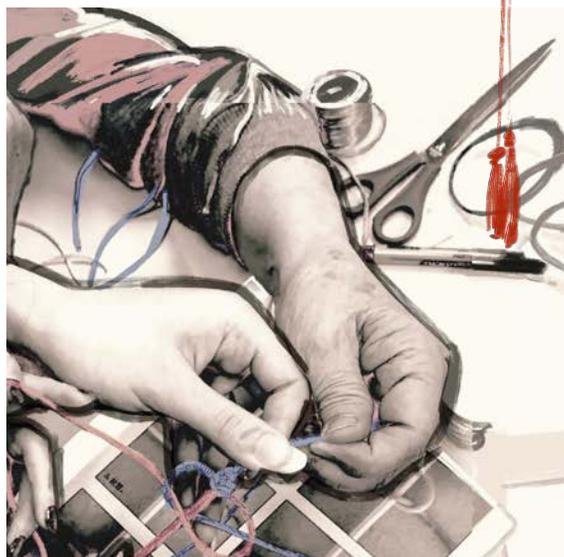


Friends  
Time  
Friend of Time



“我可以懂你”  
That moment of rediscovery, of self-recognition,  
of being truly seen





A red tassel graphic is positioned on the right side of the page, extending from the top to the bottom. It features a loop at the top, a long vertical cord, and two tassels at the bottom.

*MFA Design for Social Innovation*  
*School of Visual Arts, New York City*

*Advisor*  
*Mari Nakano*

*Design & Context*  
*Ruisi Fu*



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# 01 Context & Framing

视线交错处

*where our gazes meet*

*where our gazes meet*

Friend of Time

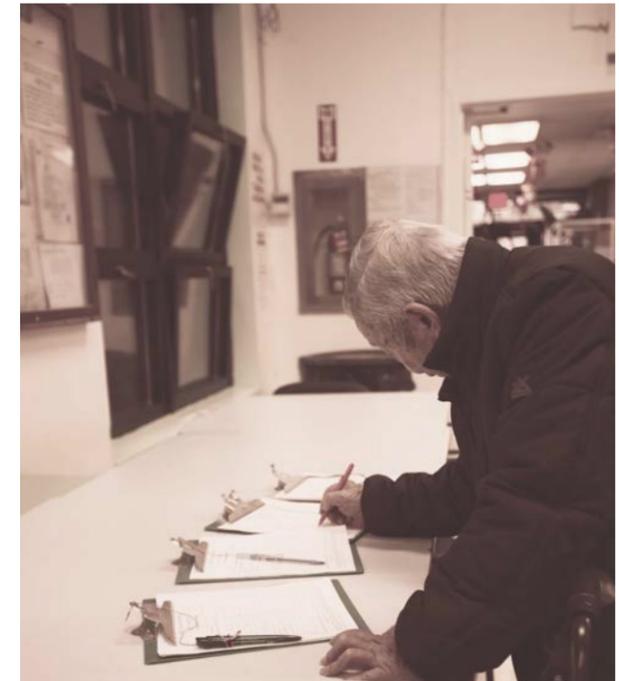


# The Invisible Gap Between Generations

In cities like New York—fast-paced, polyphonic, and perpetually in motion—cultural memory often slips through the cracks. While neighborhoods such as Flushing and Chinatown pulse with the visible presence of Chinese immigrant communities, an invisible silence lingers between generations. Chinese immigrant retirees and Chinese international students frequently occupy the same physical spaces—community centers, parks, libraries—yet rarely connect in meaningful ways. They share language, ancestry, and often even similar migration trajectories. Still, a relational gap persists, vast and unspoken.

This project began as an inquiry not into programmatic solutions or digital platforms, but into the emotional architecture of belonging. What I observed in these co-inhabited but disconnected urban spaces was not just the absence of communication, but the absence of invitation. No mechanisms existed for these two generations—one approaching the margins of public life, the other transient and culturally unmoored—to witness, learn from, or simply sit with each other.

My early observations painted a painful duality. On the one hand, Chinese elders possess deep reservoirs of cultural memory, linguistic nuance, and survival wisdom shaped by histories of migration, loss, and resilience. Yet in the absence of intergenerational dialogue, this knowledge remains largely untransferred and unacknowledged, tucked away in the routines of retirement and linguistic isolation. On the other hand, international students—especially those newly arrived from China—live in liminality: between languages, between cultural systems, and often between identities. Though surrounded by global mobility, many of them experience an acute sense of cultural dislocation and historical amnesia.



The social systems that serve these two groups—senior programming, international student offices, public service initiatives—operate in separate silos. Even well-meaning efforts often reduce them to roles of “recipient” or “beneficiary,” rather than recognizing their potential as mutual cultural partners. The result is a relational vacuum in which elders and young people mirror each other’s longing for meaning, without ever entering each other’s worlds.

What emerges from this vacuum is more than a missed opportunity. It is a systemic neglect of relational potential—a failure to imagine what could happen if generational connections were not accidental, but intentionally designed. Through this project, I ask:

*What if we could transform this gap into a space of encounter? What if design could become a tool not for building products, but for building conversations?*

# Isolation and Intergenerational Disconnection

In 2022, the NYC Department for the Aging reported that **over 30%** of older Asian Americans in the city experience regular feelings of loneliness—driven by language barriers, declining mobility, digital exclusion, and reduced family contact (New York City Department for the Aging).

For Chinese immigrant seniors, particularly those who arrived later in life or after retirement, the problem of social isolation is compounded **by cultural and generational disconnect**. Many live in multigenerational households but have limited emotional connection with younger family members; others live alone in linguistically and culturally segregated housing complexes.

