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菠蘿包(PINEAPPLE BUN): EXPLORING MEMORY AND LANGUAGE THROUGH ANIMATION

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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My thesis project is a 3-minute animated short film about my relationship with my grandfather called 菠蘿包 (*Pineapple Bun*). I plan to have my film screened at the Benson Auditorium. I included Chinese and English subtitles, depending on the language spoken in the dialogue. The content of my piece is about language and my attempt to connect with my background and culture through my conversations and experiences with my grandfather. Every summer, I would visit Taiwan to reconnect with my entire family. I am focusing my film on our daily swimming sessions every morning with my grandfather. The first scene will be my grandfather waking me up at 5 a.m. and gathering up change to prepare for our daily swimming ritual. Taiwan is a fairly walkable city, so we'd usually walk to the swimming pool and talk about various things that occurred on the walk. Once we're at the swimming pool, I'll be swimming very quickly while my grandfather will be swimming slowly. After swimming, we'll go into the steam room to cool off. This is the pivotal scene in my animation, as it shows the language barrier between my grandfather and me. In the dialogue, I say in English, "The steam feels so nice, but it's hard to breathe." My grandfather looks confused and I'll repeat what I've said but in broken Chinese. If you speak Chinese, it'll be very apparent that I was not raised in Taiwan. My grandfather smiles and we prepare to walk home from the pool. After swimming, my grandfather and I would go to a mini-mart or a small bakery to get breakfast. I'll be instantly mesmerized by a piece of pineapple bun in a display case, urging my grandfather towards to piece of bun. I ask him in Chinese, "What is this called in Chinese?" He'll respond with, "Pineapple bun. What is it in English?" At this moment, I'll pause and smile at his acknowledgment of my language. I include an evocative scene where my grandfather's soul becomes personified through his Chinese zodiac, the Tiger. My grandfather's life force transports inside my body, illustrating the deep ties we form each time we connect through

language. I'll respond back with, "Pineapple bun!" My grandfather will respond back. The scene will end as my grandfather and I are walking to the end of the street. The scene will fade into black and white, indicating that this was a memory of my childhood.

As an immigrant from Taiwan, I was fortunate enough to have been able to visit my family back in Taiwan, maintaining my cultural roots. My Chinese speaking level is advanced compared to other Asian Americans living in California, but it is rather elementary back in Taiwan. My grandfather was a textile entrepreneur and lived in 天母 (Tianmu), one of Taiwan's most affluent neighborhoods, despite growing up in a rural and low-income background. Due to his upbringing, his principles around money were rather conservative. He'd always save and spend his money on safe investments, such as real estate. His hobbies included swimming in the morning, taking long walks, and occasionally sketching. He'd always have change for the swimming pools and argue with the managers whenever they hiked up the prices. Nevertheless, he was extremely dedicated to swimming every morning. It was not only a place for us to bond but also a social outlet. For my grandfather, simple everyday activities fulfilled his life's purpose. During our daily swimming lessons, I would often learn the most Chinese and Taiwanese by speaking with my grandfather. Being back in Taiwan encouraged me to connect with my roots. I was eager to learn Chinese from my family to not only better understand my identity but also connect with my grandfather. Once we immigrated, my biggest fear growing up was losing my ability to communicate with my family back home. I believe that this fear extended to my grandfather as well. When my parents made the decision to immigrate, my grandfather began learning English and English songs so that he could feel connected to my sister. Whenever we would go on walks, he would sing "You Are My Sunshine" and "Amazing Grace" to showcase his progress. He'd also ask me how to say things in English so that he could

feel closer to my background. This cultural and language exchange was a paramount pillar of my childhood. These small moments will carry through my life forever, and I wanted to include an actual representation in my film (Tiger scene) to illustrate how we've connected in these simple moments. My grandfather's deep love and care for understanding my background inspired me to create this short film.

