



Self- Appropriation

An Examination of a Chinese
American Identity

By Madeline Lee

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Process of Ideation

Throughout grade school, my most common fun fact is that I was half Chinese and half white. As a young child I thought it was cool to be half Asian and half white, likely because I was the only Asian person in my grade and the only half Asian in the school. When I grew up and my relationship with my Chinese parental figure strained, I became disconnected with and resentful of my Chinese identity, much like I felt with my father. I felt as if this urge to live in a culture that I had little knowledge was betraying my other identities.

Since I grew up with little connection to my Chinese heritage, I turned to pottery to reclaim my Chinese identity as something new; I wanted to create a narrative that reflected my Chinese identity and what I understood about it, or at least how it was presented to me through the western gaze.

Despite having direct bloodlines to China, I had very little education growing up about Chinese culture and history. Like most Americans, my impression of Chinese culture came from art marketed to the western world, exoticization of eastern culture, and the oriental culinary food such as chop suey, which translates from Chinese as "odds and ends."

Fully aware of my misconceptions of Chinese culture, I wanted to see if I could appropriate my own culture. While it seems like a wild concept to "appropriate" oneself, it felt like the challenge would be the solution to display the diverse complication of my identity. The complicated history of cultural appropriation blurs the line between the appreciation and inspiration from a culture and the blatant ripping off of ideas without truly understanding those ideas is almost invisible currently. I often questioned my own right to appropriate Chinese pottery, not wanting to

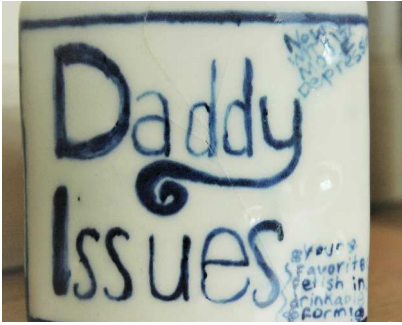
follow in the footsteps of the colonizers who have profited off a society they pretend to understand. To avoid perpetuating the racism and misconceptions created by appropriation, I aimed to not just recreate Chinese pottery, but to replicate the western interpretation of Chinese culture. Using the centuries of western countries playing international telephone to my advantage, I wanted to create something that might fool people into believing what they were seeing was "authentic" Chinese pottery, going as far to write in Chinese despite not knowing the language.

The first time I seriously worked with cobalt on porcelain clay was for a wheel throwing project to make pottery influenced by or made for a certain food. Fortune cookies became the obvious choice for me, a cookie inspired by Japanese senbei crackers, marketed as a symbol of Chinese culture in the US with added butter and sugar to adapt to the American pallet.

I related to the American pastry that markets itself as exotic even though it does not belong in Chinese culture. I made four objects: two Chinese ginger jars, a bowl and a hand-held porcelain sledgehammer along with porcelain fortune cookies that people would break, ideally with the hammer, to reveal my fake fortunes I wrote on the inside. It was with this project that I was able to make connections between the western version of Chinese culture and my disconnect of my Chinese identity tangible, using humor to critique the westernization of a culture by trying to emulate that culture.



This hammer is the most success part of my fortune cookie project. Not only did the hammer have more expression, but it was more thoughtful in its ultimate purpose and message.



In addition to "Daddy Issues," the series featured other emotionally driven products such as "Escapism" and "Existential Crisis."

As I continued my research in using blue and white pottery to explore my surface work, I turned to using slip casted flasks as a canvas. The result was a series of mental illness themed products: *From the Creator of Daddy Issues*. Full of angst and grief, I used humor to cope with my own mental health in a way that other people could relate to. Inspired by meme culture, I was drawn to the idea of a modern flask: meant to easily transport a substance to consume on the go, and often is shared among friends. For the *Daddy Issues* series, I allowed my dark humor to do most of the work while improving my brush work.

While working on the *Daddy Issues* series, I sought out the Chinese version of a flask and discovered the Chinese moon flask. Unlike the modern flask shapes I had been focusing on, moon flasks were larger and were used purely for decoration in the homes of royalty, valued for the difficulty of the form. Although the shape did prove difficult to make without cracking when made on a large scale, the form allowed me to successfully balance imagery and text.



My prototype moon flask that stood 6 inches tall.



Prototype next to bisque large flask



BLM Flasks

The first flask I made was the Black Lives Matter flask. After the murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, the BLM movement received international support and became one of the biggest movements in the United States. While I am nowhere near qualified to discuss the long-standing issues of the black community, I couldn't help but notice the similarities of the protests in the US and the protests in Hong Kong: two groups of people who feel they have been set aside and under represented by their governments, marching to end police brutality.



The Chinese text, 黑人的命也是命 is the most commonly accepted translation of black lives matter.