The consequences of such isolation are not only emotional but **deeply physical**. Studies have linked prolonged loneliness to increased risks of cognitive decline, depression, and cardiovascular disease. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory describing loneliness and social disconnection as an epidemic—one that carries health risks “comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 5). This framing reinforces that loneliness is not simply a soft, social issue—**it is a matter of health and survival**.

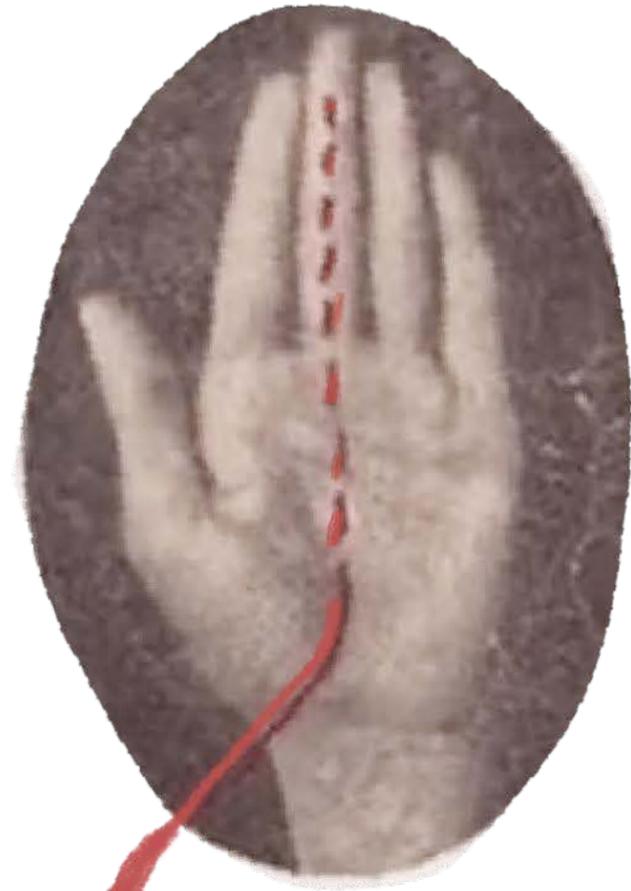
loneliness and social disconnection as an epidemic—

one that carries health risks “comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day”

—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



This disconnection is not merely circumstantial—it is systemic. Both elders and students live within structures that render them partially invisible: seniors are often seen only as care recipients, while students are positioned primarily as temporary economic actors. When intergenerational relationships do occur, they are frequently framed through charity or service—one offering help, the other receiving it. What is rarely considered is how intentional, co-created relationships might soften these roles, and create a different kind of connection—one grounded not in fixing, but in mutual presence.



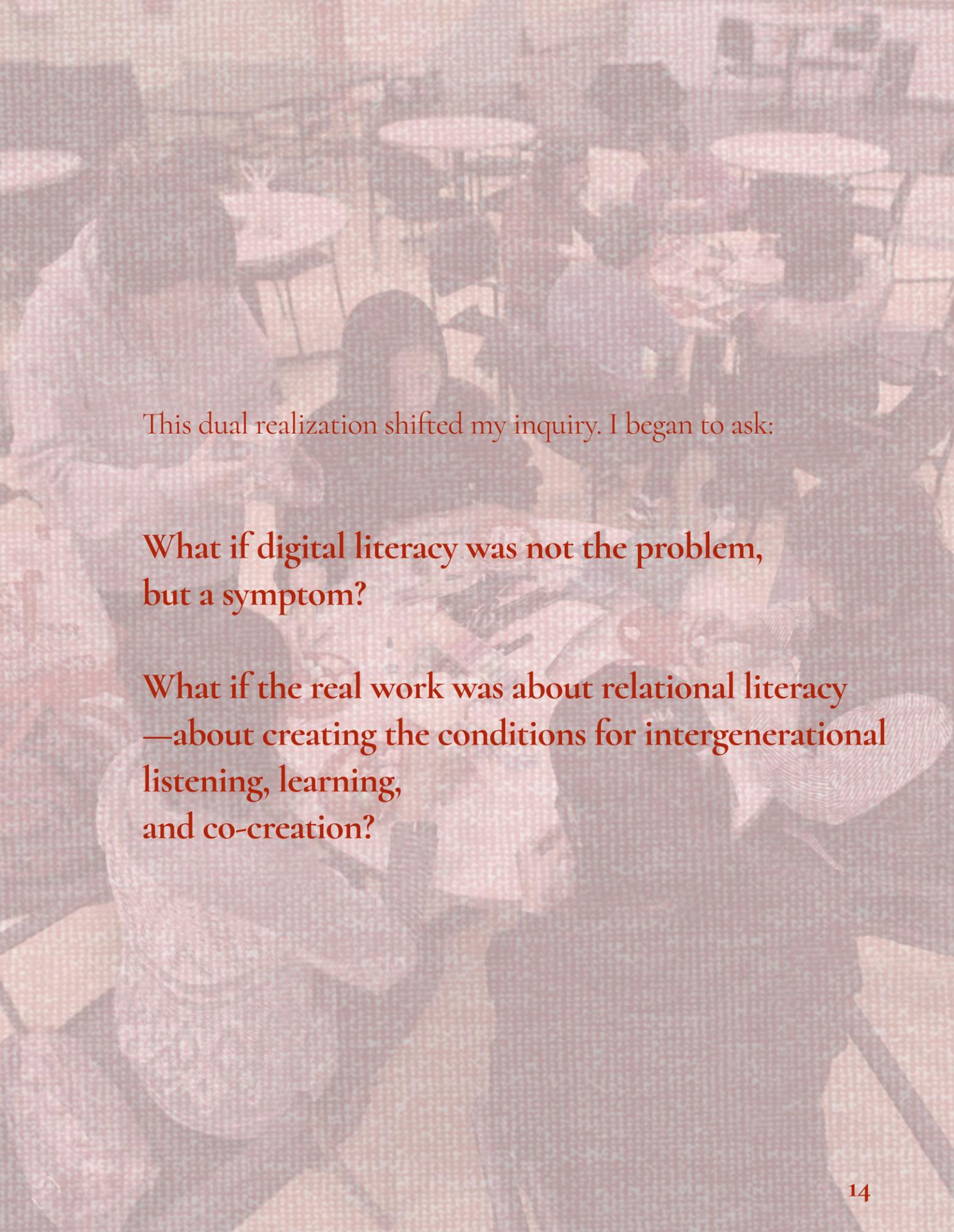
Meanwhile, young people from immigrant backgrounds—especially international students from East Asia—are also experiencing unprecedented levels of disconnection. A 2023 Pew Research Center report noted that **Gen Z adults** are more likely than any other generation to report feeling isolated or misunderstood (Parker and Minken). Among Chinese international students, **themes like homesickness, identity dislocation, and intergenerational anxiety recur with unsettling frequency.** While some seek out community through cultural organizations or student groups, many struggle with the gap between their inherited expectations and the lived experience of diasporic life.

