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Art in Health and Identity: Visual Narratives of Older Chinese Immigrants to New Zealand

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This paper explores older Chinese immigrants' visual narratives on the value and impact of paintings beyond aesthetic merit and the role art plays in their health, wellbeing and identity construction. Immigration to a new culture in old age gives rise to experiences of biographical disruption and status-discrepancy, which often invokes isolation, anxiety, and a sense of dislocation and loss. Findings reveal that art-making aids the participants in addressing biographical disruption and status-discrepancy and appreciating the richness of multiplicities of the self. Art also positively influences the participants' health and wellbeing when they live in a new culture in their later lives.

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Art in Health and Identity: Visual Narratives of Older Chinese Immigrants to New Zealand

Abstract

This paper explores older Chinese immigrants' visual narratives on the value and impact of paintings beyond aesthetic merit, and the role art plays in their health, wellbeing and identity construction. Immigration to a new culture in old age gives rise to experiences of biographical disruption and status-discrepancy, which often invokes isolation, anxiety, and a sense of dislocation and loss. Findings reveal that art-making aids the participants in addressing biographical disruption and status-discrepancy and appreciating the richness of multiplicities of the self. Art also positively influences the participants' health and wellbeing when they live in a new culture in their later lives.

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Art has a long shared history with health and ageing (Daykin, Byrne, Soterion, & O'Conner, 2010; Kilroy, Garner, Parkinson, Kagan, & Senior, 2007; Staricoff, 2004). Research has revealed that art has a positive impact on how people feel, can help improve the quality of life of people with poor health, and promote positive mental health and wellbeing (Hamilton, Hinks, & Petticrew, 2003; Heena, 2006). As the proportion of the world's population in older age groups continues to increase (Li, 2011), the impact of creative engagement in art on the health of older adults has also drawn researchers' attention. In an evaluation of the role of art as a method of therapy for Alzheimer, Espinel (1996) studied the case of Willem de Kooning. de Kooning was an artist and was diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease and associated dementia; however, he continued creating works of art. Espinel suggests that painting helped de Kooning to maintain his creativity in spite of the development of Alzheimer's disease and associated dementia. de Kooning claimed 'recovery' in the sense that colours and forms gave him a pathway for the restoration of his self. In this context, art was an aid to managing his illness and his life. More recently, the older participants, in Kilroy and colleagues' (2007) project of arts and health, reported that art enabled them to develop personally, see things differently and discover a greater sense of purpose. Art brought positive benefits to them, such as coping, functioning, and a desire to experiment, all of which underpin concepts of successful ageing. Similarly,

Cohen (2009) suggests art is associated with positive health outcomes, including a sense of control, a growing sense of mastery and meaningful social engagement and interchange. Studies on ageing have shown that when older adults experience a sense of control and mastery, they demonstrate positive health outcomes (Li, Hodgetts, & Ho, 2010).

In recent years, researchers have also paid attention to art-making and identity work. Research suggests that artistic activities have particular potency for promoting positive identity (Reynolds & Vivat, 2010; Stickley, 2010). Carlson (1997) contends that art-making helps people construct enriched identities and construct a new preferred life-story. Camic (1999) argues that art can help people living with chronic symptoms, such as those caused by ageing to live more fully in the present. As stated by Daykin, McClean and Bunt (2007), art, as a therapy tool, is a means of reinstating identities that have been damaged by the experience of illness. Such ideas help to challenge the perception of being shackled and rendered powerless by illness (Reynolds & Vivat, 2010). In research conducted amongst people who engaged with a community-based arts project promoting mental health in England, Stickley (2010) suggests that community engagement through the arts such as painting satisfies a person's need for social belonging. Such relationships help create a sense of social identity which is ultimately positive for the person. In sum, research in health and social sciences suggests that creative products communicate both to self and to others the reality of the illness, helping to gain social acceptance for their condition. Moreover, art and art-making bring stimulation and meaning to everyday life, and offer people a means of reconstructing or transforming identity (Reynolds & Vivat, 2010).