菠蘿包 (Pineapple Bun) explores the themes of reconstruction, evocation, and memory in animated documentaries and films. Historically, animated documentaries have always been debated due to their contrasting approaches to filmmaking. Animated documentaries have experienced a rise in popularity due to their ability to illustrate the unfilmable. My short film is loosely based on a memory of my grandfather. Animation, as a genre, lends itself well to telling stories rooted in truth but can also include the storyteller's subjective experiences. In Chapter 4 of Annabelle Roe's book, *Animated Documentary*, she explores the techniques used by animated documentaries, such as visual metaphors and soundtracks, to "evoke" a nonrepresentational feeling. Roe references Stephen A. Tyler's (1986) essay, citing

"Here Tyler suggests that 'evocation is neither presentation nor representation' (123) and that 'since evocation is nonrepresentational, it is not to be understood as a sign function, for it is not a "symbol of", nor does it "symbolize" what it evokes' (129). Furthermore, he stresses that 'the whole point of "evoking" rather than "representing" is that it frees ethnography from mimesis' (130, emphasis in original). When something has no visual equivalent it is impossible to mimetically represent it...In order for those who do have such experiences to better know what they are like, some other means of facilitating understanding is required." (Roe 109).

This idea of evocation in contrast to representation is evident in my film. In the Tiger scene, I am hoping to bring forth a certain feeling from the viewer rather than represent a concept. Transforming my grandfather's life force into a Tiger creates an imaginative interpretation of our intergenerational connection.

In Annabelle Roe's "Absence, Excess, and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary", she contextualizes the use of animation by exploring non-mimetic, mimetic, and evocative animation used to complicate and expand the documentary genre. My film includes all the types that Roe outlines, but the climax of my film focuses on the non-mimetic animation of my grandfather transforming into a Tiger. By representing my grandfather as his Chinese zodiac, I am utilizing non-mimetic substitution, which allows the medium "to express meaning through its aesthetic realization" (Roe 226). Sybil DelGaudio's article, "If truth be told, can 'toons tell it? Documentary and animation", also examines the animated documentary genre in relation to Bill Nichols' definition of the reflexive mode. DelGaudio argues, "Without any existence in the world of actuality, the animated film must, like the partially dramatized documentary, rely on a kind of artistic re-enactment, depend, in part, on imaginative rendering of one sort or another that may serve as compensation for the camera's non-presence at the event." Since there is no filmed material with my grandfather, animation allows for this "artistic re-enactment" in retelling my memory. This idea of the possibilities of representation in animated documentaries is also explored in Jeffrey Skoller's piece, "Making it (Un)real: Contemporary Theories and Practices in Documentary Animation." Skoller cites Ji-Hoon Kim's article, "Animating the Photographic Trace: Digital Moving Pictures and the Modes of the Documentary Disavowal", stating, "...these 'digital moving pictures' create a new kind of realism that is read as neither still or moving picture, but rather as a dynamic of the exchange between them" (Skoller 212). Utilizing animation to tell personal, subjective experiences can expand the possibilities of realism in animated documentaries. Animated documentaries allow for truth to be subjective and evocative, expanding the world of truth in this genre.

Viewer experience and imagination are also essential components of my film. My film is made for those who speak Taiwanese or Chinese, so my animations are important in conveying the story to English-speaking viewers. Roe touches on this idea, “One way it does this is by showing us aspects of life that are impossible to film in live-action...It invites us to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality.” Additionally, Roe cites Thomas Nigel, a philosopher, who claims that images, as a mental concept, hold a great significance on the viewer’s imagination. Roe interprets Thomas’ work, stating, “...viewer imagination is a significant aspect of an animated documentary successfully communication what it is like to experience a certain subjective, conscious state that may not be universally familiar because such a process usually requires the viewer to imagine what it is like to experience something that is entirely alien to them” (Roe 110). Since I immigrated to the United States, my film spans familial bonds in Asian immigrant households. I want my film to be relatable to draw the viewer into my story and help them understand the more evocative moments in the film. My concept is a common experience in many Asian immigrant households, especially among the younger generation attempting to understand and bond with the older generations. Despite being a story centered on our language differences, this story is universal in our struggle to connect with a distant family member. Animating stories out of a universal experience helps evoke certain feelings and memories that transcend language. This core idea is what I’ve illustrated in not only learning Chinese and Taiwanese from my grandfather but also the deep love we show through simple acts such as swimming together.

