2017

Culture and my art

Xin Chen

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Chen, Xin, "Culture and my art" (2017). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 16711.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/16711

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Culture and my art

by

Xin Chen

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Christopher Martin, Major Professor
Joseph Muench
Anson Call

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2017

Copyright ©, Xin Chen, 2017. All rights reserved.
DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work to my wonderful wife Xiying Liu for her great deal of encouragement and unwavering support; to my daughter Catherine Chen for being there for me throughout the entire MFA program; and to my wife’s family and my family members for understanding and giving me rock steady support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LIST OF FIGURES | ................................................................. | v |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ....................................................................... | vi |
| ABSTRACT | ........................................................................ | ix |
| CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ART JOURNEY | ......................................................... | 1 |
| Early Period | ........................................................................ | 1 |
| Studying Art in China | ................................................................ | 5 |
| Studying Art in the United States | .................................................................... | 8 |
| CHAPTER 2. CULTURAL STUDIES | ........................................................................ | 11 |
| Reasons to Study Cultural Topics in Art | .......................................................... | 11 |
| Chinese and Western Cultures | ......................................................................... | 12 |
| Culture | ......................................................................... | 12 |
| Chinese culture | ....................................................................... | 13 |
| Western Culture | ....................................................................... | 14 |
| Cultural Differences | .......................................................................... | 15 |
| Cultures Influencing My Art | .......................................................................... | 17 |
| CHAPTER 3. MY EXHIBITION | ........................................................................ | 22 |
| It is Me | ............................................................................... | 22 |
| Cultural Conflict Chair | ....................................................................... | 23 |
| Culture Shock Chair | ........................................................................ | 25 |
| Recalling the Bell | ........................................................................ | 26 |
| Chinese Zigzag Chair | ......................................................................... | 27 |
| Thunder Bird Table | ............................................................................... | 28 |
| Squares or Circles? | ........................................................................ | 30 |
| Happiness Whistle | ............................................................................... | 31 |
| Baby Rocking Chair | ............................................................................... | 33 |
| Women on the Way | ............................................................................... | 34 |
| Are You Safe? | ............................................................................... | 35 |
| CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION | .......................................................................... | 37 |
REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................... 39
APPENDIX IMAGE DOCUMENTATION .............................................................................. 43
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Adobe House Similar to My Grandparent’s House ........................................... 2
Figure 2. Book-The Art Road ...................................................................................... 4
Figure 3. Rembrandt, Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-Up Collar ......................... 5
Figure 4. The Night Watch, 1642, Oil on canvas, Amsterdam Museum on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam......................................................... 5
Figure 5. Portrait of M. P. Mussorgsky, 1881, The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia 6
Figure 6. Barge Haulers on the Volga, Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia...... 6
Figure 7. Chinese people's way, from Liu, Yang. 2015, East meets West, Taschen...... 17
Figure 8. Western people's way, from Liu, Yang. 2015, East meets West, Taschen ..... 17
Figure 9. Wu Xing Theory, from Wikipedia ................................................................. 18
Figure 10. It is Me, Installation, 2017.......................................................................... 22
Figure 11. Toy Gun Made of Steel Wire ...................................................................... 23
Figure 12. Introspection about Cultural Conflict, Chair, 2017.................................. 24
Figure 13. Culture Shock Chair, 2017 ....................................................................... 25
Figure 14. Recalling the Bell No.1, Chair, 2016 ......................................................... 26
Figure 15. Chime Bell, Chinese Instrument................................................................. 26
Figure 16. Recalling the Bell No.2, Chair, 2016 ......................................................... 27
Figure 17. Sichutou Guanmaoyi, Ming Dynastic, China.......................................... 27
Figure 18. Chinese Zigzag Chair, 2015 ................................................................... 27
Figure 19. Zig Zag Chair, Gerrit Rietveld, 1950-1959, Netherlands......................... 28
Figure 20. Thunderbird Table, 2017......................................................................... 28
Figure 21. Representation of Thunderbird, 2017....................................................... 29
Figure 22. Squares or Circles? Chair, 2016................................................................. 30
Figure 23. Representation of Huqin, 2016 ................................................................. 31
Figure 24. Happiness Whistle, 2016 ........................................................................ 31
Figure 25. Baby Rocking Chair, 2016 ................................................................. 33
Figure 26. Women on the Way, 2016 ...................................................................... 34
Figure 27. Are You Safe? Light, 2017 ................................................................. 35
Figure 28. Exhibition View No.1 ................................................................. 43
Figure 29. Exhibition View No.2 ................................................................. 43
Figure 30. Exhibition View No.3 ................................................................. 44
Figure 31. Artist Statement ............................................................................. 44
Figure 32. Representation of Huqin and Process of Disassembling or Assembling the Chai, Squares or Circles?, Walnut, Cherry, Fiber, Brass Hardware, 45"x17"x21, 2016 ................................................................. 45
Figure 33. Thunderbird Table and Process of Disassembling or Assembling the Table, Walnut, Cherry, Fiber Rope, 71"x31"x31", 2016 ................................................................. 45
Figure 34. When Cultural Tradition Hit Digital, Mixing Media Installation, Walnut, Cherry, Poplar, Fiber Rope, Digital Media (C4D), 44"x20"x5", 2017 ................................................................. 46
Figure 35. Cultural Conflict Chair, Mahogany, Plastic, Fiber Rope, 31"x17"x29", 2017 ........................................................................ 46
Figure 36. Recall The Bell Chair, Cherry, Maple, Fiber Rope, 16" x 21" x 44", 2016 ................................................................. 47
Figure 37. It is Me, Installation, Pine, Steel Wire, Fiber Thread, 2017 ......................... 47
Figure 38. Baby Rocking Chair, Mahogany, Walnut, Plastic, 28" x 11" x 23", 2016 ................................................................. 48
Figure 39. Chinese Zig Zag Chair, Cherry, Mahogany, 24"x22"x45", 2015 .................... 48
Figure 40. Are You Safe? Cabinet Light, Walnut, Plastic, Fiber Rope, 13.5"x24.75"x25", 2017 ........................................................................ 49
Figure 41. Walnut, Mahogany, African Padauk, Fiber Rope, 25.5"x20"x41", 2017 ......... 49
Figure 42. Happiness Whistle, Brass, Silver, 3.5"x2"x1", 2016 ....................................... 50
Figure 43. Women on the Way, Table Statue, Brass, Walnut, African Padauk, 8"x6"x4.5", 2016 ........................................................................ 50
Figure 44. Glass Meet Wood, Coffee Table, Walnut, Yellow Maple, 43"x25"x17.5", 2017
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Christopher Martin, and my committee members, Joseph Muench, and Anson Call for their guidance and support through the course of the creation of this thesis exhibition and research. In addition, I would like to thank my friends, colleagues, and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Iowa State University a wonderful experience.
ABSTRACT

This thesis is an account of my development as an artist. It is partly a cultural study, and partly a reflection of what has inspired my journey. It explores the cultural impact and intersections between Chinese and Western cultures that affect my work, and offers insights into my artistic experiences. I pull from a variety of sources for the purpose of explaining how my immersion in two cultures has changed the way I see and produce art. Here I try to offer a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings and social issues that are evident in my work and are important to me and others. My thesis is divided in four sections. In part one, I reflect on my personal experiences growing up in China, my immersion in Chinese culture, and my later pursuit of higher education in the United States. In part two, I offer a cultural study of Chinese and Western Cultures, and how I have been affected by Western culture. In part three, I reflect on my artistic production as I describe and explain eleven pieces I produced during my MFA study. I conclude my thesis by discussing my plans to move from studio furniture to mass-produced furniture.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ART JOURNEY

In this chapter, I divide my artistic study into three periods: first, my early period living with my grandparents and until before I went to college in China; second, studying art in a Chinese university; and third, studying art in the United States. Each of these periods had a huge impact on how my art career has developed. By reading about my journey, you will be able to understand how my art and my thinking about art evolved.

