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### MENU FOR HOME COOKING

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to chronicle the influences and origins of my work and how they ultimately led to the discovery of my current practice. While my childhood and high school experiences in China were the foundation for my art practice, my undergraduate and graduate school experiences in the United States are what allowed me to search, discover, and explore my roots. I begin the paper by describing who and what influenced me to pursue art as a calling. I then briefly refer to some of my undergraduate work for context. Next, I will address some of the work I made in my first year of graduate school during the height of the Covid pandemic, followed by how I developed my direction during my second year of graduate school. Lastly, I will describe my upcoming thesis exhibition event, which perfectly combines my love of cooking with my love of making art.

MENU FOR HOME COOKING

By:

Zherong Hu

B.F.A., Michigan State University, 2019

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

May 2023

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## Cookbook

I come from a very ordinary family in Hangzhou, China. My father sells electronic components, and my mother teaches at a university. Though it took a while for me to realize it, some of my fondest memories are of the food my mother made for us during my upbringing. Even though her cooking was not always the best, the memories of us eating together are delicious. I didn't think much of traditional Chinese food during my childhood in the '90s; an ordinary bowl of soy milk, donuts, or mixed noodles were my favorite foods. I looked forward to going to KFC each year on my birthday rather than having a home-cooked meal. I don't know if it's because I'm older or because I've been living in the states for many years, but I began longing for the traditional Chinese food and culture that I once took for granted. I missed the Chinese snacks<sup>1</sup> sold on the street and those mediocre meals that my mother cooked every night. This longing stayed with me and turned into an inspiration for work during my second year of graduate school.

One of my mother's strange habits also had a profound effect on my current work. Her passion for buying new sets of tableware every Chinese New Year<sup>2</sup> became a special tradition in our family. Upon asking my mother why she did this, I learned that the new tableware represented a new blessing and a new hope for each year. Perhaps it was because of the poverty of her time and the need for a way to feel hope, but whatever the reason, it has now

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<sup>1</sup> Local Chinese snacks are sometimes more than just snacks. Sometimes there are many staple foods included, such as fried stinky tofu, Zhoushan seafood noodles, Longyou hair cake, Jiaying zongzi, Ningbo dumplings, shrimp popping eel noodles, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Spring Festival is the first to fourth day of the first month of the lunar calendar and is considered by the Chinese as the beginning of the year

become a way for me to feel hope as well. Making a new batch of bowls for her every year is also a way for me to give back the love she gave to me.

When I was high school, I took many art courses and also learned how to cook from my mother. I didn't know it then but came to realize just how much these practices have in common -- where you start out with materials or ingredients and go through several processes to turn them into something hopefully wonderful. Both practices also involve our senses, our hands, and our instincts. I fell in love with cooking then, and my parents were my faithful tasters every weekend. I also fell in love with making art but didn't think I could pursue either love as a career.

### **Preparing the Ingredients**

When I first entered undergraduate school in the United States, I studied economics because it was practical. However, I soon found that I was not an "academic" student. I couldn't relate to the rigid words in long tedious articles, and immediately returned to the art area that I knew and loved. The unfamiliar language of economics restricted me, whereas art allowed me to express myself freely. Although I wasn't the best student in high school and did not try very hard to excel in art, it became clear to me that it was my calling. I worried at first that choosing art would disappoint my parents, as I wanted to make them proud of me, but they were behind me and helped me every way they could.

My first contact with ceramics was in my sophomore year of college. Part of the reason was because I wanted to make some dishes for my mother, but it was also because my ceramic professors Blake Williams, Paul Kotula, and Michael McCune, were very friendly and felt like a

second family. I quickly became fascinated by the immersive experience of making pottery. Ceramics involves a long, slow, and sometimes even risky journey from raw clay to the finished product, and it provided me with a beautiful outlook throughout all of these steps. The process is completely different from the fast pace of contemporary life. Ceramics slows down the maker, as if the clay itself is telling you that it is not good to rush. The process requires paying attention to the selection of materials, time, and temperature. The results are unknown and uncontrollable to a certain extent; each firing is a way for the object to reveal itself to its maker and audience in its own language. While the whole world continually advances in technology, ceramics never abandons traditional techniques and methods. I greatly value this stability and tradition.