Animated documentaries, and more broadly, animated films, utilize “psychorealism” in order to illustrate inner realities and better understand individual experiences or memories.

Samantha Moore's piece, "Animating Unique Brain States", explores the term "psychorealism" in the animated documentary genre by analyzing *An Eyeful of Sound* (2010). *An Eyeful of Sound* (2010) illustrates the experience of an individual with synaesthesia (a brain condition where when one sense is stimulated, more than one will react) through animation. By animating the conditions of the synaesthetes and obtaining direct input from them, the film was able to spread awareness and comprehension of synaesthesia. Moore defines psychorealism as allowing "the audience to get behind the eyes of the subject, explaining and evoking their unique perspective through sound, visual metaphor, and interpretation of internal experiences..." (Moore 4). In my film, there is some distance between my character and my grandfather. The viewer is never in the perspective of my younger self but rather observing the ritual of our swimming sessions. Moore's interpretation of psychorealism relates to the atmosphere that I am creating in my film. Through sound, visual metaphors of my grandfather's inner Tiger, and my artistic choices, I want to create a feeling of the past. Colors play a significant role in my film, dictating the time of day. In the final scene, the color of the scene shifts from light yellow to black and white, reiterating the past and tying it to my memory as a child. Psychorealism is similar to Roe's definition of evocative animation. When animating a personal memory, consideration of sound and visual representations can transform the atmospheric tone and temporal space. I've mixed sounds from Yuanlin (a city in Taiwan) at 5 a.m. with urban soundscapes in Taipei to evoke feelings of Taiwan's urban and suburban landscapes.

Maureen Furniss' book, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, helped to inform animation history through her discussion about full and limited animation, sound and structure, and mise-en-scene in creating animation aesthetics. My film incorporates both full and limited animation techniques to emphasize certain objects. For example, I drew a detailed pineapple bun, shining,

since it's an object of importance. However, in the scene where I'm swimming, I don't draw the water in detail or the pool itself. I mainly focus on the motion of swimming to get across that I swim quickly while my grandfather is much slower.

I am heavily influenced by other works that I've seen online done by other Asian American animators from CalArts. Chalky Wong's *Two for a Dollar* illustrates a story about his grandmother's arsenal of egg dishes and how he repays her by making an egg dish of his own when she becomes ill. The aesthetic and economic choices that Wong makes will be similar to those in my film. I am also influenced by his use of sounds in the film. He uses music to evoke feelings and the memory of his grandmother to tie together the beginning and end of the film. I am hoping to utilize my grandfather's favorite Taiwanese song in my film. The simplicity of the storyline also helps the relatability of the film, as many people can empathize with the themes presented.

Janelle Feng's *Opera* delves into the experiences of a traveling Peking Opera troupe and their fears of Sinophilia and Orientalism at their first show abroad. Feng's story is also centered around the dialogue, with the trope of not understanding the Canadian stage manager and vice versa. The dialogue and the language barrier drive the conflict in this film. My film will be more focused on the connection aspect of differing languages. Being able to share and learn from one another's language allows for deeper and more personal connections.

Yushan Li's *Yum Cha* is a Cantonese animated short film with great sound direction and a sense of motion as it deals with a little girl trying to catch a runaway shrimp dumpling. I liked the animation style and use of movement to show the kid's journey to grab the dumpling. I also liked the soundtrack; it really added to the playfulness and determination of the kid's personality.

I want to illustrate this similar feeling through my soundtrack to show my grandfather and my limited but meaningful conversations.