Early Period

Childhood is the first step of life for all of us, and it impacts us all differently. I was born in 1982 in Huludao, a small city in China, to a traditional Chinese family. My parents were very busy with work, so they decided that my grandparents would take care of me in their hometown Ankang. I lived with them until I was about four. This decision to place me with my grandparents had a big impact on my later artistic career.

I was greatly influenced by my grandparents’ culture and lifestyle. They were peasants who were diligent and sincere. These virtues were implanted in my heart and helped to push me to pursue art. I was also influenced by my grandfather’s furniture-making abilities and the environment he created for me. I was inspired by his work. Looking back, it is clear that these childhood experiences are why I chose to make furniture.
My environment also affected me. My grandparents’ house (Figure 1) is located in a beautiful mountain area near an ordinary, rural village where only a few people lived. A big river runs through the valley, and there are some farm fields on the sides of the mountains. Their house, located in the middle of the woods, was an old building made of adobe with only three rooms. Inside this simple house, we had old handcrafted furniture, a traditional stove, and colorful New Year’s pictures on the wall: all things that represented traditional Chinese culture.

There were many different kinds of trees around the house. I still feel happy when I recall them. The thing that impressed me the most from those years was seeing my grandfather making furniture. He made a lot of chairs, stools, and tables. Many times, I sat or played near him while he worked and saw what he did. Sometimes he asked me to carry a small piece of wood for him. Even though the furniture was not fancy, watching and experiencing my grandfather making furniture meant a lot to me. I consider him my first mentor, especially for furniture making. I think the seed of making furniture was planted deeply in my heart during that time, and it started to grow along with me. This past is one of the main reasons why I love making and designing furniture and wanted to become a furniture design artist. When I was first introduced to furniture design in the Integrated Visual Arts (IVA) program at Iowa State University, despite not having any real experience, I felt I was in familiar territory.
When I was four years old, I left my grandparents and moved back to my parents’ home in Huludao. In elementary school, I received some arts education, but it was the chance to study drawing in an art workshop taught by real professional artist that changed my life. Normally, I would not have had the opportunity to study art in such a small city as Huludao. Such art workshops did not exist until the “Chinese Economic Reform” policy was enacted by our leader, Xiaoping Deng, in the 1980s (Naughton, B. 1995). With this reform policy, there was an enormous flood of new culture. Like a recovering dragon, China embraced its own traditions and began to combine them with elements from the outside world. That was when everything started to develop and change. Prosperity spread out across China as it encouraged its citizens to pursue and learn from Western countries and then bring those experiences back home to help China develop economically. People did not only study Western industry, but they also paid attention to Western art. Art workshops were created by some artists based on these experiences and were one of many good examples of this development period in China.

Attending the art workshop was a great experience and had a big influence on my decision to study art later. The first time I ever drew with a pencil was in one of these art workshops, and it shaped the way I view art. Although the workshop lasted only six weeks, as a little boy of eight years old, I learned a lot, such as how to draw simple objects like squares, spheres, and cones. This experience really helped me to build my artistic dream.
The most impressive thing I received from the course was a book called “The Art Road” (Figure 2), which taught me artistic techniques and showed me beautiful drawings, paintings, and sculptures. I fell in love with art during that time. After that I always felt excited to draw, and I dreamt of becoming an artist in the future. I studied hard in art class and got straight A's during elementary school. I sowed a seed of the artistic dream in my heart during that time.

In middle school, art classes were no longer available due to the exam-oriented Chinese system. Students were required to spend more time studying the main subjects such as Chinese, Math, and English. Although this situation was very hard for me, it did not stop me from drawing. I also found another way to create art. I took my father’s camera to take photograph of beautiful landscapes like those I saw in magazines. Even though a camera was not always available for me to use, the idea of expressing my emotions though art began to grow. Many sketches and photos accompanied me throughout middle school. Fortunately, an art teacher was hired for our high school when I was in the second year, so I got a chance to study art again, and I systematically learned all of the fundamental drawing and painting skills. The most exciting thing was learning about Chinese and Western art. By that time, I recognized some famous Western works that inspired me at the time were Roman sculptures and Greek mythology. I was very interested in the West’s classical antiquity. The
The sum of the artistic experiences of my childhood had changed me and I felt a little sprout of art had started to grow in me. I was close to finding my art path.

**Studying Art in China**

In 2000, I studied art at Shenyang Normal University. Many of my artistic concepts, thoughts and additional fundamental techniques were built in that period. All of that knowledge laid the foundations for my art development in the future. During this period, I devoted all of my time, energy, and passion to drawing, watercolor, and photography. Since my school followed a traditional Russian training methodology, I was greatly influenced by the Russian academic style and especially Russian Realism. Most of my work tended toward Realism. I was particularly inspired by the Dutch painter Rembrandt (Figure 3) and his fascinating and unique way of dealing with lights in his paintings. His use of light gave me a new kind of visual perception that conveyed his spirit with its atmosphere, such as in The Night Watch (1642) (Figure 4) and the Self Portrait (1659) (Figure 3). Russian painter Ilya Repin’s painting style and attitude toward life was the most impressive to me. The most interesting thing about Repin was that he merged both Symbolism and

*Figure 3. Rembrandt, Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-Up Collar*

*Figure 4. The Night Watch, 1642, Oil on canvas, Amsterdam Museum on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*
Impressionism in his work, which resulted in a strong visual impact, such as with the Portrait of M. P. Mussorgsky (1881) (**Figure 5**) and the Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870-1873) (**Figure 6**). He was not only following the academic rules of painting, but he also made great efforts to express real life and his thoughts in his work. Besides what I studied in art school, I also started to explore different artistic styles in my junior year, such as Naturalism, Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism. My many professors were in different art fields and encouraged me to explore new art styles and to try to express ideas differently.

China was more open after the “Chinese Economic Reform” Policy in the 1970s. I got more opportunities to study, experience, and appreciate different art forms from other countries. Many famous artists visited China and exhibited their work. I frequently went to museums and famous exhibitions, sometimes in my city, but most big exhibitions were in big cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. I still remember the incredible experience of visiting the Salvador Dalí exhibition in Beijing in 2002. That was the first time I saw authentic Dalí works. It was so impressive to me. I can remember every work in the exhibition room vividly anytime I think about it. These valuable experiences pushed me to
explore art through different avenues. Confident in my research and techniques, I began to create and apply what I had learned in my art-work.