Creating art soon began to connect with my feelings of missing China. When my peers started to link their works with politics, nature, or society, the first things I thought of were my family, my dog, and the food and scenery of my hometown. When I began making art about my hometown and family, feelings of homesickness, longing, and love all emerged at the same time. When my grandfather died, I couldn't cry; not because I didn't miss him, but because I didn't think it was real. Then when I created art related to my grandfather, I couldn't stop the tears from falling. Maybe this is the inexplicable connection that art brings. I then created a



mug for each of the twelve Chinese zodiac signs, which represent the twelve years of a cycle<sup>3</sup>. The different zodiac signs are also filled with the expectations and aspirations of each new year. For each handle, I used Chinese characters to make pictograms to fit the details contained in each cup (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Zodiac cups*, 2018

During my undergraduate years I realized that, unlike painting, photography, and other two-dimensional arts, ceramics makes me feel like I am touching the earth. Both the process of making clay and the experience of making work with it make me feel the breath of the earth. In the ancient Chinese book, "Kao-gong-ji"<sup>4</sup>, the chapter on potter and man mentioned that "Heaven has its seasons, earth has its Qi, materials have their beauty, artificers' Ceramics gives the creator the greatest part of creation, the importance of materials is particularly important, and also expresses that materials in various cases also have their own characteristics, which is related to the aesthetic nature of the work." Without good material, what can be done to make skillful work? As with cooking, without good ingredients it is difficult for a cook to make a delicious meal. The material becomes the foundation for building a beautiful work of art, and clay is full of infinite feelings in the eyes and hands of potters. Grainy and rough clay makes me think of dusty history, while

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese zodiac, with 12 years as a cycle, also has 12 animals represented, in order: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, Pig.

<sup>4</sup> Kao-Gong-Ji is from the end of the Spring and Autumn Period and the beginning of the Warring States Period. It is an ancient book of early handicraft technical specifications surviving in China.

delicate and polished clay makes me think of smooth silk. Working the clay over and over again makes me think of craftspeople before me doing the same thing. Glaze or glass makes me think of a pure, simple heart. The variety of material properties (whether natural, human-made, chemical, hard, or soft) and processes, each with their unique advantages and shaping power, opens my eyes, mind, and heart, giving me the opportunity to integrate them all.

### **Preheating the Pot**

No matter how many years I've been in the United States, loneliness has been the most powerful emotion I have felt. Before moving to the US, I had nothing to worry about; I didn't think about loneliness, nor did I ever have such an experience. Therefore, when I arrived to the US, I wasn't accustomed to feeling so lonely so often and wasn't sure where it came from. When loneliness struck, it wasn't because I didn't have friends, it wasn't because I didn't have people to talk to, and it wasn't because my life was not full. One night after taking the train from Manhattan back to Long Island with my friends, I had a feeling that is hard to describe while walking from the train station to my apartment. I was sad, upset, and crying, but I didn't know why I was feeling such emotions.

This deep sense of loneliness occurred often during my first year of graduate school, however, it “made sense” because we were in the midst of isolation caused by the Covid pandemic. During this time, I created two works using the slip casting technique<sup>5</sup>, one titled *Cage* (Fig. 2) and the other titled *Lonely People* (Fig. 3). The lonely man depicted in *Lonely People* was inspired by the famous ancient Chinese backwards flowing pot<sup>6</sup>. I was attracted by its



Figure 2. *Cage*, 2020

symbolic meaning, which cautions people not to exceed the limits of anything they do. The image of the lonely man was placed on the top of the pot, and I used different glazes to convey the feeling that he is crying. In *Cage*, I wanted to communicate that people at that time were like little birds trapped in a cage. The surgical masks represented clouds floating in the air, and the people in *Cage* could only look at each other through the clouds. These two pieces were the first time I tried to express my feelings in the form of non-functional work. Though it was a good experience to express my emotions through sculpture, I returned to making functional work to connect to people’s daily lives.



Figure 3. *Lonely people*, 2019

I gradually became familiar with loneliness and came to understand the reasons I felt it. Being alone in a foreign country, I lacked the sense of security of home, the sense of cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Slip Casting, is a liquid clay slurry that is poured into a plaster mold and forms a layer of cast on the inner wall of the mold.

<sup>6</sup> Inverted flow jug, as the jug has a through tube in the center of the bottom to connect the internal space. People pour water from the bottom to the inside to achieve the effect of not using the lid.

belonging, and the fearlessness of having parents to rely on. At the beginning of my second year of graduate school, I chose to deal with missing home by cooking. Whenever I'm not working in my studio, I'm happiest cooking and sharing food with my friends. I believe that food is the root of every "wandering stranger"; family food is one of my few roots and has become the outlet for my longing for home. I miss the local Chinese food, the specialties of Hangzhou dim sum, and the simple delicacies my mother cooked for us. Most times even the Chinese restaurants in the US are not enough to satisfy my particular Chinese palette. It's not that they don't make good food, but that "familiar and unfamiliar" feeling prevents me from being comforted to my soul.

