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Faculty of Fine Arts

MA Contemporary Art

MACA 20

**CHUN, AU-YEUNG**

**What is home?**

MA Thesis

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Tallinn

April 2022

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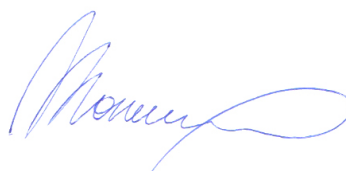
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## Abstract

This thesis began with a longing for a home since I left Hong Kong due to the unhealthy political environment. Emotional security, a significant feeling that has been lingering in my mind, became the core element for defining a home for myself. In the current thesis with the title, I seek to elaborate on some of the key concepts related to the notion of home. I'll also reflect on my previous exhibition projects as well as the graduation work in order to show how this subject has evolved throughout my studies in the Master program.

Chapter 1 starts with the question of "*Where is home?*", along with the elaboration on the notion of home in both geographical and emotional sense. The first one refers to a sense of belonging and the second one to an emotional attachment.

In chapter 2, I am asking myself "*What does home mean to me?*" by investigating the environment of a student dormitory and analysing my solo exhibition "*Don't think that I am pushing you away.*" It leads me to a new perspective by means of sensation, both of physical safety and emotional security.

In chapter 3, I explored how the atmosphere determines my emotion. By thinking *what home means to me*, I'm touching upon the notions of tangible and intangible. Through the case study of the wood stove and the explanation of my recent work "*Our memories just won't die, it's the trip that keeps us alive,*" the intimate relationship between household objects and memories reveals itself.

In chapter 4, the definition of home is observed in the context of *Tai Chi* philosophy, in which the negative *Yin* represents home and houselessness while the positive *Yang* represents house and homelessness. Through the dynamic interchanging of internal feeling and external environment, it reveals the characteristics of human nature in the living place.

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Mis on kodu?

Käesolev uurimus kasvas välja koduigatsusest – lahkusin Hong Kongist selle ebaterve poliitilise õhustiku tõttu. Hakkasin enda jaoks kodu defineerima kohana, mis peab looma emotsionaalse turvatunde. Magistritöös üritan laiendada koduga seotud võtmemõisteid. Samuti vaatan käesolevas uurimuses tagasi oma eelnevatele näituseprojektidele näitamaks, et valitud teema on olnud minu jaoks aktuaalne kogu magistriõpingute aja vältel.

Esimene peatükk algab küsimusega "Kus on kodu?", millele järgneb kodu mõiste avamine nii geograafilises kui emotsionaalses võtmes, kusjuures autor käsitleb nii kuuluvustunnet kui ka emotsionaalset seotust.

Teises peatükis esitan endale küsimuse "Mida tähendab minu jaoks kodu?", uurides tudengikodu keskkonda ning analüüsides oma isikunäitust "Ma ei arva, et ma sind eemale tõukan". See juhatab mind uue vaatenurga juurde, mis kaasab nii füüsilist kui emotsionaalset turvatunnet.

Kolmandas peatükis käsitlen seda, kuidas atmosfäär määrab minu emotsioone. Kodu tähenduse üle mõeldes käsitlen ka selliseid mõisteid nagu "haaratav" ja "haaramatu". Koduga seotud esemete ja mälestuste omavaheline intiimne suhe tuleb ilmsiks nii minu hiljuti valminud teoses "Our memories just won't die, it's the trip that keeps us alive" ja puuküttehjuga seotud juhtumiuuringus.

Neljandas peatükis vaatlen kodu tähendust Tai chi filosoofia kontekstis. Sisemiste tundmuste ja välimise keskkonna omavahelise pideva ja dünaamilise muutumise kaudu avaldub mingis kindlas keskkonnas viibiva inimese tõeline loomus.

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Lastly, I want to say thank you to my grandmother who passed away in 2017, thank you for your kindness in raising me and educating me. I hope you rest in peace.

## Introduction

For years, I was committed to longing for a home — either a home full of love and warmth, or a complete home together with my father and mother. Since my parents divorced when I was 4 years old, I've seemed destined to shift along between provisional refuges and occasional shelters. All those years and nights I spent thinking, 'What does home means to me?', I never paused to think about what precisely it was. My longing persisted as an uneasiness that diffused throughout my life like a mist.

I recall as a young child thinking that home could be conceived by drawing, repeatedly drawing the motif of a house, with a very typical triangular roof, paned window and larger garden. I always imagined myself and my parents having joyous times there together, seemingly realising Anne Balif's claim that asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy, he will succeed in drawing a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply rooted foundations.<sup>1</sup>

It is thus telling that I undertook at a very young age to create an ideal home by means of my own imagination in a drawing that captured my longing, which came from my deepest dream for a temporary shelter for my spiritual sustenance.

Starting from the period of kindergarten and primary school, I lived with my grandparents, spending my childhood in their home, where I have felt loved and safe, such that it would deserve to be called a *felicitous* space and "very well suited".<sup>2</sup> They were the first to teach me that home can be found in something as peaceful and tender as a cuddle, in the heart warmed by mutual love. Until my grandmother passed away, the notion of home collapsed and I collapsed, too. It seems that the idea of home creeps cruelly and beautifully in and out of my memories, that home exists not as a physical structure, but rather as

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<sup>1</sup> Francoise Minkowska, *"De Van Gogh et Seurat aux dessins d'enfants: à la recherche du monde des formes (Rorschach): [exposition au Musée Pédagogique du 20 avril au 14 mai 1949, guide-catalogue illustré]"* Paris, Impr. Béresniak, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *"Poetics of Space"* Paris, translated by Orion Press, 1964. Page 34

a virtual container that carries a great many memories and imaginings. Even now, every time I think of my grandparents, the image of their home appears in my mind's eye, evoking memories of the feeling of home.

2019 brought a massive protest in Hong Kong with at least 2 million people walking the streets peacefully in response to the Anti-Extradition Bill to China. I've seen how people protect our homeland for a person, for survival, for a city, and for freedom. I've seen people crying at the corner huddled hopelessly in tears, and I've seen people fighting back against police brutality. Each of these witnessed scenes reminded me that the emotional sense of home could extend to a place, a homeland, and a place where HongKongers find their collective memories.

Meditating on the idea of home brings a range of memories flitting in and out in my mind. These situations to which I have borne witness expanded the potential of how a notional home could be reconciled both conceptually and visually. Home seems so far away since I came to Estonia to study in 2020, and I have started missing my home. At the same time, this experience has brought me to realise gradually that home can actually be myself alone, which is to say the innermost part of myself such as my native culture, native language and identity, all of which I carry with me wherever I go. For me, home is thus no longer defined according to a strict geographical sense as a fixed point on the map, but is rather the destination of my soul.

Although longing for the complete home I dreamt of as a child is no longer possible, I nevertheless believe there is more to unfold regarding the inner aspect of the idea of home. Therefore, my field of examination explores on one level the human nature of the home by means of analysing the image of the house, and on another level the reflection of the soul through this value.

Before proposing my final works and concept, what follows examines my principle themes by way of addressing relevant sub-topics divided according to four chapters, each with their respective aspects, to enable the systematic elaboration of crucial thoughts and explanations. What I aim to achieve in the following chapters is an approach that interweaves personal experiences, memories and sensations with analysis of academic, literary and philosophical texts, as well as images, works of popular culture, artworks and built environment. The resulting synthesis drawing on the sensual, textual and visual spheres also fuses aspects of conventionally separate Eastern and Western cultural domains. This evocative synthetic method

provides a way to take up question of the broader issue of *what constitutes* home, which is so multi-faceted and subjective as to elude concrete definitions. In other words, this thesis undertakes to frame a method whereby certain things can be rendered discussable, understandable and approachable as home gifted with particular kinds of values, meaning, and power.

At this point in my thesis, I split up the word dwellings into two directions: *house* and *home*. The definition and meaning are various based on the examination by means of geographical and emotional sense, which leads to a dialectics of externality and internality. Following the four chapters in my thesis, I will focus more on the aspect of home which is on an emotional level in the inner soul. In this orientation, I wanted to see what the meaning of the body and the soul offered for the depths of the definition of dwellings. At the end, I applied the philosophy of *Tai chi* to conclude the nature of dwelling. The investigation furnished me with a further opportunity to explore the inner world of the definition of home.



# Chapter 1

## Home

“Home is where the heart is, and my heart is anywhere you are, anywhere you are is home...” This is a song called “Home is where the heart is” by Elvis Presley. It poetically opens up the concept of **where the home is** and seems that home is wherever we go, wherever the home is. Because home is already rooted inside our heart. If you search the internet on the topic of what is home, you will probably find a great many definitions of home, defined differently by different ways of investigation. To begin with, it is easier for me to define the notion of dwelling by my own experiences, and it can simply divide the definition of home into two: **house for the body** and **home for the soul**.