I did not commit to any of the “-isms” – Realism, Expressionism, Surrealism rather I tried to pick up different elements from all of the artistic styles that interested me. One of my paintings is called “The Chinese Red”, which was judged by my university to be an excellent student art work, and it was incorporated into the university’s art collection. This piece carried strong cultural ties and was mostly painted with three colors—red, blue, and yellow. The focal point was made by using deep blue and Chinese red in two areas of the painting. Another idea in this work was to express cultural differences by painting yellow high heel shoes laid on a red traditional Chinese costume—a Cheong-sam, or a Chinese slit dress. This motif combined different cultures, traditional thinking, and modern feelings.

In addition, I was in four group exhibitions during that time. I began to developed leadership skills by organizing various art-related activities in college. I became president of the University Photographic Association in 2002 and, I organized trips for our members to practice photography and inspire their creativity. In order to raise awareness about our work at the university, I organized several exhibitions. To better serve the organization, I began delivering workshops for new members in my spare time. All of these experiences were a great benefit to me, especially the workshops. They gave me experience with teaching art, and I became more interested in art education as a career.

After graduation in 2004, I found a job in a bank. Although this job did not directly fulfill my dream to make art, I nonetheless brought my strong interest in art to the job. In my second year at the bank, I started organizing art exhibitions as well as art movie screenings with follow-up discussions to help my co-workers learn to appreciate movies about art. I had
a great number of opportunities to improve my social, teaching, communicating, and coordinating skills during that period. As I learned more, my desire to teach and make art continued to grow. I love meeting people that were educated in art, and realized that I would need to learn more to achieve my goals. Therefore, I decided that I wanted to return to school and get a graduate degree.

**Studying Art in the United States**

My wife moved to Iowa State University to pursue her Ph.D. in economics in 2009. Two years later, I left my job at the bank in China and came to the U.S. to live with her. Coming to the U.S. began a whole new life for me. I learned English and continued to make and study art—the seed of art in my heart had sprouted, and it was growing! As I made more and more art, I became more and more convinced that I wanted to teach art as well. It was clear that an M.F.A. degree was in my future.

The most important factors in helping me make a final decision about pursuing an MFA were meeting Professor Chris Martin and getting to know the furniture design program at Iowa State University (ISU). Meeting Professor Christopher Martin was an accident—one of my American friends saw my artwork and liked it. She recommended that I should go to art school. I started to get information about the art program at ISU. I was thrilled to find the furniture design program and got very excited about it. I then met Professor Martin and talked with him at the university’s wood studio. After he saw my portfolio and furniture design sketch samples, he encouraged me to pursue graduate school in the MFA program. He gave me many suggestions and lent me some books. At that point, I started to have hope of being able to achieve my dream of becoming an artist.

Talking about wood work with Professor Martin brought back childhood memories of when I lived with my grandparents. Many pieces of furniture made by my grandfather were
conjured up in vivid colors in my mind. An urge to make furniture took over my entire body. I was not sure about furniture design and had no previous experience with it at first, but as I learned more about the program, it seemed to be a perfect fit. I was positive that I wanted to build a career around furniture design.

I started in the IVA program in Spring 2015 and learned a great deal from it. Not only did I improve my artistic skills and strengthen my knowledge of art, but I also broadened my ideas conceptually, established my own artistic voice, and worked to become a professional artist. Over the course of the three years, I studied furniture design, metal design, drawing, painting and artistic theories. I finally decided to focus on furniture design with metal design as a minor.

I still remember how excited and nervous I was the first time I made furniture. I felt I had a natural talent for woodworking. I was confident about using the tools and applying the concepts I was taught. Everything looked familiar to me. It seemed that this knowledge was awakened from inside my heart. Learning how to make woodworking joints was critical for me, especially the mortise and tenon joint. Through research, I discovered that this kind of joint has been used for thousands of years by woodworkers in different cultures around the world (Zhang, X. 2011). More surprisingly, this technique was even older than Chinese characters and even predated the Neolithic Hemudu Culture (5000 BCE to 4,500 BCE) in Ancient China. “Archaeological evidence from Chinese sites shows that, by the end of the Neolithic, mortise-and-tenon joinery was employed in Chinese construction” (Liu, X. 2002).

Only later was it used in furniture. Learning this pushed me to study not only Chinese culture, but other cultures as well. I designed many furniture pieces by experimenting with different joints that eventually become important for my work. The most significant and unique design
types are the ones in which the furniture can be disassembled and rearranged with embedded cultural elements to create a new imagery, such as “Square or Circle? (The chair)” and “Thunderbird Table”. This idea of using joinery to assemble and reassemble furniture has become a signature of my designs which I have shown in many exhibitions. I will discuss about these works in detail in a later chapter.

When I realized that joinery were used in both China and the West, it motivated me to study my own Chinese culture more closely. Five thousand years of Chinese history bred a rich national culture. It had many magnificent features and elements such as Chinese characters, costumes, patterns, and so on. They are deeply implanted everywhere in my society. As a Chinese artist, I feel I have a responsibility to carry it forward and introduce the quintessence of Chinese culture to people who are trying to understand China. I included important Chinese elements in my work such as the color red, certain patterns unique to China, Chinese characters, and theories. My metal pieces Happiness and The Women on the Way are two examples, and I will discuss them in detail in a later chapter. Besides Chinese culture, I also studied aspects of Western culture. Different cultures became a creative source that has inspired me in my art exploration. “Thunderbird Table” was a perfect example of my cross-cultural studies.

Looking back, I have changed a lot as an artist in the course of my M.F.A. degree. It was not only about gaining knowledge, but also gradually changing my perspective in life, my philosophy, and my values. I was living in a different culture, and this gave me a new lens to see the world and create my art, and it changed my art in turn. This special situation pushed me to actively play with psychological and cultural elements to naturally convey my emotions in my work and effectively involve the viewer into the soul of my work.
CHAPTER 2. CULTURAL STUDIES

In this chapter, I will discuss why the combination of culture and art fascinates me, the meaning of culture, differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and how these cultures influence my art.

Reasons to Study Cultural Topics in Art

The phenomenon of cultures shifting in the context of globalization is very interesting and important to me. Globalization has removed barriers and distances between countries and cultures (Abdelrazik, A M, 2015). In this context, people who have diverse cultural backgrounds have increasingly migrated to other nations and brought ideas, skills, and traditions from their motherland with them. As a result, culture has become a complex subject in most societies, and is reflected in individuals, communities, and countries. The phenomenon of cultures mixing together provides many positive opportunities for society, but it also brings many challenges, such as religious or cultural conflicts or other issues. This giant complex structure of mixed-culture societies is influencing the entire world. As an artist, I want to reflect on this social reality. Moreover, my personal experience living in two different countries and encountering different cultures makes me part of this complex structure.

I was formed into a Chinese cultural identity after thirty years of living in my home country: This is a crucial factor which plays an unshakeable role in my life. However, when I came to the United States, I met a new culture that I had to adapt to. I felt a culture shock. I managed to balance Chinese and Western lifestyle and cultures, and I applied this mentality to my work. These different cultural experiences became the inspiration that pushed me to create my art. As a result, I developed my own artistic language using cultural elements to convey my ideas and create a resonance with people who have similar experiences in society.
My reading of reality also plays an important role. Many consumer products have been endowed with cultural symbols and many are designed for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a three-dimensional artist, I want to use my cultural thinking to design and make furniture. I hope my art pieces become appropriate cultural carriers that will facilitate communication about both Chinese and Western cultures.