## From Digital Literacy to Relational Design

This project did not begin with intergenerational connection as its central focus. In its earliest stages, I was interested in the problem of **digital literacy among immigrant seniors**—specifically the ways in which older Chinese adults navigated smartphones, QR codes, and online forms in a city rapidly shifting toward contactless systems. I saw how unfamiliar technology further isolated them from services, mobility, and even their families.

But as I began conducting interviews and spending time in senior centers, I noticed a pattern: **even when technology training was available, seniors often seemed disengaged or unmotivated.** What they truly longed for was not more apps—but **more moments of connection.** They wanted someone to sit beside them, to ask questions, to listen. The digital divide was not just technical—it was deeply relational.

At the same time, I observed that many young Chinese international students—my peers—felt equally disconnected, albeit in different ways. Despite being technologically fluent, they lacked meaningful spaces for intergenerational dialogue, cultural memory sharing, or reflective identity work. Many expressed a quiet desire to understand the elder generation—not just out of respect, but out of a need to locate themselves within a lineage that now felt distant.

A photograph showing a group of people, likely seniors, sitting around a table in a community center. They are gathered around a smartphone, looking at the screen together. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, reddish-orange tint. The people are dressed in casual clothing, and the background shows other tables and chairs, suggesting a communal space.

This dual realization shifted my inquiry. I began to ask:

**What if digital literacy was not the problem, but a symptom?**

**What if the real work was about relational literacy—about creating the conditions for intergenerational listening, learning, and co-creation?**

## Intergenerational Practice: A Global Model, A Local Gap

Globally, the value of intergenerational practice is well-documented. **The World Health Organization's 2021 Global Report on Ageism** identifies intergenerational contact as one of the three most effective strategies to reduce age-based prejudice—alongside educational reform and legislative change. Intergenerational models have been shown to **improve empathy, reduce loneliness, and increase civic trust** (WHO, 2021).

The WHO's Connecting Generations guide (2023) offers frameworks for implementing cross-age engagement initiatives—emphasizing participatory design, mutual learning, and context-specific facilitation. Their recommended continuum of contact—from passive presence to deep collaboration—provides a valuable conceptual scaffold. However, most documented cases come from schools, care homes, or institutionalized programs. Few address the **relational disconnection within immigrant communities** in major metropolitan settings, or explore how youth and elder groups **co-exist without systemic channels of engagement**.

In New York, intergenerational projects exist, but are often organized by age-segregated institutions: schools adopt grandparents for a day; senior homes host youth volunteers. Rarely do we see horizontal, community-based models that treat both youth and elders as equally valuable contributors—not helpers or helped, but partners. This project responds to that gap.

## From Service to Ecosystem

To move beyond transactional models of engagement, I grounded my work in the principles of **Design for Social Innovation (DSI)**—a methodology that views social challenges as **relational, systemic, and emergent**. As Ezio Manzini argues in *Design, When Everybody Designs* (2015), social innovation requires creating platforms where people can generate their own solutions—solutions rooted in local knowledge, shared agency, and participatory meaning-making.

This project frames intergenerational connection not as a “solution” to loneliness, but as a **designable process**—one in which roles, rituals, and relational infrastructures can be co-created by those involved. It is not enough to host events or teach skills. We must design the conditions for reciprocal growth, where cultural memory and contemporary experience meet not as opposites, but as collaborators.