### 1.1

#### What is home?

Once upon a time, our ancient ancestors opened up a history of living habits in which dwelling leads to a variety of abodes. Tracing back to the formation of the world’s first ‘home’<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 1), we can

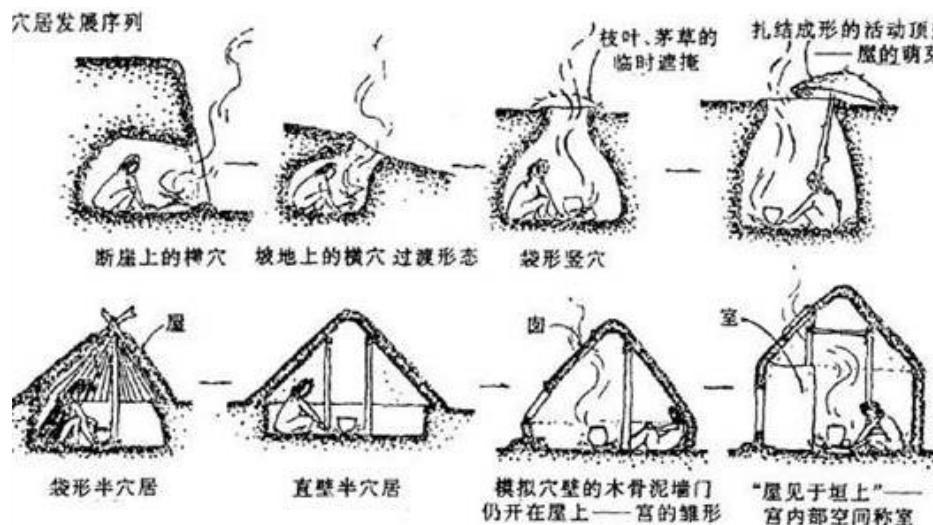


Figure 1

<sup>3</sup> Formation of cave dwelling: <<https://www.newton.com.tw/wiki/穴居>>

refer to how our ancient ancestors and prehistoric hominids as **cave** dwellers built a 'home' in one place. As we can see from the picture, the cave was built to serve actual practical purposes, using all materials they have from a place to make a convenient and comfortable layout for a specific environmental context based on their daily experiences, by changing the shape and space to fulfil their needs and survival. On this level, the structure of the cave fulfils the needs of safety and protects cave dwellers. Therefore, the idea of expressing harmony with the surroundings by dwelling became a natural outcome called '**shelter**,' which is in the way that they felt **safe, comfortable, private** and **survivable**. To quote Jerry Moore: '*More than passive backdrops to human actions, our dwellings reflect and shape our lives.*'<sup>4</sup>

Today, with the intensive development of industry and technology, we no longer need to live in caves or shelters but in a **house**. For most people own a house or mansion or rent an apartment.<sup>5</sup> (See figure 2) Based on their preferences and locations for setting up their house, people will vary from decorating one's interior space such as lighting, climate, entertainment systems to building up a bonding



Figure 2

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry D. Moore, "*The prehistory of home*" Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. Page 7

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wolf, "*Architecture of Density (Stand Alone Volume of Hong Kong Inside/Outside)*" Peperoni Books; 3rd edition, 2012

within the surrounding neighbourhood. It opens up a vision of the diversity of every single individual in the world into a more complex definition, which is shifting from shelter to **home**.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>6</sup>, the meanings for the word home are as follows:

*'The house or flat that you live in, especially with your family'*

*'The country, town, district, country, etc. that you come from, or where you are living and that you feel you belong to'*

*'Used to refer to a family living together, and the way it behaves'*

*'A home away from home, a place where you feel relaxed and comfortable as if you were in your own home'*

*'Home is where the heart is, a home is where the people you love are'*

*'Home sweet home, used to say how pleasant your home is'*

*'Spiritual home, the place where you are happiest, especially a country where you feel you belong more than in your own country because you share the ideas and attitudes of the people who live there'*

Simple things are always the most difficult. It is difficult to summarise the concept of home so briefly, especially when the definition of home is so **multi-layered** and has expanded to different dimensions of meaning. However, for me, the term "**house**" can be understood as a place/shelter that provides a **safe environment** on a geographical level for a body while the term "**home**" can be recognised on an **emotional level** such as the feeling of security for a soul. According to Bachelard, home can be investigated in a phenomenological way by "*write a room,*" "*read a room,*" or "*read a house*"<sup>7</sup>. For him, reading poetry about home is important for understanding human values of the material world. However, although the concept of home involves many different dimensions of meaning, but we can briefly divide it into two directions: **emotional sense** and **geographical sense**.

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: <[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/home\\_1?q=home](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/home_1?q=home)>

<sup>7</sup> Gaston Bachelard, "*Poetics of Space*" Paris, translated by Orion Press, 1964.

## 1.2

### Emotional conceptualisations of “Home”

‘You can sell your house but not your home’<sup>8</sup>. Whenever I ask myself what home is, it usually comes along with the next question: **where is my home**. Undoubtedly, my grandparents’ home would be the answer. More precisely, it was my first home ever when I was born (except for the uterus). That place gives me such a strong **attachment** to **emotional feelings, satisfaction and sensation** in the time I grew up because I had a good time along with my grandparents. As I remember, when I was still a kid living at my grandparents’ home, every morning at say 5 am, I was always half woken up by the volume of the television because my grandparents were used to waking up so early. They always liked to start their day by watching black and white Cantonese vintage films<sup>9</sup> (See figure 3). After that, my grandmother prepared breakfast and started worshipping and offering joss sticks (incense) to the ancestor shrine. The thick, lingering smoke from the incense filled up the air in the room with an aromatic illusion, giving the space character. After I was completely awake, I got out of my bed. My grandparents had already left to buy food in the market. At



Figure 3

<sup>8</sup> Polly Adler, “A House is Not a Home” University Massachusetts Press; illustrated edition, 2006

<sup>9</sup> Chen Pi, “The Reunion of a Bitter Couple” Film archive’s selected films, 1953 <<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201608/02/P2016080100948.htm>>

that moment, I was so confused about where that noise and smell was coming from, I was wondering if it was a dream.

Nevertheless, while I was talking about ordinary things just in the morning section, **memories** were already flooding back. The **smell** and the **visual** from the incense and the sound of the film's dubbing gradually became my consciousness that constitutes what a home should be in a sense of memory. As Emmanuel Levinas describes home as

*"a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome."*<sup>10</sup>

It seems that the sensation of home is abstractly (unconsciously) from within, connected to my brain and to my **soul**. It is related to one specific place which provided me warmth and security - the home of my grandparents. As a result, wherever I am, when I hear something similar to the sound of the Cantonese dubbing or when I smell the scent of incense, there is my home.

### 1.3

#### Geographical conceptualisation of "Home"

Besides the concept of the emotional level, in which we can easily find the connection and attachment of our soul and memory towards one specific place. On the other hand, we can also define a dwelling in a **geographical level**. The American storyteller Garrison Keillor says a hometown contains '*the geography of a man's life*'<sup>11</sup>. It seems that a place comprises one's sense of **belonging** and sense of **origin** through the passage of time. It usually refers to a **physical location** such as a **birthplace** or the **grown up place** where we can find our identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *"Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority"* Duquesne University Press, 1961, Page 151

<sup>11</sup> Garrison Keillor, *"There's no place like home"* National Geographic, February 2014, Page 67



Figure 4



Figure 5

I grew up in a public housing environment<sup>12</sup> (See figure 4 & 5). The surrounding neighbourhoods and my childhood friends who lived nearby gave me a sense of belonging to the place. The passage of time strengthened the establishment of my **affectionate bonding** and **satisfaction** with the people in the area and the **neighbourhood** that I lived in. The park that I usually went to after school, the children that we always met up and played around with, the smell of cooking from the neighbour, those experiences and feelings are defining me that I was once there and I once belonged there.

*Home in its most profound form is an attachment to a particular setting, a particular environment, in comparison with which all other associations with places have only a limited significance. It is the point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world.*<sup>13</sup>

When I think further about why I feel such a strong attachment to this particular place or location unlike to many other places where I have lived before, I realised that it is a place where I felt that I not only belonged, but it also shows how the surrounding environment and people mentally distinguished, shaped and developed my **identity, knowledge, emotional maturity, self-understanding** and **self-characteristic** etc.

It is important that I belong not only to the place where I lived, but more so the **distinctive connection** with the people who lived nearby. For a long time, public housing in Hong Kong created the impression of '**human touch**'. Its structure and the layout of the building provide a great range of intimate

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<sup>12</sup> Hong Kong Modern Building History: <[http://housingwhy.blogspot.com/2016/03/blog-post\\_71.html](http://housingwhy.blogspot.com/2016/03/blog-post_71.html)>

<sup>13</sup> Edward Relph, "Place and Placelessness" SAGE Publications Ltd; 1st edition, 2008



quality among the neighbourhood. People usually open their front door in daytime (see figure 5)<sup>14</sup>. When people walk past in the corridor, they can see into their neighbour's home. I remember when I was a kid, I would usually say hello to the neighbour at the door, and then the neighbour would give me a candy. Such behaviour has given me a welcoming and friendly feeling, and more importantly, fundamentally, It taught me how to be kind to others. From the diagram below (See figure 6), we can see how Otto Bollnow singles out 'home as reference point' which gives us another perspective based on the geographical level of home<sup>15</sup>.