**Chinese and Western Cultures**

**Culture**

If we want to understand Chinese or Western cultures, we have to know what culture is first. There are dozens of definitions. Culture is a very complex term in the English language (Williams, R. 1983). Abdelrazik describes that “Culture is an identical combination of memories, visions, values, symbols, expressions, and innovations, which leads human groups to establish a nation. Culture saves its civilized identity in a developing frame owing to its internal dynamics and its capability of communication” (Abdelrazik, A M, 2015, citing Benedict, 2005, p. 10).

In my understanding, culture is a large, integrated whole which develops in specific places over a long period of time. There are many cultures around the world, based on different people who live in various places producing different cultures and civilizations. Within cultures there often are subcultures.

People are not only applying cultural elements in daily life and work, but also are influenced by it in many aspects intangibly or tangibly. No doubt, the cultural elements have been instilled in a society and people’s lives, such as common behaviors, food, clothing, and lifestyles. From the historical and social perspective, culture can be seen in numerous ways, such as literature, religions, arts, laws, ethics, and etiquette. Culture is deeply anchored in people’s hearts. What is the most important part in culture? Human beings are the most
important part. Looking back into human history, humanity not only created culture, but was also created by culture.

**Chinese culture**

Chinese culture can be dated back to more than five thousand years. It is one of the oldest cultures in the world (Chinese Dynasty Guide, 2008). Since China has one of the Earth’s earliest civilizations, it has had a profound impact on the world in many aspects, such as language, writing system, literature, philosophy, virtue, and etiquette. Most Eastern Asian countries were dominated by Chinese culture (Wong, D. 2017). Today, people who live in East and Southeast Asian countries and in Chinese communities throughout the world still continue to celebrate and practice Chinese traditions and festivals. With globalization, Chinese culture is still spreading and influencing the world. (Website, The original and unique culture of China).

China has 56 officially recognized ethnic groups (Guo, R. 2011). A general term, “Zhonghua Minzu”, was created for all Chinese to describe the nature of Chinese nationalism (Landis, D. & Albert, R D. 2012). Throughout Chinese history, it is not hard to find many ethnic groups who have merged and assimilated with each other, while some even disappeared. Now, Chinese people officially are considered one nationality that includes all 56 ethnic groups.

Today, the idea of Chinese culture carries numerous cultural connotations and elements. It includes spiritual culture and material culture which are categorized according to specific characteristics and geographical regions. The most typical cultural influences are found in architecture, philosophy, Chinese written characters, auspicious symbols and patterns, instruments, religions, customs, and historical relics. In other words, the essence of Chinese culture is represented by these typical traditional Chinese elements which are different from other cultures. The examples are many: Chinese architecture include (e.g., The Forbidden City,
the Great Wall, and Suzhou Garden), costumes (e.g., Chinese silk, the Tang suit, and Cheongsam), religions and philosophy systems (e.g., Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Dragon, and Kylin), traditional musical instruments (e.g., the erhu, pipa, guzheng, suona, and huqin), and the theory of the Five Elements, also known as the Wu Xing theory: Fire/red, Earth/yellow, Wood/blue, Metal/white and Water/black (Yu, D. 1999). Throughout Chinese history, China’s unique art, culture and distinctive symbols have been carried through time and are clearly distinguishable from other cultures. Moreover, they identify Chinese culture to the world.

**Western Culture**

Western culture can be considered as Western civilization, Occidental culture, the Western world, and Western society (Hayas, C J. H., 1954). It is a popular term and has been backed by a thousand years of Western history. It originated in Ancient Greece, then passed through the Roman period, Christianity, the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, up to the current era of Modern Civilization. Western culture is a rich culture that includes specific ethical values, religious beliefs, social norms, political philosophy, traditional customs, science and technology, and art and literature, and more (Wikipedia: Western Culture). Although it has its origin in Europe, Western culture can be found in many countries outside of Europe. Many countries have a strong cultural relation to Europe due to immigration and colonization including the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Looking at Western history, Christian culture heavily influenced Western counties. The concept of Christianity was deeply implanted in Western people’s hearts. It also became their cultural identity (Dawson, C. & Olsen, G. 1961). Besides this, Western culture also includes the indigenous cultures from indigenous people who had the original settlements and maintained their own traditions of a given region (Sanders, D. 1999), such as Native American, Australia
Torres Strait Islanders, and New Zealand's Māori. Their cultures and customs were also very important and have influenced Western culture. Western culture is a big pool that contains many cultural treasures. It is difficult to study them all in a short period of time, but there are some important commonalities that attracted me. This includes the history of Western art, and the concepts of free thought, rational thinking, individualism, human rights, capitalism, and the pursuit of happiness.

Cultural Differences

Nowadays, the world has become a global village. The phenomenon of multiculturalism has happened in most societies. Cultural differences manifest in many aspects including social orientation, beliefs and values. Belief systems which come from religions and philosophies dominate people’s thinking. “Values” are defined as “broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (Hofstede, G. 1986, p. 5). Values also allow people to judge for themselves if a thing is good or evil (Ourfali, E. 2015). Knowing about people’s beliefs and social values helps in the understanding of the cultural differences, which will help people understand diversified cultures and societies, avoid many cultural conflicts, and accelerate cultural harmony. I will discuss some Chinese and Western culture differences based on my values, interpretation, and research.

There are many differences between Chinese and Western culture, including (but not limited to): living principles, religion and truth, collectivism and individualism, and passion and venturing. I think the most important aspect is the dimension of collectivism and individualism. Hofstede (2011) defines collectivism as: “a societal (…) characteristic (…) in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (…) that continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty, and oppose other in-groups.” (Hofstede, G. 2011, p. 11). Individualism, according to Hofstede, is
characterized by “Everyone is supposed to take care of him- or herself and his or her immediate family only” (Hofstede, G. 2011, p.11). In my opinion, most Chinese people follow a collectivist way of thinking, while most Western people follow more of an individualist way of thinking. This philosophy is reflected in many social aspects.

My understanding is that Chinese people think somewhat intricately, like a spiral. This logical thinking is from the traditional Chinese Philosophy of Confucianism. In this philosophy, collectivity is prized. Individual needs are second and follow after the collective good. According to Abubaker (2017, p. 13), this is because “Individuals in collectivist cultures tend to be more concerned about the importance of being members of a cohesive group. This may be to protect themselves socially in their peer groups in return for their loyalty and conformist social behavior.” People who encounter some social problems need to think not only about the problem itself but also about the relevant social environment and relations. This way of thinking makes the problem become more complicated.

In Western culture, I have observed this kind of logic is not followed. People’s thinking is linear. Because they advocate individualism, they do not need to consider anything outside of the target. This leads Western people to think simply and efficiently. Moreover, it is also expressed in lifestyle choices. Chinese people live in a group. For example, Chinese people have a very close relationship with their family members. They frequently meet together and a large number of young people after getting married still live with parents or grandparents. Most Western people typically live on their own in a nuclear family setting. Normally they leave their parents when they get married and many people leave earlier. Connection and relationships are the other parts that reflects this philosophy.
Chinese people have a more intricate social network than the most Western people because people believe in collectivism. No matter what their experience in their growing, learning, living, and working, collectivism will lead people to join in different kinds of social networks that make their relative networks more completed. Meanwhile, every single different social network links to each other, which forms a giant, complex society. In term of connections, everyone relates to each other based on various social networks (Figure 7). In other words, in Chinese culture people cannot escape from this intricate social network based on collectivism. Most Western people simply believe the individual is the center of the society. Their relationships and networks are based on themselves (Figure 8).