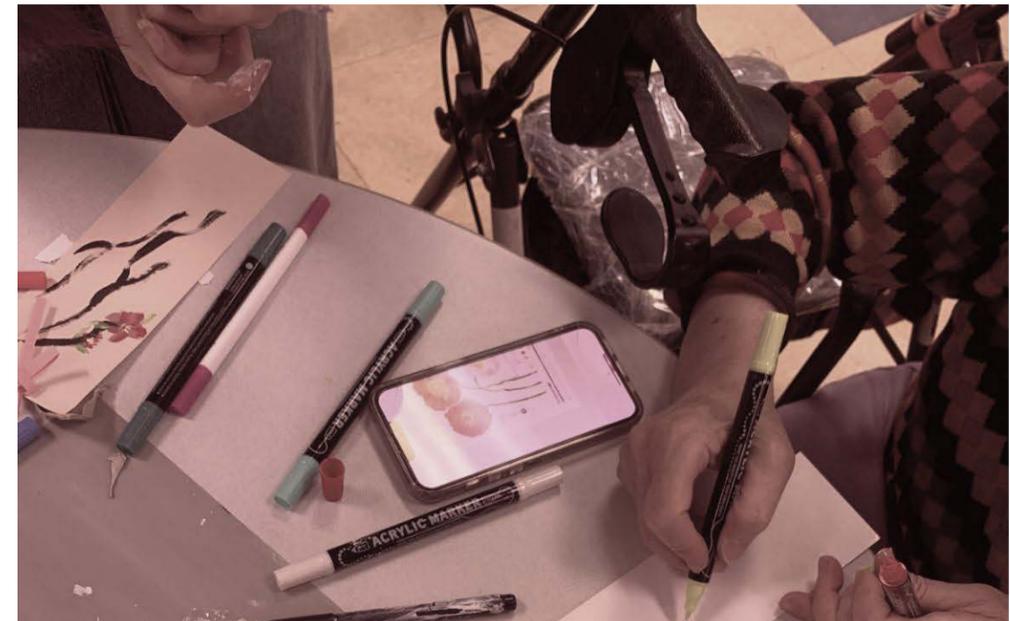
Informed by systems thinking and facilitation ethics, my design process integrates participatory research, iterative prototyping, and continuous reflection. It seeks not to provide services, but to build **a co-learning ecosystem**: a social space where generations do not simply coexist, but converge—with curiosity, humility, and shared authorship.

## 02 My Process

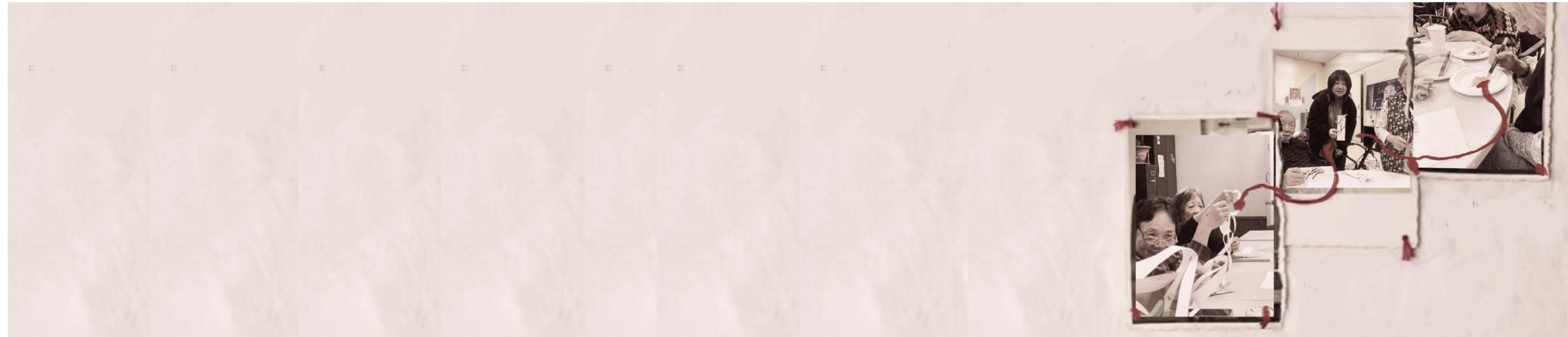
边走边想

*think as one goes*

Friend of Time







## Key Insights from the Field

Through over three months of immersive research, several thematic insights emerged that shaped the direction of the project:

### 1. Elders want to share.

Many older participants spoke openly about a sense of loss—not only of homeland, but of social usefulness and voice. While they appreciated structured services provided by the senior center, **what they truly valued was the opportunity to pass on stories, skills, and lived experience.**

In sessions where they were asked to demonstrate calligraphy or describe a festival dish, their engagement levels noticeably increased. Several elders framed this not as “helping” but as “remembering together.”

### 2. Student volunteers feel disconnected from living culture.

Despite fluency in digital tools and design vocabulary, many of the student volunteers—most of whom were international students from Chinese diasporic backgrounds—described feeling uncertain about their cultural identities. While they had inherited language, holidays, or family traditions, few had interacted directly with elders outside of family settings. Several admitted to feeling awkward or performative when visiting the senior center for the first time, **unsure how to initiate authentic, mutual interaction without seeming patronizing.**

### 3. There is relational potential—but no architecture.

Across all sessions, both elders and students demonstrated openness to connection. Yet this potential was often blocked—not by unwillingness, but by a lack of shared structure. The gaps were not only linguistic, but emotional, spatial, and institutional. Existing community programs often assigned each group a separate role—provider or recipient, leader or audience. There was no design infrastructure to **support mutual curiosity, iterative exchange, or role fluidity.**

Together, these insights shifted my orientation from service design (e.g. standalone workshops or content delivery) toward **ecosystem design.**

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# From Isolation to Opportunity

To better understand the institutional and relational dynamics that shaped intergenerational isolation in Chinese immigrant communities, I created a systems map identifying key actors, structural barriers, and cultural leverage points.