Along with the ageing population phenomenon, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in human movement across international borders (Li, 2011). However, there has been little research investigating the function of art in migration and in immigrants' attempts to create continuity in their identities and to maintain their health in transition. Ankori (2003) explores displaced bodies and embodied displacements in contemporary Palestinian art. By analysing a photograph entitled *Grafting*, Ankori argues that the grafted tree symbolises that the migrant trees are bestowed with the hybrid identity of immigrants who retain elements of their cultural heritage even when they relocate. More recently, Tucker (2007) finds that art, both as practice and as art object, becomes a site for investigation of concerns of loss, unbelonging, disconnection and isolation. Tucker argues that art makes reference to a distant and an

embodied encounter in the cross-cultural landscape and provides cultural ties to immigrants' homeland identities. In sum, research in other social sciences suggests that migrant art, in Durrant and Lord's (2007) words, as 'migratory aesthetic', proposes the various processes of becoming that are triggered by the human movement: experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself into new art work and new ways of being.

New Zealand's population statistics have shown a marked transformation in their age structure. In 2006, people aged 65 years and over comprised 12.3 percent of the national population. Of this, 3.2 percent of the older population were Asians, up from 1.8 percent in 2001. Chinese is the largest ethnic group within New Zealand's older Asian population. In 2006, there were 9,069 Chinese aged 65 years and over living in New Zealand, an increase of 56 percent from 5,800 in 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). However, the experiences of older Chinese people in Western countries have not been high on the agenda of academic research or policy (Li, 2011). To address this research gap, this article aims to provide empirical evidence for better understanding such experiences of transition and the transition of experience among older Chinese immigrants.

This paper considers the role art-making plays in older Chinese immigrants' health and wellbeing and how their selves are nurtured by art-making. The analysis will be presented in three sections. The first illustrates that biographical disruption and the loss of social status are issues that the participants experience in New Zealand. The second explores the role of art in addressing the loss of social status and participants' appreciation of the richness of multiplicities of the self. The third section considers positive influences of art on the participants' cultivating a sense of belonging and establishing biographical continuity through grafting the Chinese and the New Zealand cultures. The agentive nature of art is foregrounded because in research on older immigrants there is a tendency to construct them as passive victims of broader socio-historical shifts, or to focus on what they lack in terms of language and social support (Ip, Lui, & Chui, 2007). As Espiritu (2003) argues, migrants, in particular older migrants, are often portrayed as an unwanted burden on society and as welfare dependents in both popular and academic discourses. I wish to emphasise agency and highlight art-making in which older Chinese immigrants are involved in order to create a sense of control and to improve their health and wellbeing in their new place of residence. Despite experiencing hardship, as I will show, the participants not only survived but also flourished. Their engagement with art

encourages them to become more inspired, involved and willing to change and adapt, which contributes to their personal development and wellbeing (Kilroy et al., 2007). They not only cope with challenges and adversity, but also consider that their everyday situations foster their growth and identity construction.

Methods

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 older Chinese migrants who immigrated to New Zealand from the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the family reunion programme. The research sample consisted of 18 females (56.3%) and 14 males (43.7%), ranging in age from 62 to 77 years ($M=69.8$, $SD=4.05$). At the time of the first interview in 2008, the length of their residence in New Zealand ranged from four months to 12 years and 6 months ($M=7.67$, $SD=2.52$). Regarding the reasons of migration, 63 percent had moved to New Zealand to assist with caring for grandchildren, and 22 percent for enjoying retired life and 15 percent for family reunification. On arrival in New Zealand, all participants lived in the homes of their adult children. At the time of the first interview, 31 percent of the participants lived with their adult children; 69 percent lived with their spouse only or lived alone, 32 percent of these lived in state houses while 64 percent lived in private rentals and 4 percent lived in retirement villages. Prior to moving to New Zealand, 69 percent were employed as professionals including engineers, health professionals and teachers; 28 percent were managers; and 3 percent were factory workers. At the time of first interview, 97 percent had incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000, and 3 percent had incomes under \$5,000. The participants' low incomes are consistent with the findings of other studies of older Chinese migrants living in Western countries (Chappell & Kusch, 2007; Ip et al., 2007).

