

Estonian Academy of Arts  
Faculty of Design  
Department of Jewellery and Blacksmithing

**Muyang Li**

**Velvet Flower as A Container of Emotions**

**Master's Thesis Project**

Supervisor: Tanel Veenre

Tallinn 2023





## Copyright Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. the present Master's thesis is the result of my personal contribution and it has not been submitted (for defence) earlier by anyone else;
2. all works and important viewpoints by other authors as well as any other data from other sources used in the compilation of the Master's thesis are duly acknowledged in the references;
3. I give consent to the Estonian Academy of Arts to publish my Master's thesis in the repository thus making it available for the general public by means of the Internet.

Pursuant to the above, I state that:

- I as the author of the thesis am the sole owner of the individual copyright of the present Master's thesis and the works included and/or described within the thesis and the disposal of the proprietary rights related with the Master's thesis is subject to the procedures in force at the Estonian Academy of Arts;
- as the Master's thesis published in the repository may be accessed by an unlimited number of persons, I presume that the readers of the thesis comply with laws and other legal acts and good practices in good faith, in a fair manner and with respect to and consideration of the rights of other people.

The copying, plagiarising or any use of the present Master's thesis and the works included and/or described within the thesis that infringes the copyright is prohibited.

17.05.2023

*(date)*

Muyang Li



*(the name and signature of the author of the Master's thesis)*

The thesis complies with the Master's thesis requirements:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*(date)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*(the signature of the Master's thesis supervisor, academic or research degree)*



INTRODUCTION .....	8
TRADITIONAL CRAFT: VELVET FLOWER .....	11
<b>1.1 Origin and development of Velvet Flower .....</b>	<b>11</b>
1.1.1 Zan Hua .....	11
1.1.2 History of velvet flower.....	13
1.1.3 Current status and potential problems of velvet flowers .....	15
<b>1.2 Process flow of velvet flower .....</b>	<b>19</b>
1.2.1 Materials and tools.....	19
1.2.2 The production process of traditional velvet flower .....	20
<b>1.3 Categories of velvet flowers.....</b>	<b>22</b>
1.3.1 The shape of the velvet flower .....	22
1.3.2 The function of velvet flower .....	26
THINKING AND PRACTICING VELVET FLOWER IN CONTEMPORARY ART.....	29
<b>2.1 Interpreting velvet flowers .....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1.1 Narrative.....	29
2.1.2 Relativity .....	31
2.1.3 White space.....	35
<b>2.2 A practice based on personal experience and emotions.....</b>	<b>38</b>
2.2.1 In Context.....	38
2.2.2 Practice: the container of emotions.....	40
SUMMARY .....	48
KOKKUVÕTE.....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	52
APPENDIX.....	54



# Introduction

In the context of the complex changes of the epidemic, with its intricate global interconnections, this paper has been conceived. It recognizes that no one can exist as an isolated entity, and that an individual's identity must be situated within a group. The question arises: what constitutes one's identity within a group? An individual's identity is not fixed, but rather is subject to change depending on the different environments in which they find themselves. As an overseas student, the label "Chinese" was initially an uneasy fit for the author during the early stages of the pandemic. Nonetheless, it served as a cultural anchor for their identity. The pandemic strengthened the author's national identity and sense of belonging, leading them to explore traditional Chinese aesthetics. They detached themselves from the traditional milieu and took a certain distance to observe its traditional craft, pondering whether it might yield other possibilities in a different context beyond its traditional realm.

The Velvet Flower Craft is a longstanding traditional Chinese headdress craft that dates back over a millennium. This craft is capable of creating intricate and lifelike representations of animals and plants using velvet strips that are expertly trimmed and assembled to form various shapes. Although the craft appears to be highly sophisticated, its underlying production principle is quite straightforward - the combination of rolled-out velvet strips by trimming and splicing allows for the assembly of a wide range of forms. Often, elaborate subjects are constructed from numerous basic single elements. Through a contemporary lens, the author seeks to reexamine the Velvet Flower Craft, deconstructing it and imbuing it with a fresh significance.

The second section delves into the prospect of exploring velvet flowers beyond their customary milieu. These flowers exhibit a striking appearance, featuring a harmonious blend of two pleasant textures - plushness and shine. Every stage of their production process carries distinctive nuances that invite exploration within a particular context. The intricate balance of simplicity and complexity, order and disorder, wholeness and fragmentation, the figurative and the abstract are all in play within velvet flowers.

A velvet work typically involves the assembly of numerous identically shaped strips of velvet to produce a final piece. Analogous to Lego, the strips' shape is generally uniform, yet the final appearance can vary significantly based on the artisan's arrangement and organization of the bends and shapes. In the creative process, the velvet flower can become a conduit for dialogue with its creator. In my practice, I have approached the interpretation of flattened and three-dimensional velvet strips separately. The former is driven by color but remains anchored to a specific object, whereas the latter embodies the transformation of the author's identity and emotion across different periods and environments. The three resultant works correspond to distinct stages: studying abroad, returning to China, and successfully returning home.







# Traditional Craft: Velvet Flower

## 1.1 Origin and development of Velvet Flower

### 1.1.1 Zan Hua

The tradition of Zan Hua<sup>1</sup>, which involves wearing floral accessories, has a rich history in China spanning approximately three thousand years. The Notes on Ancient and Modern China attests to its practice as far back as the Qin Dynasty, when concubines and consorts would adorn their hair with "five-coloured grass Suduozi."<sup>2</sup> Although hairpins for men are recorded in the Tang Dynasty, they appeared later than men's facial makeup, which originated in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. By the Song Dynasty, it had become a natural social behavior for men to wear hair flowers, as evidenced by the numerous poems and literary works depicting life during that period. Depending on the season, people would choose different flowers to wear as accessories.

According to historical records found in the Song History, hairpin flowers had already become part of the court ritual system during that period. The Lizhi Fifteen chapter of the Song Shi clearly documents the various styles and colours of flowers that ministers of different grades could wear. Among the flowers conferred by the emperor, the Luo flower (a fabric flower) was considered the most valuable and reserved for officials of rank higher than chief executive. The Luo flower came in three colours: red, yellow, and silver-red. The Luan Zhi (another type of fabric flower) was considered somewhat lower-level and was designated for officials of the Qing Jian (official position) position or above. Silk flowers were presented to officials below the rank of general and came in two colours: red and silver-red<sup>3</sup>.

Under conventional thinking, only women who wear splendid and attractive flowers are considered to conform to the aesthetic habits of ordinary people. However, during that time, men's hairpins were not associated with elegance, and the flowers worn by men reflected a particular social class or identity. When a minister received a reward from the emperor, if they were given peony flowers along with gold and silver jewelry,

---

<sup>1</sup> As a verb is to wear flowers on the head; As a noun, it is a kind of headgear in ancient China, which is used as jewellery to wear on women's heads.

<sup>2</sup> Flowers made of plant called Tong Cao, Tong Cao flower is also a traditional Chinese craft.

<sup>3</sup> XuhongYang, Study of Song Dynasty Male Flower Pinning Rituals (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company),.15

the flower would be considered a supreme honour worth more than money. Flowers ceased to be simply beautiful plants and became political symbols during this period.

When considering conventional aesthetics of ordinary people, it can be observed that women who wear flowers on their heads are more appealing than men who do the same. During the time period in question, men's hairpins were not associated with elegance, while flowers were more of an indication of a particular social class or status. In instances where a minister was bestowed with a reward from the emperor, in addition to monetary or valuable gifts, the special gift of peony flowers would hold the utmost significance, surpassing the value of any monetary reward. As soon as flowers became politically relevant, they transformed from mere beautiful plants to symbols of power.

In Shen Kuo's *Meng Xi Bi Tan · Supplementary Bi Tan*, an intriguing allusion of *Zan Hua* is recorded. This allusion refers to a rare and exquisite peony flower with red petals and a circle of golden stamens at its center, known as the "Golden Waistband". Han Qi, the prefect of Yangzhou at that time, cut this flower and adorned the heads of himself and three guests he was entertaining with it. Remarkably, all four individuals later became prime ministers consecutively. The Golden Waistband flower subsequently became an emblem of good fortune, with a belief that its bloom would bring the owner prosperous official prospects. This tale was then referenced by several literary experts and artists, who frequently employed it as the theme of their creative works<sup>4</sup>.

But why did the flower become such a significant cultural symbol? Despite the Song Dynasty's exceptional economic growth and technological advancements, why did natural flowers evolve into spiritual totems that were sought after by all members of society? Moreover, what caused *Zan Hua* to gain such widespread popularity and become a prevailing social phenomenon?

During the Song Dynasty, a time marked by the aftermath of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms wars<sup>5</sup>, a highly developed economy, culture, and civilian structure emerged despite the destruction wrought by conflict. The people of this era demonstrated a deep appreciation for the arts, as evidenced by their pursuit of artistry even during times of war. In particular, the pursuit of flowers reflected a collective longing for beauty and comfort, symbolizing a shift away from a society defined by power and wealth towards one defined by artistic expression. This was a remarkable moment in an otherwise dark and feudal period, as flowers embodied the last vestiges of romance and tenderness amidst the struggles of daily life.