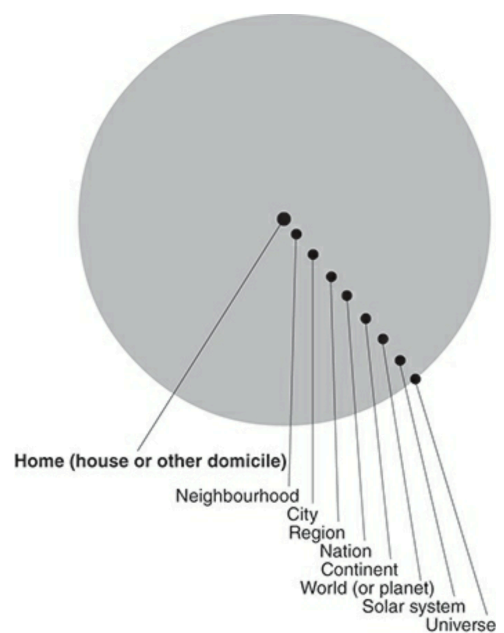
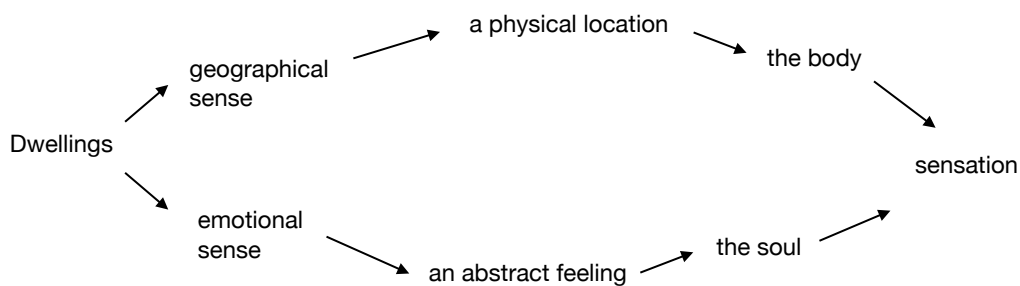


Figure 6  
Otto Bollnow, 'home as reference point'

**Concept development:**



<sup>14</sup> Hong Kong Public Estate: <<https://www.bastillepost.com/hongkong/article/425644-房委會分年更換屋邨舊鐵閘>>

<sup>15</sup> Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Human Space" Hyphen Press, 2008

## 1.4

### Artwork analysis: *How Are You?*, 2020

#### Objects, photographs, videos and installation

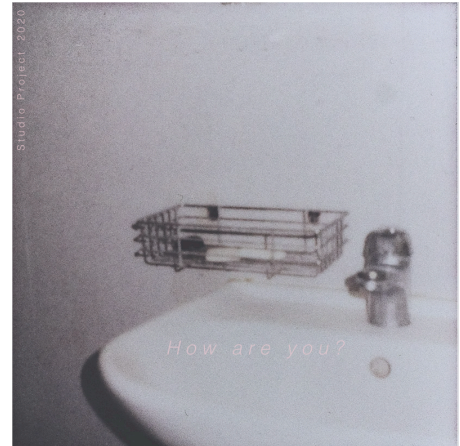


Figure 7

In my first semester, I missed my friends, my parents and Hong Kong so much, I actually planned to write the letters to them, but I had no idea how to start. One day, I was inspired when I saw my roommate's soap stacked with my soap. (See figure 7) I felt that this was comforting, there was some kind of intimacy in it. So I made a work by using a soap with the messaging "How are you?". I stamped some of my personal thoughts and messages such as 'how are you,' 'I miss you,' 'Please stay,' 'Don't cry,' etc on the surface of the soap, (See figure 8) and put them in the public bathroom at school. It is somehow so satisfying to see the soap dissolved with the texts and it's like someone has washed away my sadness. At the same time, I also believed the messages will end up in the sea and the harbour in Hong Kong as well. (See figure 9 & 10)



Figure 8  
Artwork "How Are You?"



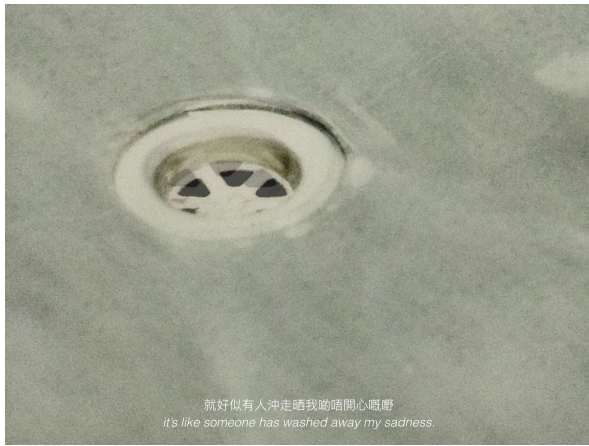


Figure 9

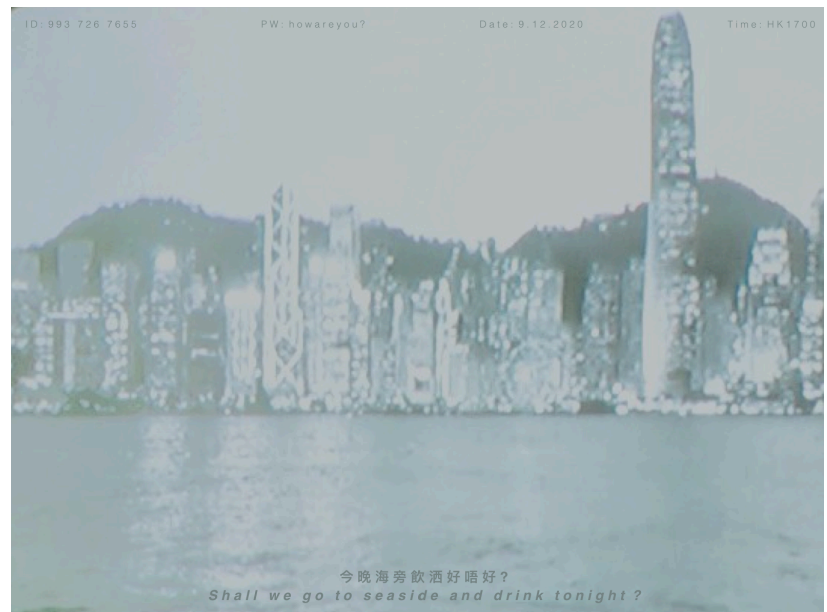


Figure 10

Indeed, it is nevertheless difficult to simply generalise home as being one exact location or as being carried in one's soul because all of the elements constitute my sense of belonging and emotional feeling to a place, either a physical location or within my soul. Somehow these two concepts are blended together as often as not. Hence, it blurs the line between oneself and the surrounding environment. As Julie Beck, an editor at *The Atlantic* magazine, said '*home isn't just where you are, it's who you are*'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Julie Beck, "The psychology of home: why where you live means so much", *The Atlantic*, 30 December 2011, Page 2 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/12/the-psychology-of-home-why-where-you-live-means-so-much/249800>>

## Chapter 2

### The sensation of a Home

In this chapter, I will base on the findings from chapter 1 to explore the sensation of a home. By asking *what home means to me*, I will simply describe the differences between physical safety and emotional security. Then, I will look into a case study of a student dormitory and analyse my artworks to reveal the importance of emotional security.

#### 2.1

##### Physical safety vs Emotional security

*“Money can buy a house, but not a home”*.<sup>17</sup> It is very true that money can buy us a safe shelter for our **body**, but it can't buy us a secure home for our **soul** and **emotions**. But what makes us feel at home when we are at house? Distinguishing why this specific place but not another is home is an important question. We know that home can provide us with **physical safety** in a **structural** way, yet home should also be able to provide us with **emotional security**. We can see the basic structural components of a house, such as the floors, walls, roof, doorways, windows, etc. In a more delicate way, they will be divided into bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living room, balcony, fireplace, etc. Each room serves its function in varying ways depending on people's needs.

However, there are also some elements that we may not know simply by **seeing**, (See figure 11 & 12 & 13) that we can only determine by our **feelings**, which makes us feel secure at the specific place. To analyse how a specific place has shaped our emotional state, we can refer to Bachelard, *“Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives”*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, we can understand that our sense of **emotional security** is actually reflected by/based on the **intimate situation**

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<sup>17</sup> Pat Williams, *“What Are You Living For? Investing Your Life in What Matters Most”*, Revell, 2011

<sup>18</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *“Poetics of Space”* Paris, translated by Orion Press, 1964. Page 44

or the **condition** of a place. In the following I will examine intimate situations in a student dormitory through the explanation of my artworks.

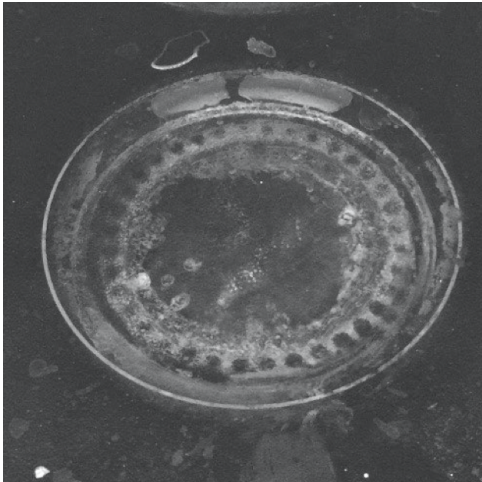


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

## 2.2

### Case study - Student Dormitory

Since I came to Estonia to study, I lived in a student dormitory for over a year. I lived with a roommate in the first part of my life in Estonia, I had my own room, but we shared the bathroom and kitchen. The place feels like a prison cell that limits our space for activities. We lived together well in the beginning. We cooked together and I brought him a pizza for his birthday too.