While a large of majority of the participants were involved in gardening through which they spatiotemporally established biographical continuity between their old lives in China and new lives in New Zealand (Li et al., 2010), two participants in the research, Sheng and Fen, were extensively involved in art-making. Sheng was a 74-year-old male, who was a chief surgeon in China and had lived in New Zealand for six years. Fen was a 68-year-old female, who was an art teacher in China and had lived in New Zealand for eight years and five months. Sheng participated in two interviews while Fen took part in three. The paper focuses on the two participants' practices of art-making to illustrate how art challenges people to think differently,

engage in different behavioural experiences and enhance their health and wellbeing. Using these two cases, this paper is not intended to be statistically representative. Rather, my analysis moves beyond offering thick descriptions or a means of giving voices to the older Chinese migrants, and towards more theoretically informed interpretations and systematically informed arguments for the conclusions reached (Li, 2011). This approach makes it possible to create a space, for readers, from the older Chinese migrants' personal experiences per se in order that the narratives can be rendered sensible to other older Chinese (and ethnic) immigrants. In doing so, the theoretical and conceptual generalisability is possible.

With the participants' permission, a house tour was undertaken during the initial interview and the author took photographs of objects and spaces that the participant felt were important. These photographs were then discussed with the participant in the follow-up interviews. The house tours involved aspects of what is commonly termed the 'go-along' interview. These interviews enable researchers to accompany participants through, and to become familiar with, their environments and the spaces and objects considered as important and meaningful to them (Carpiano, 2009). Researchers can explore participants' places with them and prompt the participants to reveal the history and personal relevance of particular domestic spaces in their everyday lives that would be likely to be missed by casual observers (Li et al., 2010).

This paper employs the visual narrative as a data collection and analysis tool. Visual narratives in this article refer to narratives constructed with images and/or about images that themselves tell a story (Riessman, 2008). In contemporary social sciences, photography has emerged as an influential communication method (Mitchell, DeLange, Molestane, Stuart, & Buthelezi, 2005; Radley, 2009). Soutter (2000) argues that a photograph "might function as a narrative if we recognize its visual codes as belonging to...a form dominated by narrative such as cinema, theatre or history painting" (p. 3). Baetens and Ribiere (1995) define a photo narrative as "a set of photographs arranged to create a storyline within the constraints of a particular format" (p. 314). Riessman (2008) proposes that visual representations of experiences in photographs enable researchers and/or audiences to see as participants see, and to feel what participants feel. This argument is drawn from the earlier work of Radley (2002) who proposes that pictures not only restore feeling, but also the capacity to feel. Photography provides a means of documenting processes through which participants make sense of what they see and

experience. In the process, links between personal identities, local contexts, society, history and culture are invoked (Harper, 2005).

Photography was used as part of the methodology because it is ideally suited to the study of people's everyday lives, providing a pictorial dimension of culturally meaningful objects and settings (Li, 2011). Visual analysis precedes conventional verbal interviews by visual materials that encourage researchers and readers to understand the world as defined by participants (Harper, 2005). As I will show, visual narratives are not a copy, substitute, or complement to linguistic narrative. It is, instead, an alternate form of representation that focuses on the parts of culture which cannot be accessed by just the use of words (Trafi-Prats, 2009). Seeing often comes before words to establish people's place in the surrounding world (Berger, 1977). It is also important to note the verbal and the visual should not be polarised as if these were separate worlds. The mundane truth of everyday life is that people live in a world of words and pictures, of sensations and articulations. As Radley and colleagues (2010) suggest, human beings can never go beyond discourse, but neither are humans ever wholly contained within its articulatory schemes.