---

<sup>4</sup> XuhongYang, *Study of Song Dynasty Male Flower Pinning Rituals* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company),.36

<sup>5</sup> A period in Chinese history from 907 to 979, and there were continuous wars and turmoil in the separatist towns.

The development of Zan Hua during the Song Dynasty reached its peak and experienced a decline during the Ming Dynasty. Nevertheless, this custom remains significant during certain periods. An important event in the Ming Dynasty, for instance, involved welcoming the arrival of spring through the "beating of the spring" ceremony, which included the whipping of cattle. This activity required all officials to wear red attire and engage in Zan Hua practices to welcome the spring<sup>6</sup>.

The most sophisticated version of the imperial examination system in ancient China was the imperial examination, which was under the auspices of the emperor. The palace examination was typically conducted every three years in March, with officials required to wear distinctive apparel depending on the nature of the ceremony. According to the records of the Da Ming Hua Dian Palace Examination, all officials and newly qualified scholars attending the banquet were given a flower hairpin.

To celebrate the birth of a prince, significant events such as the emperor's military expeditions and those involving public officials required Zan Hua practices in accordance with the ceremony. In traditional wedding customs, the groom would wear a new coat and hat adorned with a hair flower when welcoming the bride at her family's home. Hair flowers also served as premarital tokens.

### 1.1.2 History of velvet flower

As the custom of wearing flower pins evolved and technical limitations emerged, seasonal flowers became insufficient to satisfy people's demands. Consequently, various artificial flower techniques, such as silk, grass, and velvet flowers emerged. Velvet flowers, in particular, gained popularity as palace flowers and became a tribute to the royal family. In Zhou Fang's painting, *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), five different seasonal flowers, including peonies, begonias, hydrangeas, and jasmine, were worn on the ladies' heads as silk simulation flowers. According to legend, velvet flowers first appeared during the Tang Dynasty and were fragile and challenging to preserve. Currently, excavated silk flower artifacts from tombs have yet to reveal any intact velvet flowers.

Velvet flower was first introduced in Nanjing, where cloud brocade was produced, due to the relatively low demand for silk necessary to produce velvet flowers. Subsequently, the excess trimmings from the production of Yun Jin<sup>7</sup> proved to be sufficient to satisfy the demand for velvet flowers. Throughout the Qing Dynasty

---

<sup>6</sup> Spring Plate, Flower Pin, and Spring Streamer, a ritual of looking at spring, Huashang News (2018) access 20/10/2022 <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2018-02-04/doc-ifyreuzn2463313.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> Traditional Chinese silk handicrafts, known as "inches of brocade and inch of gold".

(1644-1912), Nanjing velvet flowers were presented as a tribute to the court. It was during this period that the official government of Nanjing established a specialized workshop devoted to the creation of velvet flowers. The production of Nanjing velvet flowers experienced its pinnacle during the Kangxi and Qianlong periods (1684-1799).

As a result, the emergence of the North and South schools of velvet flowers gradually took shape. In the early stages, northern silk velvet items were predominantly observed in the local headwear, which was linked to the particular customs and traditions of the Manchu population during that era. Manchu women were fond of styling their hair into “two heads” and adorning it with a flat square-shaped headdress (Manchu women's headdress, also known as flag head). Large velvet flowers were commonly utilized as decorations on the flat square headdress. During the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, Nanjing’s velvet flower production experienced its peak, and its products were distributed throughout the country, with a few even being exported.

The Chinese pronunciation for "velvet flower" is identical to that of "Rong Hua", which represents prosperity and good fortune. In earlier times, people frequently used velvet flowers as decorative elements during festivals to express their aspirations and hopes for an improved standard of living.



Figure 1 Portrait of aristocratic women wearing headdresses in the Qing Dynasty  
<https://www.yeeyi.com/news/details/323440/> (accessed 20/10/2022)

In the wake of the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, Beijing fell, resulting in domestic and international instability, and leading to the closure of various industries. Among them, the velvet flower industry was not immune, as its domestic sales dwindled, and its export trade was disrupted.

In the 1950s, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Nanjing Municipal People's Government orchestrated the unification of individual workshops and floral artists engaged in floral production, establishing the Yimei Cooperative. The collapse of the Qing dynasty ushered in a significant transformation in people's hairstyles and costumes, subsequently resulting in a shift in the primary use of pompom products, from hair ornaments to general ornaments. However, during the Cultural Revolution<sup>8</sup>, the production of pompoms was abruptly halted as a target of the Four Olds<sup>9</sup> campaign. Following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, the production of velvet flowers gradually resumed. In the 1980s, the Nanjing Craft Flower Factory was founded, producing predominantly animal velvet products for export, with a limited number of traditional products<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.1.3 Current status and potential problems of velvet flowers

Following China's reform and opening, the country entered a phase of high-speed modernization and development, consequently leading to the marginalization of velvet flowers, as they were unable to keep pace with the aesthetics of the new era and gradually lost their appeal. However, in recent years, with the flourishing of the costume film and television industry, the demand for props has gradually intensified. The revival of velvet flowers, a craft that had long been forgotten, was catalyzed by the explosion of the costume TV series "Yanxi Raiders" in 2018, and bringing it back to the public horizon.

The dynamic social landscape is in a state of constant flux. Owing to historical events, the Chinese populace has endured the devastating consequences of protracted warfare and cultural schisms. In recent years, bolstered by China's economic growth, a burgeoning sense of national pride and cultural self-assurance has emerged. The national resilience has been further fortified in the wake of the epidemic, while the resurgence of traditional culture has been expeditiously expedited. A surge of

---

<sup>8</sup> formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a sociopolitical movement in the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched by Mao Zedong in 1966, and lasting until his death in 1976. Its stated goal was to preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society.

<sup>9</sup> was a term used during the Cultural Revolution by the student-led Red Guards in the People's Republic of China in reference to the pre-communist elements of Chinese culture they attempted to destroy. The Four Olds were: Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits

<sup>10</sup> Junling Li, Beijing Velvet Flowers Birds( Velvet Flowers) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House),7-11

enthusiasm has ensued, and people have commenced delving into historical archives, scrutinizing the restoration of antique costumes, and meticulously examining the unique characteristics of apparel throughout different dynasties. An increased eagerness has been exhibited by the populace in acquiring knowledge about traditional culture and craftsmanship, with a renewed appreciation of the inherent beauty that stems from the local culture.

Making traditional crafts has become more accessible with the proliferation of self-media platforms. Videos showcasing the process of crafting traditional items are frequently posted on these platforms, allowing people to learn more about the art form. Many bloggers share their work or upload instructional videos simply out of their passion for the craft, with the goal of making it more widely accessible. Numerous intangible cultural heritage and traditional crafts possess a deep sense of local identity and mystique. However, the Internet's ease of search and sharing has helped to diminish the distance caused by professionalism to some extent. As a result, certain techniques on the brink of extinction, lacking a successor, can now be passed down and disseminated. This has led to the resurgence of traditional crafts, which are a testament to the ingenuity of folk wisdom. One such example is the creation of velvet flowers.

Two distinct categories exist among contemporary pompom practitioners, namely traditional artisans typified by Zhao Shuxian and Cai Zhiwei, who tend to preserve conventional production methods and exhibit a more conservative creative style, and the so-called "Zan Girl"<sup>11</sup> of the Han Chinese clothing community, whose designs break away from the tradition-bound approach of craftsmanship and mainly cater to the requirements of donning Han Chinese attire. The latter group predominantly operates on diverse online platforms. In order to obtain an in-depth comprehension of the contemporary situation of the pompom industry, the researcher conducted interviews with representatives of both groups.

Based on the interviews conducted, a multitude of obstacles that impede the development of velvet flowers were identified. Firstly, a pressing issue facing the industry is the problem of involution. A significant number of practitioners in the hairpin maid community are students or individuals seeking a short-term source of income. The relatively low cost of learning velvet flower-making and the easy accessibility of detailed online tutorials have resulted in many individuals opting to utilize this craft. Additionally, silk embroidery threads available in an array of rich hues can be readily procured online as a substitute for the more traditional untwisted cooked silk utilized in the creation of velvet flowers. While the internet's speed and convenience have enticed many to partake in this craft, a considerable number of individuals eventually lose interest and seek to dispose of their tools and completed products at a low price on second-hand platforms, despite the fact that the materials and tools involved are not excessively expensive.

---

<sup>11</sup> Crafters who make traditional hairpins offer customization services for Han clothing lovers.



Despite the relatively stable and reasonable prices of tools and materials on second-hand trading platforms, the inexpensiveness of finished velvet flowers is astonishing. The majority of these products are priced at less than 7 Euros, while even the most elaborate designs do not exceed 50 Euros. The simpler designs necessitate only 4 to 8 hues, and their assembly typically requires a minimum of 2 hours, including tasks such as combing silk, twisting the pile, and trimming the pile. Conversely, more intricate models take at least 4 hours or more to complete. Moreover, every stage of the process must be carried out manually, making mass production challenging for independent creators. Consequently, these meager price tags solely account for the cost of materials and disregard the value of craftsmanship. This trend not only displays a lack of respect for the importance of craftsmanship but also undermines the industry's market. The continuous rush to sell products and lower their price points recklessly will only result in people further overlooking the significance of individuals in the process. This will inevitably cause velvet craft to be labelled as "cheap" due to the widespread ubiquity of low prices.