Chinese Immigrant Elders (ages 65+)

Language barriers

Senior centers

Migration Loss

International offices

Digital exclusion

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

University International Offices and Student Clubs



Young People from Chinese Diasporic Backgrounds (ages 18-30)

How might we design repeatable, adaptive formats within immigrant communities that allow intergenerational dialogue, memory, and cultural making to grow—as lived, reciprocal experiences of belonging and co-learning?

# Relational over Transactional

Based on these insights, I structured the next phase of the process around **co-creation as methodology**. Rather than designing a solution for users, I aimed to **design with them**, using participatory sessions to generate not only content, but trust.

*Workshops were not framed as “events” but as “encounters.”  
Each session had three layers:*

- 1. Personal storytelling** – Prompts like “Tell me about a dish that reminds you of home” created emotional entry points across generations.
- 2. Tactile co-making** – Shared activities (zine collage, dumpling folding, recipe writing) enabled non-verbal collaboration and memory sharing.
- 3. Reflection and naming** – Each participant reflected on their role in the space —not as helper or student, but as a “co-learner,” “culture holder,” or “memory companion.”

These sessions were not always smooth. There were moments of awkward silence, hesitation, and translation fatigue. But in those frictions, **relational breakthroughs occurred**: an elder teaching a student to use Deepseek, a student asking a grandparent’s name for the first time, a shared memory of the same regional food reappearing decades apart.

This phase culminated in the prototyping of my intervention: a **Cultural Mentor Model** built around shared authorship, co-created rituals, and mutual identity recognition.



## 03 Prototypes

# 练习 中的理解

*Understanding in practice*

Friend of Time



## Prototypes — Translating Listening into Practice



The earliest phases of my field research were not about intervention, but about learning to stay. I spent time sitting in silence, listening to the ways elders resisted the language of “need” and how students stumbled over the idea of “help.” **These were not gaps to be filled with content, but symptoms of deeper asymmetries in cultural memory, in intergenerational expectations, and in power.**

It became clear that **I was not designing for outcomes—I was designing for rhythm.** For how people approach each other. For how stories begin, pause, and are picked up again. This meant prototyping not as solution-making, but as a form of situated rehearsal. Each prototype became a space for testing how much vulnerability a form could hold, and how much reciprocity could be invited—without collapsing into performance or asymmetry.

The concept of the “Cultural Mentor” did not appear as a title or label I gave, but as a pattern I began to observe. Elders often spoke not of what they lacked, but of what they carried—stories, idioms, foods, sayings. Students, meanwhile, voiced a desire to connect, but lacked the cultural scripts or confidence to do so. They were unsure whether it was appropriate to ask questions, unsure whether they were “qualified” to listen.

I was on my journey of:

“I thought I was helping.”

Thus,  
the prototypes aimed not to bridge these two  
sides in a straight line,  
but to create enough texture and tactility for  
relationships to form naturally.

Co-Creation: Shifting from  
Leading to Listening

OR



# Prototype1: Community Engagement – Memory Handcraft Workshop



## 1. Period of observation:

February craft club hosted by me - getting to know each other, slowly getting to know each other



## 2. Iteration period:

Interviews with all volunteers in March to find out their feelings and more suggestions.



## 3. Co-create period:



Independent artists and competent people were invited in April to bring more technical and fun craft workshops - learning together based on relational connections

The first prototype emerged as a natural extension:  
Memory Zine Workshops,

in which elders and students co-created visual documents centered on shared themes such as Chinese New Year or family mottos. The act of making—cutting, gluing, handwriting—disarmed hierarchy. Elders brought forward the content; students supported its shape. The zines were not outputs in the institutional sense, but evidence of co-agency. Some pairs stayed in touch afterwards, a fact I hadn't designed for but learned to design toward.

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## Prototype2: Art Therapy Sessions

The second prototype shifted the temporal structure.

In a series of art therapy-inspired workshops, participants created self-portraits at different life stages, then responded to symbolic prompts—mandalas, Möbius strips, house-tree-person drawings. These formats moved away from biography and toward metaphor. Here, a different kind of language emerged: one shaped by image, rhythm, and layered time. The goal was not interpretation but resonance.



This is where art and storytelling come in. Art creates a **comfortable third space**—a space where conversation flows naturally.  
A space where barriers dissolve.

What all three prototypes shared was an attempt to design **situated listening**: to let the material form hold the tension, so the people involved didn't have to. These were not scalable tools, but **context-sensitive rehearsals** that helped me discover the parameters of trust, authorship, and cultural humility. More than anything, they taught me to design **with, not for**—to create conditions, not conclusions.

## 04 The Intervention

让关系  
自由生长

*Let relationships grow freely*

Friend of Time



# Cultural Mentor Model

## *Shared Tables, Shared Stories*

The prototypes did not culminate in a product. They culminated in a pattern.

What I came to name **the Cultural Mentor Circle** was not a standalone program, but a relational framework—a rhythm of practice for intergenerational memory exchange. It was repeatable, but not standardized; replicable, but only when rooted in local specificity.

At its core, the Cultural Mentor Circle reconfigures roles:

- Elders are not recipients of support, but bearers of lived cultural knowledge.
- Students are not helpers, but facilitators of presence and co-authors of memory.
- Designers are not central figures, but stewards of relational dynamics—holding the emotional tempo and ensuring shared authorship is possible.

Each session began with ritualized invitations: a shared meal, a breathing exercise, a visual prompt. These practices established rhythm and grounded the session in care, not in productivity. In this space, stories surfaced organically—not because they were elicited, but because the structure allowed for vulnerability without exposure.