To represent the Hong Kong protesters, I used the image of Pepe the Frog, a very controversial character who is out of context image became synonymous with white supremacy in the US, but is a symbol of the rebellious youths in China and ultimately a symbol of the Hong Kong protests. To create separation from the alt-right, I used Hong Kong's versions of Pepe, adding a hard hat and goggles and a bloody eye which calls attention to the physical harm caused by the police's use of "non lethal" bullets, another issue protested in the United States. With these flasks, I wanted to capture the resilience and strength of the people behind these movements, while showing support for the causes.



Mulan Flasks

Being one of the most prominent Chinese figures in American pop culture, but also a feminist icon, Mulan has always been a role model of mine. Although the 1998 film stays mostly loyal to the historical context and themes of the original Chinese folktale, the accuracy to Chinese tradition is generalized and often misleading. Leading up to the making of the 2020 film, Disney promised fans the live action film would be authentic to the tale's place or origin. Disney's deceptive corporate social responsibility was uncovered with obvious whitewashing of Chinese concepts; demonstrating that the corporation's standard for creating an "authentic" film stops at having Chinese people on screen, not seeming to even consult a Chinese person for the script.

Using these flasks, I call attention to the blatant ignorance of non-Western cultures that is still persistent in the film industry. The large flask compares the imagery of a Chinese dragon, a water serpent-based creature and the more western fire-breathing dragon designed for the animated film, Mushu. For the English text, I used an excerpt of the original hymn of Hua Mulan translated to English, and for the Chinese text, I used food commonly found on a takeout menu, purposely misleading non-Chinese speakers that the Chinese text is a translation of the English.

"Her comrades are
all amazed.
Traveling together for
12 years,
They didn't know
Mulan was a girl.
The he-hare feet is
heavy
The she-hare eyes are
squinted
When the 2 hares run
side by side,
Can you tell if I am he
or she?"



"蛋花湯"
translating to
egg drop soup.



Buddha Flasks

Like many Asian-Americans, I grew up with the varying degrees of racism toward Asian cultures. Casual racism towards Chinese people includes benign stereotypes such as being good at math and more maleficent stereotypes of dirtiness and bad driving. The inspiration for these flasks came from the image on the left I saw posted on my Facebook feed: the condensing of Asian cultures and beliefs for something frivolous as likes is just a symptom of the marginalization of eastern cultures. Even in the current social climate, the picking of Asian ideas for trends or to use as buzzwords is something that is commonly overlooked.

For the Chinese text, I used the characters for the words live, laugh, and love as a continued play on buzzwords being overused to the point of kitschiness. To juxtapose the seemingly harmless side of racism, I painted the image of the Covid-19 virus, which was oftentimes referred to as “the Chinese Virus” by President Trump in the beginning of the 2020 pandemic.



Technical Issues, Challenges, and Technical Solutions



Me compressing the joint between the first face slab and the side slab.

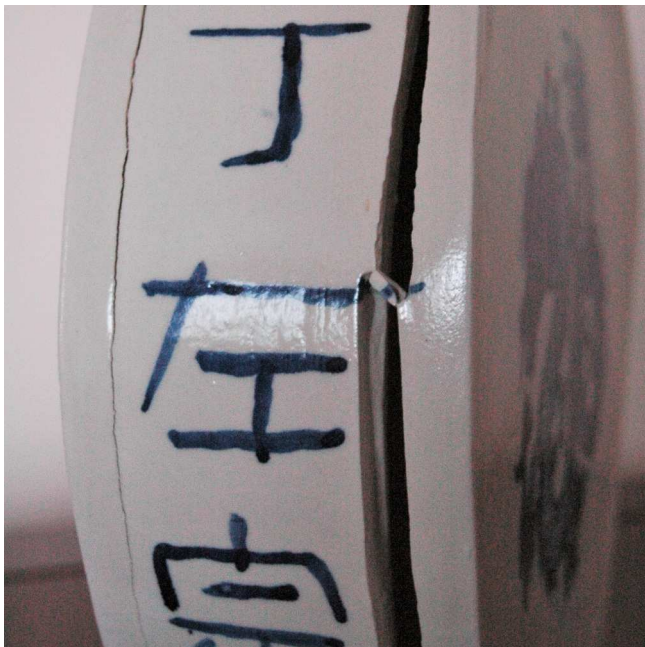
Large Flasks

For the large flasks, I was committed to hand building them to try to stay dedicated to what made the original moon flasks so valuable. For the faces and sides of the flasks, I used slabs of rolled clay: laying one of the face slabs on a wooden board, I wrapped the side slab on the circumference, and would close the form by placing the second face slab on top. After combining those parts to make the body, I would attach a neck and foot that was previously thrown. I had to do much of my experimenting to make the body of the vessel, playing with different wetness and thickness of the slabs to prevent the clay from



Although the stress between where the different slabs meet could lead to cracking, this breaking was likely due to wetness or different thickness

cracking and from the vessel from collapsing from under its weight. My main issue was that as soon as I added the second face slab, I was unable to compress the connection from inside the cylinder. To avoid cracking and warping in my flasks, I had to be extra careful in the drying process and had to be constantly compressing at every stage with different hardness of ribs.