Upon deeper analysis, it is evident that individuals who offer their products at comparatively low prices include not only those who fall under the category of "exit pit" but also those who have alternate primary occupations or are students. These individuals possess a fervor and fondness for their craft, yet they do not rely on the sale of velvet flowers to generate a consistent and substantial income. In particular, for those who are new to the industry, selling products at a lower price point helps to establish a sense of recognition, hence the pricing is often set lower. Some may even lack the confidence to mark up their prices.

The apprehension towards raising prices among these individuals appears to be a reasonable phenomenon. Even in the official store of velvet flower inheritor, Mr. Zhao Shuxian, the traditional velvet works are not exorbitantly priced. During the course of the interview, it was discovered that a majority of independent flower makers struggle with the process of pricing their products, which makes it understandable that a low price point may serve as a starting point for generalizing the pricing within the industry, particularly with reference to a renowned benchmark.

From the interview with Mr. Cai Zhiwei, I have learned that the art of velvet flower making is more delicate than previously assumed. Despite the existence of governmental policies aimed at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, numerous crafts in historically rich cities such as Beijing and Nanjing require protection. Unfortunately, velvet flowers, with their limited influence both domestically and globally, have not managed to secure the attention of the government, despite their proliferation on the internet. Even the inclusion of velvet flowers in the costumes for the Beijing Winter Olympics has not substantially improved their situation.

The rapid proliferation of the internet has given rise to the exponential expansion of the Hanbok industry at an alarming pace. The practitioners, who are predominantly engaged in full-time occupations, have become highly mobile and are progressively transitioning from their roles as "hairpin maidens" to other sectors within the Hanbok-related industries, such as suppliers of materials, Hanbok makeup styling, and Hanbok photography. Regrettably, the meager financial returns derived from their labor often compel many to shift their focus towards alternative ventures, such as offering video courses instead of concentrating on product creation. Hence, the situation for the Hanbok pompom craftsmen remains distressing. The inadequacy of financial gains poses a significant impediment to the creators' ability to focus on their craft and innovate. With only a marginal distinction between today's velvet flowers and the traditional ones in terms of form and technique, albeit with richer hues and intricate designs.

Despite the flourishing of creative endeavors on the internet, there exists a perilous homogenization of works, indicating a fragile prosperity. The renaissance of the velvet flower owes its success to the revival of traditional culture; however, it remains inextricably bound to its origins. The velvet flower exudes a potent sense of history and era, with limited application to settings outside of Han costume styling for film and television productions and enthusiasts of Han clothing. It cannot be seamlessly integrated with modern culture. Despite Mr. Zhao Shuxian's participation in numerous international brand window displays and dress productions for stars on the red carpet at film festivals, he acknowledged in an interview that the velvet flower must seek new frontiers beyond the Han cultural sphere and explore ways to develop in tandem with other cultures. A new breakthrough is necessary for the velvet flower to evolve and prosper.

## 1.2 Process flow of velvet flower

### 1.2.1 Materials and tools

In the creation of velvet flowers, a technique involves employing metal wire as the framework for the bones, and silk thread as the body. To accomplish this, the copper wire is folded and compressed onto the silk thread, and the silk is fluffed up by rolling the two copper wires together. The necessary materials for producing velvet flowers consist of raw or cooked silk - the former being more rigid and ideal for crafting velvet balls or decorative items, such as animals or birds that are used in Peking Opera headdresses, while the latter is softer and suited for crafting more delicate and intricate shapes, such as flowers. Additionally, copper wire or other malleable metal wire is required (in ancient times, silver wire was commonly used in the court), along with charcoal, a brush, scissors, splint, tweezers, a wooden rubbing board, etc.

The production process for traditional velvet flowers is rather intricate and typically begins with the softening of the silk. This entails removing the gum from the surface of the raw silk and subsequently processing it into cooked silk. The dyeing of silk is a highly intricate and experienced procedure. The more delicate and elaborate the velvet, the more diverse the range of colours required. To achieve a natural gradation of a single colour from dark to light, more than five colours are typically necessary. Moreover, lighter colours are more difficult to achieve an even shade. Presently, independent creators often choose to circumvent dyeing by utilizing richly coloured silk embroidery threads instead.

Usually, the embroidery threads used are Hunan embroidery thread and Su embroidery thread. The former boasts a thickness of approximately 1-2mm, while the latter measures about 0.5-0.8mm. Typically, each embroidery thread comprises two small threads that are intertwined, and prior to application, these small threads are disentangled to prevent entanglement during subsequent combing. This innovative technique is referred to as "thread splitting".

Copper wire also needs to be treated before use. In ancient times, the customary approach entailed placing the copper wire on charcoal and heating it until it became pliable. Careful attention was required to prevent the wire from becoming charred. This process augments the wire's toughness and accentuates the surface oxide, which heightens the friction to ease the subsequent silk clamping. Only upon completion of the aforementioned procedure may the production of velvet flowers begin.

## 1.2.2 The production process of traditional velvet flower

The velvet flower technique involves the utilization of copper wire as the foundation and silk thread as the main component. During the crafting process, it is necessary to fold the copper wire in half to hold the silk, and by tightly rubbing the two copper wires together, the silk is fluffed up and transforms into a velvet strip. To create velvet flowers, the necessary materials include raw or cooked silk (sturdier raw silk can be employed to fabricate pom-poms or animal and bird ornaments on Peking Opera headwear; more delicate and intricate shapes such as flowers necessitate the use of softer cooked silk), copper wire or other ductile metal wires (in ancient times, silver wire was utilized in court), brushes, scissors, splints, tweezers, wooden washboards, etc.

The production steps of crafting traditional velvet flowers is relatively intricate, typically starting with the dyeing and softening of silk. Subsequently, the copper wire is boiled to make it malleable, prior to commencing the actual production process.



Figure 2 Step1 Tie the silk

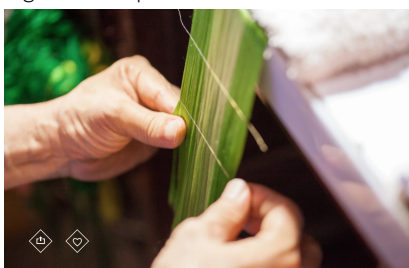


Figure 3 Step2 Velvet shearing



Figure 4 Step3 Rolling

1. Tie the silk: Fasten one end of the cooked, previously-dyed velvet onto the work surface, cover it with a damp cloth for several minutes, and subsequently brush it uniformly with a brush.

2. Velvet shearing: Fold a thin copper or silver wire in half, twist one end to create a spiral shape, grip the two evenly arranged separated metal wires on the other end, and twist the two metal wires in a spiral shape side-by-side. Thereafter, cut the silk into strips of varying thicknesses according to the design requirements.

3. Rolling: This step involves simultaneously twisting the cut strips of silk in opposite directions using the left and right hands, followed by rubbing it against a designated wooden board, while ensuring the delicate balance between tautness and spacing. Excessive force may cause the silk wire to fracture, and subsequently, adversely impact the ensuing trimming and shaping procedures. However, if insufficient force is applied, the silk will not be

optimally fluffed, which will result in an unsatisfactory visual appearance or loss of structural integrity.



Figure 5 Step 4 Sharpening

4. Sharpening: The velvet strip is trimmed using scissors, with the final shape requirements usually determining whether the ends or middle of the strip should be shaped into circular, conical, arched or other configurations.

5. Ironing: Sometimes, a final flattened effect is necessary, in which case a soldering iron is employed to flatten the fleece.



Figure 6 Last Step

6. Assemble the flower: The velvet strips are bent using tweezers, and then bonded together with materials such as latex or glutinous rice glue, in accordance with the desired shape concept, to form the final product.

<https://artlab.nju.edu.cn/heritage/jp/velvet-flowers/mssh/> (accessed 20/10/2022)

## 1.3 Categories of velvet flowers

### 1.3.1 The shape of the velvet flower

Velvet flower products primarily serve as jewelry or ornaments, and can be broadly classified into two categories based on their visual form:

The first category pertains to the objective of authenticity, wherein the objective is to emulate the form and hue of actual flora with utmost precision. It involves harmonizing the color gamut of the wool by consolidating the unique attributes of diverse flowers. An illustration of this can be seen in the Palace Museum's collection of velvet flowers from the Qing Dynasty, specifically No. GU00181912 and No. GU00181915. These artifacts provide an intuitive portrayal of the natural world's flora and fauna, as well as exemplify the rudimentary creative concept of velvet flowers, devoid of any practical utility.