**Cultures Influencing My Art**

The way that culture influences art and design practices has become a complex and profound problem in our society (Abdelrazik, A M. 2015). Culture and design interact closely. When designers create a piece of art work, they also have to study cultures at the same time (Boradkar, P. 2010). Designers are human beings who have their own cultural background from their society that forms their cultural identity. This cultural identity will reflect their values and their work will reflect their culture. Designers are always trying to express themselves while involved in the design process (Abdelrazik, A M. 2015). My cultural identity is Chinese, so my body of work is heavily related to Chinese culture and reflects the Chinese
historical values. My work was also influenced by Western culture because I am living and studying in a Western country- the United States. My art is based on this cultural mix of identities and experiences, and it integrates various cultural elements. Meanwhile, it is also a self-expression of cognition and experience that comes from my innermost emotions.

There are many Chinese cultural elements that I apply to my work. The three Chinese philosophies that are deeply reflected in all of my art work are: Confucianism, the Wu Xing (the Five Elements) (Figure 9), and Chinese Red.

Confucianism is a traditional philosophy, but is considered as a religion, a humanistic philosophy, and simply a way of life (Yao, X. 2000). Humanity is the core of Confucian ethics (Juergensmeyer, M. 2005). In this philosophy, the most important element of Confucian ethics is characterized by the Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant virtues. In traditional China, people’s behavior was strictly guided by Confucian doctrine. This philosophy still affects people today. The Three Fundamental Bonds deal with traditional society’s most fundamental social relationships: father and son, lord and retainer, and husband and wife. As essential relationships, these three serve as shorthand for all human relationships” (Knapp, K N. 2009, p. 2252). The Five Constant Virtues are: benevolence (Rén, 仁); righteousness (Yì, 彥/义); propriety (Lǐ, 礼/礼); wisdom (Zhì, 智); integrity (Xīn, 信) (Runes, Dagobert D., 1960; Knapp, K N. 2009). The Doctrine of the Mean is the most essential in the propriety part. It is very important in the Confucian canon: “the

Figure 9. Wu Xing Theory, from Wikipedia
proper action is the way between the extremes” (Website: philosophy.lander.edu). Generally speaking, this means a balance of outside world and inner spirit influences, and it also means a sense of balance that merges humans with the universe. It also stresses the unity of opposites in the world. Moreover, it recognizes the potential for long-term goals. This was the most influential traditional Chinese philosophy in my art work but it also guides my behavior and life. So this balance can always be found in my work, no matter which material, colors, shapes, and cultural elements.

The Wu Xing (Figure 9) concept is from Taoism and also called the Five Elements, the Five Phases, the Five Agents, the Five Movements, and the Five Planets: Mars/Fire, Saturn/Earth, Jupiter/Wood, Venus/Metal, Mercury/Water (Zai, J. 2015). Each elemental property corresponds with one color, which are Fire/red, Earth/yellow, Wood/blue, Metal/white and Water/black. In Wu Xing theory, all five elements are applied to the “mutual generation” and the “mutual overcoming” by the certain order as shown in the figure above (Kommonen, K. 2011). That means all things are from these five fundamental elements, each of which dominated the others. This theory highlights the balance among these elements and this balance is the key to maintain all things working well together. I applied this theory to my work by seeking the common point and using different cultural elements.

Chinese Red also a major element in my work. I use it as a special element to represent the Chinese culture in my work. It is the national color in China, and symbolizes happiness, good fortune, and joy. It can be found everywhere during the festivals, holidays, and family gatherings such as the Chinese New Year. There are many daily things relating to Chinese Red; for example, monetary gifts are always wrapped in a red envelope, and a red bag symbolizes good fortune. Authority is the other important significance of red color. The only
person who was allowed to use red color was an emperor in Chinese feudal society. Today, the Chinese government uses the red color for official purposes such as official seals and official titles.

Although Chinese Red was recorded as a color name in English in 1924 for the first time (Maerz, A. & Rea Paul, M. 1930), it has been used for a long time in Chinese history. Red was associated with blood in ancient China. The Chinese character for blood was recorded on tortoise shells during the primitive cultural period in China. An important cultural rite during that time was blood sacrifices (Wang, Y. 2013). Red became an important color by people worshiping blood during that time. The material, vermilion, was also available and so people used it. Vermilion is one of the oldest colors. The oldest piece of vermilion work ever found was a lacquered wooden bowl from the Chinese Hemudu culture, dated 4000-5000 BCE (Wikipedia, Lacquerware). Another other reason for the importance of the color red is worship of fire by worshiping the sun. Because fire is red, they believed the sun is an origin of the world in ancient China. These are the reasons for Chinese Red becoming the national color.

Western culture is a rich treasure of history, philosophy, and beliefs that I have learned a lot from. In my perspective, the most interesting thing is the West’s rational way of thinking which is different from China’s. I know both ways of thinking formed through a long historical development process. Normally, most Chinese people have an ability to think more intuitively, however, most Western people have an ability to think more rationally. This does not mean the Chinese people cannot think rationally just because they are from different cultures. We can find their roots from both sides of the old philosophies, such as Confucianism and Green Philosophy.
During my three-year study period, I learned how to think rationally in many aspects, and understood how to apply intuitive and rational thinking to affect my work and even my attitude towards life. Chinese thinking apparently considers the general entirety that comes from intuitional experience. Western thoughts pay attention to logical thoughts that allow them to calmly observe and distinguish the objective material world. These two ways of thinking are very helpful for me to create my art. For example, when I start to project a boldness of conception, I will use the intuitive thinking. It will give me more general ideas and let me think creatively. After getting the general conception, the rational think will play a big role to make sure the inspiration, the conception, and the process possible or not.
CHAPTER 3. MY EXHIBITION

The eleven works that I will talk about in detail in this chapter were collected for this exhibition. There are nine furniture pieces and two metal pieces, which shown the course of my art growth over time. These pieces are inspired by different motifs and reflect many aspects: personal experiences, cultural issues, cultural communication, and social issues, but they share a similarity in how Chinese and Western cultural elements were applied. The key to my work is dealing with Chinese and Western cultures, and organically merging different cultural elements together to express artistic emotions and to raise social issues. One of the most important visual feature of my work is a unique Chinese cultural tastes. Every work clearly represents Chinese cultural elements based on different meanings and purposes. But they also try to tactfully apply Western cultural elements to serve the theme.

My art was created by three steps. The first step is finding an interesting topic. My interests are based on my personal experiences and social issues. The second step is to seek solutions with cultural thinking. The third step is designing it with Chinese cultural taste, especially using joinery techniques.

It is Me

This piece (Figure 10) is made of wood and wires. The idea of this piece is to reflect how I found my art path and how I became a mature artist while studying during the IVA program. This is a very important experience about my art thinking, personal life, and future

Figure 10. It is Me, Installation, 2017
career. This piece was composed of four different parts that were my four situations when I met a big challenge. By making this piece, it allows me to recall where I am and where should I go. It also encourages me to face any challenges in my future career. As audiences view it, I want to convey the ideas that, as a Foreigner-Chinese student who has lived and studied in a different culture/country, one faces and solves many cultural issues every day and by working hard I could find an art path and get to this place artistically.

