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ISSN 1890-9515 Vol 19, No 2 (2026), Art 11, 1–29 https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.6320

Peer-reviewed article

Crafting Individualism

Cross-Cultural Expressions in Contemporary Jewellery – related Practice

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Keywords

Individualism, cross-culture, practice-based research, craft, jewellery

Abstract

This article presents a cross-cultural study employing a heuristic research methodology through design (RtD) to investigate how different understandings of individualism, as encountered in Chinese and Western cultural contexts, inform contemporary jewellery practices. By focusing on two practice projects and their creative processes, I suggest that the works examined here reveal different emphases: one tends towards the articulation of individual viewpoints, while the other places personal expression in closer relation to collective cultural identity. Based on my experience navigating these cultural contexts, I reflect on two parallel jewellery projects created from a shared creative motif. These projects reveal how cultural contexts influence artistic decision-making processes and outcomes. Contrary to assumptions of binary cultural opposition, the findings demonstrate a hybridised creative stance emerging from the interplay of Chinese and Western forms of individualism. The study contributes to the global discourse on cultural diversity in contemporary jewellery by contextualising the growing presence of Chinese jewellers in Europe. It offers a framework to help European educators and curators interpret Chinese works through a cross-cultural lens while providing practical insights for Chinese artists adapting to European creative paradigms.

Introduction

This article is based on the primary author's PhD research, which examines conceptions of individualism in Chinese and Western cultural contexts and their manifestations in contemporary jewellery making and outputs. The study emerges from my observation of different contemporary jewellery practices and values across these cultural contexts, and from my interest in how such differences may shape artistic expression.

The research context is informed by strands of modernist thought that re-evaluated jewellery in relation to expression rather than decoration (Pevsner, 2003). Historically, jewellery served as a crafted symbol of power and status (Phillips, 2019), but the dynamics of modernism prompted significant formal transformations in jewellery after the 1960s, particularly through the emergence of conceptual approaches that challenged the traditional boundary between fine art and craft (Drutt and Dormer (1995). In many cases, maker intentionally moved away from conventional materials and aesthetics of refinement and luxury, redirecting focus towards jewellery's conceptual and artistic potential (Philips, 2019, p.153) (Figure 1). Terry Frost is renowned for his abstract painting, and his use of geometric forms, blocks of colour, and rhythmic compositional language was translated into jewellery. By transforming this non-figurative aesthetic into wearable objects, he broke away from the

traditional limitations of jewellery, which had largely emphasised decoration and realism, and instead moved jewellery towards a more 'artistic' mode of expression.

Figure 1

Necklace modelled in wax by abstract artist Terry Frost and cast in silver by HJ Company, 1961. © Estate of Terry Frost. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2025 & © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 2025.



Contemporary jewellery, as defined for the purpose of this article, is driven by a conceptual idea—personal, political, cultural, material or otherwise. Preciousness of material is optional; what matters is that the maker selects form and material to advance a critical or artistic expression. Furthermore, when jewellery takes on a more sculptural character, attention is often drawn more strongly to its conceptual dimension, while practical questions of wearability—such as comfort—may become less central (Risatti, 2007). These works still display the characteristics of craft, their connection with the body is grounded in touch and is not restricted to wearability (Risatti, 2007, Adamson, 2007). Consequently, non-wearable yet personally expressive fine metalwork also fall within the scope of this discussion.

The contemporary jewellery movement originated among jewellery artists in north-west Europe and North America from 1960s-1980s, growing into an international movement in late 20th century. Many accounts of this movement emphasise its strong investment in artistic individuality (Watkins, 1993). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), individualism is "a principle favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control"; the entry also notes the related sense of "self-centred feeling or conduct". In many discussions of contemporary jewellery, this idea prioritises artists' self-exploration, allowing makers to distinguish themselves from mainstream conventions and assert creative individuality (Veiteberg, 2001). Some artists integrate informational or symbolic elements into their work to critique socio-political issues, thereby transforming adornment into provocative commentary (Rothwell, 2023) and asserting strong individualistic positions. This can be seen in *Slave Manacle* (1975) by David Poston, which draws attention to the ethics of normative luxury materials. Its inscription "Diamonds Gold and Slavery Are Forever" exposes jewellery's historical entanglement with colonial exploitation and environmental harm (see Figures 2). In such cases, jewellery can function as an extension of the artist's agency, giving material form to a strongly individual voice.

Figure 2

David Poston's Slave Manacle. Used under CC BY-ND 4.0., 1975 © David Poston. All Rights Reserved, National Museum of Scotland 2025.



The conceptual foundations of contemporary jewellery were introduced to China from the West in the late 20th century (Cao, 2020). After over 2 decades of development, contemporary jewellery in both China and the West engages with personal as well as collective narratives. However, in many Chinese examples discussed in this field, collective cultural elements remain particularly prominent. Such as in Wang Xiaoxin's work *Wen Yi Zhu Hun* (*Cultivating Spirit Through Culture*), he reimagines classical Chinese celadon forms—including the iconic plum vase (Mei ping) and pear-shaped vase (Yu hu chun ping)—through

a synthesis with cloisonné craftsmanship. This fusion demonstrates the creative reinterpretation and innovative evolution of traditional cultural heritage in contemporary contexts, making innovative use of the cloisonné technique to evoke the effect of ceramics (Wang & Sun, 2022) (Figure 3). This manifests through contemporary reinterpretations of traditional motifs, techniques, and material philosophies, suggesting a distinct approach to individualism that integrates personal expression with communal heritage. The individual will of the artist manifests through its absorption into a collective narrative. Professor Deng Xiaomang (2010)—known for his work on comparative aesthetics—argues that personal freedom in China must unfold inside a collective consciousness. Such findings prompt critical questions about how individualism in culture differentially shapes material practices in these contexts.