Figure 7 No. GU00181912

<https://digicol.dpm.org.cn/cultural/detail?id=b04ad556a184495388dbcc7f08f0097c&source=1&page=1>(accessed 13/10/2022)



Figure 8 No. GU00181915

<https://digicol.dpm.org.cn/cultural/detail?id=d0c2fa933cc04974a310a78f0dbcc4ff&source=6>

(accessed 13/10/2022)

The second category is characterized by a combination of graphics depicting flora and fauna with a distinct connotation. Its visual manifestation typically exhibits a pronounced graphic sense or a more conspicuous narrative. These items commonly express propitious meanings that are popular in folklores. A prime instance in Chinese culture is the combination of the pine tree and the red-crowned crane, which represents steadfastness, good health, and longevity. Thus, their fused form is known as "pine crane prolonging life." The pomegranate, abundant in fruit particles, often signifies the birth of sons. Similarly, the peach, specifically the longevity peach, denotes longevity. As such, the pomegranate, peach, and bergamot configuration is known as "Fu Shou San Duo," signifying robust health, longevity, many sons, and more blessings.



Figure 9 Fu Shou San Duo

<https://digicol.dpm.org.cn/cultural/detail?id=d0111df9ccf84035833ae7faca04eb1d&source=6>

(accessed 13/10/2022)

Moreover, in Chinese culture, the "Harmony Method" is a prevalent technique used to accentuate the propitious meanings of objects. By harmonizing particular items, people combine and reconstruct visual elements to express certain symbolic meanings. For instance, in the case of "Wan Shi Ru Yi," "Wan" harmonizes with "Rohdea japonica," and "Shi" harmonizes with "Persimmon." Consequently, the visual representation is a fusion of Rohdea japonica, persimmon, and Ruyi. Similarly, the combination of bat and longevity peach signifies longevity, and thus, the amalgamated image of bat and longevity peach symbolizes "good fortune and longevity."



Figure 10 Velvet flowers with symbolic meaning

<https://posts.careerengine.us/p/62e716754cdbc81880c279e5?from=latest-posts-panel&type=title>

(accessed 26/11/2022)





Figure 11 Face mask 2, Muyang Li, silk, copper, plastic, 2023

### 1.3.2 The function of velvet flower

According to their function, velvet flowers can be classified into two categories: accessory and decorative ornaments.

The accessory under study can be classified into several types, namely head flowers, hat flowers, boutonnieres, and theatre flowers. Among these, head flowers represent the most primitive form of velvet flowers, serving as adornments for hair and sideburns. The ancient Chinese believed that one's body and hair were bestowed upon them by their parents, and that damaging one's own body without permission was an act of filial impiety. Therefore, it was customary for them to grow their hair long and not to cut it easily. Velvet flower headpieces have been used to ornament and adorn intricate hairstyles to great effect. Over time, the form of the headdress has evolved, culminating in the elegant and ornate velvet phoenix crown, a traditional accessory worn by brides on their wedding day.

In traditional theatre, the form of theatre flowers differs from that of everyday head flowers. They are adorned with multiple silk pom-poms, which are affixed to the actor's head helmet or hair cap. The various branches of theatrical characters each have their own distinct roles to play, complete with characteristic performances and headgear. Consequently, headpieces and hair ornaments are crucial in identifying these characters. The number and arrangement of pom-poms, as well as their color, serve as significant criteria for identifying these characters.



Figure 12 Peking Opera helmet  
[https://www.sohu.com/a/519271124\\_121124787](https://www.sohu.com/a/519271124_121124787) (accessed 13/10/2022)



Figure 13 Velvet phoenix crown.  
<https://city.cri.cn/chinanes/20180821/478590c6-17ef-1f33-32fe-481fdeff56cd.html>  
(accessed 13/10/2022)

In the domain of decorative objects, a classification of adornments includes ornaments, velvet birds, pendants, and hanging objects. Among these, pile ornaments, crafted predominantly from pile flowers, are paired with diverse materials and motifs to produce decorous items. The range of subjects embodied in pile ornaments encompasses a multitude of traditional and fictitious narratives. Velvet birds, a variant of the aforementioned flat paste form of head flowers, evolved into a three-dimensional representation, imparting an immediate and striking impression. This era further witnessed the emergence of velvet chickens, tigers, cranes, and figurines, which gained substantial

popularity. Given the epoch during which the greatest quantity of velvet birds was fashioned, this period came to be commonly referred to as the 'velvet bird' era.

Hanging objects, as a category of decorative articles, exhibit a greater degree of innovation and breakthrough than their predecessors. Pendants, in particular, are crafted to produce a desired effect, combining traditional ink painting aesthetics. Take, for instance, Mr. Zhao Shuxian's pendant, "Quotations from the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms", which is composed of pile strips resembling seal script and pile strips simulating ink painting. The pendant features two layers: the upper layer is comprised of velvet strips resembling seal script, while the lower layer features ink and wash drawings of a general beating a drum, with the design's lines rendered in incredibly thin strips of velvet simulating ink patterns. This approach to representing calligraphy in velvet constitutes a significant innovation in the domain of velvet flowers. It confers greater artistic value upon traditional chintz and creates fresh avenues of expression for the chintz craft.



Figure 14 Face Mask 2, MUYANG LI, Silk, copper, plastic, 2023

# Thinking and practicing Velvet Flower in contemporary art

Traditional craftsmanship exhibits a timeless quality, a rich heritage, and a comprehensive process. It represents a national culture that has been nurtured over the course of many years. This is the hallmark of traditional craftsmanship, but to some degree, it may also impede its development. At the same time, breaking with tradition is never an innovation aimed at severing ties with one's cultural roots. In this chapter, I aim to explore the possibility of merging velvet flower crafting with contemporary art, in terms of both materials and crafting techniques, by examining it through the lens of contemporary art thinking. Finally, I will incorporate my personal subjective emotions and experiences to challenge tradition through practical application.

## 2.1 Interpreting velvet flowers

### 2.1.1 Narrative

The discourse surrounding conventional jewellery typically involves the employment of a straightforward narrative approach, frequently exemplified by the direct presentation of a story or situation as a decorative motif in a highly visual manner. The content of the aforementioned "Fu Shou San Dao" and other styles mainly revolves around "good blessings", "power and status", "peaceful atmosphere". The content of the styles such as "Fu Shou San Dao" is centred on "good blessing", "power status" and "peaceful atmosphere". These styles were worn by people to adorn their bodies and to experience the gratification that ensues from the visual appeal of such jewellery.

Within the contemporary jewellery domain, narrative jewellery is characterized by its utilization of a visual language consisting of storylines, characters, images, or emotions that are presented in such a way that allows the viewer to 'read' them. In Renee Bevan's piece, entitled *Wearing the World*, the artist lies supine, clutching a necklace loop to the ground while maintaining a crouched posture, thereby transforming the entirety of the Earth into a pendant through this small act of wearable structure. This process completely subverts the formal and spatial concept of jewellery-wearing, utilizing the act of wearing itself to explore the relationship between human beings and the dimension of space. The velvet flower also plays with the wearer's interaction,

as the increasing number of velvet rods combine to create a new narrative context with the wearer's body.

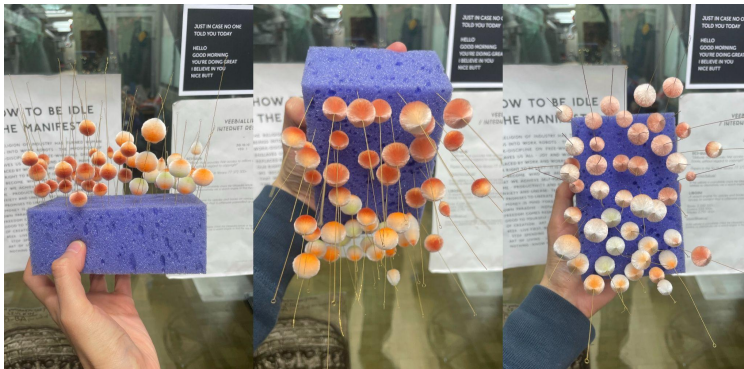


Figure 15 Colour in different angles, Muyang Li ,2022

The selection of silk as the primary material for the velvet flower was based on its inherent qualities of lightness, softness, and fineness, combined with its high fibre strength. Archaeological findings indicate that silk was utilized for object creation as far back as the Shang

and Zhou dynasties, rendering it one of the first animal fibres to be employed in China. Furthermore, silk's lustrous quality is characterized by a strong reflection of light, resulting in a heightened sense of brilliance. This lustre is further enhanced by the high proportion of internal reflections and certain dispersion and diffraction reflection effects, resulting in a brilliant, soft lustre that can produce total reflection and a dazzling light speed effect. The distribution of reflected light intensity along the surface of the fibres is also relatively uniform<sup>12</sup>, contributing to a consistent lustre. After undergoing the dyeing process, silk can achieve a delicate color transition that is softer and more vibrant than other natural fibres.

Silk, as a crucial textile crop, witnesses a significant number of pupal casualties in the reeling process. While I find it unnecessary to overly stress the ethical aspect, as with chickens raised for consumption, the question arises: Does this raise questions about the hierarchy of life as it pertains to silkworms? In light of the vocal animal protection groups and environmentalists advocating against man-made materials that pose threats to the natural ecosystem, plants appear to reign as the superior choice. Does this reasoning imply the existence of a life hierarchy? People > Animals > Insects > Plants

Is silk indispensable in the velvet production process today? While ribbons manufactured from plastic and fiber materials can produce similar results to silk, there is a noticeable disparity in terms of luster and color intricacy. The rolled velvet strips crafted from these alternatives lack the texture of silk and are discernibly synthetic in nature. However, the use of diverse materials can create a more elaborate visual effect. The selection of fibers with different diameters and strengths can result in varying outcomes. Furthermore, the combination of various materials can lead to the emergence of novel contexts.