To analyse the data, I first worked on the verbal narrative accounts by using thematic analysis. The following steps were followed in the thematic analysis. First, I chronologically rearranged participant accounts from the two or three interview meetings. This process generated two chronological biographical narratives - one narrative for each participant. Second, I worked with a single chronological biographical narrative and used three tools - metaphors, painting stories and places - to identify analytical themes. Working with the narratives, I noticed that the participants often used metaphors to help them think about their lives. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that metaphors are useful tools of narrative analysis. I looked for metaphors (e.g., immigration prisoner, hidden dragon) to map out the analytical themes. I then searched for paintings stories and places (e.g., painting rooms), which were meaningful for the participants. The metaphors, paintings stories and places served as analytic tools that connected the verbal and visual resources. Third, I zoomed in, selecting particular accounts (and paintings) to illustrate the themes and general patterns.

Following the thematic analysis, I adopted the four steps for visual analysis proposed by Riessman (2008). First, I recorded information of the production of photography, which set the

scene of the photograph. The information included how and when the photograph was made, which participants were involved, why the participant wanted me to picture this particular object or place, and other relevant aspects of the photograph-making process, such as my impressions of the process. Second, I interrogated the photograph, searching and re-searching the story the photograph invoked. I recorded my interpretations of the photographs, and I familiarised myself with the interpretations before I conducted the follow-up interviews, and discussed the photograph with participants. Third, I focused on how the photographs were read by the participant by discussing the photograph with them. Fourth, I interpreted the photographs alongside the oral accounts, using visual resources to illustrate the verbal resources. The visual analysis strategy enabled me to show readers the world through the participants' eyes, for readers to see what the participants see. The participants' experiences become "seeable" in ways that transcend the "sayable" (Riessman, 2008).

Findings

Immigration, biographical disruption and status-discrepancy

As Li and colleagues (2010) point out, immigration can invoke unfamiliarity and the disruption of taken-for-granted social supports, community ties, cultural values, daily practices and meanings that are central to personhood. The idea of biographical disruption, introduced by Bury (1982) in a discussion of arthritis, has become a pivotal concept in research of health and immigration. Bury maintains that chronic illness can disrupt the structure of everyday life and the forms of knowledge which underpin it. Migration can have similar disruptive effects, especially for older migrants who move to a new country in their later lives (Li, 2011). Fen's extract typifies the participants' accounts of an embedded and socially connected life in China that has changed as a result of migrating to New Zealand. A plot line evident across participants is the loss of social ties, experiences of loneliness, and a desire for reconnection with others:

I was an active member of the Association of Artists [in China]. As a teacher for 40 years, I had thousands of students. Every year they invited me to visit them and deliver seminars to their students ... I was very lonely during the first year after I arrived in New Zealand. I'd become blind, mute and deaf. I didn't understand when people talked to me. I didn't understand when I watched TV. I had no social life. I didn't know who I was.

Although a majority of my participants were highly educated professionals, immigrating to an English-speaking country resulted in a disruption of daily activities and social networks. The disruption of language ability and social network make the participant a 'prisoner of space' (Piro, Noss, & Clause, 2006), which is socially and culturally determined and maintained. Socio-spatial imprisonment puts them at a disadvantage relating to other residents in communities where the range of social network has expanded beyond localised neighbourhood. Sheng stated:

The first two years [after my arrival in New Zealand] were the most difficult period. I felt like I was living in a prison. We (Sheng and his wife) stayed home by ourselves most of the time. I didn't know how to kill time. I read all Chinese newspapers I could collect word by word very slowly. You know what? It just took me two hours! I still had 22 hours to kill. I felt very bored and lonely.