Elders → cultural mentors



Me (Facilitators) → rhythm-keepers, system stewards



Students → story-carriers, dialogue facilitators

# Building a Collaborative Ecosystem

One of the core strengths of the intervention lay not only in the workshops themselves, but in the infrastructure of care and coordination that supported them. This ecosystem was composed of senior-facing community partners, student volunteers, and cross-generational facilitators—all contributing to a fluid, distributed network of trust and learning.

The primary partner was the **BRC Senior Services**, represented by **Kim Fong** and **Rick Akin**, who provided both space and emotional scaffolding. Their consistent presence offered stability and insight into the rhythms of elder engagement. Meanwhile, the student side of the ecosystem was led by **Hanna Wu**, a volunteer coordinator who helped organize and mentor a rotating network of over 40 student participants, mostly from the **Craftopia Club**—a craft-based undergraduate collective I had built prior to this thesis project.

Rather than assigning fixed roles, I allowed these stakeholders to operate organically within the space. Students were not simply helpers—they became dialogue facilitators, story listeners, and visual translators. Elders were not passive recipients, but co-authors of their own narratives. Facilitators like myself moved between roles, observing emotional rhythms, guiding workshop flow, and adjusting formats responsively. The team didn't merely support a series of events; it co-produced a sustained, intergenerational learning environment.



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## Tangible Impact and Legacy

The social outcomes of this work are both quantifiable and deeply human. Over the course of the intervention:

- **30+ Elders And 40+ Students** Participated In Facilitated Co-Creative Dialogue And Cultural Storytelling, Building Emotional Connections That Transcended Language, Class, And Age.
- **200+ Memory Artifacts** Were Co-Created, Including Bilingual Zines, Hand-Illustrated Timelines, Oral History Scrolls, And Collaborative Poems—Serving As Tangible Proof Of Shared Authorship And Intergenerational Reciprocity.
- **20+ Intergenerational Cultural Exchange Activities** Were Conducted, Ranging From Festival Sharing And Calligraphy To Painting, Clay Work, And Traditional Food Conversations.
- **A Training Guidebook** Was Developed For Future Student Facilitators To Replicate And Scale The Cultural Mentor Model With Intentionality And Care.
- The Program Received A **\$1,000 Community Grant**, Validating Its Public Relevance And Sustainability.
- Participating Volunteers And Artist Hosts, Including A Curatorial Team Of 10 And More, Came From **Different Parts Of China, Different Schools In New York: NYU, FIT, SVA .....**, And A Network Of Contacts Among Each Other.

## Invisible outcomes

Beyond the tangible numbers and quantifiable evidence, what's more precious to me is how people really feel and the stories of what happened in the process.

In traditional project evaluation, impact is often measured through quantitative outcomes: attendance rates, completed sessions, or material deliverables. While such metrics have value, they are insufficient for capturing the depth of transformation at the heart of relational, intergenerational work. This project—rooted in emotional connection, shared authorship, and cultural memory—required a different lens. I designed an evaluation framework grounded in empathy, reflection, and narrative-based change, drawing on both the WHO's recommended ageism reduction indicators (WHO, 2021) and social design evaluation strategies. Success was reframed not as output alone



“I thought they would just play with their cell phones, but I didn't realize they were willing to listen to me talk about my childhood.”

— Mrs. Huang



“I haven't written with a brush in years, and today they made me pick it up again.”

—— Mrs. Zhuang



“My greatest wish is for my children to be happy and in good health.”

—— Grandma Bao

“I thought it was going to be hard, but I didn't realize I was quite talented.”

—— Mrs. Ma

“Hosting this kind of event makes me more confident in my abilities as well.”

—— Artist Host



Friend of Time

“Your drawing is so much better than the reference we brought!”

— Gloria



“The last time I made a kite was when I was a kid in China .....”

— Grandma Qun

# Reflections

## Designing with, not for

One of the most profound shifts I experienced throughout this thesis journey was understanding the difference between designing for people and designing with them. In my early explorations, I often asked questions like: How can I make seniors feel more connected? or What can I offer to bridge the digital gap? These were well-intentioned, but subtly centered my own perspective—assuming a position of problem-solver.

Through ethnographic listening and participatory practice, I began to realize that elders were not asking to be helped—they were asking to be heard. And students were not seeking solutions—they were seeking connection. Both groups had deep capacities for wisdom, warmth, and insight. What they lacked was not ability, but invitation.

This realization transformed my role. I stopped trying to "solve" and instead started to host, hold, and co-create. I began to design spaces where others could lead. This wasn't a loss of leadership—it was an evolution of it.

## Embracing Friction, Fluidity, and Failure

Working across generations and cultural lines is not always harmonious. There were awkward pauses, failed prototypes, emotional moments that surprised both participants and myself. I learned that in social design, friction is not failure—it is data. It is a sign that something real is happening.

Designing for relational change requires a kind of emotional fluency and flexibility that is rarely taught in design school. It involves knowing when to step forward, when to step back, and when to let silence do the talking. Some of the most impactful moments occurred when I let go of structure and allowed unexpected gestures—sharing a poem, showing a childhood photo, sitting in silence—to guide the process.

These moments reminded me that design is not just about form—it is about presence.

# Reflections

## Rediscovering My Own Cultural Identity

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of this project was how deeply personal it became. As a Chinese international student in the U.S., I often existed in a liminal cultural space—too foreign to be fully American, too distant to be fully Chinese. Working closely with immigrant elders, I encountered stories that echoed in my own family history: the smell of preserved vegetables, the quiet grief of separation, the resilience behind small rituals.

These encounters did not just connect me to the participants—they reconnected me to myself.