---

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.ctanet.cn/Technic/Show\\_700106411.html](http://www.ctanet.cn/Technic/Show_700106411.html) , access 20/10/2022, translated from Chinese by Muyang Li.

## 2.1.2 Relativity

During the course of my practice, I have come to realize the presence of two pairs of dialectical relationships inherent in the velvet flower: order and disorder, as well as movement and stillness.

The former aspect pertains to the directionality of the velvet flower. Typically, the flower is composed of multiple unit shapes of identical color and size, which are bound together to form a simple shape. Subsequently, numerous identical simple shapes are tied together and bent at an angle to create a complex final shape with intricate details. The purpose of "Sharpening" is to consistently trim the desired unit shape. The trimmed strips are then affixed vertically to a sponge or board to prevent them from compressing one another. On occasion, the strips are inserted individually at specific intervals to ensure uniform directionality, resulting in a highly organized overall appearance. However, in some instances, the opening where the pile is inserted can accommodate multiple piles of identical color, size, and shape, and the directionality spreads outwards from the center to the periphery. The compression between different groups causes the pile strips to produce a random directionality that falls outside the law, yielding a staggered sense of disorder.



Figure 16 process, Muyang Li, 2022



Figure 17 process, Muyang Li, 2022

The additional lint strips also demonstrate a relative relationship between motion and stasis during storage. Due to the fact that the fleece strips are tied together, adequate space must be allocated for adjustment, and the metal wire is only cut after fixation is achieved. Consequently, a specific length of metal is preserved at the top and bottom of the strip before use. Generally, brass and copper wire are utilized, although silver and iron wire may also be employed. The tightly coiled wire is incredibly robust, such that when the board with inserted strips is moved slightly, the strips oscillate, contingent upon the length of wire and the distance between them. Longer wires yield greater oscillation amplitudes, whereas closer spacing results in smaller amplitudes. If placed too closely, oscillation can not occur.

When the strips are arranged in an organized manner, they will exhibit oscillation, and the movement pattern of all strips will tend to be uniform, resembling the phenomenon of "flocking." Flocking refers to the collective motion of a group of self-propelled entities and is a collective animal behavior observed in various living organisms such as birds, fish, bacteria, and insects<sup>13</sup>. It is regarded as an emergent behavior that arises from simple rules followed by individuals and does not involve any central coordination.

The scene was nothing short of magnificent: a multitude of birds soaring in unison, their formation fluid and adaptable without a central directive. Optimal group behavior would entail a state of "unity and tension," situated squarely between "order" and "disorder" akin to a phase transition's critical point. In such a state, a collection could preserve its stability while simultaneously ensuring the smooth flow of information amongst the individuals. This collective phenomenon is ubiquitous in various biological systems, intriguing many researchers investigating animal groups, and prompting inquiries regarding the existence of fundamental laws governing such behavior. What actions do individual undertake, and what kind of relationships are present between groups and individuals within human societies? These questions seem to offer a framework for the genesis of velvety blooms.

An additional remarkable feature of the Velvet Strip is the presence of the built-in metal wire that can be readily contorted to alter its shape. Once the strip is secured, its movement is constrained, facilitating the shaping of the direction of each pile's motion, with the capacity for easy and flexible adjustments. The motion trend is evidenced in a static state, aiming to attain an equilibrium of motion within a state of stillness.

---

<sup>13</sup> "Flocking (Behavior)", Wikipedia, last modified 19/12/2021, accessed 13/04/2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking\\_\(behavior\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking_(behavior))





Figure 18 Face Mask 1, MUYANG LI, Silk, copper, plastic, 2023



Figure 19 Face Mask 1, MUYANG LI, Silk, copper, plastic, 2023

### 2.1.3 White space

The prevalent Chinese aesthetic tradition connotes Zen, utilizing white space to convey implicit emotions. In stark contrast, the Velvet Flower's exhibition is characterized by an extreme vibrancy of hues, with greater grandeur and intricacy epitomizing the style. This aesthetic approach became even more popular among the masses, with its direct visual language appealing to a wider audience.

When a large number of velvet works are placed together, the texture may become monotonous, and the distinctive tactile sensation of silk velvet may be compromised. To counteract this, one may look to the Chinese "white space" approach or follow the design philosophy of modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who believed that "less is more." By reducing the repetitiveness of velvet and embracing simplicity and refinement, one can emphasize the texture's specificity and uniqueness.

In 2021, I attempted to combine the floral technique with commercial jewellery, employing frosted acrylic to highlight the distinctive qualities of the silk component of the floral texture. In this assemblage, I drew inspiration from flowers while employing acrylic as the principal medium. Despite the modest size of the velvet flower's stamen, it serves as the primary visual focus. Notably, while donning the jewellery, the silk component evinces subtle variations in colour and sheen when viewed from diverse angles.



Figure 20 Figure Elegy: Explosion Event for the Opening of Cai Guo-Qiang: The Ninth Wave <http://www.art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=80550&forumId=8> (accessed 13/10/2022)

The copious amounts of colour powder gradually disperse into the air, the initial sense of oppression recedes, yielding to a novel atmosphere that is progressively shaped in the dynamic "white space".

The concept of "white space" is effectively embodied in Cai Guo-Qiang's work, White Sun Fireworks. By incorporating biodegradable colour powder into the gunpowder, the artist utilizes the entire expanse of the sky as a canvas, creating a magnificent spatial painting. Notably ingenious is the integration of wind as an element of the work. Wind is a phenomenon that is invisible without an object of reference, but rather perceived. The wind serves as the arbiter of the "white space" in the artwork, and also the most unpredictable element. As the

In the process, the velvet strips are fastened together to create a predetermined shape, with the individual strips typically lacking in significance. As a result, the relationship between the strips and the surrounding space is confined to this rigidly structured configuration. By introducing "white space" into the work, a novel spatial relationship between the velvet strips can be generated, engendering a fresh context.

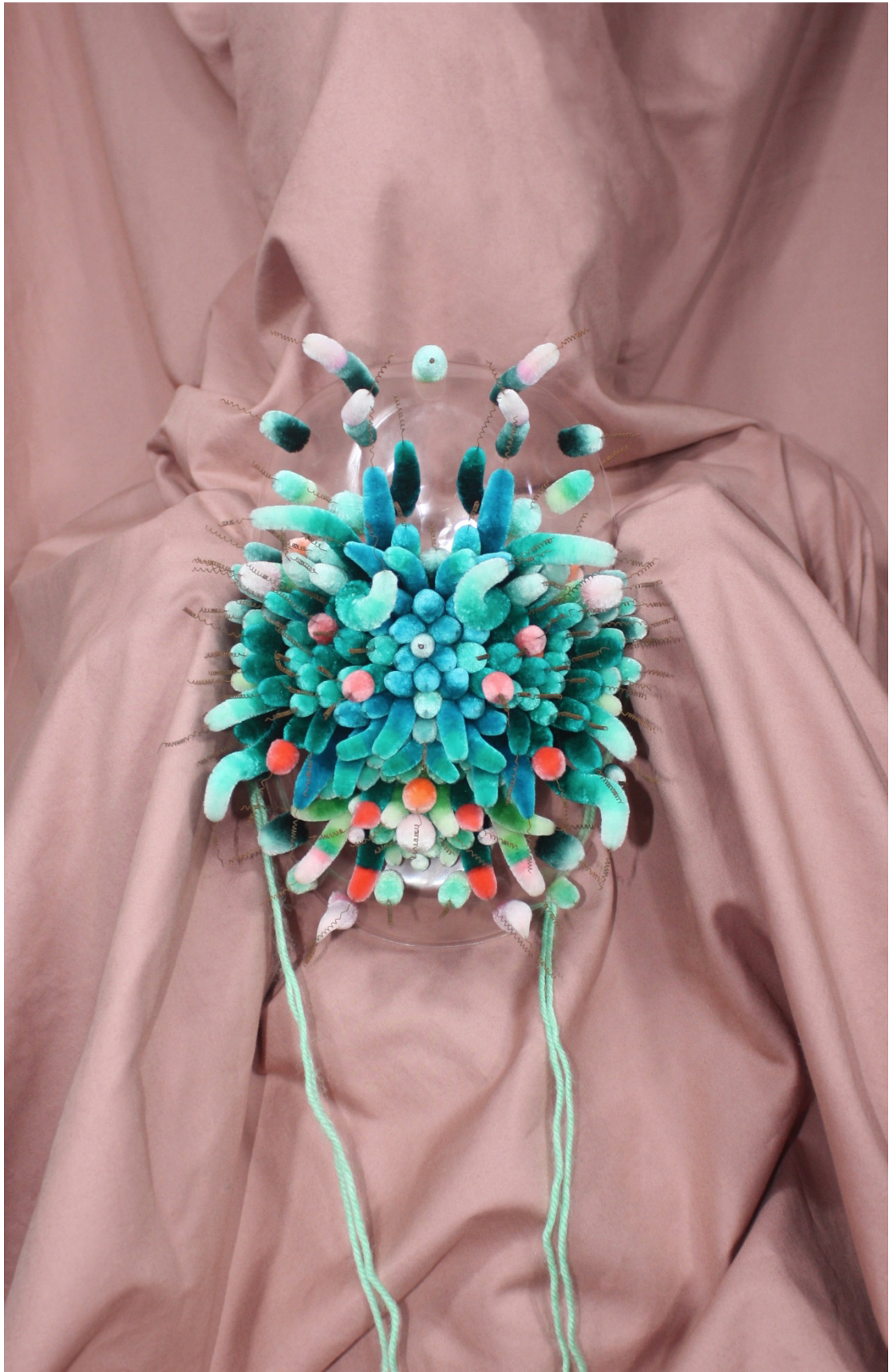


Figure 21 Face mask 3, Muyang Li, Silk, Copper, Plastic, 2023

## 2.2 A practice based on personal experience and emotions.

### 2.2.1 In Context

A potted flower on my windowsill,  
Once bloomed in colors bright and still,  
But when I thought of it once more,  
It withered away, and lived no more.