Before I started creating the story, I closely followed Jackie Droujko's video on creating a short animated film. I knew that I wanted to create an animated story about my family so I could stay engaged with it throughout the whole semester. After I found my story, I collected images on Google Maps of my grandfather's neighborhood, the roads, the shops, and the swimming pool, so I had all my references. I started creating a character design sheet for my grandfather so I could easily draw different angles once I started animating. Using the images I pulled from Google Maps, I drew all the backgrounds needed for my film so I could animate on top of the still backgrounds. I also started writing up a script and finding actors by asking my family and friends for people who could speak Chinese and English. Then, I began storyboarding the entire film and got feedback from my peer group and Professor Mayeri before actually animating. I started overlaying my storyboard with my intended color script, which was to show the progression from dawn to daytime. I also wanted the last scene to fade out into black and white to show that it's a memory. Once I had all the materials I needed to begin, I began animating each scene chronologically. I did this because of my strict color script and because I wanted to make sure that the colors were changing correctly with one another. I was also able to get the voice actors through my mom and my sister. My mom's dry cleaner's husband is Taiwanese and volunteered to voice my grandfather. My sister voiced the younger version of myself.

When I got to the scene where I see the pineapple bun, I realized that my animated short felt more like a documentary. Instead of utilizing the animation techniques I had learned, I was focusing more on retelling the memory. This was when I decided to create the Tiger scene. This

scene allowed me to utilize more creative storytelling elements to convey the idea of connection with my grandfather. After animating my rough cut, I sought out feedback from Professor Tran and Professor Mayeri. Professor Tran gave me feedback on the soundtrack, stating that I could include humming sounds for the tiger transformation scene. She suggested that my grandfather humming a tune would match the other more ambient sounds that I have already included in the film. Professor Mayeri gave me helpful feedback that the tiger transformation was rather abrupt. She suggested that I include hints of my grandfather's tiger earlier on in the film so that it would connect to that final scene. Following Professor Mayeri's advice, I went back in to change the steam room scene where my grandfather changes into a Tiger for a moment in the steam. I felt that this helped to round out my film a lot more. It also helped to lightly introduce the mystical elements of the overall story in a subtle way.

My peers also gave me feedback that was more focused on the sound aspect. Athena suggested that for the subtitles, I would interchange between English and Chinese based on the language spoken in the dialogue. For example, if the character was speaking Chinese, the subtitles would be in English, and vice versa. I was able to incorporate this into my rough cut, and it was well-received by my peers. I thought it also furthered the message behind my film because it is about the connection between my American and Taiwanese backgrounds. Waverly suggested that I use the room effect when my characters speak to each other inside the house or the pool. Mya suggested that I use one of my grandfather's favorite songs for the Tiger scene to add my grandfather's personal tastes to my film. During my work-in-progress pitch, my peers also suggested that I drag out the Tiger scene for a beat longer so they could better understand the ending of the film. To incorporate everyone's feedback, I have increased the time on the steam scene and will include an instrumental Taiwanese song for the transformation scene.

After finishing my project, my process went as expected. I was well prepared by watching Jackie Droujko's video, so the actual animation time wasn't as long as I had originally expected. There weren't many surprises or challenges that hindered my process. Since I did draw each frame, the most difficult part of the production process was reanimating certain scenes. When I decided to add the tiger in the steam room, I had to completely redraw the frames, which was pretty time-consuming. Most of my problems came from my inexperience with editing sound, so I would say that is the weakest point of my animation. Since I wasn't there in person to direct my actors, their voices can sound somewhat separate.

This was my first time creating a full animated short, so I learned a lot about the process of creating one. I also learned how to create a color script, character study, and use different tools to stay organized in this process. Before this process, I used to jump right into creative projects with little planning. However, I think the thesis process lends itself well to preparing yourself before you take on this monumental task. It was also really helpful to have check-ins with the professors and my peer group. I liked that my peer group members were working on similar projects to mine so that we could get advice from one another along the way. I am very proud of the work I've created and thankful for all the support along the way.

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