Several participants used metaphors such as 'feeling imprisoned by language barriers', 'social blindness, muteness and deafness' to describe the biographical disruption associated with moving to a country dominated by a language different to one's own. The phenomenon of prisoner of space indicates that language problems have severely limited the participants' ability to communicate with non-Chinese neighbours, and restricted their participation in social activities. They experience feelings of being fundamentally out of place, alone and socially isolated.

Apart from language barriers, the loss of social status is another issue that my participants frequently raised in the interviews. Compared to their being professionals in China, the participants' socioeconomic status as beneficiaries in New Zealand suggests a psychological phenomenon of status-discrepancy. Sana (2005) asserts that immigrants typically face a decline in socioeconomic status and lose their citizenship status and sense of membership in the larger society upon arrival in a new country. Li (2011) argues that older migrants are more likely to experience such status-discrepancies that may impact on their health and wellbeing. Sheng's account paints a picture of status-discrepancy:

A majority [of older Chinese immigrants] were high-level intellectuals. They are hidden dragons and crouching tigers in New Zealand. I was a chief surgeon in China but now I am a beneficiary in New Zealand. She (Sheng's wife) was a senior teacher. But in New Zealand we are the poor. We are nobody here.

In Sheng's extract, the primary issue is one of shifting from a professional status to that of a beneficiary. He felt disappointed and frustrated, claiming that "we are nobody here." Sheng's status-discrepancy is derived from social interactions. The metaphor of 'hidden dragon and crouching tigers' - a chief surgeon becoming a beneficiary - grows out of the ways in which he interacted with others as a chief surgeon in China and a beneficiary in New Zealand. Sheng felt disruption between the old self (the professional) and the new self (the beneficiary and ageing immigrant). In this sense, migration has caused a disjuncture in Sheng's biography. This discrepancy, then, represents him a psychological situation of the presence of negative outcomes, and he is likely to be vulnerable to agitation-related emotions, such as fear, anxiety, threat and edginess (Higgins, 1987). Such psychological consequences were disclosed by Sheng's wife, Hua, who was 70 years old and had lived in New Zealand for six years:

There was a period of time that he didn't like me participating in community activities and sometimes was upset when I talked to my friends on the phone. He seldom went out. He isolated himself and started becoming grumpy.

Hua described Sheng's apathy and de-motivation, which leads to a 'poverty of aspiration' where Sheng has little motivation, desire or opportunity to aspire to anything beyond current circumstances or health status (Kilroy et al., 2007). The poverty of aspiration may predispose Sheng towards continued isolation, deteriorating poor health and an adjacent lack of motivation to change that.

I have illustrated that the participants' accounts of biographical disruption and status-discrepancy not only help them recall their past lives but also to articulate their present situation, a sense of loss and the need for new connections in their lives. Next, through the analysis of Sheng's and Fen's visual narratives where art brings the past to the fore to inform the present, I

will explore how art functions in their health and wellbeing enhancement, and identity reconstruction and transformation.

Sheng's visual narrative: Art in health and wellbeing

As mentioned previously, health and social scientists have written much about the aesthetic basis of identity and links between the self and art. Through involving the creation of art, people come to know and understand themselves and develop a sense of control and belonging (Radley, 2009). Such a sense can foster people, who experience social isolation, live in a poverty of aspiration and thus have low expectations of making changes to health or lifestyle, to cope with life and situations. For example, Sheng modified his garage into a painting room (see Figure 1) to pursue a change. The painting room is not merely a place in which he painted, but a place he could communicate with others. Below, Sheng's account illustrates that the emplacement of artwork constitutes expressions of the self and social relationships with others:

I am somewhat unsociable. I have difficulties to get on with people I don't appreciate. I have been a doctor in my whole life. People asked for my help all the time... I seldom mingled with people spontaneously. I am sort of indulged in self-admiration ... Now I have a painting room. I can paint again. Many people came to me asking for my paintings. I gave them my paintings as gifts (see Figure 2).