It grew in silence, day by day,  
And faded in the same way,  
So quiet that I failed to see,  
It lived, until it ceased to be.

In September 2019, shortly after enrolling in a school, I had the opportunity to view the documentary *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time* as part of a course on exploring the art of the earth within a forest setting. A particular segment of the film, which utilized overhead time-lapse photography to demonstrate the growth of tall plants' roots as winter transitioned to spring, left an indelible impression on me. The rhizomes of the tall plants initiated their growth, with the roots slowly becoming denser and forming a black mass, and culminating in the arrival of spring. The slow-paced environmental transformations captured in the segment were condensed into mere seconds, powerfully conveying the explosive force of growth and the rite of life's extension. Estonia offered a similarly captivating atmosphere to that of the film, and as a foreign student, I was intuitively drawn to this unique environment. However, after a tranquil six months, I was abruptly confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread from China to Estonia in March 2020, causing prolonged fluctuations. As a result of my Chinese nationality and the predictable situation of the pandemic, I found myself fraught with anxiety and unease, despite having just begun to adapt to my new surroundings.

In this environment, cultural differences are amplified, and the intricate reality engenders a multitude of variations in each country's prevention and control policies, the cooperation of the populace, and the results of policy implementation. Artistic creations serve as an exceptional conduit of ideology. Wang Nan, a Chinese American director, showcases the medical device industry in her documentary film, *In The Same Breath*. The film portrays a sense of fantastical realism in the real world, revealing the sobering lesson that history provides no guidance for mankind. The world appears increasingly disordered.

In this particular context, the decease of silkworm pupae during silk production and the neglect of a flower placed in a windowsill pot reveal striking similarities.

Comparable to the majority of organisms constrained to silently withdraw from the world, both entities are merely able to endure their inevitable fate without resistance. If one were to dissect the floral specimen or retrace its developmental stages, the fundamental components comprising its overall structure, no matter how elaborate or vibrant its appearance may initially seem, are fundamentally identical. With the act of artistic creation, I aspire to sustain my capacity for critical reflection and establish a platform for personal introspection.

Thereafter, the second stage of transformation of identity unfolded upon returning to China. The designation of "Chinese student in Estonia" transitioned to that of a "returnee." This period bore witness to the frequent oscillations in China's policy pertaining to the administration of individuals reentering the country from abroad. It was a protracted and arduous duration, necessitating the ordeal of undergoing mandatory quarantine. Despite grappling with a multitude of uncertainties, an undercurrent of anticipation pervaded, propelled by a yearning to rupture the inertia of long-suppressed sentiments. In tandem with this second stage, the chromatic richness progressively intensifies, characterized by subtle variations in hue within a subdued contrast. The luminosity of the colors subtly modulates from bottom to top, culminating in a pinnacle of pure white. The range of mobile areas becomes more focalized when attaining higher levels. The uppermost wire coils, while the motion range of the velvet strip diminishes.

## 2.2.2 Practice: the container of emotions

The initial practice involved flattening the velvet flowers. The silk strips were flattened to align in a unidirectional manner, accentuating the surface gloss and colour gradation. Placing the flattened strips on the same plane minimized any sense of dimensionality that could be perceived. At first, the hues and contours drew inspiration from flowers, but over time, my fascination with colour itself grew. I came to believe that colour should not be subservient to a specific object, as seen in traditional crafts, but rather should transcend the limits of any particular object. Consequently, my works progressively diverged from their original purpose, and I became more preoccupied with colour variations. My artistic process during this phase was characterized by disorganized thinking, and this chaotic state is reflected in the final works.



Figure 23 Garden001-009(1), Muyang Li, Silk, Copper, 2023

Subsequently, my attention shifted toward working with three-dimensional velvet strips, a medium that proved effective in expressing my emotional state through a powerful visual language.

This shift in artistic focus reflects a transformation in my emotional state, driven by a change in my sense of identity.

As an individual, we possess multiple identities that can shift depending on the context, time, and subject matter. In Samuel P. Huntington's book *Who Are We? The Challenges to American's National Identity* "identity" is defined as: "Identity is an individual or group's sense of self. It is a product of self-consciousness, distinguished from you or them by an awareness of the unique characteristics that I or we possess," i.e., identity is the imagined self, who I would like to be or who I think I am.

My personal identity has undergone several stages of evolution: when I first went abroad, there were few international students in the school, and as the only mainland



Chinese student, the impact of the cultural shift was not significant enough to evoke strong feelings of nationalism. As facial features were the most conspicuous distinguishing factor, my group identity was classified as "Asian". However, with the outbreak of the pandemic, my group identity became crystallized as "Chinese". After a prolonged period of acclimation and adaptation to the environment, my current identity has evolved into that of a "Chinese student in Estonia". This transformation in my individual identity has been shaped by cultural and emotional factors.

During the early days of the pandemic, the internet was awash with discussions about China, and a mixture of rumours and truths caused the word "China" to take on a negative connotation in my mind. I felt restricted in my freedom, and my limited social life kept me confined within an invisible bubble. I struggled to adapt to my environment, and as a result, felt disconnected from both my native environment and my current surroundings. This caused me to suppress my emotions, which soon became habitual. This emotional repression is reflected in my work through the use of excessive black and white colours, with the velvet strips crowded to cover the entire head. However, the metal part at the top of the work allows the velvet strips to move freely and change according to the wearer's head movements. The range of motion of the velvet strips is extensive.

Following the return to China, the second stage of identity transformation ensued, where the previous status of "Chinese student in Estonia" was replaced with that of a "returned student." This period was characterized by the Chinese government's fluctuating policies regarding the management of incoming international individuals, a protracted and arduous time necessitating mandatory periods of quarantine. Despite confronting immense uncertainty, there existed a concurrent sense of anticipation, a yearning to break the inertia of long-subdued emotions. In correspondence with the second phase of the project, the saturation of colors progressively intensified, while the variance in hue remained minimal, resulting in weak contrasts. The luminosity of the color gradient gradually ascended from the bottom to the apex, culminating in pure white. The breadth of movable areas when worn at higher levels contracted, with the uppermost wire curving inwardly, and the degree of mobility of the velvet strip decreased.

In the third stage, upon returning to China, the cultural identity undergoes a gradual attenuation, gradually supplanted by the social identity. As the individual ceases to be a "student" and returns to the familial fold, their identity transforms into that of a "child." The family unit provides a sense of security that precludes any emotional suppression. However, this should be a transitory phase, brief in duration, necessitating the creation of a new social identity to facilitate their reintegration into the social milieu from which they had been removed for the previous three years. In the context of an employment landscape characterized by sluggishness and malaise, apprehensions regarding the future continually loom. Works corresponding to this stage are typified by heightened color saturation in comparison to the preceding stage.

The variance in color is more pronounced, with greater color contrasts. The metallic element at the top of the strip is more extensively coiled, with fewer strips to sway and a reduced degree of mobility.

These three works are an attempt to liberate the velvet flower from its figurative guise and extricate it from the primitive cultural orbit, in a bid to articulate abstract emotions in a realistic framework.



Figure 23 Garden001-009(2), Muyang Li, Silk, Copper, 2023



Figure 24 Garden001-009(3), Muyang Li, Silk, Copper, 2023



Figure 25 Face mask 1, MUYANG LI, Silk, Copper, Plastic, 2023



Figure 26 Face mask 2, Muyang Li, Silk, Copper, Plastic, 2023



Figure 27 Face mask 3, MUYANG LI, Silk, Copper, Plastic, 2023

## Summary

My fascination with Velvet Flower originated from the cultural self-awareness that I cultivated in the aftermath of the epidemic, while residing in a foreign country. As a Chinese student confronting the epidemic, my emotions were repressed for an extended duration. Although I harbored trepidations about my family's well-being back home, my surroundings galvanized my cultural identity, based on emotional identification, to take root. I gravitated towards Chinese traditional crafts, culminating in my discovery of Velvet Flowers.

