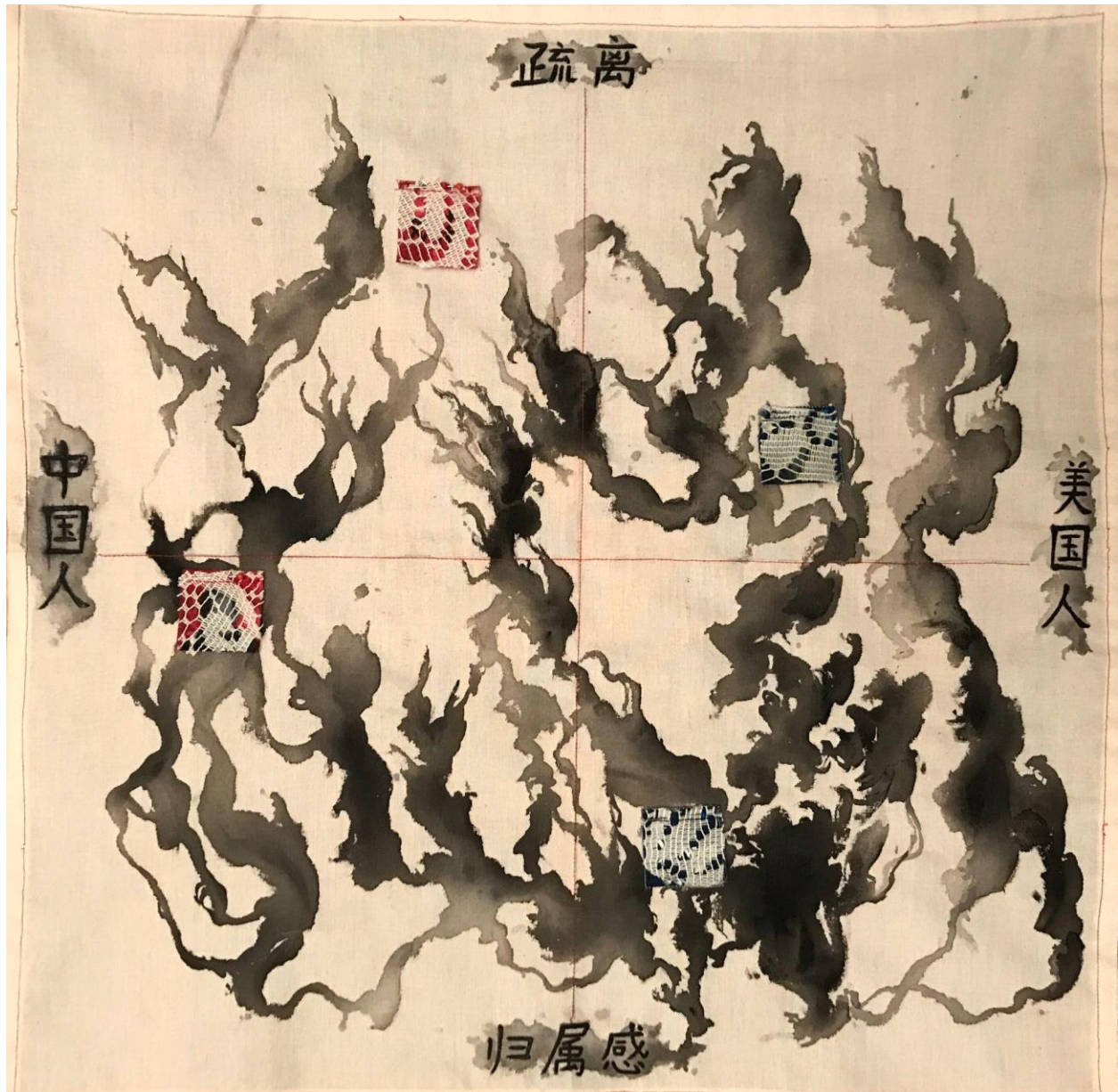


## Contextualizing *Longing*



\*20 1/4" x 20

1/4"

## Author's Statement

During the fall 2022 semester, I had the opportunity to take a first-year writing course centered on Asian American experiences and identities. This topic continues to be relevant and salient, despite being a couple years removed from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequential spike in Anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. Within the context of Carnegie Mellon University (an institution with a majority Asian student body), the course challenges students to be more conscious of how race and ethnic upbringing directly affects their self-concept and their perception of the world around them. For my final contribution project, I chose to produce the included work, titled *Longing* that would address my identity in relation to the all-encompassing label of “Asian American”.