Figure 1 Sheng's painting room



Figure 2 Sheng's uncompleted painting for his friend

When friends ask for Sheng's paintings, this is symbolic of asking for his help. Painting is something that Sheng loves to do. Additionally, the activity of painting is also a part of Sheng's attempts to confront the disruptive and discrepant self (albeit probably unconsciously) and to overcome his fear that he is no longer respected by others or worthy of being called on for help. New relationships have been established when Sheng and his friends share artwork and ideas. In that regard, art-making may not be directly associated with Sheng's health improvement; but it has value within a social model of health where improvements in social connectedness and social cohesion are the important indicators which may lead to long-term health improvements (Macnaughton, White, & Stacy, 2005).

Art-making and sharing help Sheng to explore his identity, move beyond his comfort zone and look at his experience in new ways. Painting crafts a sense of mastery and functions as a strategy for constructing new meanings and a sense of purpose. Art becomes another language, allowing Sheng to communicate the new meanings (Song, 2009). Through art-making, Sheng paints experiences and memories. The memories are not about closure of the past. They enable Sheng to reconceptualise and renegotiate the present, to re-member himself now (Li, 2011). Through such a process, Sheng achieves an understanding of multiple perspectives and sees the richness of his multiplicities. He is empowered to claim *all* of who he is, including the biographically disruptive and discrepant self. In this sense, uses of paintings as

symbolic resources can be seen as interactional and dialogical processes. These symbolic resources they take place in a cultural world constituted by semiotic exchanges, which lead Sheng to interact with others and the new cultural and social environment. The symbolic resources as artefacts contain echoes of the voices of the old and new selves (Zittoun, 2007). Malchiodi (1999) asserts that “many people use the art process to author a new story for their lives ... as a result, creating a new sense of who they are” (p. 20) . Hua confirmed that Sheng had a greater energy and enthusiasm for life in general since the painting room - where he could paint and maintain his creativity - was built.



Figure 3 Sheng's bedroom decorated by his paintings

During the house tours offered by Sheng, I noticed that his paintings were used to decorate the home. Hurdley (2006) explores the objects people display on mantelpieces in their homes as aspects of their identities. People in Hurdley's study talked about their objects as if they represented their characters and the relationships they hold dear. In trying to define the self, they used symbols and objects – things that are meaningful to them – to describe who they were. Sheng does something very similar. Figure 3 posits Sheng's bedroom decorated by his paintings. The painting in the middle presents a crouching lion which reflects Sheng's metaphor of 'crouching tiger' in his text narrative. The two other paintings are entitled *Flowers* and *Green Forest*. As Sheng stated, “The flowers and green forest represent hopes and positiveness.” What makes these paintings unordinary objects is the revelation they give Sheng of his perception of his life in New Zealand – Although he has experienced hardship, there are hopes and positiveness. In this sense, Sheng's home as a 'creative space' is conducive to raising

expectations, triggering inspiration and motivation for change, and encouraging learning and personal growth. This in turn creates the conditions for wellbeing and health to arise (Kilroy et al., 2007).

Fen's visual narrative: Art in identity construction and transformation

For some time, researchers have explored the relationship between art and identity. As Trafi-Prats (2009) puts it, aesthetics encompass critical reconsideration of notions of belonging, emplacement, movement and identity. Donaldson (1997) also argues that, throughout the history of human existence, culture and experience have remained alive in 'the bosom' of the art. In everyday life, as shown in Sheng's case, aesthetics envision alternative spatial and social relations. This can also be seen in Fen's work *Heaven* (see Figure 4) where the cultural and spiritual meanings, and symbolism and transformation of identity fulfil her multiple social and spiritual needs:

Heaven is my work I donated to my church. I call it as a cultural graft. I combined the Chinese image of Dunhuang Flying to the Western image of angels in the Bible.