Figure 3

Wang Xiaoxin's work Wen Yi Zhu Hun (Cultivating Spirit Through Culture). © Wang Xiaoxin, All Rights Reserved, Wang Xiaoxin 2025.



My doctoral research employs a heuristic methodology of research-through-design. By comparing my own creative experiments in Chinese and Western cultural contexts, this practice-based approach provides insights into divergent aesthetic priorities, material decisions and creative strategies. This comparative framework helps to show how different cultural conceptions can reposition jewellery's conceptual significance in relation to both personal statement and communal representation.

Methodology

The research is grounded in a heuristic methodology of Research-through-Design (RtD), employing reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and heuristic review, positioning craft praxis as a tool for developing knowing and insights (Candy, 2020; Frayling, 1993). Central to this is researcher self-reflexivity, which means this article is written from a first-person perspective. The making in this framework comprised two projects, *The Heft* and *Lithos Offering*, in which I applied the artistic creation methods under the influence of Chinese (*The Heft*) and Western (*Lithos Offering*) cultural contexts respectively.

A shared thematic focus on stacked stones facilitates cultural comparison: *The Heft*, begun in China and later developed in Birmingham under pandemic isolation with Chinese peers, remained continuously shaped by my Chinese cultural background; *Lithos Offering*, produced in Edinburgh, was shaped by local post-pandemic interactions (see the following sections on 'building practice'). Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action framed in-the-moment decision-making and self-reflection (Schön, 2008). The materials leading up to the outputs, *The Heft* and *Lithos Offering,* acted as co-participants in knowing and insight production through self reflection (Moustakas, 1990).

Through these structured reflective methods, intuitive understandings were reconfigured, refining practice and advancing inquiry, while revealing cultural variations in individualism (Throne, 2019).

Building practice in a Chinese context – the heft

Making process

While *The Heft* emerged within a cross-cultural environment, it was informed mainly by Chinese cultural influences, and its design approaches and aesthetic orientation are more closely aligned with Chinese cultural and aesthetic frameworks. It places emphasis on both the inheritance of tradition and the expression of Yì Jìng (artistic realm). Its mode of personal expression highlights the integration of the artist's individual will into the collective cultural narrative.

The Heft draws inspiration from the balancing game of stacking stones on a beach (see Figure 4). In this process, I must carefully sense the weight and centre of each stone, positioning it precisely to maintain stability as the structure grows. This act requires repeated experimentation, with each failure serving as a meditation on patience and inner stillness. This pursuit of balance and peace resonates with the Chinese philosophical concept of *Hé* (和: harmony), an idea of yin-yang equilibrium. Through crafts, I seek to explore this

philosophy, using material practice to understand balance, peace, and the subtle interplay of forces.

Figure 4

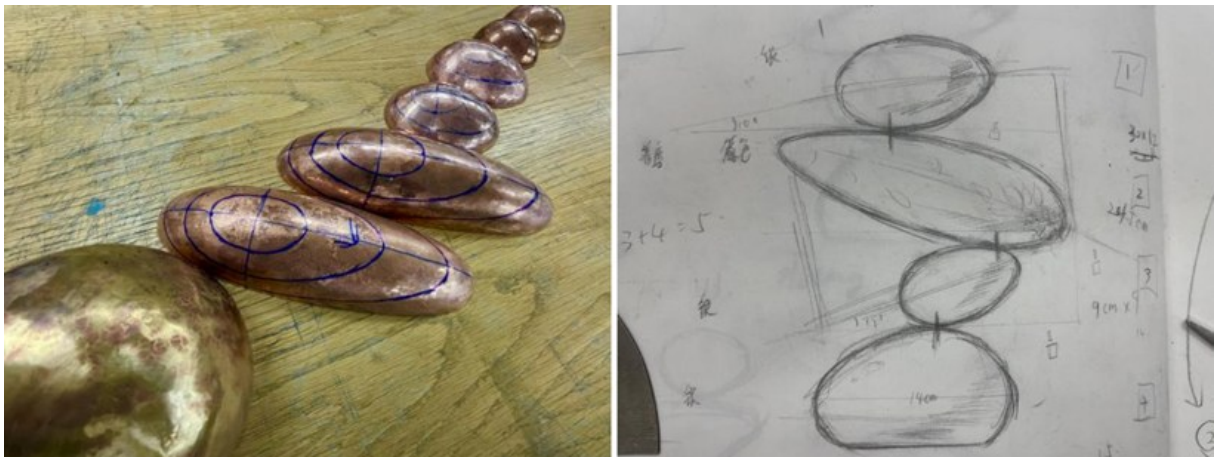
Beach game – stacked stones. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



At first, I believed a realistic shape would convey the desired *hé* most effectively, as its raw, textured surfaces evoked an unrefined, natural aesthetic untouched by artifice. But when I tested this by combining different forms, the combination of pebbles created visual inconsistency. They clashed and looked messy. While I struggled to articulate the source of this disharmony, it prompted an intuitive reassessment—a process rooted in reflection-in-action. This tension between intention and outcome guided iterative refinements, reflecting a responsiveness to the *hé*. To address this, I simplified the realistic details, adopting an abstract oval design to restore balance and fluency.