This piece was made of wood and metal wires. Together, the four wire sculptures create a main body that represents how my thinking changed during the IVA program. Wood stools act as pedestals support the wire sculptures, which express my field of study: woodworking. All parts were lined up on the ground, showing the timeline of my art developing. The inspiration of using wire is from my childhood experience, which is also part of modern Chinese culture. During my childhood, only a few toys were available for me. Making toys became a new way for pleasing myself. Metal wire was an abundant available material, so my friend and I made a lot of simple wire toys such as wire guns (Figure 11) and rolling wheels.

Cultural Conflict Chair

This chair (Figure 12) is a conceptual piece. The idea of this piece reflects introspection about cultural conflict between Non-Western and Western cultures. Cultural conflict occurs when different belief systems and values collide (Wikipedia, Culture conflict). Cultural
conflict issues increasingly arise in the world along with globalization, especially in immigrant countries like the United States. Why do different cultures conflict? Culture belongs to a majority which then dominates people’s beliefs and values in the nation. So the majority’s beliefs and values often are identified as natural and normal (LeBaron, M. 2003). When a different cultural minority moves to a country this type of conflict can appear. Cultural conflict usually happens in many aspects of our life both consciously and unconsciously. If people understand different cultures the issue will gradually solve itself over time. My point is to show people cultural differences and raise this issue so that they can rethink their ideas about different cultures.

I designed typical Chinese and American cultural elements into my chair to represent two different cultural identities. This ideally can attract people to think about cultures. Two types of chair, which are the traditional Chinese chair, Quanyi, and modern mass-produced plastic chair were combined together to indicate the idea of cultural conflict. Moreover, the two cultural parts were tied together by the Chinese Red rope, which is the other key item to represent the inevitable cultural conflict. In this design, I also sought a balance between Chinese and American cultures, that is to tie a whole plastic chair and two of third Chinese chair with Chinese Red rope, which will give audiences the most visual pleasure. The idea of balance is from the Chinese philosophy, the Wu Xing.
Culture Shock Chair

This is cultural issue piece (Figure 13) that reflects to cultural shock that happened in many immigrant countries like the United States. It explores thinking about different cultures. The idea of this is from my personal experiences of cultural shock which happened in the United States. There are many issues with culture shock in this society, which can become a hot topic in different fields such as sociology and psychology. As an artist, I want to raise this issue and help people understand cultural shock by experiencing my piece.

Culture shock is “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation” (Merriam-Webster). There are four stages of culture shock: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and acceptance (Four Stages of Culture Shock). Most people will experience these four stages during culture shock. I designed a chair based on this principal for people to experience how cultural shock works. Two drawers were designed to represent and carry two cultures: Chinese and American cultures. And each drawer was connected by a Chinese Red rope with a knot, which means the two cultures have met. Three straight backs not at the same level provide an uncomfortable situation which mimics the frustration of cultural shock. Since I study in the United States now, choosing typical Chinese elements such as Chinese Red, joinery, and smooth shapes can better represent the Chinese culture, which express more cultural differences.

Figure 13. Culture Shock Chair, 2017
How does culture shock work in this piece? There are also four stages: seeing, sitting, adjusting, and finding. Seeing represents the honeymoon: when people see this unique chair first, the curiosity will drive them to sit on it. Sitting represents the frustration because the back is not flat. It is very uncomfortable when you sit on it. Finding represents acceptance, because if you slightly adjust your body you will find a comfortable position. The whole process of the sitting experience provides a chance for people to think about culture shock, and lets people understand more about cultural differences.

Recalling the Bell

This is cultural communication piece a sitting form-chair (Figure 14). The inspiration for the idea is from two cultural elements, one is the traditional Chinese instrument –Bianzhong (The chime bell) (Figure 15) and the second is the traditional Western corset. The motif of this piece is to deliver Chinese cultural history by tying both Chinese and Western culture in same piece. Bianzhong is one of the oldest musical instruments in China. It can be dated in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE-771 BCE) (Website, Topchinatravel). It was an important musical instrument for the royal family, and was a symbol of status and position in ancient China. I chose it as my subject to express the rich history of China and designed a representation of the bell as my chair’s seat. The corset was a common traditional clothing item during the Victorian and Elizabethan period in Western countries. It had about 350 years
of history and is a well-known Western cultural icon. It is an interesting element to represent Western culture. Corsets served to shape women’s bodies. I subtly designed a narrow back and applied the metaphor of the corset, meaning using ropes to tie both cultures together in the piece. The other feature is to use the rope’s color-Chinese Red - to express the typical Chinese culture. It also can be disassembled into individual pieces, which can then be arranged to form representative Chinese imagery a bell (Figure 16).

**Chinese Zigzag Chair**

This chair (Figure 17) concept is about the transition between Chinese and Western cultures, especially concerning the furniture design cultural elements of both. The inspiration for my work is from two cultures. One is a traditional Chinese Chair-Yoke-back armchair (Sichutou guanmaoyi) (Figure 18) which was often found in Ming Dynasty China. It is a ritual chair and normally used by noble families during that time (Website, Classic Chinese Furniture). The other one is a famous Zig Zag chair (Figure 18) which was designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1934, and was
collected by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It is a very simple piece that only use four pieces of wood, jointed together.

I analyzed and rethought the idea of both Chinese and Western chair designs. I chose different parts that can well represent both cultural characteristics, such as the Chinese chair’s armrests and the top of the back, along with the Zig Zag chair’s shape (Figure 19). I wanted to extract the essence from both classic chair designs unified into my piece. Both cultural Elements can be clearly identified in my work. By making this chair, I established my typical aesthetic, which is to merge different cultures, and emphasize a new visual experience. For example, the Chinese “curve” and western “Z” forms are harmoniously merged in my Chinese Zigzag Chair.

Thunder Bird Table

The idea of the piece (Figure 20) is to advocate the spirit of the Thunderbird, which reflects a Native American Cultural icon- the thunderbird. “The thunderbird is a legendary creature in certain North American indigenous peoples' history and culture. It is considered a supernatural being of power and strength” (Wikipedia, Thunderbird). It is very important in Native American tribes because it is a representative of the Sun, the Great Spirit, and the Creator that governs the world. Also, it is able to create a fresh beginning. There are many
 virtues that were symbolized in the Thunderbird, such as power and dominance, undefeatable fighting spirit, courage, strength, victory, and honor (Website, Thunderbird Tattoos). Nowadays, the Thunderbird is used as a symbol of the spirit that can push people to fight against any difficulties and never give up.

The other reason why I want to create this piece is my personal experience studying outside of my home country and overcoming many difficulties. This experience makes me have resonate with the Thunderbird’s spirit, because these merits are also Chinese traditions. These stories motivate me to design an art piece to express my emotion. I, trying to be respectful of another culture, designed a table that can be shown in two forms: a table and a representation of the Thunderbird (Figure 21.) (after the table is disassembled and rearranged to create an image). I chose a table form as a metaphor to present the idea which is displaying and carrying the Thunderbird’s spirit based on the function of table.
Squares or Circles?