However, over time, by my observation, I seem to understand from his habits and ways of living that he does not like to clean the place. The hygienic problems somehow affected my feelings towards this living place. (See figure 14) Such as the smell of littering on the floor; leaving the cooking oils on the stove; dirty floor; clogged drains, etc. I understand that the standard of cleanliness varies according to people's subjectivity, but people can usually determine whether a place is clean or dirty by way of our senses of sight and smell.

On another level, based on the conditions of a place, I felt very uncomfortable to live in that place that completely affected my **emotional security**, which brought me to a range of negative feelings such as **distancing, insecureness, dirtiness** and **dislike-ness**. Therefore, I had made one solo exhibition called “*Don’t Think That I Am Pushing You Away*” to describe my general **insecurity feelings** in a student dormitory.



Figure 14

## 2.3

### Exhibition analysis

#### *Don't Think that I Am Pushing You Away*

In 2021, I did a solo exhibition in Vent Space Tallinn called '*Don't Think that I Am Pushing You Away*,' (See figure 15 & 16 & 17) it actually reflects on my **emotional feelings** in the period of 14 days of quarantine in a student dormitory. I felt strange and distant that we suddenly didn't talk or communicate.



Figure 15. Installation shot from "*Don't Think that I Am Pushing You Away*"

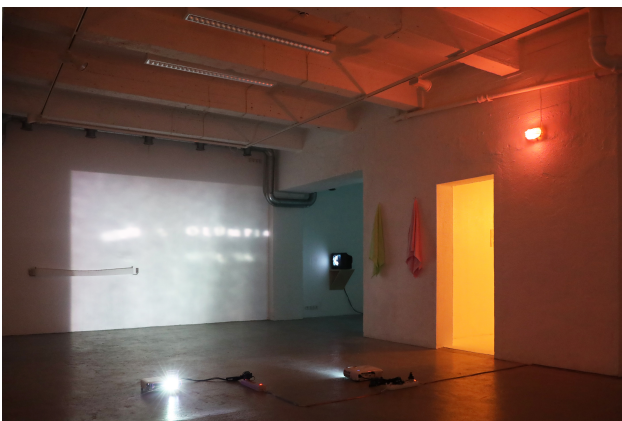


Figure 16



Figure 17

My roommate turned into a complete stranger to me because both of us needed to be isolated in our own room. In the following, I will going to explain deeply my video installation, drawings and objects.

### 2.3.1

#### Video installation

##### ***“Don’t Cry Olümpia”***

In the exhibition, I used quite a lot of lighting to create the mood of the atmosphere and also showed the videos that I filmed during the period of quarantine that reflect my **personal struggles** of emotion such as **sadness, emptiness, distancing**, etc. One of the video works “Don’t Cry Olümpia”<sup>19</sup> (See figure 18) is actually projecting my feelings on the illuminated sign on top of hotel Olümpia that I saw

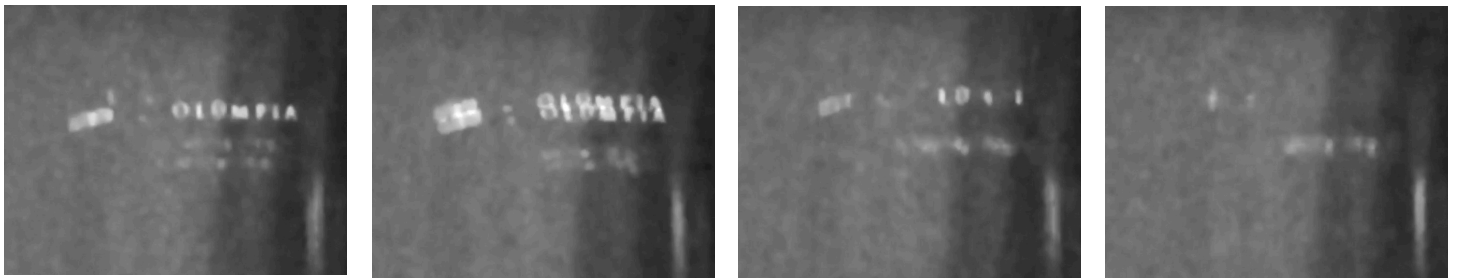


Figure 18. *Don't Cry Olümpia*, 2021

through the window of my room. Don't know why that night the light from the illuminated sign kept flickering, and somehow I thought it knew I was crying, too. In this sense, I juxtaposed my emotions with the flickering billboard light outside to reflect my depressed feelings during the quarantine period inside my room. I felt happy that I found the one - *Olümpia* who understands my feelings, too.

##### ***“Compromise Exercise”***

For another video work, I used hand as a metaphor in “*Compromise Exercise*,”<sup>20</sup>(See figure 19) to describe and reflect two people’s cohabiting relationship by showing an exercise of ‘closing the suit button’ that needs to be finished by both **left and right hand**. The video itself is muted, playing back and forth in a loop with no starting and ending point, creating an ambiguous situation.

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<sup>19</sup> Video link: *Don't Cry Olümpia*, 2021 <<https://youtu.be/dcLX86llli4>>

<sup>20</sup> Video link: *Compromise Exercise II*, 2021 <<https://youtu.be/Azq0Vb1VZcl>> *Compromise Exercise I*, 2021 <<https://youtu.be/2r9MIXYyXrQ>>



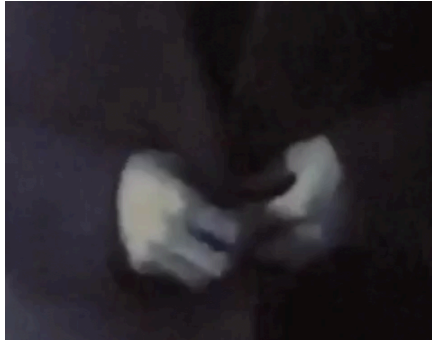


Figure 19. *Compromise Exercise*, 2021

Somehow, the word of **compromise** potentially involves some kind of **micro-politics** based on the **shared and private place** in a dormitory environment between me and my roommate. As we both have our own opinions about various questions which lead to a **negotiation**, ranging from any kind of cooperation to mutual respect, for me, is a compromise exercise that shows a regime for achieving power and advantage. Perhaps, our respective silences became the answer of the failure of the negotiations at the end and we actually don't really have interactions or communicate with each other anymore.

### 2.3.2

#### Drawings



Figure 20.  
*Chair I* (detail)



Figure 21.  
*Chair II* (detail)

#### **“Chair I” & “Chair II”**

Besides the video installations, I also did some drawings to describe my feelings of **suspension** and **alienation**, etc. In the drawings “*Chair I*” & “*Chair II*,”(See figure 22 & 23 & 24) I was inspired by the restriction from the government during the lockdown that people should keep one chair empty for social distance, so I use chair as a symbol for **distancing** and put it next to the empty wooden frame that I made



Figure 22.  
*Chair I*, 2021

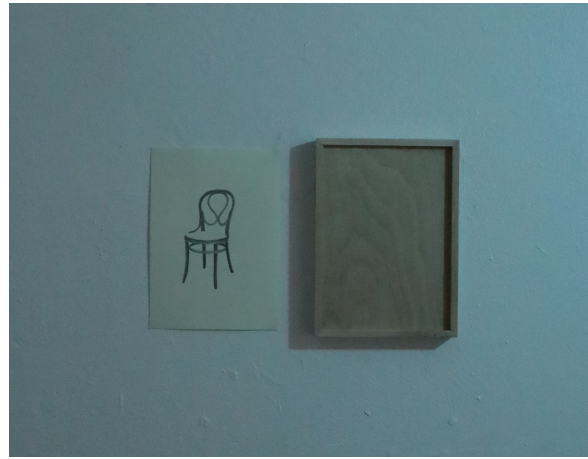


Figure 23.  
*Chair II*, 2021

to create a feeling of suspension. For the type of chairs, its appearances also specify where it comes from, the style of the chair in the drawing “*Chair I*” is traditionally from Hong Kong while the chair from “*Chair II*” is from Romania, where my roommate comes from. They both are carrying their own geographical culture and native language. Furthermore, I also play around with the chair’s physical structure. I drew the structure of the chair in an unreasonable way, resulting in inability to function in reality because the legs are staggered and crooked. (See figure 20 & 21) On the other hand, not many people from the audience have noticed the mistake, so for them it looks reasonable and natural.