Figure 5

Two halves and design sketch. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



During the creation process, I dedicated a significant amount of time to practising my raising skills to shape “pebbles” into more balanced and fluid forms for a kinetic sculpture (see Figure 5, left side). In the Chinese craft discourse that informs this project, the pursuit of beautiful materials and exquisite crafts is often treated as a lasting value (Hang, 2014). For this project, I considered the combination of different hammers and stakes essential to this task. Each “pebble” consisted of two halves, and they needed to match each other, as do the angle and the weight when pulled together to achieve smooth mechanical rotation (Figure 6). I used mathematical principles, such as the Pythagorean theorem, in the design to enhance its effectiveness (Figure 5, right side).

Conceptually, the concept of time accompanies this state of *Hé*, the golden leaf pattern is engraved on the stone's surface like a fossil (Figure 6). In addition, the thought about time is also reflected in the choice of craft process and materials. Using raising hammers to shape the metal in the studio is like a Zen master hitting a wooden fish[1] one by one when meditating; it aligns with the pursuit of Dào (also known as Tao), the absolute principle underlying the universe (Stevenson, 2011).

Figure 6

Chasing fossilised leaves. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



While this work is mainly influenced by a Chinese cultural context, my western education experience has informed its creative trajectory—I conducted extensive research and iterative test pieces to determine formal parameters such as pebble arrangement and angular relationships. The artistic decision to incorporate fossilized leaves serves as a direct representation of temporality (Figure 6) — a material index of geological time that bridges the ephemeral and the eternal, grounding abstract temporal concepts in tangible, slow-crafted form. I believe this decision also resonates with strands of Western art in which representational or indexical imagery is used to convey specific symbolic meanings (Wang, 2023).

Figure 7

The Heft 1, Silver and Gold Plated Gilding Metal, Brass, Steel 2023. Photo: Shannon Tofts.



Most artistic decisions in this work were intentionally rooted in subjective intuition. This approach proved critical for achieving Yì Jìng *(意境, artistic realm)* (Zong, 1981). The Yì Jìng *(Artistic realm)* is 'the spiritual realm and aesthetic dimension created by a work of art beyond its concrete imagery' (Ye, 1985). It is an aesthetic ideal Chinese artists have pursued since antiquity, emerging where the artist's inner emotional landscape and an external, culturally shared ideal, often idealised, representation of scenery become inseparably fused (Su, 2006). Within the framework I am discussing here, this form of personal expression gains force when it is related to a collective narrative. The finished work is a dynamically balanced sculpture that responds to environmental interactions with rotational shifts (Figure 7). When installed, it channels the whisper of the mountain and the pulse of natural cycles, materialising a harmonious interplay between stillness and motion that mirrors the relaxing lifestyle.

Building practice in western context: lithos offering

Making process

Lithos Offering was informed mainly by Western cultural influences, and its design approaches and aesthetic orientation reflect a Western cultural and aesthetic framework, including a series of jewellery, a candlestick, and incense holders. In this project, I placed greater emphasis on challenging inherited forms and conventions, and highlight the artist's personal identity within this process. Its mode of personal expression emphasises the artist's individual thought.

Narrative has often been treated as an important dimension of contemporary jewellery practice (Cunningham, 2008). As with *The Heft*, *Lithos Offering* began with stacked stones, reminiscent of Scottish cairns—memorials for the deceased (Figure 8). For the purposes of this project, these collective stones, often inscribed with names, triggered reflections on loss, funerals, and the contradictions of mourning—genuine grief mixed with self-interest. Throughout history, rituals like cairns, poetry, and offerings have honoured the dead yet can feel performative, reflecting the virtues of the living. This disconnection, especially in chaotic times, fuels my work. Offerings central to funerary rites often involve animals. I explored this through both material and form, allowing the process to evolve organically, responding to themes of death, rebirth, and memory in modern society.

Figure 8

Scottish Cairn, Isle of Arran. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



Figure 9

Sarira of Siddhārtha Gautama (the founder of Buddha Dharma) © All Rights Reserved, Nanjing Niushoushan Cultural Tourism Group Co., Lt2025.



