allowed me to be subtly different. The second vase has the privilege of that,

being a vase but also taking on a non-traditional form, letting the other one take the spotlight.

Conclusion

By now you may have postulated that I didn't fit the mould that was expected of me. While the first vase was made and performed to a certain vision, in a way, the second vase did not have a choice but to follow the first. However it did not become the same form, it wasn't even a common or "practical" form. Overall, the experience of making art to use as a representative for an academic assignment was humbling, and navigating the making of these two vases was uncomfortable. I've never had to explain my work more than how I made it, and I've never shared the meaning behind a piece. When a passerby sees these two vases on display, they'll just see two ceramic vases of the same clay body, the same glaze, and different forms - a common ceramic set. Perhaps that is beautiful in itself - a story hidden in plain sight, yet I also wonder, how many vases get passed by, unnoticed in the shadow of another?



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