My chair “Squares or Circles?” (Figure 22) reflects a "culture game theory" between Eastern and Western cultures relating to post-colonialism and race theory. These concepts were written about by important scholars such as Olu Oguibe, Chakrabarty, and Richard Dyer. Culture game theory highlights “non-Western” artists struggling in art, while Western society is dominating the art world (and other cultural worlds). If “non-Western” artists want to get into this crowd they were supposed to do what Western society expected, which is to make art relating to their own ("exotic", Non-Western) culture. Western people often think only this kind of art was authentic art. For example, Western people often prefer to see Chinese artists make art like Chinese watercolor rather than Western art such as abstract painting.

I think this is a piratical problem and exists in the art world. As an artist, it is hard to change immediately, but I want to make my effort to let more people understand it. Then there will have more chances for helping solve this problem. This is a meaning of why I made this particular chair. Based on this theory, I want to follow this rule but also break it. So I found a point and method to balance both sides. On one hand, I present the culture game theory. I applied many traditional Chinese elements to represent I am a Chinese artist, such as the joinery, circle shape, and Chinese Red. On the other hand, I merged some Western elements,
such as the hard edges and square shapes in my pieces. My point is to play against the theory with my designs. I want to raise awareness about this cultural issue and to let more people pay attention to it so that this situation can be improved in the future.

I also designed a new feature to carry forward Chinese tradition. The chair is held together by tension, and can be disassembled into individual pieces, which can then be arranged to form representative Chinese imagery: A Huqin (Figure 23), a traditional Chinese musical instrument. The process of disassembling and rearranging is not only about playing with furniture, but also inheriting Chinese cultural traditions to make deeper meanings with my work and inspiring audiences to think about furniture differently. Using art language to express issues will encourage me to continue expressing social issues and help me to deepen my understanding of the Western world.

**Happiness Whistle**

This piece is called “Happiness,” (Figure 24) a wedding whistle, which is built around design motifs that indicate differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Both culture's elements can be seen easily. The inspiration comes from the wedding ceremony. I found people perform
instruments in both Chinese and American wedding ceremonies. Both cultures' performances are designed to celebrate the happiness and give a benediction to the bride and bridegroom. The only big difference is that they use different instruments. My idea is to design an instrument for brides and grooms in both cultures, so they also can perform the instrument to celebrate the happiness during the wedding.

I chose to design a whistle. This design is based on the Western Bosun call whistle used on naval ships. It was originally designed to “pass commands to the crews when the voice could not be heard over the sounds of the sea” (Wikipedia, Boatswain's Call). I choose traditional Chinese characters and patterns and some Bosun call elements as my design inspiration to design my whistle. It subtly merges Chinese elements and Western elements together in a single piece, to represent multiple cultures. The design with two holes serves the purpose of allowing the bride and groom to whistle together, representing the close relationship of the couple. The double rows of red Chinese characters, “Xi,” are designed into the top middle part of the whistle and those characters mean double happiness. Normally, those double happiness characters are pasted on the middle part of walls, gates, and doors in China and are also often seen in Chinese wedding ceremonies. Two figures, the female and the male, representing the bride and bridegroom, perfectly match each other on the ball. The symmetrical shape of tubes describes the joy of both people finding the most significant person in their life and the similarity of each other at that moment.
Baby Rocking Chair

This piece (Figure 25) reflects on child abuse, a destructive social issue that crosses all cultures worldwide. According to the organization Childhelp, 28.3% of adults were physically abused and 20.7% of adults were sexually abused as a child in the United States (Website, Childhelp). According to Mruthyunjaya’s research, Two of three children were physically abused and 53.22% children reported sexual abuse in India in 2007 (Website, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India). Moreover, according to BBC news, in the “Syria war: 2016 deadliest year yet for children, says UNICEF.” The news report said that at least 652 children died and more than 850 children were recruited to fight during the Syrian civil war in 2016. Many children struggle against a troubled destiny every day. They often do not have food, water, and even their lives are threatened. Their situation causes children psychological-trauma, and such trauma will last long time. Whenever I see these kids in this kinds of situation, I really want to calm their hearts and give them to a safe place and let them be a comfortable, to help them to forget everything miserable for even a few seconds.

As an artist I feel I have a responsibility to bring this issue up and let our society to pay more attention about this issue. I chose to design and make the most comfortable chair to express my emotion, which is a rocking chair. In my opinion, the most important function of a rocking chair is to make children feel relaxed and safe. If child sits on it, they should easily fall asleep and dream with a smile. My focus is Chinese and Western cultures studies, with this children’s issue, I applied symbolic cultural features to represent the world. The chair outlines
a simplified “Zig Zag” shape to represent the West, because the original design of “Zig Zag” chair is from a Western country. The top of the back and armrests are abstracted from the essence of a classic Ming dynastic Chinese chair, to represent the East. The transparent plastic materials represent our modern society. The other unique visual experience is when you see this chair from far away, you may feel as if the chair is floating on the ground due to the “almost invisible” rockers. This shows that the issue of child abuse is not resolved yet: we still need to continue to work hard to eradicate it from our world.

**Women on the Way**

“Women on the Way” (*Figure 26*) is a piece inspired by women fighting for equal rights. That fight has a long history and has reached worldwide. Even though the women’s rights movement has made a lot of progress, there is still more work to be done.

Normally, a chair is a special term that represents a person’s status (as a chairman or chairwoman). I chose to use different sitting devices such as a chair, a bench, and a big base to represent different position of women in our hierarchical society. The interesting thing is the relationship between the chair and power, because power is intangibly embedded into the chair in our society. Although a record of this is hard to find in the literature, usually it is interwoven into the social order and the general ideas that we accept unconsciously. So studying about and using the sitting form are very important opportunities for expressing and exploring the various social statuses of women in different period of time.
I chose Eastern and Western elements to build a multi-dimensional space for this piece to represent the entire world. I used three different sitting forms: the modern female shape chair, the bench, and the big base, to represent women’s status in a patriarchal society where women are still fighting for equal rights. I introduced a time concept that includes past, present, and future. I added an Eastern art element, the old Chinese character, to represent thousands of years of experience. The modern chair was painted with blue to represent the present. The space surrounding the chair represents women’s future, full of opportunities and challenges.