Figure 4 Fen's painting *heaven*

Using the most basic metaphor – graft - Fen explores the experience of migration and hybridity. Grafting Chinese Buddhist images of Dunhuang Flying fairies into Christian angels, *Heaven* symbolises Fen's desire to connect the Eastern and Western cultures. A graft, literally, is “a small shoot or bud of a tree or plant inserted into another tree or plant where it continues to grow, becoming a permanent part” (Ankori, 2003, p. 78). Through grafting, a new identity is signified in Fen's aesthetic work. Ankori remarks that “in human beings, indeed in all living creatures, grafting implies the creation of a hybrid being, that is both self and other, both here and there” (p. 78). Fen's own position – oscillating between ‘home’ and ‘away’ – is analogous to that in her culturally grafted *Heaven*. Through grafting, Fen bears her cultural marks in the present and future. In this regard, painting serves to facilitate Fen's reconstruction of the self and to ease her transition from China to New Zealand. As she constructs meaning in her work, Fen is simultaneously being constructed; often re-constructing her own identities in response to the images she creates and values (Milbrandt, 2003).

The concept of hybridity in *Heaven* informs the viewer of Fen's cultural identity and the merging of traditional ideals with new ideologies. The title *Heaven* is a symbolic expression of Fen's text statement:

New Zealand is a paradise for us even though we are beneficiaries here. Receiving benefits from the Government gives me a sense of belonging. I feel that I am a member of New Zealand society.

Fen refashions meaning-making of being a beneficiary. For Fen, receiving benefits is a formal recognition of her status as a New Zealander, satisfying her identity attached to New Zealand physically, psychologically and socially. Such attachment acts as a buffer, a means of retaining a sense of belonging and strengthening the self as a member of larger society (Li, 2011).

As Strauss (1969) has pointed out, the self and consequently the person's everyday practices are capable of changing, of transforming over the course of the person's life. Strauss claims that identity change is a process of reconceptualising one's social world, a change in one's terminological framework that reorders one's world and has marked effects on one's actions and

practices. A transformation in identity involves a shift in perspective and world outlook. As individuals change their perspectives, they change their identities and their definitions of social reality, and consequently their practices. Such a change is evident when Fen reflected on how she changed her painting style:

When I returned to China in 2003, I produced a slideshow constituting all of my paintings I drew in New Zealand. My former colleagues surprisingly found that I had changed my painting styles. I didn't realise that until they told me. When I was in China I was not interested in drawing flowers. My focused on mountains (Figure 5), waterfalls, and oceans. But I started drawing flowers since I moved to New Zealand (Figure 6). Beautiful flowers are everywhere in New Zealand. I just can't help drawing them.