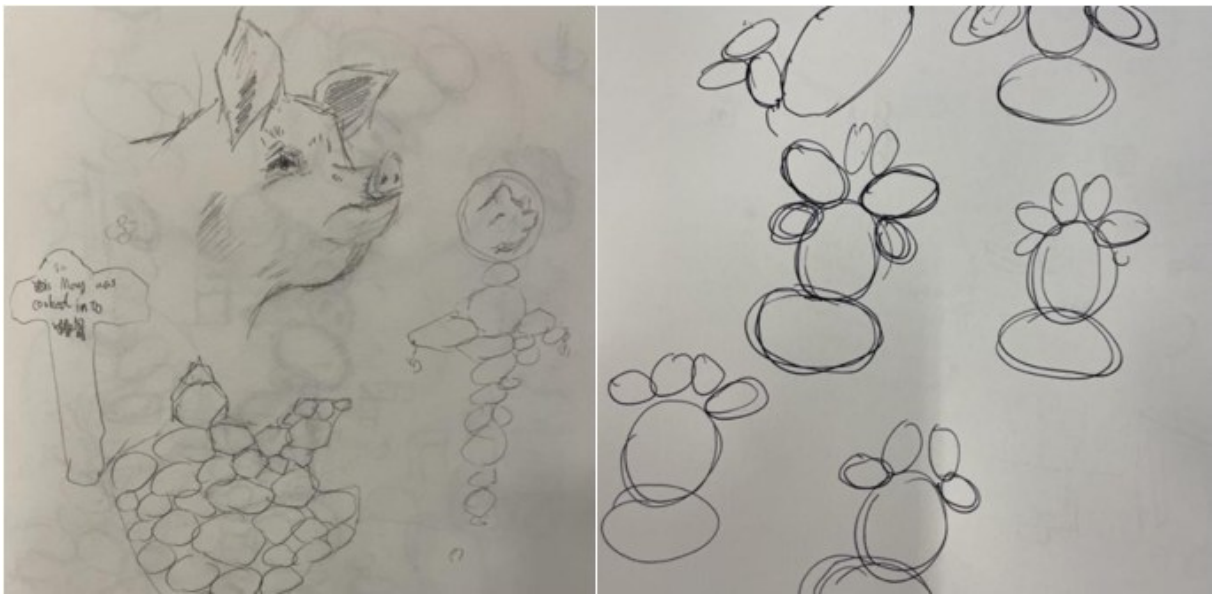
Figure 10

Burnt lamb bones and primitive bone-enamel. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



Figure 11

Sketches: Cairn-inspired ideas. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



I started with material experiments. From my material research, I noticed that *Sarira*—Buddhist relics resembling pearls or crystals found in cremated remains of revered monks—are considered sacred offerings (Buswell & Lopez, 2013; Niushoushan, 2025) (Figure 9). Inspired by this, I explored ways to incorporate the concept of Sarira into my project. I experimented with real beef and lamb bones to create a Sarira-like material. Since Sarira's formation remains uncertain, I studied its characteristics and found its glass-like texture similar to enamel. However, traditional enamel adheres only in thin layers to metal or clay. This led me to explore bone china, which mixes clay with bone ash. I tested enamel and

bone ash combinations, finding that at 800°C, they formed calcium silicate, yielding a novel material. Excited by this, I conducted extensive tests on proportions, firing times, and temperatures, refining my process (Figures 10).

Figure 12

Cake offering and animal inspired work. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



Figure 13

Lithos Offering 1 & 2. Silver, Bone-Enamel, 24K Gold Foil, Efcolor Enamel, 2023. Photo: Qiwei Liu.

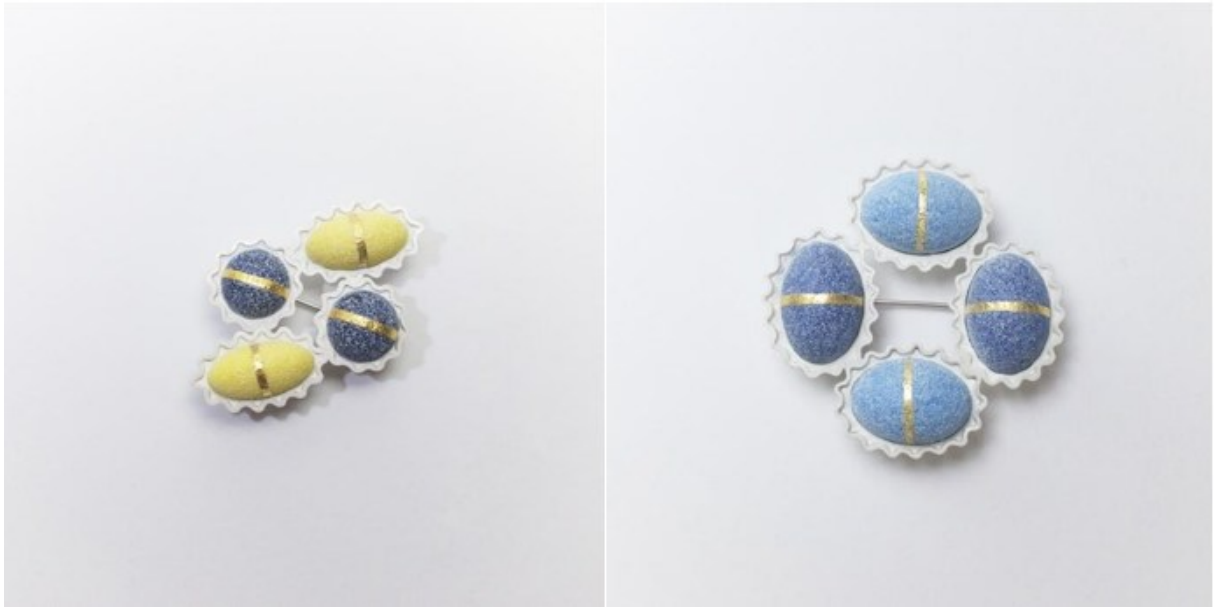


Figure 14

Lithos Offering 5 & 6 & 7. Silver, Bone-Enamel, 24K Gold Foil, Efcolor Enamel, 2024. Photo: Shannon Tofts