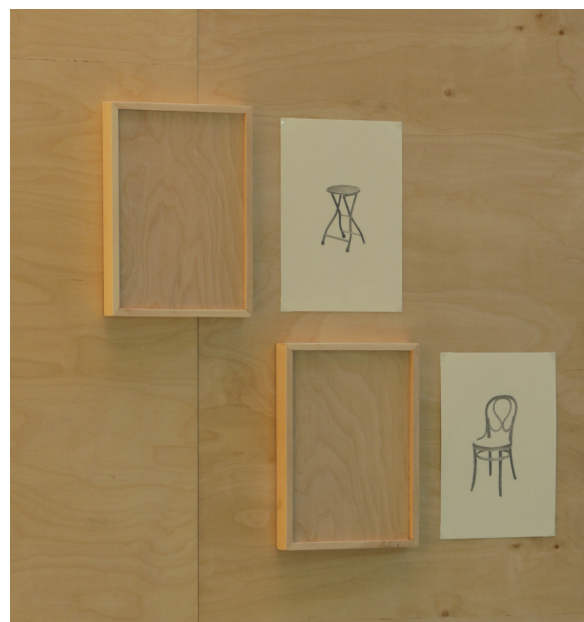


Figure 24. Photo taken in 3rd studio projects in Estonian Academy of Arts



### 2.3.3

#### Objects

##### ***“Washing Hands”***

Apart from the drawings, again, I am using hand as a subject to describe the feeling of **suspension** and **distancing** between two people. In the work “*Washing hands,*” (See figure 25 & 26) the idea is inspired by the hand diagram that could be seen everywhere during the Covid period. Personally, I think the diagram is not just simply showing how to wash our hands, instead, I was fascinated by how both hands can work together so smoothly. I scratched the gestures of the washing hands onto two plaster plates and separated the drawings of right hand and left hand, and showed them on each of the plaster plates respectively. If you just look at the plate individually, the meaning of the gesture will be vague, but if you combine them together, you will see the whole picture.

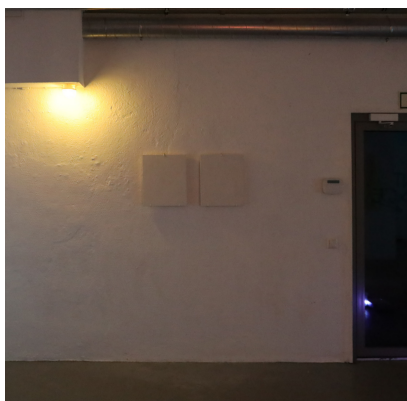


Figure 25

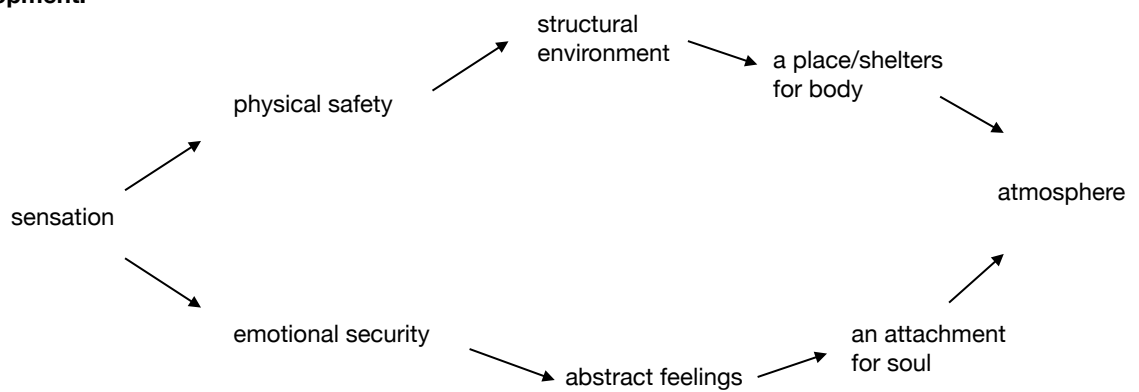


Figure 26

Thinking back on the experiences I had living in the dormitory, I consider it as a **temporary shelter** that only provide safe environment without feeling of emotional security. Even though I spent a relatively long period of time in place, I don't have any **attachments** to that place. The structure of a dormitory is kind of in between shared and private space, resulting in a transformation of space and atmosphere that

involves *politics* of various sorts such as the negotiations. The *intimate situation* of our *cohabiting relationship* has brought me a new perspective of a space and to look a little closer at myself. Also, I tend to be longing for the emotional security. However, in reality, I truly understand the feeling of a complete home should meet the needs of both the body and the soul, which is the combination of physical safety and emotional security.

**Concept development:**



## Chapter 3

### The atmosphere of Home

In the following, I will discuss how the **atmosphere** as an important element shapes our sensation by means of objects and certain situations or environments. By thinking **what home brings to me**, I will explain my recent artwork on how memory secures our emotions and affects our intimacy with a given environment.

#### 3.1

##### What is atmosphere?

The definition of atmosphere by *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>21</sup>

*'The feeling or mood that you have in a particular place or situation; a feeling between two people or in a group of people'*

*'a party atmosphere'*

*'the children grew up in an atmosphere of love and happiness'*

*'use music and lighting to create a romantic atmosphere'*

*'a situation when people do not say anything, but feel embarrassed or uncomfortable'*

Apart from the meaning of the astronomy, atmosphere can refer to the **distinct feeling** or sense evoked by a place or situation, usually speaking of the quality of a place, for instance the daily maintenances such as orderliness and cleanliness, brightness, good music, and more specifically how an object such as personal things like photographs, letters, drawings, or any of furnishing like wood stove, window etc, to shape the intimate atmosphere at home. Those elements can make a positive, distinct atmosphere as long as those elements make us feel energetic and happy in a mental way. It also secures our emotional feelings at some point. Thus, we can see the importance and the way of how the atmosphere

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<sup>21</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: <[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/home\\_1?q=home](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/home_1?q=home)>

helps to create intimacy with a given environment or a particular personal object. The feelings given by the atmosphere will directly affect our belonging to one place in a sense of emotion.

Basically, to define how an atmosphere appears to a place in a way to shape our emotional sense, we can simply divide the circumstances into two directions; **tangible** and **intangible**. Tangible is being touchable while the intangible is the opposite. Please note that both the tangible thing and intangible thing can be interchangeable at the same time.

## 3.2

### Intangible

When we talk about the intangible thing, we may usually refer to some **visual** effect. The colour of the lighting at home could be for instance a natural light coming through the windows and curtains, or simply of a table lamp. Sometimes, the visual impression of the lighting and its colour can create **metaphors** which can express our emotions. For instance, the movie of my favourite director *Wong Kar-wai*<sup>22</sup> from Hong Kong, often described as beautiful and unique because he's using a lot of bolded and saturated tones to create emotions (See figure 27). We can read the story in the movie without relying on dialogue. In fact, the tone and the lighting can manifest the **psychology** and **emotion** of a scene by colour



Figure 27. Wong Kar-wai, "In the Mood for Love"

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<sup>22</sup> Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong film director, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wong\\_Kar-wai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wong_Kar-wai)>

connotations. (See figure 28) Warm colours symbolise securing and comforting our inner heart. It usually reminds us of a warm and comfortable living room where we have a peaceful dinner with family. However, different people will have different interpretations of the colours. Personally, whenever I see a warm colour, it will bring my mind back to my home.



Figure 28. Nan Goldin, “The Balled of Sexual Dependency”

### 3.2.1

#### **Feng shui**

*Feng Shui*<sup>23</sup>, an ancient Chinese traditional practice which claims to use energy forces to harmonise individuals with their surrounding environment. It is also considered to be the intangible category which



Figure 29



Figure 30

<sup>23</sup> Feng shui from Wikipedia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feng\\_shui](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feng_shui)>

sees home as a living thing on a **spiritual level**, especially concerning the position in the *Shrine* (an altar for placing the incense and offerings) (See figure 28). A good position of Shrine will bring good health and wealth to the family. My grandmother is a Buddhist and she believes that the deceased spirits have a continued existence in the world and they will look after the family and the house in a spiritual way. Therefore, she offers various kinds of incense to the spirits of deceased ancestors, keeping them satisfied in their spiritual world, so they would protect us in return. The spiritual experiences open up connections to communicate with and worship the spirits by providing the offerings and incense in the shrines. Under this intimate relation to our ancestors, we feel more belonging to the place we live in and our soul feels more secured.

### 3.3

#### Tangible

On the other hand, the tangible things that we may easily refer to as a sense of attachment towards a touchable **object**, for instance when we sit on the soft and dense carpet, we can feel and touch it with our hands and skin. Or it can be simply just putting an intimate family picture on the wall, or sitting around the fireplace, looking at the flames flickering in splendid colour. To a certain extent, we can find our own identity in the **connection** with the object that gives us a sense of belonging to one specific place in order to secure our feelings and give our lives meaning, the objects contribute to creating an intimate domain. Whenever I feel tired, I look at the pictures on the wall. It gives me strength to move on with my life. Whenever I feel cold, the fireplace will always warm me up with no complaints, like a sunny cuddle in the harsh winter. In this case, there is an **intimate relationship** developed between me and the object. Geographer *Yi-Fu Tuan* describes objects as **material language** for communication and interrelation:

*... richly populated with particular and enduring things. The particular things we value may be given names: a tea set is Wedgwood and a chair is Chippendale. ...An object such as a valued crystal glass is recognised by its unique shape, decorative design, and ring when lightly tapped. ...An object or place*



achieves concrete reality when our experience of its total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind. <sup>24</sup>

In the movie *Chungking Express*,<sup>25</sup> we will see more clearly how the director uses language to show the intimacy between the character and objects, employing the inner confession to reflect the emotion of **human nature**.