**Are You Safe?**

This piece (*Figure 27*) discusses the social issue of invading one’s privacy. Nowadays, privacy faces many threats. According to the UK Daily Mail (2013), the U.S. government monitors people’s internet and phone calls around the world. Today, the government is still spying on Americans (Los Angeles Times, 2017). There are also many other ways of breaking into people’s privacy, such as information theft and identity crimes. According to The Washington Post (2014), “Target said Friday that the thieves who stole massive amounts of credit and debit card information during the holiday season also swept up names, addresses and phone numbers of 70 million customers, information that could put victims at greater risk for identity theft” (The Washington Post, Business, January 10, 2014). This is a big issue in many societies with regards to how individual liberties and privacy are violated. Based on this social problem, I designed this piece to raise the issue up and reflect on a social reality.
“Are You Safe?” was made of different materials: wood, plastic and a light bulb. The cabinet show how people’s privacy and safety have been seized. The general idea is that each piece of the cabinet represents different aspects of this environment. Normally, small cases or cabinets give people a feeling of safety. That is the reason why I chose a cabinet form to represent safety. I chose a long case furniture as the typical Chinese element to express the combination of an outside world, a strong power, and an authoritative environment that one cannot control. I used a light bulb to represent a person who believes to be in a safe place. And turning the light on and off express that this person consciously or unconsciously believes they are safe. I used a rope to tie the door up to the top to represent a person who cannot control the door which means they cannot control their privacy because it is controlled by others. I used translucent plastic to shown that even though people can protect information about themselves, they actually cannot. Personal information will still show up.
CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

Having nearly finished an MFA in furniture design at Iowa State University, I have decided to go further and pursue a Master’s degree in Industrial Design (MID) with a focus on mass-produced furniture. As I mentioned in the first chapter, my long-term goal is to teach college-level art and design. My three years of studio training in furniture design will be a strong foundation from which to draw as I learn how to design mass-produced furniture. By mastering skills and knowledge required for creating both studio furniture and mass-produced furniture, I hope I will become a well-rounded art teacher able to teach students and inspire a wide variety of young artists and designers.

There are two pillars that support my goal of being a well-rounded art teacher at the college level. The first pillar is studio furniture design, which is my current focus. It is based on artistic self-expression, which provides me with many opportunities to express my emotions in furniture. It gives me lots of freedom and allows for creative thinking in making furniture with cultural thought influences. The second pillar is mass-produced furniture, which is what I will develop in the MID program. Mass-produced furniture can be more than just a product in people’s daily lives; designers have many chances to use cultural elements and emotions to create mass-produced furniture that influences people and touches their them with emotions. Design is based on clients’ preferences, which requires designers and clients to work together to conceive a product that embraces clients’ wishes, a designer’s philosophy, and cultural contexts shared by both sides. This is how mass-produced furniture can better deliver the cultural heritage instilled by designers.

Globalization makes our world more complex. Cultural merging and mixing have been constantly happening and recurring in many countries, and integrating cultural elements into
mass products is becoming a popular topic worldwide. As a furniture designer who focuses on cultural studies, I have a strong motivation to instill cultural thinking into furniture design, and to help people understand the meanings and relationships from different cultures. There is a research field called culture-centered design in the industrial design master’s program at ISU, and I would love to pursue it as my future research topic. I would like to investigate how to design culture-centered mass-produced furniture. I am also interested in learning how to design furniture products to properly fit circumstances and users without losing the tastefulness of good fine art furniture. These questions drive me to seek better mass-produced furniture design. Even though this field is new to me, my research on cultural studies, and my past knowledge, skills, and experience in art have prepared me to become a unique and creative culture-centered designer. I will make an effort to find answers to these questions and to design valuable mass-produced furniture in the context of Chinese and Western cultures.
REFERENCES


Chinahighlights (Internet), Available at: www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/culture/lucky-numbers-and-colors-in-chinese-culture.htm


Childhelp (Internet), Available at: www.childhelp.org/child-abuse

Classic Chinese Furniture (Internet), Available at: www.chinese-furniture.com/c_furniture/c_chair_yokeback_ch.html


Global-Perspectives, The 4 Stages of Culture Shock (Internet). Available at:
medium.com/global-perspectives/the-4-stages-of-culture-shock-a79957726164


Hinner, M B. & Lang, P AG (2014). Chinese Culture in a Cross-Cultural Comparison, ProQuest Ebook Central. Available at:


Philosophy.lander.edu (Internet), Philosophy 312: Oriental Philosophy Main Concepts of Confucianism. Available at: philosophy.lander.edu/oriental/main.html


Topchinatravel (Internet). Available at: www.topchinatravel.com/china-guide/chinese-chimes.htm

The Times Editorial Board, (2017), Los Angeles Time, “The U.S. government is still spying on Americans. Here are some fixes for that” (Internet), Available at: www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-fisa-renew-20170621-story.html


Yang, J. & Jayakumar, A. January 10, (2014), “Target says up to 70 million more customers were hit by December data breach”, The Washington Post (Internet), Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/target-says-70-million-customers-were-hit-by-dec-data-breach-more-than-first-reported/2014/01/10/0ada1026-79fe-11e3-8963-b4b654bce9b2_story.html?utm_term=.adcaed6e2d35


Wikipedia. Boatswain's call (Internet). Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boatswain%27s_call


Wikipedia Western Culture (Internet). Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_culture#Themes_and_traditions (accessed October 12th, 2017)
APPENDIX IMAGE DOCUMENTATION

Figure 28. Exhibition View No.1

Figure 29. Exhibition View No.2
Figure 30. Exhibition View No.3

Figure 31. Artist Statement

Artist Statement

Xia Chen is a Chinese artist. He focuses on his thoughts regarding art and culture in both China and the United States. He reflects on his personal experiences growing up in China and being immersed in Chinese culture and later pursuing higher education in the United States and being affected by Western culture.

In this exhibition, the most of his work are furniture, and it also includes metal and mixed media pieces. These pieces are inspired by different motifs and reflect many aspects: personal experiences, cultural issues, cultural communication, and social issues, but they shared a similarity applying Chinese and Western cultural elements visually and theoretically. The key to his work is dealing with Chinese and Western cultures, and organically merging different cultural elements together to express artistic emotions and to raise social issues. One of the most important visual feature of his work is a unique Chinese cultural tones which based on expressing different meanings and purposes. He also tries to tactfully apply Western cultural elements to serve the theme.

These pieces pull from a variety of sources for the purpose of explaining why he thinks differently about the work. Understanding his art will lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings and social issues.
Figure 32. Representation of Huqin and Process of Disassembling or Assembling the Chai, Squares or Circles?, Walnut, Cherry, Fiber, Brass Hardware, 45”x17”x21, 2016

Figure 33. Thunderbird Table and Process of Disassembling or Assembling the Table, Walnut, Cherry, Fiber Rope, 71”x31”x31”, 2016
Figure 34. When Cultural Tradition Hit Digital, Mixing Media Installation, Walnut, Cherry, Poplar, Fiber Rope, Digital Media (C4D), 44"x20"x5", 2017

Figure 35, Cultural Conflict Chair, Mahogany, Plastic, Fiber Rope, 31"x17"x29", 2017
Figure 36. Recall The Bell Chair, Cherry, Maple, Fiber Rope, 16" x 21" x 44", 2016

Figure 37. It is Me, Installation, Pine, Steel Wire, Fiber Thread, 2017
Figure 38. Baby Rocking Chair, Mahogany, Walnut, Plastic, 28" x 11" x 23", 2016

Figure 39. Chinese Zig Zag Chair, Cherry, Mahogany, 24" x 22" x 45", 2015
Figure 40. Are You Safe? Cabinet Light, Walnut, Plastic, Fiber Rope, 13.5"x24.75"x25", 2017

Figure 41. Walnut, Mahogany, African Padauk, Fiber Rope, 25.5"x20"x41", 2017
Figure 42. Happiness Whistle, Brass, Silver, 3.5"x2"x1", 2016

Figure 43. Women on the Way, Table Statue, Brass, Walnut, African Padauk, 8"x6"x4.5", 2016
Figure 44. Glass Meet Wood, Coffee Table, Walnut, Yellow Maple, 43"x25"x17.5", 2017