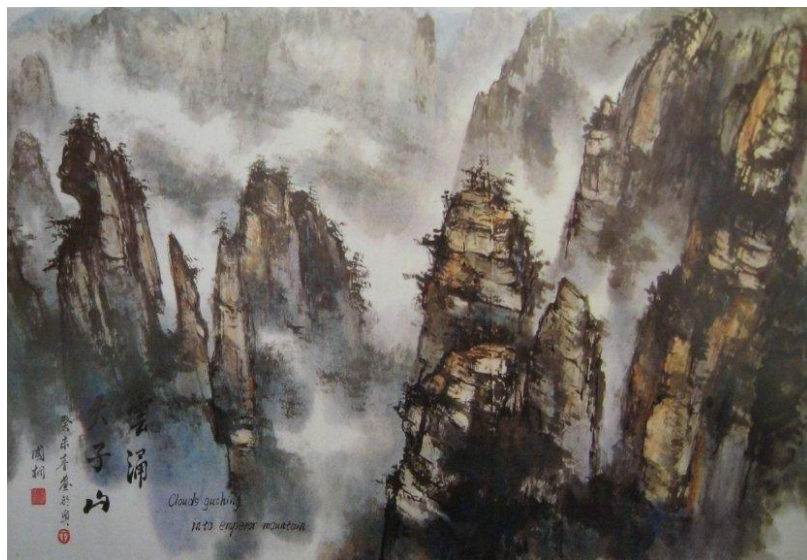


Figure 5 Fen's painting of mountains



Figure 6 Fen's painting of flowers

The change in Fen's painting style can be regarded as a symbol of her shifting self. The notion of shifting self reflects the view of the self as a dynamic process rather than a relatively stable or unchanging unit. The self is an object to explore and grow – to be transformed by exposure and openness to change. This is a process which de St. Aubin and colleagues (2006) term selfing. Speaking of the process of selfing, de St. Aubin and colleagues argue that the meaning of an autobiographical recollection is likely to be changed even as the memory itself remains relatively stable. The meaning of the storied event changes as a function of the individual's ongoing process of self-making. Fen's account suggests that she is more likely to find new meanings in recalled life events as she ages in a new culture. For Fen, self is a process, evolving in the contexts of immigration and ageing. Self is adaptable because it leads to relationships marked by the potential for change. Such flexibility is also adaptable in that it allows Fen to adjust to given contexts and situations. This plasticity promotes her survival, growth and vitality. As Fen stated:

I can feel the power and vitality of life when I am painting flowers. Flowers experience storms. However, they survive, flourish and bloom. Umm, just like us, we move to New Zealand in our later lives. We experience hardship; but we survive and flourish too.

Fen's account indicates that art functions to increase her understanding of her self and others, build up a capacity of self-reflection, and encourage adaptation (Camic, 2008). In the process, she develops a sense of personal power and the ability to exercise choice, enhancing her capacity for transformation. Fen's confidence, motivation and wellbeing are important developments that strengthen her capacity to cope with or to change the adverse situations (Kilroy et al., 2007).

Discussion

Painting is often considered as an aesthetic practice. Yet, I have illustrated that paintings are more than aesthetic. Paintings promote much more profound and positive identity construction, through which the participants embrace a new view of self as a healthier person engaging in ongoing development, albeit sometimes in difficult circumstances (Reynolds & Vivat, 2010). Art-making enhances the individual, building their capacity for change by stimulating personal growth, self-determination and contributing towards self-awareness and transformation of identity. Art offers the participants greater choice and contributes towards perceptions of having a sense of control which improves a sense of wellbeing and quality of life. All of these can be pre-determinants of healthy behaviour (Kilroy et al., 2007). As I have demonstrated, through painting, the participants toil to address the biological disruption and status-discrepancy by establishing biographical and cultural continuities across time and space between China and New Zealand. These findings reflect Mossakowski's (2003) argument that positive identity construction has a strong association with fewer depressive symptoms in the process of post-migration settlement, and acts as a stress buffer integral to coping with the stress caused by immigration. In the words of Foucault (1994), positive identity construction implies the 'techniques of the self', which refers to the procedures that individuals carry out "in order to determine their identity, maintain it ... through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge" (p.87). In other words, the techniques of the self are "a matter of placing the imperative to 'know oneself' ... What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self?" (p. 87).

The participants' stories in many ways are affirmation that the process of 'knowing oneself' is a facet of quest which Frank (1995) maintains as 'automythology'. The predominant metaphor of the automythology is the phoenix, both in English (Frank, 1995) and Chinese (Li, 2011), reinventing itself from the ashes of the fire of its own body (*Fenghuang Niepan* in Chinese). May (1991) uses the phoenix metaphor to describe the totality of self-reinvention following trauma or catastrophic illness. May writes, "If the patient revives after such events, he must reconstruct afresh, tap new power, and appropriate patterns that help define a new existence" (p. 22). Automythology fashions the narrative author as one who not only survives but has been reborn as an exemplar of the change (Frank, 1995). The accounts presented in this paper are examples of automythology. The participants create their automythology from their art-making and claim a new identity. Such a progressive structure in these stories reflects the broader cultural and social context within which personal control over dislocation and loss is promoted. The study of these narratives illustrates the importance of the personal quest for meaning and, more particularly for mastery over the biological disruption and status-discrepancy.

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