During the initial phase of material experimentation, I began exploring formal possibilities aligned with my conceptual framework. Keywords such as ritual, offering, cairn, rock, and food guided prototyping (see Figures 14 & 15). Through multiple rounds of development—sketching, test pieces, re-sketching, and re-test pieces—and coincident discoveries in material behaviour and expression (notably the textural interplay of bone and enamel), the final forms emerged. the final forms emerged: offerings such as cupcakes and candies fused with animal motifs, symbolically using sheep bones to honour sheep, reflecting the conflict idea I mentioned in the concept (see Figures 16 & 17). This paradox inspired the series' name *Un-Titled*, reflecting my speechlessness at the contradictions within these rituals.

After completing my first animal-themed pieces, I noticed the combination of oval shapes, silver, and bone-enamel. In response, I shifted my focus to arrangement, composition, and colour coordination (see Figures 13).

In *Lithos Offering*, cupcakes and bone ashes serve as symbolic elements, conveying my thoughts of rituals and sacrifice. And still, my Chinese cultural identity remains in the creation of *Lithos Offering.* Through the candlestick and incense holder, the sculpture focuses on an imagery scene of sadness, transcending the abstract meaning of cupcake and bone-enamel and a specific point of view.

After, I returned to my original themes. Inspired by the Bone-Enamel firing process, I explored worship rituals, particularly candles and incense. I created two towering structures reflecting the ancient social divide: the lower class grovelling in the darkness beneath the unattainable realm of heaven. This contrast between the earthly and divine became central to my work, highlighting the tension between humility and holiness (see Figure 14).

Reflection on the approach of the two creative processes

The Heft

The Heft originated in my Chinese philosophical engagement with stone-stacking practices. Building upon its design foundations, the craftsmanship further integrates the creative logic of traditional Chinese art. As an artistic work, *The Heft* serves as a meditation on Yì Jìng (Artistic realm) (will be discussed later). In the Chinese-oriented framework through which I interpret this project, this meditation unfolds through two interconnected layers, first, the timeless principle of "beautiful materials and exquisite crafts", which is the unchanging foundation of craftsmanship. And second, each era contributes its aesthetic sensibilities. Returning to the essence of craft aesthetics means returning to "beautiful materials and exquisite crafts" (Hang, 2014).

The Heft embodies the principle of “beautiful materials” and “exquisite craftsmanship”, foundational to Chinese craft aesthetics (Hang, 2014b). “Beautiful materials” requires respect for a material’s nature, working with rather than against its intrinsic nature, while “exquisite crafts” means technical excellence that reveals this essence. Accordingly, *The Heft* employs traditional material for silversmithing - metals, amplifying inherent qualities through craft instead of substitution. Integrated structures create smooth, wind-like motion. Under this principle, *The Heft* perpetuates Chinese craft’s technical essence and philosophical integrity. Simultaneously, it engages the principle that “each era contributes its aesthetic sensibilities”. While grounded in Yì Jìng (artistic realm), it evolves beyond ornamental excess, shifting from realism to abstraction (Figure 6), from decorative motifs to

fossil-like textures, and incorporating kinetic components emblematic of our technological era (Hang, 2014b). This balance of heritage and innovation sustains enduring relevance. In my experience of making *The Heft*, my reflections on Hé (harmony) developed through concepts drawn from Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. In that process, my individual will felt increasingly situated within a broader cultural framework. The final expression therefore remained personal, but it also sought resonance with values understood as collective rather than solely individual—individual insight dissolves into a wider cultural current, at once affirming the self and sustaining the collective (Deng, 2010).

In the creation process of *The Heft,* the selection and treatment of materials and techniques were more conservative compared to *Lithos Offering*. While critical thinking and innovation in materials and techniques are undoubtedly valuable, within the framework through which I approached *The Heft*,, introducing new, untested elements that lack the validation of time is risky and unstable. Such instability would struggle to support the expression of grand concepts like *Dào* that *The Heft* seeks to embody.

Lithos Offering

Lithos Offering started after completing *The Heft*, shifting focus from the formal qualities of stacked stones to the narratives embedded in cairns. The work began with rigorous investigations into materials and craft processes to amplify this narrative dimension. As Drutt and Dormer (1995) mentioned, jewellery is a "conscious declaration of self to the world"—a meaning central to *Lithos Offering*. However, whereas *The Heft* placed stronger emphasis on beautiful material and exquisite crafts, *Lithos Offering* used research-driven material experimentation to articulate a more explicit conceptual statement. *Lithos Offering* deliberately encodes my perspective into tangible forms, inviting viewers to decode its layered cultural and personal narratives.