This article centers on the conventional handicraft of velvet flower, which appears to have regained momentum yet still grapples with a looming crisis. Despite its inability to meet the requisites of the contemporary era, velvet flower has garnered renewed attention, courtesy of the rapid surge in self-media. However, the internet's sudden exposure has ushered in excessive scrutiny, which is gradually eroding the last vestiges of Velvet Flower. The first half of this article meticulously delves into the origin and history of traditional Velvet Flowers, striving to foster clarity regarding its development. The article further elaborates on the production process, visual configuration, and cultural implications, with the aspiration of presenting a comprehensive and three-dimensional portrayal of traditional Velvet Flowers.

Following the market survey and expert interviews, I came to the understanding that the current state of the velvet flower industry is precarious, with its delicate nature and heritage at risk. Owing to historical circumstances, a significant gap in generational transmission of velvet flower craftsmanship exists, resulting in a dearth of experienced artisans in their prime years. Although the advent of the Internet has attracted younger enthusiasts, it has also disrupted the traditional market, rendering the industry somewhat disjointed and challenging for new entrants to pursue as a sustainable career path. Therefore, innovation in the velvet flower field remains relatively conservative, impeding its potential for breaking out of its original cultural niche and integrating with contemporary society.

As a Chinese student specializing in contemporary art jewelry, I have gained a comprehensive understanding of the current state of velvet flower development. In view of this, I aspire to introduce new possibilities to this traditional craft through my creative practice. In particular, I have conducted extensive experimentation with both flattened and three-dimensional velvet flowers, carefully studying and refining their material characteristics, production processes, and finished products. For the flattened flowers, I have endeavored to achieve an extreme degree of flatness by breaking and reconstructing the border shape of the color, though over time, I found myself becoming increasingly detached from the craftsmanship itself, as my focus shifted to the interaction between silk and color.



My attention was directed towards the three-dimensional velvet strips, which were subject to scrutiny. In the conventional methodology, the aim of the technique is to achieve the "passing of the flower" in all the steps, and all preceding actions are designed to prepare for this ultimate step. However, my approach advocates for the insertion of all trimmed velvet strips vertically prior to this stage, thereby allowing for flexible movement due to the unfastened metal. Although they lack the completeness of a finished piece, they communicate a robust visual language. Each constituent part of the velvet strip holds its own significance. In my practice, I sought to adorn these pieces in a manner that vividly manifests distinct emotional stages as the velvet strips sway. Finally, my final three pieces embody figurative representations of three distinct emotions as I approach the culmination of my study abroad career.

For me, this traditional craft holds a great appeal. It appears to be an exception within the context of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which typically prioritize minimalism and an appreciation for negative space. Although my master program concluded with the creation of three masks, my interest in velvet flowers has only just begun. Going forward, I intend to delve deeper into the potential of velvet flowers and uncover the broader issues they may convey.

# Kokkuvõte

Minu huvi sametlilledele (velvet flowers) vastu sai alguse suuremast kultuurilisest eneseteadlikkusest, mis tärkas minus epideemiajärgsel ajal välismaal viibides. Hiinast pärit tudengina surusin oma epideemiaga seotud tundeid pikalt alla. Tundsin ärevust selles osas, kuidas mu perel Hiinas läheb, kuid samas aitas uus keskkond mul oma kultuurilise identiteediga taas ühendust saada. Emotsionaalsest identiteedist kasvas välja kultuuriline identiteet. See suunas mind heitma pilku Hiina traditsioonilise käsitöö poole ning nii jõudsin lõpuks ka sametlilledeni.

Käesolev magistritöö keskendub eelkõige traditsioonilisele sametlilledele valmistamise tehnikale, mis on küll taas elujõudu kogumas, kuid on endiselt kaduvuse piiril. Tänu sotsiaalmeedia kiirele levikule on sametlilled taas suurema tähelepanu alla sattunud. Sellele on kaasa aidanud ka ootamatu populaarsus internetis, ülemäärane tähelepanu, mis saab hoogu sametlilledele tehnika hääbuvast kunstist. Artikli esimene osa on suures osas pühendatud traditsiooniliste sametlilledele tehnika algupärale ja ajaloole, lootes anda selge ülevaate sametlilledele valmistamise kunsti arengust. Kirjeldan selles osas detailselt ka sametlilledele valmistamise tööprotsessi, visuaalset vormi ja kultuurilisi konnotatsioone. Loodan anda oma essees traditsioonilisest sametlilledele tehnikast põhjaliku ja kolmedimensioonilise ülevaate.

Jälgides erialaturgu ja intervjuuerides valdkonnas tegutsevaid inimesi, sain teada, et sametlilledele valmistamise kunst on täbaras seisus. Olukord on hapram, kui pealtnäha paistab ning tehnika säilimine on endiselt ohus. Ajaloolistel põhjustel on sametlilledele valmistamise kunsti meistrite seas põlvkondlik lõhe. Vanem meistrite põlvkond on hääbunud, keskealise põlvkonna seas on aga kogenud traditsiooni edasikandjaid väga vähe. Tänu internetile on paljud noored hakanud traditsiooni õppimise vastu huvi tundma, kuid ühtlasi on see turu segi paisanud. Alal puudub piisav stabiilsus ning noortel on raske endale selles vallas püsivat karjääri luua. Seetõttu jäävad valdkondlikud uuendused küllaltki konservatiivseks, algupärasest kultuurilisest ringist on raske välja murda ning sametlilledele valmistamise kunsti on raske päriselt tänapäeva inimeste ellu integreerida.

Olles end viinud täielikult kurssi sametlilledele tehnika praeguste arengutega ja arvestades, et minu taust on kaasaegses ehtekunstis, loodan, et minu praktika pakub sellele traditsioonilisele kunstile uusi arenguvõimalusi. Olen oma praktikas katsetanud nii tasapinnaliste kui ka kolmemõõtmeliste sametlilledega. Tutvusin kasutatavate materjalide, tootmisprotsessi ja valmistoodetega ning tegin omapoolseid täiendusi. Lamelilledele (flattened flowers) puhul tahtsin nende tasapinnalisust rõhutada, järgides, vormides ja lõigates värvilise siidi loomulikku avalduvat kuju. Aja jooksul eemaldusin üha enam käsitöolisest lähenemisest ning siidi ja värvi kokkupõrkest sai eraldiseisev teemaarendus.

Seejärel suunasin oma tähelepanu kolmemõõtmelistele sametribadele. Traditsioonilise lähenemise kohaselt on kõigi erinevate töötappide eesmärgiks „eluslille kehastamine“ ning kõik eelnevad tegevused toimivad justkui ettevalmistusena selle nimel. Isiklike töövõtete kaudu jõudsin tehnikani, kus kõik

lõigatud sametribad jäävad fikseerimata enne viimistluse etappi. Valminud "lill" moondub tööprotsessis. Neil puudub lõpetatud tööle omane terviklikkus, see-eest aga loovad nad tugeva visuaalse kujundi. Kõik sametriba osad on mõjusad. Soovisin, et sametribade võbelemine looks tööd kandes visuaalse ja tugeva kujundi emotsiooni erinevatest etappidest. Kolm lõputööks valminud teost esindavad kujundlikult kolme erinevat emotsiooni, mis mind minu välisõpingute lõpufaasis saatsid.

Minu jaoks on tegu väga põneva arhailise käsitöövormiga. Traditsioonilise Hiina esteetika raamistikus mõjub see anomaaliana. Zen- ja tühjuse-esteetika kõrval on see liialt ülepakutud ja toretsev. Kuigi minu magistriprogrammi lõpetuseks valmis kolm maski, on minu töö sametlilledega alles alguses. Kavatsen tulevikus sametlilledega tehnikaga töötamise võimalusi edasi avastada ning vaadata, millised suuremad teemad sellest välja kooruvad.

Translated by Mari Volens

# Bibliography

## Videos

Thomas Riedelsheimer. Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time. March 2002. Germany. Mediopolis Film and Skyline Productions.

Daming Wan. ONE MORE MINUTE. September 2020. China. VeeR and Dax Pictures.

Kevin Macdonald. Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang. January 2016. China. Mission-X Entertainment and Huaxia Film Distribution Company.

Nanfu Wang. In the Same Breath. August 2021. America. HBO.

## Online Resources

“Flocking(behaviour)”. Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking\\_\(behavior\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking_(behavior))

“Cai Guo-Qiang: A Tribute to Eternal Art”. Esquire. By Lu Han.

<http://www.esquire.com.cn/2019/1213/289531.shtml>

“Introduction to traditional crafts”.by Nanjing Traditional Crafts Non-Foreign Heritage Virtual Exhibition Project Team.

<https://artlab.nju.edu.cn/heritage/jp/velvet-flowers/mssh/>

Sharing of specific operating techniques. by 堆樱桃的小丸子 lulu.

[https://space.bilibili.com/388757886?share\\_medium=iphone&share\\_plat=ios&share\\_session\\_id=A2FB012A-55D1-4D09-89D8-D5CB8650CD1B&share\\_source=COPY&share\\_tag=s\\_i&timestamp=1650968790&unique\\_k=zScPCDU](https://space.bilibili.com/388757886?share_medium=iphone&share_plat=ios&share_session_id=A2FB012A-55D1-4D09-89D8-D5CB8650CD1B&share_source=COPY&share_tag=s_i&timestamp=1650968790&unique_k=zScPCDU)

Art works of Kaori Juzu.