### **Adding Oil**

The idea for the first project in my second year of graduate school was inspired by the Chinese roadside stalls and small street food stores I grew up with. Because the stores were so small, people often had to sit on the side of the street, holding the edge of the bowl with one hand and eating hot noodles or rice with



Figure 4. *Handle Bowl*, 2021

chopsticks. With this in mind, using the slip casting technique, I made a series of bowls with a long handle to make it easier for people to eat without burning their hands. (Fig. 4) The project was for my critique class, where I used my bowls to serve my classmates, professors, and friends a recipe from my hometown, Hangzhou. The decals on the outside of the bowls were

images of newspapers from Hangzhou, and I painted images of various foods from Hangzhou on the inside of the bowls. I wanted the paintings inside the bowls and the newspaper decals outside the bowls to connect diners to me, my family, and my hometown food, thereby promoting my Chinese culture. While I was creating the work, I was imagining people eating my food to complete the piece. For his Performance Art piece, *Pad Thai (1990)*, at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, Rirkrit Tiravanija said, “Enjoying a meal is a way to really engage with and understand the other, to share time and space and sustenance.” My primary source of satisfaction comes from making food from my hometown, serving it to others on tableware that I’ve made, and watching them enjoy it.

For my next critique, I made and shared different foods from my country. (Fig.5) Using the slip casting process, I based the tableware design on a spoon holder, transforming it into a plate for snacks to share with the class and friends who came to watch.



Figure 5. *Should be Spoon Holder, 2022*

The critique event went well, however, there were a few details that needed to be revised due to the limitations of the slip casting process.

Throughout my second year of graduate school, I experimented with various interpretations of specific tableware paired with different hometown recipes and presented them at each critique. I continued to enjoy observing my classmates, professors, and friends as

they used my tableware and ate my food. I answered their questions and listened to their comments about my work, both of which helped me to improve it for the next iteration.

For his series "The Dining Project" (1997-present), artist Lee Mingwei invites one stranger at a time to dine with him and prepares various special foods based on their dietary preferences. He considers food as a medium of trust and a catalyst for intimacy. I agree with him and believe that food is one of the only things that can bring people together, regardless of their differences, to sit down and enjoy the meal in front of them. I plan to eventually invite strangers to my events, but right now I am focused on sharing my tableware and the food from my hometown with my peers, faculty, and friends.

### **Cooking**

Because I left China over a decade ago, I at once feel a sense of attachment to and estrangement from my hometown. However, no matter how much I or my hometown may change, my roots are always there, the food of my hometown will never change, and the love of my family and friends is also still there.

For my thesis exhibition event, I am making an entire set of tableware on which to serve a six-course meal of food from my hometown, Hangzhou. The tableware is inspired by classic scenic spots of Hangzhou as well as pottery handed down from the Southern Song Dynasty.

Song Dynasty ceramics had a Qing glaze<sup>7</sup>, and the artisans made sure that all surfaces were covered with as much glaze as possible. The pieces are glazed very pure, but then change over time as they come out of the kiln and crackle and brittle. When I came across the many potteries works from my hometown of Hangzhou, especially the ‘Ru Ware’



Figure 6. Ru Ware, 2022

(Fig. 6), I was able to learn more about the history of Chinese clay sculpture along with the history of my hometown. Ru Ware shapes are ancient and generous. The famous glaze color for which it is known is extremely unique; the ancients called it “like jade, not jade, but better than jade”. “The Ten Views of West Lake” is a famous tourist attraction of West Lake in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province and includes the ten characteristic<sup>8</sup> scenic spots nearby. The most famous spots include, “Spring Dawn at Su Causeway”, “Fish Watching at Flower Port”, “Sunset at Lei Feng”, “Three Pools with the Moon”, and “Twin Peaks with Clouds”. As people walk on the long embankment in spring, the willow trees on both sides sway with the wind and the lake surface is as calm as a mirror. In summer, people are intoxicated by the burst of lotus fragrance while walking around the lake or as they sit near the lake drinking a cup of good West Lake Longjing tea. For the glaze colors of the tableware I chose light green and green to connect with the lake and green hills surrounding my hometown near West Lake. The use of gold luster around the edges of the tableware evokes the shimmering reflection of the lake at sunset.

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<sup>7</sup> Qing Glaze in Song Dynasty, Jingdezhen. Mainly cyan in color, the color will be different under different light and different angles of observation, showing different changes.