Furthermore, Bone-Enamel, is a novel jewellery material that I developed for this project. It constitutes a deliberate departure from traditional enamel craft, challenging established material hierarchies and aesthetic conventions through experimental engagements with form and process (Drutt & Dormer, 1995). Traditional enamel possesses a glass-like texture similar to gemstones, and its widespread popularity over thousands of years attests to its alignment with broadly accepted aesthetic standards (see Figure 15). However, Bone-enamel challenges the techniques and aesthetics of it. Transition of aesthetics led to the emergence of new value systems and the creation of pieces that reflect personal thoughts, narratives, and individualism (Phillips, 2019), wherein jewellery is no longer viewed merely as adornment but as 'wearable sculpture' (Risatti, 2007). In this "innovative" craft process, it is my own will that becomes visible. This individualism differs from the perspective emphasised in *The Heft*, where the artist's 'personal will' is expressed through integration

into a collective narrative. Since the Bone-enamel craft was developed by me, it is bound to my own identity and artistic identity. This form of individualism highlights my autonomy within the act of creation.

Figure 15

Traditional enamel jewellery. Photo: Qiwei Liu.



Regarding the overall design process, the evolution of *Lithos Offering* was more akin to self-examination. Each piece of material and every visual element was embedded with my personal narrative during the making process. The silver and enamel, once mere materials, became vessels for exploring concepts of death and ritualistic commemoration. This transformation lies at the core of the series' value—delivering a narrative with intricate precision to the audience as fine art (Risatti, 2007).

Expressing the concept: a reflection

The Heft

The expression of Yì Jìng (artistic realm) holds particular importance in conveying the concept of *The Heft*. It emphasises the artist's expression of Yì Jìng (artistic realm), which is grounded in the continuation of tradition. Rooted in classical Chinese aesthetics, Yì Jìng (artistic realm) has been a cornerstone of artistic philosophy for millennia. It refers to using natural and subtle imagery to express the essence of the universe and life, which is vital to Chinese artistic philosophy (Zhang, 2022). The concept of Yì Jìng (artistic realm) refers to a state where emotions and scenery merge, where reality and imagination coexist—a seamless unity of subjective and objective elements in art. The artist's subjective emotion and the transcendent "scene" derived from objective reality are organically fused (Su, 2006). Chinese aesthetic thought has long been deeply influenced by Confucian, Dàoist, and other philosophical traditions. The painter Gu Kaizhi (CE 348–409), influenced by Dàoist thought, believed that landscape painting carries profound meaning, embodying the pursuit of the "Unity of Heaven and Humans". Meanwhile, Confucius acknowledged the necessity of beauty in form but opposed excessive decoration, instead emphasising the inner beauty (meaning and expressing) of objects (Tian & Lan, 2024). The artistic language of *The Heft* serves as a medium for conveying aspirations through objects. This transmission of meaning is facilitated through the dynamic imagery of stacked stones, which act as a medium between subjective emotions and scene. By achieving this correspondence of "He", the work ultimately seeks the unity of subjectivity and objectivity (Su, 2006).

The expression of Yì Jìng (artistic realm) lies not in the tangible artifacts I made, but in the evocative power of the unarticulated imagery—This is a *liú bái (留白)* technique (leave space, a technique derived from Chinese painting, where the emphasis lies not on what is done but on what is left undone, expressing the interplay between the tangible and the intangible, and reflecting the subtle, evocative aesthetic consciousness of Chinese art (Song, 2023). Ma Yuan (CE 1160-1225) frequently employed liú bái (expansive negative space), in his compositions to amplify Yì Jìng (artistic realm) of his works (Ma, 2025) (see Figure 16).

The Heft is a kinetic stacked-stone sculpture that undergoes gradual rotation in response to external forces. When exhibited, this raised form evokes sensations of the breeze in the mountains and the flowing rhythms, a easy and composed lifestyle—those hidden imagery that embody the work's conceptual core, transcending its material manifestation as an arrangement of metal pebbles. However, as noted earlier, attaining its ideal physical balance demanded rigorous preliminary research, iterative test-piece making, and precise calibration of rotational dynamics in advance—a methodology paralleling the systematic approach adopted in *Lithos Offering*.

Figure 16

Ma Yuan - Shui Tu Juan (Water painting) © Estate of Ma Yuan. All Rights Reserved, The Palace Museum 2025.



Lithos Offering

Compared to *The Heft*'s grand conceptual narrative of "Unity of heaven and humans", *Lithos Offering* focuses more intimately on my personal micro-narrative. Unlike traditional jewellery—primarily decorative and symbolic of power—*Lithos Offering* exemplifies contemporary studio jewellery by merging craft design with artistic narrative. The work transcends ornamentation to articulate my identity as a maker (Veiteberg, 2001), challenging historical divisions between art and craft.

In some influential Western art traditions, art and craft were often theorised as distinct categories, and the craft was often reduced to technical execution, as Collingwood (1938) argued: activities producing functional objects were deemed non-artistic if they followed predefined plans. As a contemporary jewellery project, *Lithos Offering* is not the mechanical realisation of a design blueprint but a narrative action where process and materiality respond to the art concepts (Mazanti, 2020).