My intention behind *Longing* was to investigate my attitude towards my ethnicity in an informal way, and build off of my years of artwork addressing the identity conflict that arises from being a Chinese-American adoptee. At first I intended this to be a participatory, public work of art, but I found out along the way that there was some sort of mental block preventing me from producing such a piece. How could I ask strangers to reconsider their perceptions of their own racial identities, without doing so myself? My purpose shifted to an in-depth personal analysis of how my race has affected my sense of belonging throughout my life. In the end, this piece is my shot at catharsis, and reevaluating how I view my own ethnicity.

Throughout my process, I chose materials that held particular cultural meanings to help express my theme. In East Asian countries, there is a myth of the “Red String of Fate” or 姻緣紅線 (yīnyuán hóngxiàn) in Chinese. It is said that everyone has a red thread tied to their pinky finger that connects you to people you are destined to meet. I used red thread to sew the axes of

my diagram to reference this myth, and also echo the idea that it was my fate to be taken in by my adoptive mother.

Another major factor was my fabric choices. I chose muslin as my main fabric, because its pale yellow color reminded me of how Asian people are often ascribed as ‘yellow’ in the U.S. I wanted to lean in on how the color of Muslin is reminiscent of my skin tone. It complicates the narrative by implying that I’m sewing into my own skin. The other fabric samples I used for the 1½” squares consisted of red mottled fabric, white lace, and blue starred fabric. My intentions were simple: to mirror both the Chinese and American flag, and the intersection between the two. I was immediately drawn to the red fabric, because the dye patterns resembled that of blood, symbolizing how race is viewed primarily as genetic. I attached the white lace on top of the samples because I liked how it mimicked spider webs, and partially concealed the content of the squares to make it more interactive. On the samples themselves, I wrote both my English name and my Chinese name. Θαλεια, or Thalia, is a Greek name given to me by my adoptive mother. I was named 欢莉 (huān lì) by caregivers at the Maoming Welfare Institute in Guangdong, China. To contrast those, I painted two self-portraits of myself: one as a toddler from my adoption papers and one of my current self.

The primary medium of the piece was ink. Using a paintbrush, I applied the ink to the fabric by diluting it with water to create a softer image with a range of values, while also alluding to iconic Chinese ink wash paintings. I wasn’t going for anything particular in the beginning, but as I painted, abstract shapes of smoke or fire took form. I view them as a representation of my unconscious rejection towards my racial background, or how I’m unable

to see a clear view of myself. However, the viewer may interpret the end result differently. For context, the four axes are labeled from the top clockwise: 疏离(shūlí - alienation), 美国人(měiguórén - American), 中国人(zhōngguórén - Chinese), and 归属感(guīshǔgǎn - sense of belonging).

Throughout my time here at Carnegie Mellon, I plan to continue to populate the diagram at the end of every fall semester in order to create a visual representation of how truly fluid racial identity is over the course of a person's life. As it stands, I'm satisfied with the work and all that it symbolizes for me, or others like me. In the future, I hope to be able to translate this piece into a large-scale art installation, where students, faculty, and alumni could interact with it and experience a similar reframing of their identity.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first and foremost like to thank my parents for supporting me through art school and enabling the opportunity for me to pursue a higher education. Art in general, and the humanities peripherally, in relation to STEM are not as socially valued (be it academically or financially). This piece, and other works like it, come together to disprove that notion and further legitimize art's place in encapsulating humanity, and *especially* that of people of color.

Lastly, I want to thank Professor Nisha Shanmuguraj for both nominating this piece and ensuring that this class even happened. The conversation about the treatment of AAPI in this country is ongoing, and the more young people are made aware of this, the better off we are in recognizing the shared responsibility we all have going forward to incite change and break out of preexisting modes of complacency.