Mini Flasks

The process for making the large flasks was very consuming of time and clay, thus slowing down my process of making. To make sure I had successful vessels for this thesis, I made miniature slip casted flasks that I decided to pair with my large flask in the end. The foot and the neck were molded from thrown parts and mold of the body was made with a plaster cylinder. Although I had to remake a couple molds, I ended up with three 2-part molds. After casting, I used slip cast "goop," which was made of casting slip and Epsom salt, to attach the different parts. I did have to experiment with how to use the goop for best attachment without cracking, ultimately deciding to an excessive amount of goop to attach the parts but compressing it into the joint as soon as the goop solidified.

Cobalt

If there is one thing I have learned since learning about the science of pottery, is that cobalt is a very strong colorant. A small amount of cobalt left over on a brush or the cobalt dust that sticks to the surface after blowing excess cobalt off could be seen after the glaze firing. But, using too much cobalt will cause bleeding and/or a metallic sheen to appear where the layer of cobalt is too thick. In learning to use cobalt, I applied cobalt in small quantities like water color paints. Since cobalt oxide is not a soluble substance, it sits on top of the surface like charcoal, allowing it to be brushed off, blended, and even erased. To glaze the flasks, I sprayed clear glaze since it gave me the most control over the thickness since excessive thickness could lead to the cobalt to bleed.







Above: Sides of the Buddha flasks

Below: Sides of Black Lives Matter flasks



Recipes

New Paltz Studio Porcelain ^6

Minspar	30
Grolleg	25
Flint	20
C&C Ball clay	10
Tile 6	10
Frit 3124	5
Bentonite	+2.5

Andrew Martin Forgiving Slip

Grolleg	39
Tennessee #1	10
Custer Feldspar	17
Nepheline Syenite	17
Flint	17
Water	40
Sodium Silicate	+125

Madeline Lee

Ceramics artist and craftsperson

49 Pamela Rd

Cortlandt Manor NY, 10567

(845) 853-4257

leem13@hawkmil.newpaltz.edu

EXPERIENCE

Kumon, Croton NY —Grader/
Homework Prep

March 2015- August 2016

Prepared and graded students'
homework and aided with their
practice work.

Kiwi Country Day Camp, Carmel NY
— Jewelry Specialist

Summer 2017 & Summer 2018

Helped teach and assist campers in
jewelry making. Ages Pre K- 8th grade

Peekskill Clay Studio, Peekskill NY —
Intern

Summer 2019

Assisting with the second session of
Clay Camp and general maintenance of
the studio including firings and
reclaiming studio clay

Mohawk Day Camp, White Plains NY
—Hands On Clay

Summer 2020

Assisting Hands On Clay head and
campers in wheel throwing. Ages 7-
teens

EXHIBITIONS

Materialistic- April 2019

Work from SUNY New Paltz Ceramics
Department at Art Centro

SUNY New Paltz Foundation Show —

Apr. 2018, Apr. 2019

Wood Design Annual Show — Feb

2018, Feb 2019

SKILLS

Quick and Eager Learner

Experienced with Photoshop

Public Speaking

Teamwork

Adaptivity

Teaching Children

EDUCATION

Hendrick Hudson High School,

Montrose NY — *Adv. Regents*

Diploma

September 2012 - June 2016

Peer Leadership, National Honor
Society, Captain of the Speech
team for two years, Drama Club,
Field Hockey, AP and Honors
student .

SUNY New Paltz, New Paltz NY

August 2016 - December 2020

Ceramics major with a minor in
chemistry and art history

Dean's List

Co-President of the Queens and

Kings of New Paltz

Volunteered under Lisa Sandick

Madeline Lee is a ceramic artist and craftsperson from Westchester, New York. After finding catharsis in craft, she uses her art to reflect her observations of the world and the impact it has with humor.

HER
COMRADES
ARE ALL
AMAZED

TRAVELING
TOGETHER
FOR 12 YEARS

THEY DIDN'T
KNOW MULAN
WAS A GIRL

THE HE-HARE
FEET IS
HEAVY

THE SHEPARE
EYES ARE
SQUINTED

WHEN THE 2
HARES RUN
SIDE BY SIDE
CAN YOU TELL
IF I AM A
ME OR SHE

花

花

花

花