

Mother
by Theresa Wang

My parents were content being childless until the year that both of my mother's parents passed away. I was the result of my mother's grief transformed into a yearning to supplant her familial loss. Following my parents' separation, my mother trailed after me to Toronto, where we sought to partake in a relationship predicated upon each other's independence rather than one built on the blood-relation piety of mother and daughter. Once, I asked about her relationship with her own mother, who had died before we could meet. My mother admitted to her disaffected indignation that was in turn met by her mother's upholding of authority. Their bond was so strained that it distressed my mother to think of repeating those same mistakes. She took it upon herself to volunteer at a daycare centre to familiarize herself with children and embody the maternal. I could see her struggling with the regrets around her mistakes as a daughter, as someone who had lost a mother, and how she was trying to reconcile maternal loss by having a daughter. Her anxious devotion to make amends spurred by misgivings about her caregiving capability moved me to tears, to which she responded with quiet acknowledgement, her eyes welling with tears of gratitude.

Consisting of 14 photographs and one video, *Mother* (2017) by Chun Hua Catherine Dong is an attempt to reconcile feelings around the mother-daughter relationship following the artist's mother's abrupt death. Upon encountering Dong's images, I think of my own mother's grieving process. Although prompted by death, Dong's work is more concerned with the unsettled identity of a mourning daughter, when the tie to her mother has been severed. Each photograph in the series portrays a symmetrical image of Dong seated in a rural home, next to one of her mother's close friends or relatives. Each figure stoically looks toward the camera while mirroring the other's pose. The doubling carries over to their garments: Dong asked the women to lend her something to wear from their closets, resulting in Dong being adorned in similar fabrics, patterns, and styles as the woman she is seated next to, bringing to mind the phrase "cut of the same cloth." Each pictured woman not only is a mother in her own right, but also plays the character of another person's mother—that of Dong. These variations on motherhood are connected by a sole constant: the floral embroidered shoes that each woman wears. Dong offered these floral shoes to the women as a gift, and a reminder of the style of shoes treasured by her own mother.

Dong's practice is largely interested in social relations in the context of both Chinese identities and family roles. As a performance artist, she places great emphasis upon the individual in dialogue and confrontation with cultural expressions, expectations, and spaces. In *The Misfits* (2020)—a series of photographs animated with augmented reality—Dong examines the social roles of husband and wife through the symbolic gender-based representations of the feminized phoenix and masculinized dragon. To Dong, the relationship between the dragon and phoenix is closer to a compatible partnership than oppositional forces. The mirroring of kindred individuals in *The Misfits* is also present in *Mother*, when Dong resurrects her own mother through her pining search for a maternal figure in each of the pictured

women. The maternal figure in *Mother* is knotty, encompassing the denial of loss by Dong's projection of the maternal onto other women. However, the artist's performative gestures also profoundly declare to replace the absence, with Dong adopting and embodying the identity of the mother. Dong aptly captures this ambivalence by manufacturing and accentuating the likeness between herself and her "mothers." During infancy, the parent-child relationship resides in the womb, where intimacy is built from sharing a body. But throughout life—and especially adulthood—the mother and daughter are made distinct, and resemblances are as comforting as they are confining. The mother is a model for comparison, an exemplar through which differences are distinguished with pride and shame, as the child moulds their identity. The anguish of bereavement, then, is twofold: once for the mother and once for the self.

Within the foreground of the photographs in *Mother* are assorted furniture pieces and decorative elements. Some of the objects, like the small dining table, are repeated throughout the series. Such repetition breaks the illusion of authentic family portraiture, and instead reveals the photographs as staged, fragmented attempts to reconstruct togetherness. In an interview with Lena Chen, Dong explains that all of her mother's personal belongings had been burned shortly after her death, in accordance with a hometown tradition. Instead of physical mementos, Dong was left with memories. The sparseness in the homes of these photographs alludes to this dwindling of material possessions that tends to accompany age (and eventually, death), as well as the personal value that accrues in what little remains of the deceased.

Despite depicting the act of gathering at a table, Dong and her "mothers" are never shown facing one another, or engaging in activities together. Any sentiment or affinity between Dong and these women is inferred through their reserved stance and dynamic. Like early photographic portraits of families, Dong controls the proximity between figures and meticulously arranges the scene to suggest domestic intimacy and ancestral lineage. Certain objects such as a floral teapot or a humble home altar hint at the possibility of shared activities, like drinking tea or burning incense for worship. In two photographs, red banners marked with good fortune read "zǔ dé liú fāng 祖德流芳," pointing to the endurance of the noble ancestral virtues that continue to inform future generations, and consequently, the implicit, unwavering presence of kin.

This poetic grace of distant yet deeply felt bonds is most palpable in the video component of *Mother*, where the women from the photographs are seated in a row of wooden chairs in a grass field. Only the middle seat is left unoccupied. Gradually, the seat is filled through the superimposition of Dong herself. As she comes into view, the other women fade out—only their embroidered shoes remain. Soon, Dong also vanishes, only to be replaced by another version of herself in different attire, with her back turned to the camera. Dong's image is visually and figuratively bound up with her mother's reflection, finding closeness and consolation through a boundless act of longing and becoming. The film eventually returns in a loop to the initial image of the seated women, epitomizing the acceptance of mortality, the bonds that extend out of one's life, and the discovery of familial legacy within oneself.



Both images: Chun Hua Catherine Dong, from the series *Mother*, 2017, photographs, 81 cm x 1.22 m
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

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