“My mother was very pretty in her youth. You mustn’t give yourself up. How can you have grown so fat in such a short time? Even if she’s gone, you still have to carry on with yourself. You mustn’t indulge yourself any more. Control your diet.”



Figure 31. Wong Kar-wai, “*Chungking Express*”

In one of the scenes the Cop 663 talks to a soap (See figure 31 ).<sup>26</sup> It shows the intimacy to his belongings, assigning human emotions and thoughts to the objects around him, which comes from the **loneliness**.

“When a person cries, you just hand them a tissue. But when an apartment cries, it’s a lot of work to mop up,”<sup>27</sup> said Cop 663 when he returned to see his apartment soaked.

<sup>24</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “*Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*” University of Minnesota Press, 2001, Page 18

<sup>25</sup> *Chungking Express*, written and directed by Wong Kar-wai in 1994

<sup>26</sup> *Chungking Express*, one short scene from youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ1VQzxwSFo>>

<sup>27</sup> *Chungking Express*, written and directed by Wong Kar-wai in 1994

Indeed, sometimes we quite easily project our feelings onto something, especially when we are emotionally vulnerable, similar to my video work “*Don’t Cry Olümpia*” that I mentioned in Chapter 1. Instead of seeing an object as a dead or isolated object, we can create the connection with objects, so they could become our temporary or permanent friends or companions, *intimate persons* who protect our inner world.

### 3.4

#### Case study - Wood stove

When I moved into my new apartment in Soo Street, there was nothing inside except a mirror, the kitchen facilities and the vintage-looking iron wood stove (See figure 32). To be honest, I have never ever used a wood stove before, as I was born and lived in Hong Kong, which is a very hot and humid city where we don’t need any heating system. And now, it has become part of my life and I’m sure I will not survive



Figure 32

without it. Additionally, I regard the wood stove as the “*heart*” of the living place, connected to my body. In this sense, my body can represent the entire space of the apartment by sharing the same “heart,” creating an intimate connection to the space. And the character of the wood stove shifts from an object to an *intimate person*.

On the other hand, the wood stove that I have in my place is like a magic spot or time machine that transcends me back to the past whenever I sit in front of it alone. It gives me satisfaction looking at



beautiful flames and listening to the crackling sound of the wood. Somehow, the fire is a visible and tangible source of comfort and pleasure that creates a homey atmosphere, which secures my emotion in that place. It's especially like a focal point that allows me to sit around it and share my dreams in the warmth of cosy gleam, and evokes pleasant feelings and **memories**. The wood stove is not just one of the fancy objects in the house, when we look at it we recognise the feeling deep inside our hearts that reflects our emotions related to the object. In this case, the function of a wood stove shifts from physical to emotional. Rather than providing the heat, it secures our feelings and emotions by evoking memories.

### 3.5

#### **How do memories secure my feelings?**

Many of my artworks are based on the intimate relation with situations and my emotional insecurity from daily life, often using my memories. But why are memories important to me? As Bergson said, the present is a dynamic interpenetration of past and future.<sup>28</sup> For me, memory is not just a fragment of the past, but a source of strength and desire that helps me recognise and retrieve a dream in the present moment. Similarly to the wood stove, the longer I look at the fire, the more memories come to my mind. This action is relatively automatic and has become my daily habit of digging into the memories from the past. In that way the present and the past are connected through recognition.

The past and the future are represented in our present respectively as memory and fantasy, desire and dream. Our dreams in the future, are more or less, are the interpenetrations of our memory and desire by means of the present. For instance, when I think about how our parents or friends will celebrate my upcoming birthday, I will reach my memory, which is based on the memories of my last birthday. Thus, we can come up with a conclusion that we use **imagination** when we recollect and recognise something from the past, from the memory.

As follows, I will explain one of my recent artwork that shows the relationship between objects and memories by using household objects such as chairs and lamps.

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<sup>28</sup> Henri Louis Bergson, "*Matter and Memory*" digireads.com, 2010



Figure 33

### 3.6

#### Artwork analysis

##### ***Our Memories Just Won't Die, it's the Trip that Keeps Us Alive***

This year, I made a sculptural installation called “*Our memories just won't die, it's the trip that keeps us alive*” for the Young Sculptor Award exhibition. (See figure 33) The installation included chairs, lamps, fabric and wood from the chairs, a cabinet and curtains. The work reflects my feelings based on the memories of the people I loved in the past, for instance my grandparents, my lovers, my friends, etc. Even though I've experienced the passing of my grandparents, a break-up from my lover, lost friendships, every time I look back at my memories, it always gives me strength to move on, it's part of my growth. In the installation, the chairs are the main elements that symbolise two persons, looking back at their past. Basically, I used everything from the chairs such as the leg and the pattern from the seat's fabric. It's as if two people are sacrificing something for each other when I disassemble the chairs bit by bit. For those who have sacrificed something, the missing things will become a frame of each other's memories.



Figure 34

For creating the setting for my works, I placed one table lamp on the cabinet, and installed two wall lamps and one ceiling lamp, which both manifest my emotions and feelings from the memory. There are two lamps on the wall, one of them with a lamp cover and the other without light. The cover of the lamp, without light, was placed on the floor. The lights in the household not only create a certain kind of atmosphere or mood, but they can also be seen as indicators of my sense of emotional security. In overall, the idea of disassembling the physical structure of the chairs to reassemble the parts into a frame, it shows the process of transforming the **external object into internal feeling**; a physical and tangible household object transformed into intangible emotion and memory.

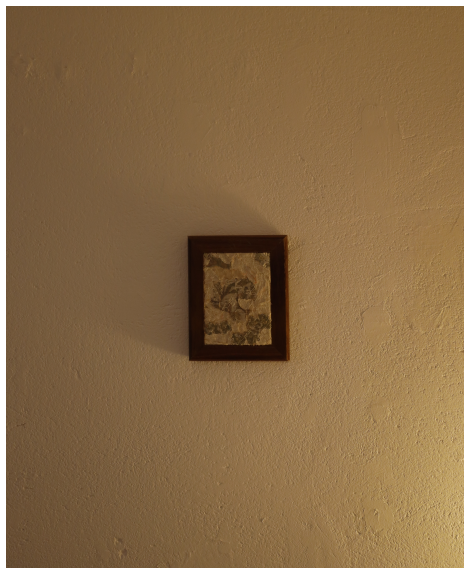
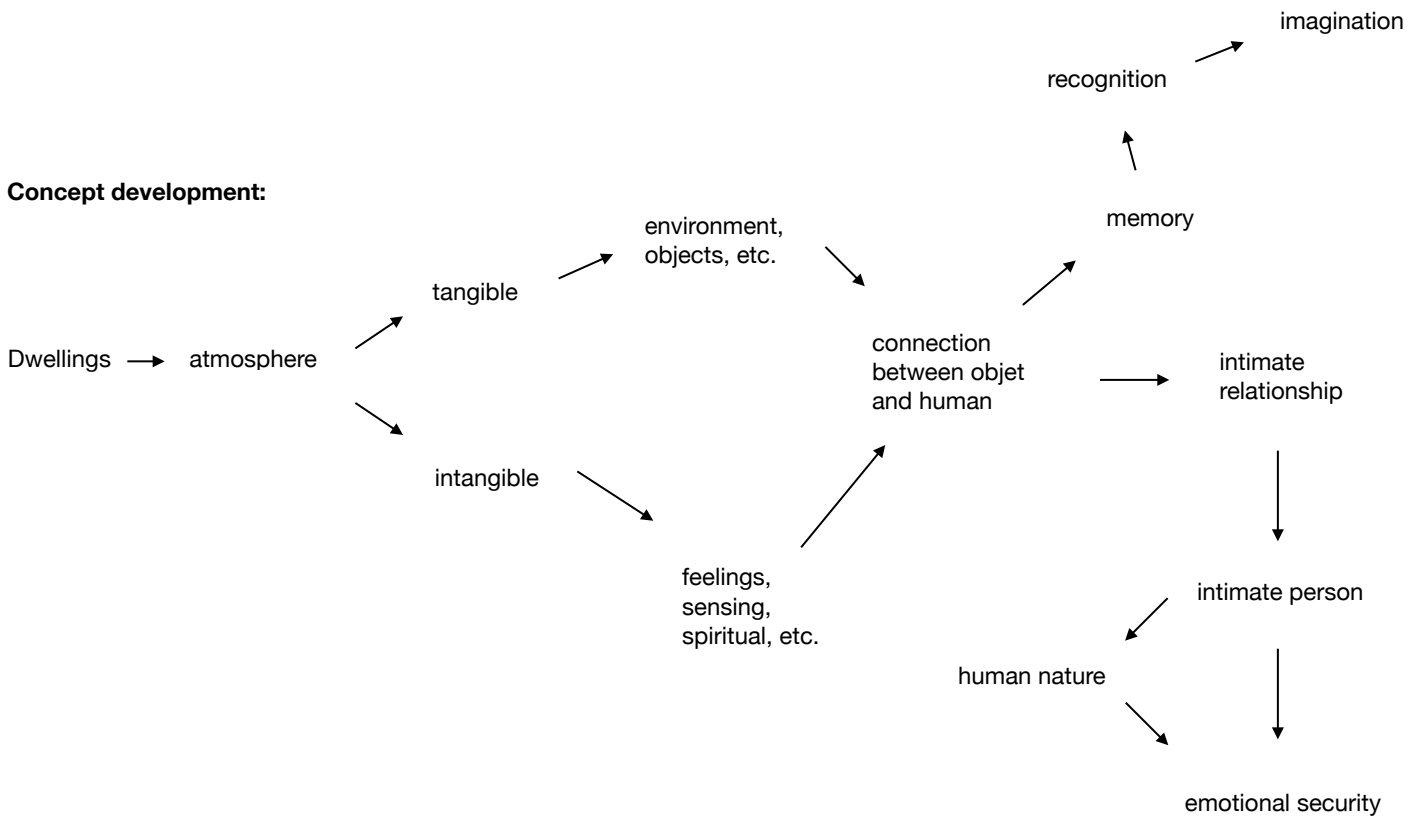