<sup>8</sup> The ten representative spots around West Lake are: *Spring Dawn at Su Causeway, Lotus in the Breeze at Courtyard, Autumn Moon over Calm Lake, Melting Snow on Broken Bridge, View Fish and Louts Fronds at Flower Pond, Evening Bell Ringing at Nanping Mountain, Twin Peaks Piercing the Clouds, Sunset Glow over Leifeng Pagoda, Three Pools mirroring the Moon and Listening to Orioles Singing in the Willows.*

I will make ceramic chopsticks and spoons for each set of tableware as well, using the slip casting technique. Though most chopsticks are made of bamboo because ceramic chopsticks can easily grind and break, ceramic chopsticks better align with my set of tableware and better reflect the feelings I want to express. Chopsticks carry many memories and emotions of the Chinese people and of me as well. There are ancient books as early as the pre-Qin era that record the name taking hold<sup>9</sup>. Chopsticks are round at one end and square at the other, the round end representing the sky and the square end representing the earth. This was also the ancient Chinese understanding of the world<sup>10</sup>. Practically speaking, the use of chopsticks emerged simply to avoid using one's hands to grab the vegetables in hot soup.

Whenever I think of West Lake, one of the most immediate memories is of tourists or locals sitting by the West Lake drinking cups of lime green West Lake Longjing tea. So, Longjing tea from my hometown will also be an essential part of my thesis exhibition event, served to each diner in a cup using 80–90° water. The inspiration for the cup (Fig. 7) comes from the small park in front of my grandparents' house, where they used to take me to see the bamboo when I was little. I



Figure 7. *Long Jing Teacups-Home, 2022*

used the wheel throwing technique to make the cups and the trimming technique to finish the

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<sup>9</sup> Chopsticks originated from Chinese tableware, the ancient Chinese Han Feizi - Yu Zhi (韩非子·喻志) called them chopsticks (箸、挟提)

<sup>10</sup> The Chinese believe that the sky is round and the earth is square, which also appears on the columns of ancient Chinese buildings.



surface of the cups. The handle is in the shape of a bamboo leaf instead of the usual round handle.

The food for my thesis exhibition event will consist of six courses - two appetizers, two main courses, and two desserts, each based on a classic Hangzhou dish, and each served in a separate set of my tableware. For the appetizer, two classic Hangzhou snacks will be served: Stuffed Lotus Root with sticky rice and Stir-Fried



Figure 8. *Xiang Ling- Home, 2023*

Bean Curd Rolls stuffed with minced tenderloin, which is very popular because of its crispy appearance and special shape. “Evening Bell Ringing at Nanping”<sup>8</sup> was the inspiration for this first course of tableware (Fig. 8). This dish is made of bean skin and pork. When you chew it, the sound is loud, and makes the diner think about a ringing bell.

Because one of the appetizers is a fried food, I chose the plate as the main body of this tableware and the lid is inspired by the Buddhist bell. I chose a green glaze for the lid because green is the color of



Figure 9. *Lotus Bowl- Home, 2023*

the lake and the mountains. I chose a lighter glaze for the plate to highlight the food. The other

appetizer is made of sliced lotus root (which is generally taken from the bottom of the West Lake) with cinnamon and sugar, which is one of the most famous traditional dishes of the Jiangnan region. This dish is made from lotus root and glutinous rice. The best lotus root is from Hangzhou, China. The lotus root expresses the emotion of lovesickness. This tableware was inspired by Lotus in the Breeze at Crooked Courtyard park in Hangzhou, China.<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 9)



Figure 10. *Do Po Poke- Home*, 2023

The food for the second course will include Dongpo Pork and Stir-Fried Glutinous Rice. Dongpo Pork originated from the Northern Song Dynasty and was made famous by the poet Su Shi. He loved pork and created this dish to serve the people who brought him pork during the New Year. I will serve this dish in a jar (Fig. 10) inspired by the famous “Su Causeway Spring Dawn”<sup>8</sup>, it is tops the list of the ten best known scenes in Hangzhou for beauty, which is located next to Su Shi's tomb. This dish is made from pork belly. It is said to have been created by famous poet Su Dongpo in the Sung Dynasty when he received pork belly as a gift. In spring, the willow trees flourish and the cold winter is over,

showing the wonderful view of spring next to Su Causeway. The Stir Fried Glutinous Rice recipe is derived from the Beginning of Summer (Li Xia<sup>11</sup>), which is an important Chinese holiday. The Hangzhou people grow two kinds of summer rice, one is umami rice and



Figure 11. *Stir Rice- Home*, 2023

the other is glutinous rice, to which I've added peas. The bowl for the rice (Fig. 11) is inspired by the attraction "Sunset Glow over Leifeng Pagoda"<sup>8</sup>, located on top of the Lei Feng Mountain in front of the Jing Ci Temple, West Lake in Hangzhou, which is famous for the Buddha's light shining as the sun sets in the west. The inspiration resembles a Song dynasty vessel, though I made it with double walls so I could add ancient windows as a decoration.