Contemporary artistic thought further breaks these boundaries. Inspired by avant-garde movements, today's artists reject rigid categorisations, dismantling traditional "organic" art concepts and replacing them with "new" ideas (Bürger, 1984). This shift often elevates novelty and conceptual originality over the pursuit of quality perfection— although there are controversy: a trend critiqued by Krauss (1985), who observes that the fixation on "newness" risks privileging superficial innovation over artistic authenticity (p. 162).

The development of bone enamel responds to the idea. Unlike traditional enamelling techniques, this method incorporates bone ash—a material innovation that changes the medium's inherent qualities—while demanding precise adjustments to firing durations. Though the addition disrupts the established craft process, it generates a distinct aesthetic unattainable through standard practices. This material experimentation reflects broader trends in contemporary craft, where the pursuit of conceptual originality often supersedes loyalty to craft perfection, even as such shifts may adjust priorities away from traditional craftsmanship ideals.

Further, art is not only about what is seen but also about the audience and the act of viewing (Risatti, 2007). In *Lithos Offering*, I aimed to communicate my thoughts, concepts and emotions as clearly as possible to the audience. Combining bone-enamel, cupcakes, colours, and animal shapes forms a visual sign system, transforming opaque, abstract meanings into visible signs. When these signs are placed within a suitable social context, their symbolic meanings are "read" and understood by the audience (Risatti, 2007). I hope that through this process, my thoughts can be conveyed as accurately as possible. However, such visual signs are not as apparent in *The Heft*. The visual elements of *The Heft* are more like a bridge, but on the other side of the bridge, there is fog. What lies within the fog varies slightly in meaning for each person. *The Heft* I see as a creator may vastly differ from what the audience perceives.

Discussion

Attitudes toward tradition: divergence at the scale of personal expression

The Heft and *Lithos Offering* epitomise two different approaches to tradition. In the comparison developed here, the Chinese-oriented project – *The Heft* places greater emphasis on reworking tradition from within—preserving its essence while recontextualising its forms—whereas the Western-oriented project places greater emphasis on questioning and reconfiguring inherited norms, thereby foregrounding the artist's identity within the process.

According to Hang (2024), traditional Chinese craftsmanship functions as both a cultural archive and a living practice—preserving collective memory through tacit, material-based knowledge while adapting to modern aesthetics (p. 143). *The Heft*'s material and technical standards adhere to traditional ideals, while its abstract forms echo classical philosophical contemplation. Unlike most of Western contemporary jewellery that strongly privilege personal expression, the Chinese framework drawn on in The Heft places greater value on aligning creative expression with a broader collective, and sometimes cosmological, order. This idea, rooted in traditional art philosophy, reflects a holistic integration of self, community, and natural order, in which the artist incorporates collective cultural traditions and finds their own position within the community. In *The Heft*, the selection criteria for materials and techniques adhere to the traditional artistic standards of "Exquisite materials and skilful craftsmanship"(Hang, 2014). The work's content expresses philosophical reflections on the world akin to ancient artworks, while its form emphasises emotional expression through Yì Jìng (artistic realm).

For *Lithos Offering*, however, the modernist movement has driven jewellery to evolve into contemporary art—a departure from tradition. In Risatti's account (2007), craft objects such as jewellery are understood primarily through their objecthood: they are things before they are images. However, this does not mean that jewellery in Western contexts has lacked symbolic, devotional, social, or expressive functions. Rather, the issue for my argument is that as a contemporary jewellery project, *Lithos Offering* places emphasis on concept, artistic agency, and critical self-positioning. It has emerged as an interdisciplinary practice merging craft and art, akin to individual artistic acts in contemporary art (Bürger, 1984). Adopting a sculptural approach emphasises objecthood and self-sufficiency (Risatti, 2007). Through the relentless pursuit of originality, it continually breaks free from traditional constraints, creating strong contrasts with conventional craft and jewellery. This represents a challenge to tradition and a partial shift away from inherited material expectations and

craft priorities. Western contemporary jewellery, exemplified by *Lithos Offering*, transcends craft limitations to become an autonomous artistic medium—for instance, the bone enamel technique rebels against traditional enamelling practices through material innovation. In this process, as I challenged traditional paradigms, my identity was accentuated and my personal expression was strengthened.

Figure 17

Star Fruit in two perspectives. (The image was generated by OpenAI-Chatgpt 2025).



In general, *The Heft and Lithos Offering articulate self-expression within their respective cultural contexts through contrasting attitudes towards tradition—one emphasising inheritance, the other emphasising rebellion. Yet, together they collectively embody a nuanced dialectical engagement with tradition, involving neither complete inheritance nor*

outright rejection. Both works selectively integrate traditional craftsmanship and standards while introducing contemporary ideas that break historical paradigms. Though diverging in emphasis— *The Heft* foregrounds the parts of continuity with cultural heritage, while *Lithos Offering* prioritises the parts of subversion—they represent dialectical perspectives on the same artistic inquiry, akin to viewing a carambola (star fruit) (see Figure 17); its elliptical profile and pentagonal cross-section are distinct yet inseparable aspects of a singular form.

This mirrors the potential interconnectedness of cross-cultural artistic practices. As hybrid creations born of my cross-cultural identity, both projects materialise the tension between individualism and collective narratives. I simultaneously occupy dual roles: an individual maker and a representative of cultural collisions. Here, the personal and the collective, traditional and innovative, Chinese and Western contexts are united opposites.