In a way, this project helped me reclaim cultural parts of myself I had not known were lost. I began to see social design not only as a tool for community change, but also as a practice of personal re-rooting.

# Looking Forward

## Implications for My Future Practice

This thesis has fundamentally reshaped how I view myself as a designer. I no longer aspire to be a creative problem-solver alone. I want to be a bridge-builder, a space-maker, and a steward of human stories.

In my future work—whether in community design, civic innovation, or cultural programming—I will carry these commitments:

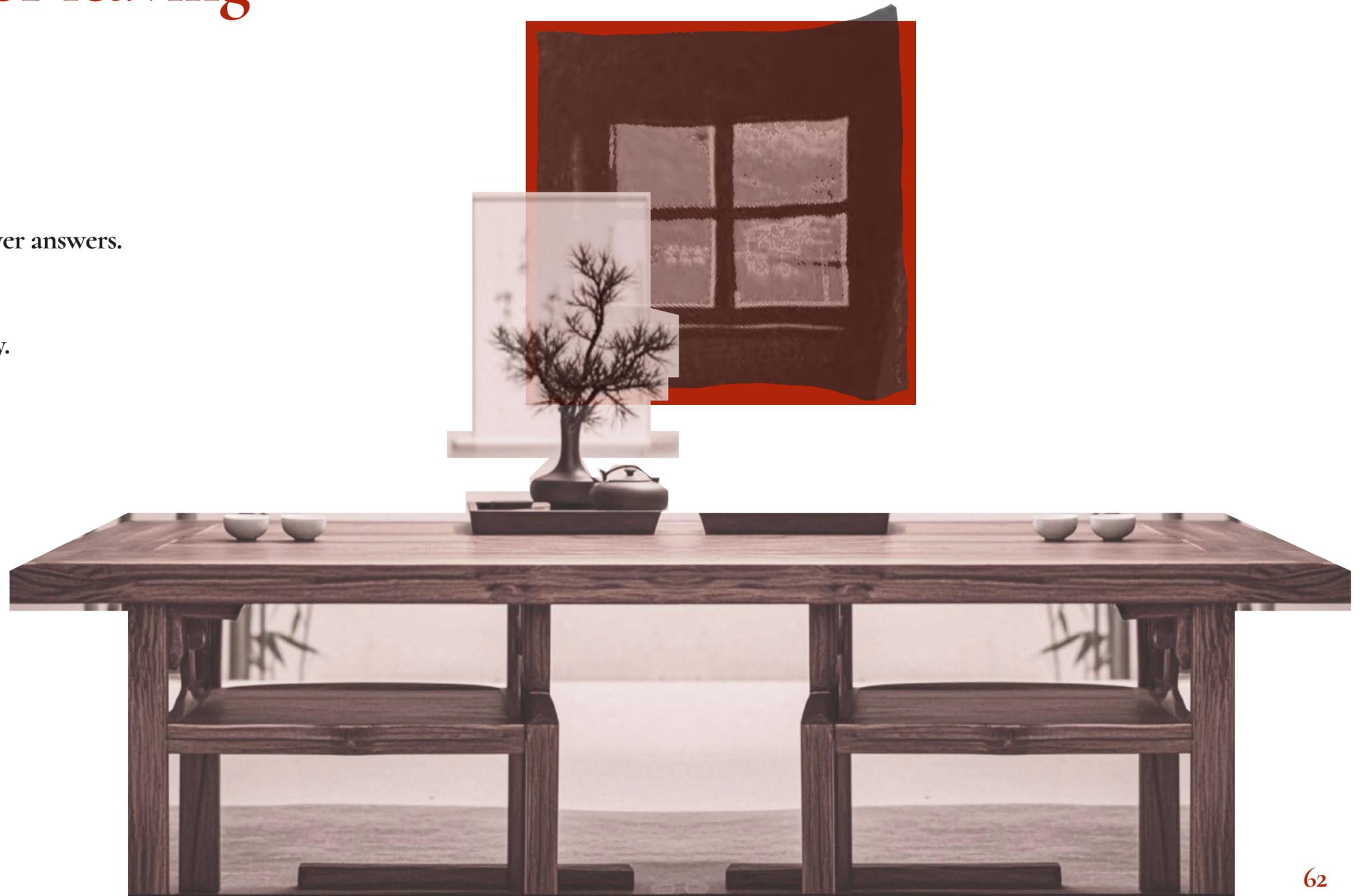
- To center relationship over efficiency
- To invite voices, not impose answers
- To treat culture not as heritage to be preserved, but as a living process to be shared

I do not know yet what form my next project will take. But I know how I want it to feel: slow, generous, rooted in care.