I will make two desserts to end the thesis event meal -- a sweet one called Sweet Wine Stuffing and a salty one called Fresh Pork Mooncake. The container for the sweet wine brew (Fig. 12) is inspired by "Three Pools Mirroring the



Figure 12. *Tian Jiu Niang- Home*, 2023

<sup>11</sup> There are 24 solar terms in China, and Lixia is the seventh one of them.

Moon”<sup>8</sup> , which are three stone towers in the West Lake. The towers are hollow with five small round openings, and on nights with a full moon the tower interiors are lit by moonlight that reflects out of the round openings onto the lake to form multiple moons. The lid of the bowl was inspired by the top shape of the tower and the body of the bowl was inspired by the bottom shape of the tower. Both the bowl and the lid are made using the wheel throwing technique. The cutlery for the Fresh

Pork Mooncake (Fig. 13) is inspired by “Autumn Moon over Clam Lake”<sup>8</sup>, which refers to the view of the moonlight reflecting on the lake on an autumn night -- the lake is calm as a mirror, the bright autumn moon is



Figure 13. Fresh Pork Mooncake - Home,

high in the sky, and the moonlight and the lake are reflected in each other. Mooncakes symbolize prosperity and good wishes for a family reunion. Mooncakes are also a beautiful vision of home. I chose Fresh Pork Mooncake because it is the most special type of moon cake in Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

### Serving

When one of my teachers asked me, "Why do you think bowls and utensils can be used as art?" I was at a loss for



Figure 14. Akihiro Nikaido

words, and I thought about it for a long time. The Japanese potter Akihiro Nikaido (Fig. 14) once

said, "It may not be called art in that sense, but I think pottery is not completed by itself, but it is with us as beings."<sup>12</sup> He also said, "Some say pottery is not a piece of art by itself, but they connect things around us."<sup>12</sup> My answer is that a bowl or utensil may not be art on its own, but it becomes art when it is integrated with the food, the diner, and the environment. I believe that the weight of the tableware is as important as the food it contains. They are complementary to each other, independent yet integrated. Tableware means to me what it meant to my mother, something that can make a difference in people's lives by bringing a sense of hope, something that people can use to enrich their lives. With attention and love, tableware is a symbol of home for me, representing the meaning of home in my heart. It represents my love and longing for my hometown and allows me to express that to my audience. I got into ceramics because of clay; I like its texture, its feel, and the experience of making art with it. It has a plasticity that can be easily changed and a hardness like plaster. When I went deeper into the culture of clay, the history of Chinese clay sculpture and my thoughts about my hometown gradually came together.

Art and food have become a way of expressing my feelings while at the same time sharing the Chinese culture and cuisine of my hometown. Cooking is so wonderfully connected to the art of making, whether it's the way it's made, the source of inspiration, or the expression of emotion. However you look at it, cooking and art are languages that are distinct from traditional language. They both communicate by engaging a number of sensory experiences – touch, sight, sound, smell, taste -- all without the need for even one word. For me, art and food represent not only a love of life itself, but also a nostalgic and sentimental attachment to the

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<sup>12</sup> Interview form: <https://essencekyoto.com/blogs/akihiro-nikaido-english/an-interview-with-akihiro-nikaido>

art and food created by the ancients of the past. The traditions and processes of making art and food have been passed down for several millennia and the ingenuity of the ancients remains present throughout. Having the ability to replicate, touch, and taste these traditions reveals as much, if not more, about the lives and cultures that came before us than the typical historical accounts that are only read in books.

Additionally, because China is historically a large agricultural country, food culture is classified from many perspectives -- such as era and technology, region and economy, ethnicity and religion, diet and tableware, consumption and hierarchy, folklore and function -- showing differences in cultural characteristics and values. With the emergence of traditional Chinese festivals, we gradually became accustomed to traditional festival food, making Chinese food deeply "rooted" in our bones. It is not that we don't love eating burgers and pizza, but we are awakened to the soul and history of certain traditional holidays by the food made during certain festivals. These are some of the most profound memories that I, and many others, carry from childhood into adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back at my previous work from high school to graduate school, I find that my work has always reflected the emotions in my heart, whether sadness or joy, loneliness or love. I believe that art is inspired by life experiences but then ideally goes beyond them to become something shared. When I was an undergraduate student I followed teachers' directions, then as a graduate student I learned to pave my own path. Graduate school has helped me understand who I am and what my goals are. I hope to always remain swimming in this limitless sea of art.

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