The pursuit of Dào in Chinese cultural identity through *The Heft* and *Lithos Offering*

Despite being conceived within distinct cultural contexts, the two projects reveal unexpected convergences during their making—an inevitable entanglement of my cross-cultural identity. Seemingly oppositional artistic philosophies demonstrate mutual permeation and displacement: The creative processes of both *The Heft* and *Lithos Offering* ultimately reflect my identity as a Western-based Chinese artist, embodying a hybrid understanding of "thingness" (Wù Xìng). This synthesis manifests in two dimensions: the two programmes contain a rigorously systematic research process, and an intuitive, wholehearted engagement with craft, where craft becomes a tool for pursuing my own *Dào (道)*—the ultimate way or principle.

Everything can embody Dào. In the Western tradition, in many influential Western art discourses, technique and artistic expression have often been treated as separable categories (Collingwood, 1938). However, according to Li and Zhang (2023), in the Chinese context throughout time, when one's technical skill reaches a certain level of mastery, it itself can be regarded as Dào, which means that extreme techniques can be considered a form of art. When the project gradually developed, I became interested in the uniqueness and innovation of the bone-enamel technique. The original concept started to tone down. With the progress of the techniques, I perceive that the ashes and enamel elevate each other—not only as a physical transformation but also as a reshaping of emotions and culture. The making process is like an ancient ritual—the end of life becoming the beginning of rebirth. For my own reflection on making, the story of Cook Ding Cutting an Ox (*庖丁解牛*) provides a useful philosophical lens through which technical mastery can be understood as inseparable from a broader way of being and knowing (Li & Zhang, 2023). It tells of a chef

who skilfully butchers an ox—a process that is, at its core, purely technical. However, through the perfection of his technique, Dào naturally emerges:

> Cook Ding was cutting an ox for Lord Wen Hui (CE356-311BC). Wherever his hand touched, his shoulder leaned, his foot stepped, or his knee pressed—there came a slicing sound, a rhythmic flow as if he were performing the "Mulberry Grove" dance, perfectly in tune with the melody of the "Jīngshǒu" music...When he laid down his knife, Cook Ding said: "What I truly seek is Dào —I have gone beyond mere technique." (Li & Zhang, 2023)

The act of hammering in *The Heft*'s creation—each strike resonating with the rhythmic discipline of a Zen Buddhist ritual (see the making process of *The Heft*)—transcended mere workmanship to become integral to the work's expressive language. While *Lithos Offering* originated within Western frameworks, its final piece as a candlestick revealed an unexpected synthesis. The Bone-enamelling process, with its cycles of firing and transformation, evolved into a contemporary performance of ancient ritual—a symbolic alchemy where the termination of organic life (embodied in bone ash) marked the origin of material rebirth.

In this phase, the two projects transcend their identity as a deliberate product of an "authentic" praxis of cultural methods. Instead, they emerged as an artistic odyssey shaped by my cross-cultural lens—a practitioner navigating dual creative paradigms. The work's material metamorphosis mirrors my own trajectory: a dialogue between inherited traditions and transcultural reinvention, where the process becomes both medium and metaphor.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article employs the projects The Heft and Lithos Offering to establish heuristic comparative research grounded in praxis inquiry. It interrogates contemporary jewellery through cross-cultural inquiry, contrasting Chinese and Western conceptions of individualism.

In the Chinese-oriented framework explored here, my jewellery practice tends more towards abstract and atmospheric expression, often articulated through Yì Jìng (artistic realm), enabling the artist's will to be strengthened via collective narratives. While the Western-oriented project discussed here places greater emphasis on more concrete and symbolic articulation of viewpoint, thereby amplifying individualism. Yet as sole creator of both projects, my hybrid identity resists binary separation. The works inevitably synthesise opposing paradigms, producing artefacts with hybrid cultural features.

Findings suggest that cultural contexts significantly shape how individualism is articulated in jewellery. While Chinese and Western practices differ in priorities, these distinctions are dynamic rather than fixed, offering potential for cross-cultural complementarity and challenging static notions of identity. This research contributes to cross-cultural scholars, curators, and artists—including Western-based Chinese practitioners, returnees to China, and Western educators working with Chinese students—by fostering dialogue and praxis innovation. More broadly, it highlights jewellery as a platform for transcultural exchange, enabling critical engagement across material, aesthetic, and ontological paradigms.

This article reflects an early stage of my PhD research, which investigates individualism in craft across cultural contexts through practice research. A fuller and more nuanced account of this inquiry is presented in my doctoral thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Edinburgh College of Art Jewellery & Silversmithing Department and the Birmingham School of Jewellery for providing essential technical infrastructure and workspace support. We express our sincere appreciation to colleagues from Craft Scotland and the Craft Hub EU for their invaluable support during the conceptual development and publication stages of this research. We also gratefully acknowledge the following institutions and artists for granting permissions to reproduce images in this article: DACS, The Victoria and Albert Museum, National Museum of Scotland, Wang Xiaoxin.

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[1] A Zen master gently strikes a wooden fish drum during meditation to keep rhythm and focus, helping the mind stay present.