Figure 35

**Concept development:**





## Chapter 4

### Homelessness

The definition of home can't be complete without considering homelessness. There are people who no longer have a place to live, migrants or refugees with more than one identity; and the ones that are spiritually homeless. Referring to the notions of “dark” (*negative*) and “light” (*positive*) in Chinese cosmological philosophy *Tai Ch*, I will examine how these elements apply to the concept of dwellings by means of *internal* and *external*.

#### 4.1

#### Houselessness and Homelessness

##### Houselessness

*“I’m not homeless, I’m just houseless.”*<sup>29</sup>

The movie *Nomadland*, is a story about a lady called Fern (See figure 36), who decides to live a nomadic life in her RV van (recreational vehicles) after she loses her job. I was inspired by the characters saying that she’s *houseless* instead of being of *homeless*. Based on my findings in previous chapters, the



Figure 36

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<sup>29</sup> “*Nomadland*”, written and directed by Chloé Zhao in 2021

term house can be understood as providing a safe environment for a body. Apart from that, it also opens up the concept of a house as a **transportable structure** instead of **fixed residence** that responds to different demands of the environment or personal goals. The term 'house' is turned into a **shapeless form** without an actual structure. It is similar to the living style of **nomads** who don't have a fixed or permanent structural house, and the herding communities that **migrate** from one place to another, looking for the grass for their animals.

In the movie of *Nomadland*, Fern drives and lives **boundlessly** in the world, the vehicle allows her to dwell **everywhere externally**. She doesn't have an actual house, she feels comfortable living her nomadic lifestyle. The concept of dwelling, for her, can be extended to a place, a region or even a world.



Figure 37



Figure 38

Thinking of the nomads, people living on the street can be considered as houseless rather than homeless. Since they set up an area for living in the public, they build up a feeling of belonging and security to that particular area. Even though they don't live in an actual house, they are still using cardboard or metal sheets to cover up their living area in order to create their private space. (See figure 37 & 38)

## Homelessness

*“Our weapons are our truth, and our truth lies in the fact that this is our land, this is our country, our children, and we are going to defend all of this...Glory to Ukraine!”*



Figure 39

The current war in Ukraine (See figure 39) has brought heartbreaking news to the world, it keeps lingering in my mind recently. Many and many Ukrainians have left their home country because of the invasion by Russians and seek a safe environment to live. Despite the fact that their houses are already destroyed and collapsed, people are still longing for returning to their motherland because they are rooted in their country where they were born and raised. With that in mind, they can be considered homeless: **they lost the home for their soul**. Even though they have already escaped to the neighbouring countries, and are settling down in a safe environment, they still hope and wait for a chance to return. Hence, the sense of homelessness tends to be an **internal feeling**, the inner world of the soul.

**Concept development:**

Houselessness → in terms of the body → to an infinite outward place → externality

Homelessness → in terms of the soul → to an infinite inward space → internality





Figure 40

## 4.2

### ***Tai Chi - Yin and yang***

*Tai Chi* is the fundamental dynamic energy of nature in Chinese thought. The elements *yin* and *yang* come in pairs and reflect the composition of two opposing and complementary forces: dark and light. Generally speaking, those two forces are indispensable and constantly in motion, exchanging both dynamic but stable harmony of energy in the universe<sup>30</sup>. The nature of those two forces is not static which allows them to interact and interchange with each other. On figure 40, we can see a circle divided into two halves by a curved line, both half circles have a dot: a white dot on the black area and a black dot in the white area. It shows that each force contains certain components of *yin* and *yang* elements respectively expressing coexisting and balancing.

Applying the philosophy of *Tai Chi*<sup>31</sup> to the concept of dwelling, showing the importance of balancing two elements in achieving harmony. The ***inward energy of yin*** is characterised as internal feeling of the soul while the ***outward energy of yang*** is characterised as the external environment of the body. It's important to have both components to achieve a harmony in the dwellings; an emotional security and an environmental safety. Therefore, on figure 41, I marked home as *yin* with a white dot symbolising houselessness; and house as *yang* with the black dot symbolising homelessness.

The character Fern in the movie of *Nomadland* is living anywhere with her vehicle, driving in the world without any limitations. The vehicle is her everything, it is her home. Hence, in the symbolics of *Tai Chi*, Fern is represented as *yin* which means she feels at home in her vehicle while the white dot means she doesn't have an actual house. As a result, she is houseless rather than homeless.

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, Richard J., "Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World: The *Yijing* (*I-Ching*, or *Classic of Changes*) and Its Evolution in China" Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. Page 8

<sup>31</sup> Tai Chi from wikipedia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiji\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiji_(philosophy))>

**Concept development:**

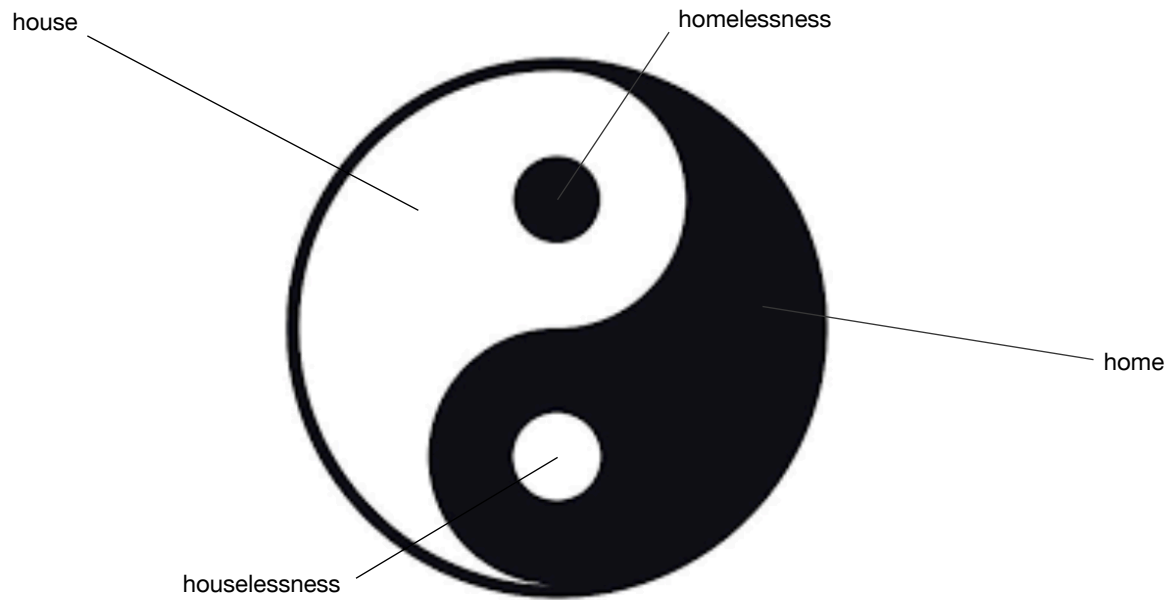
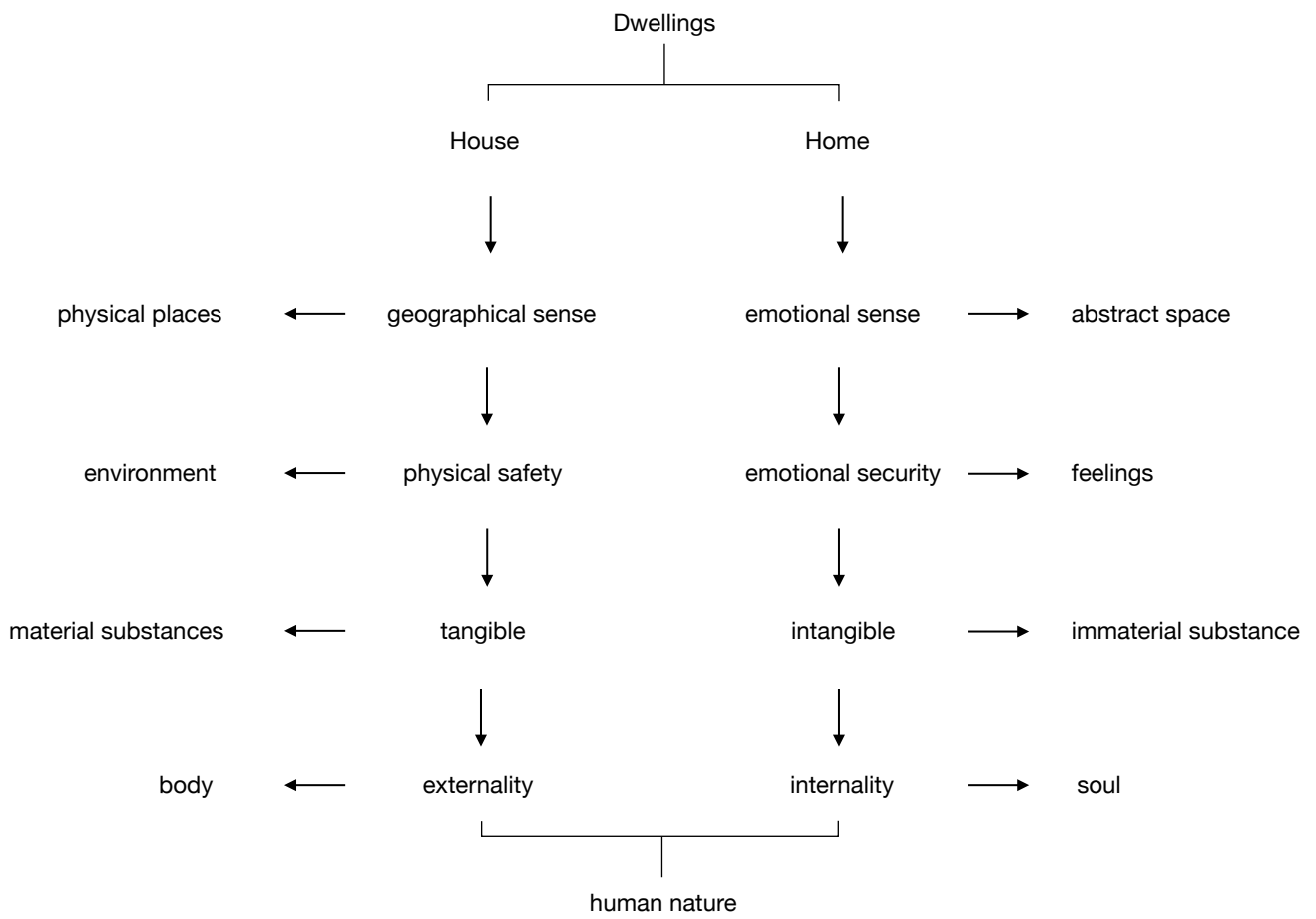