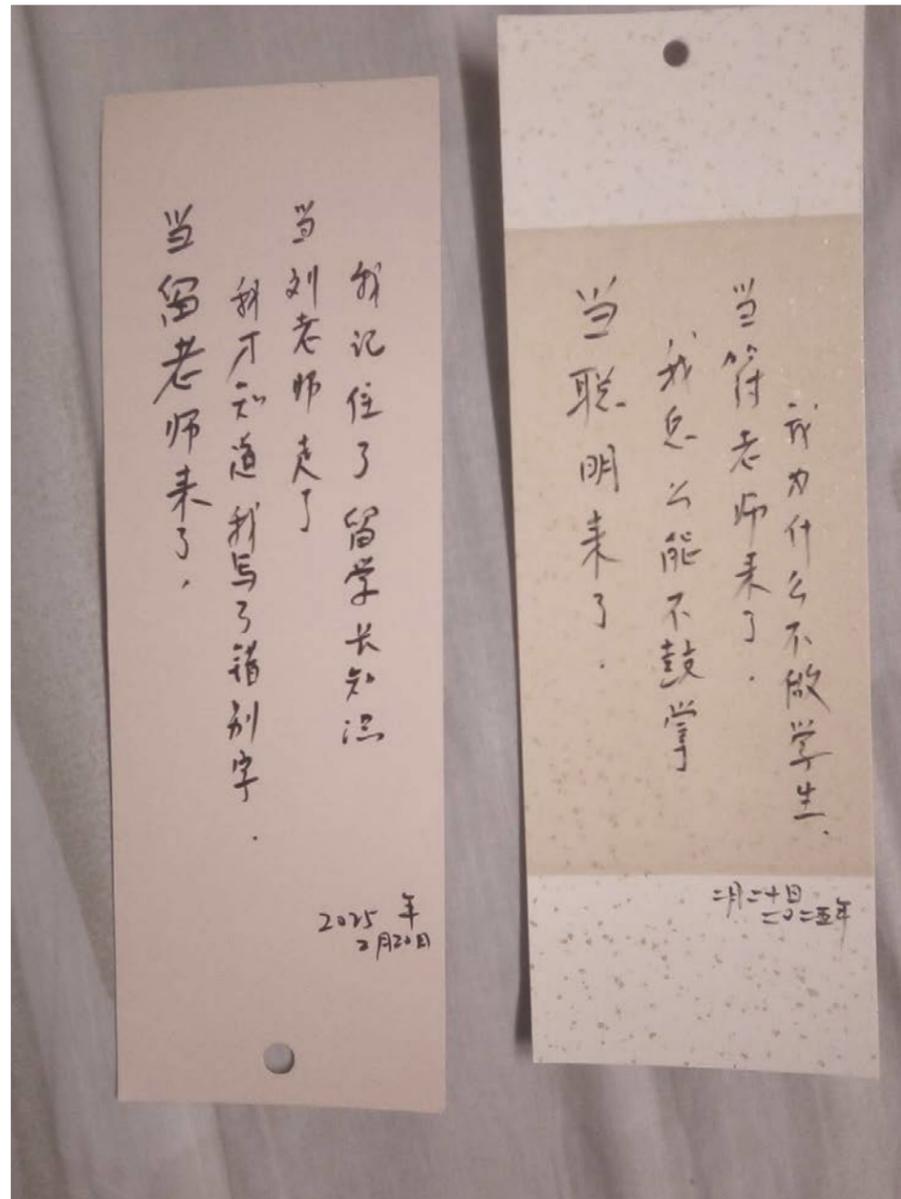
Friend of Time

# Design for leaving

I didn't come to deliver answers.  
I came to hold space.  
To set a table.  
And then... step away.



# A Closing Note



“How can I not applaud  
when wisdom comes?”

When Miss Fu comes,  
why can't I be a student?”

# Special Thanks

This work is not mine alone. It is a tapestry woven from countless conversations, shared memories, and acts of trust.

To **the elders** and **BRC Senior Services** (Mrs. Ma, Mrs. Qun, Mr. Shang): thank you for welcoming me into your stories, your silences, and your wisdom. You did not simply participate in this project—you reshaped it. You reminded me that culture lives not in textbooks, but in hands, recipes, laughter, and pauses.

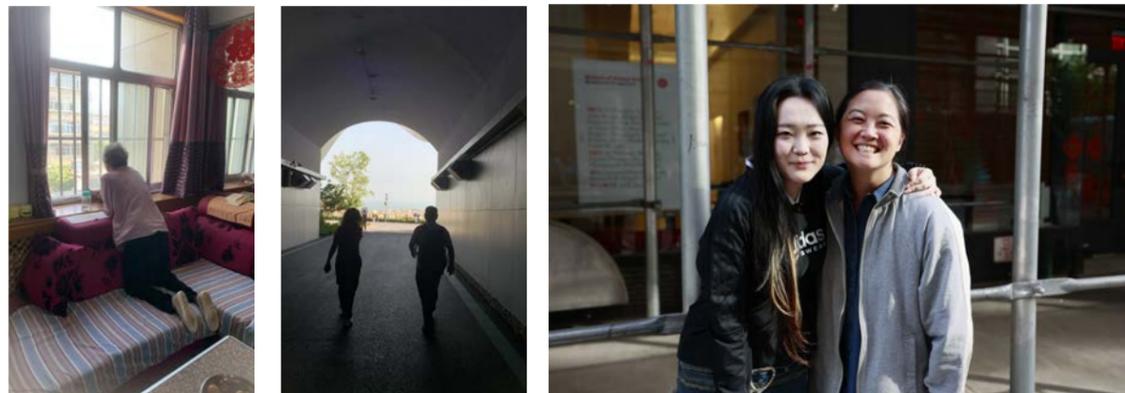
To the **student volunteers**—especially **Hanna Wu, Sebrina Ma** and the members of **Craftopia**—thank you for showing up not just with your skills, but with your patience, humility, and willingness to listen.

To My parents and friends: Your support was the scaffolding behind the scenes.

To my BEST ADVISOR **Mari Nakano**, thank you for everything you done and told me, both in my lift and study, **Miya Osaki** for bring me into social design, professors for challenging me to think deeper, to stay uncomfortable, and to let the process lead. And to **my cohort-- DSI 2025**—thank you for walking beside me.

Finally, to the young person I used to be—the one who always tried to "fix" things—you are not gone, only quieter. This project is yours too.

This thesis is not a conclusion. It is a table—one we built together.  
And the table remains open.



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