Figure 41

Coming back to the example of the student dormitory-although I lived in a safe and protective place, I didn't feel at home because the conditions of the place were not satisfactory, resulting in emotional insecurity. Therefore, the situation of the student dormitory can be represented as *yang*. I had a place to live but I didn't have any belonging or secure feeling towards that place. Thus, I consider myself homeless instead of houseless.



### 4.3

#### Human nature

The term human nature sums up the concept of 'house' and 'home' comprehensively. Those sub-findings are essential ingredients that are important for formation of an ideal and harmonious home. Similarly to the concept of *yin and yang*, the balancing of both forces are important. In his short story titled "*Malicroix*" Henri Bosco describes a house as an intimate person like his mother. We can see how the house protects the body and secures the soul at the same time. Hence, we can reveal the **human nature** in the dwelling.

*"The house was fighting gallantly. At first it gave voice to its complaints; the most awful gusts were attacking it from every side at once, with evident hatred and such howls of rage that, at times, I trembled with fear. But it stood firm. From the very beginning of the storm, snarling winds had been taking the roof to task, trying to pull it off, to break its back, tear it into shreds, suck it off. But it only hunched over further and clung to the old rafters. Then other winds, rushing along close to the ground charged against the wall. Everything swayed under the shock of this blow, but the flexible house stood up to the beast. No doubt it was holding firmly to the soil of the island by means of the unbreakable roots from which its thick walls of mud-coated reeds and planks drew their supernatural strength. Though the shutters and doors were insulted, though huge threats were preferred, and there was loud bugling in the chimney, it was of no avail. They already human being in whom I had sought shelter for my body yielded nothing to the storm. The house clung close to me, like a she-wolf, and at times, I could smell her door penetrating maternally to my very heart. **That night she was really my mother.**"<sup>32</sup>*

In the story, the house not only protects the dweller from extreme weather, but also secures the dweller's soul. It fulfils the dweller both with physical safety off on the outside and emotional security inside.

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<sup>32</sup> Henri Bosco, "*Malicroix*", NYRB Classics, translated by Joyce Zonana, 2020. Page 115

## Conclusion

The year of 2019 marks a tearing and heartbreaking memory for all Hongkongers. The political and socioeconomic freedom and environment are completely eroded and destroyed. Under the situation of the dictatorship, I made a decision to leave. I came to Estonia to study without saying a goodbye to my friends because I believe the distance will not affect our friendship and I know we will see each other again in the future. Therefore, I began this project hoping to trace back the definition of my home.

I started with the question of **where is my home** while the word 'where' can lead me to two different destinations: the body and the soul. In this orientation, I divided the destination into two directions: geographical and emotional sense; looking for a physical place for the body to live and finding an abstract space for housing the feeling of the soul. I realised it's important to find a place with both physical safety and emotional security for living as they will determine my feeling of belonging to that place.

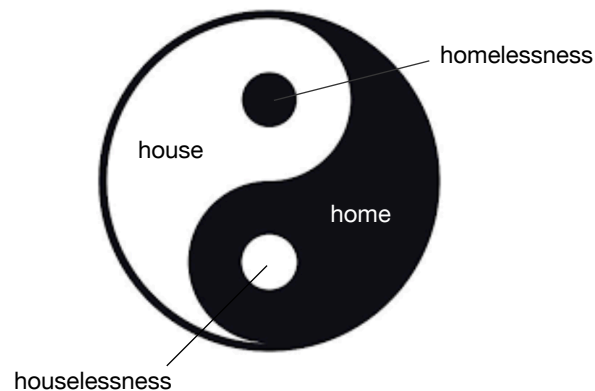
By the time I started my new life here, I realised how vulnerable my emotional feelings are especially when I started to miss my friends and my home. Living in the student dormitory, the unsatisfactory conditions made me question **what does home mean to me**. So, I began to seek emotional security from a living place. During the investigation, I came to know more about myself, my sensation and learned how to deal with my emotions regarding the realities of the dirtiness in a shared place. As French philosopher René Descartes has once said *I think, therefore I am*<sup>33</sup>, this points out how the soul dominates everything in life. Conversely, when this logic is re-applied to the concept of dwelling, it gives me *I am feeling [at] home, therefore I am [at] home*; the feeling of home is everything. Otherwise, it is just a temporary shelter without a feeling of belonging.

After self-understanding my emotions, I started to think **what does home bring to me**. Undoubtedly, the atmosphere of a home is able to evoke memories from the past. It's about pinpointing the connection between me and the home. It also significantly secures my feeling of belonging to home and brings me certain distinct feelings by those tangible and intangible things. Sometimes, this feeling blurs the

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<sup>33</sup> Rene Descartes, "*Meditations on First Philosophy*", CreateSpace, Independent Publishing Platform, 2010

line between reality and imagination, creating an unpredicted feeling of intimacy or intimate persons. From the movie *Chungking Express*<sup>34</sup>, the character Faye has once said *I have only one person in my thoughts*, revealing how she falls for an imagined person in her mind.



In Chapter 4, I applied the philosophy of *Tai Chi* to the concept of home and house to sum up the nature of dwellings. It reflects how everything in the world is composed of many different situations, some of them sometimes are opposing while also coexisting and even complementing each other. Sometimes, to some extent, both components even rely on one another by interchanging roles. For instance, shadow cannot be separated from light by the interchanging of day and night; nor can the soul separate from the body. Therefore, if we see home as a whole, home will represent ***the nature of humans***. It involves both physical features of a house and abstract sentiments of a home; the human characteristics of the external body and the internal soul.

In my practical work, I will set up three installation divided into three different themes in three different exhibition places by a home, memory and homelessness. The first two places are at my apartment and the third one is at the EKA building. Based on my application of the philosophy of *Tai Chi*, I will examine both *yin* and *yang* though to my artistic practice.

Last but not least, both my written thesis and my practical work are influenced by the current situation in Hong Kong and Ukraine. While defining the meaning of home, I also wanted to express my sadness and despair. Thinking of this, the ending line of the movie *Transformers* came to my mind: “*We live*

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<sup>34</sup> *Chungking Express*, written and directed by Wong Kar-wai in 1994

*among its people now, hiding in plain sight, but watching over them in secret, waiting...protecting. I have witnessed their capacity for courage, and though we are worlds apart, like us, there's more to them than meets the eye. I am Optimus Prime, and I send this message to any surviving Autobots taking refuge among the stars: **We are here. We are waiting.***<sup>35</sup> It is such a strong message, telling me that no matter where we are, we still believe we can go back our home one day.

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<sup>35</sup> *Transformer*, directed by Michael Bay in 2007

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