<https://klimt02.net/forum/articles/introducing-kaori-juzu-mori-art-museum-shop-celine-robin>

Research Fellowship for Innovation in Vitreous Enamel Surfaces in Jewellery.

<https://cfpr.uwe.ac.uk/project/research-fellowship-for-innovation-in-vitreous-enamel-surfaces-in-jewellery/>

“The Age of the Information Cocoon: Bias, Tearing and Hooligan”. by zhibenshe0-1.

<https://www.pingwest.com/a/226865>

Book and Periodical

### **Book and Periodical**

Minan Wang. *文化研究关键词* Cultural Studies Keywords. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing Ltd. 2007.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of perception : an introduction*. London: Routledge. 2011.

Danni Yan. *就饰论事——身体语言介入首饰的叙事研究* Ornaments as a matter of fact—A narrative study of body language interventions in jewellery [D]. China Central Academy of Fine Arts. 2021.

Ning Xv. *南京非物质文化遗产:绒花* Intangible Cultural Heritage of Nanjing: Velvet Flower. Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House. 2014.

Shang Zhou. *Research on Cultural Connotation and Decorative Design of Nanjing Silk Flower* [D]. China Academy Journal Electronic Publishing House. 2017.

Qing Shi. *首饰的故事* The stories of Jewellery. Tianjin: Baihua Edition. 2003.

Junling Li. *北京绒鸟（绒花）* Beijing Velvet Bird (Velvet Flower). Beijing Art and Photography Publishing House

Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright. *Practice of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Translated by Pinxiu Chen. Taipei: Taiwan Comic base. 2009.

Liesbeth den Besten. *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery*. Germany: Arnoldsche Verlagsanstalt. 2011.

# Appendix

Two types of Velvet flower creators were interviewed during the writing of this thesis: traditional intangible cultural heritage inheritors and young Internet handicraft creation sharing bloggers. The former does not want to put the content in the paper. The text of the latter interview is presented in the appendix of the thesis with the consent of the person concerned.

Interview conducted via text or voice in WeChat on November 8, 2022, translated by MUYANG LI.

Interviewer: MUYANG LI "L"

Interviewee: bilibili craft blogger "D"

L: The first time I saw your work on website Bilibili, there was a clear difference between the visual style of your work and the other hairpin maker's work, can you talk about your basic background? How did you do you meet the velvet flower?

D: Handmade is purely a hobby, there is no systematic learning and no formal heritage.

My friend who entered the Han clothing pit very early recommended me to make velvet flowers, and then there was the TV series "Yanxi Raiders" which made me understand it more clearly as a non-heritage technique.

L: I noticed that most of the people who initially posted their works on video platforms were Han clothing enthusiasts or hairpin makers, are you in a similar situation?

D: I was a fan of Han clothing before I became a hairpin maker.

L: How long did it take you to become a professional velvet creator? Do you have any other art education, or did you develop your own visual style entirely by intuition?

D: I've been making velvet flowers for 3 years now. I've been working on them full-time for about two or three months. The designs are all based on my own feelings, no training.

L: Have you created works in other materials as well, but why did you insist on creating Velvet flowers? What attracted you?

D: I have done some copper, heat shrinking and flower wrapping, but finally I found that I like velvet more, so I am concentrating on velvet. What attracts me is the cute and fluffy appearance and the process of making them.

L: What are your sources of inspiration in the creation process? Do you also borrow from traditional styles or do you deliberately avoid traditional styles?

D: The inspiration comes from life, I also like to recreate the works based on the Forbidden City.

L: Do you usually follow the works of other creators? Or are there any exchanges between creators in this circle?

D: I rarely pay attention to other creators' works, and I try to avoid using other people's ideas. There is very little exchange of styles between friends, usually just sharing tools and materials.

L: In your opinion, can velvet flowers be considered an industry, and are there any issues that only industry professionals can focus on?

D: Personally, I think velvet flower should be one of the traditional handicrafts, I'm not sure about the second question.

L: Regarding innovation, I noticed that some time ago you released a work that combined velvet flowers with inductive opening and closing mechanisms to make flowers that move to imitate the process of flower blooming. What do you think about the innovation of velvet flowers?

D: The flower that can be opened and closed is not my idea, I was concerned about an ironing flower teacher did open and closed one, thought about whether it can be combined with the velvet flower, but in the process of looking for machinery hit a wall, is a friend sent me a small machinery to do a good job.

Personally, I think that velvet flower needs to be innovative and needs to keep up with the times. There is no conflict between innovation and tradition. I think innovation is probably to combine other things with the traditional that never existed before and to make it more beautiful or practical in design.

L: When I interviewed Mr. Cai before, he mentioned that the involution of hairpin maiden is harmful to the velvet flower. It also causes the public to lose sight of the value of the craftsman's labor and gradually makes velvet flowers cheap. So my question is, do you know the current price range of velvet flowers on the market? Are there any differences in the price range of the creators?

D: There are very low priced flowers and also normal priced flowers. There are more and more people making pompoms, and many people can't sell them, so they have to lower their prices. Maybe the hairpin maids themselves feel that there are flaws or poorly made hairpins to set a lower price, but generally the hairpin maids with mature skills are still more normal prices, but I do not know the details.

L: How much is the very low price (corresponding to the number of hours of work)? What is the normal price (corresponding to the number of hours)? What is the price range of the higher-priced flowers you know (corresponding to the number of hours)? Do you usually sell the flowers at different price points on different platforms?

D: I'm not sure how long it takes for others. And I think there is no such thing as normal price or high price for craftsmanship.

L: How do you price your work? Do you put a price on your work unit time? Because when I interviewed Mr. Cai before, the orders they usually take in the studio are for companies, or some bulk products so the way of quoting is totally different from personal customization. So, do you have your own pricing criteria, such as your price per unit of time multiplied by the number of hours worked? Since I am a jewelry student, many independent jewelry creators who sell non-volume pieces or custom styles will quote their clients in advance in a similar manner. The quoted price is usually calculated by the cost of materials plus labor hours, so I wonder if you are pricing in a similar way.

D: It depends on the production time, difficulty, and design. There is a general range of labor hours, it's not fixed, and each style is still priced together as a whole.

L: As a full-time flannel creator (I assume you are a full-time flannel creator?) H What is the income structure like? Can you earn a living by selling your work alone?

D: I have a bad cervical spine, so I can't do it for long. The income from making flowers can sustain myself, but it's not a high salary.

L: I've noticed that there are some classes on velvet flowers in WeChat, is this also part of your income? Are there people who are curious about this craft and don't have a strong need for Hanfu, or are there people in the Hanfu circle who want to make their own headpieces to match their clothes? Which group of people are more likely to come? Will you focus partly on teaching afterwards? Or will you spend more time on creation?

D: Sorry, I don't really want to answer this question, but I hope you understand.



L: It's okay, because I want the paper to show the working and living conditions of velvet flower workers as three-dimensionally as possible, so I will ask some more practical questions. I completely understand if you feel uncomfortable answering them. So the next question is: What do you know about the current state of the industry?

D: Everyone is trying to improve their skills and research creativity, so they feel more involutional, I guess.

L: More and more people are coming into contact with velvet flowers through the internet, sharing their creative process and showing their work. Do you think there is a widespread and common phenomenon of plagiarism? What are some of the ways the internet has influenced you?

D: The more publicity we have, the more people will know about this craft, so that it will not be easy to break the heritage. Now everyone is more and more aware of copyright, and the phenomenon of plagiarism is becoming less and less. I have received some negative comments or malicious attacks that do not affect my creativity but do affect my mood. On the other hand, on the internet, knowing that someone supports me and likes my work gives me more motivation to continue creating.

L: In your future plans, will it still be the main content of your work? Is there any possibility of commercial cooperation for velvet flowers? Are there any limitations or potential development possibilities? Or if there is anything else you want to talk about?

D: I don't have a clear plan for the future, and I'm a bit confused at the moment, so I hope I can plan clearly later.

The potential of velvet flower is infinite, so far I know there are TV series, poster shooting, costume design, etc. all use velvet flower.

L: Is your current work style completely dependent on the internet?

D: Pretty much, sort of.

L: Do most of the flower makers that are active online like you work in a similar way? Individually, at home or in the studio. Do you sell your designs in non-batch production through online platforms?

D: Most of them do, but many of them also participate in offline events to sell their work.

L: How do you organize your work and life? Do you work according to your mood, or do you work when you have orders and rest when you don't?

D: Basicly according to my mood

L: Is your creative passion always in a stable state? Is there a bottleneck in creativity? What do you usually do to relieve or rejuvenate your creativity during the bottleneck?

D: Not steadily. If I don't have inspiration, I just do client orders honestly, and when I have inspiration, I do inspiration again.

L: By the time you mentioned before you should have started making flowers after the epidemic started? Do you think the epidemic had an impact on your creations?

D: I started making before the epidemic, and my skills were not particularly good at the time of the epidemic, so I have been practicing at home.

L: Finally, it is convenient to reveal your age? Or are you post-90s, post-95s or post-00s?

D: I'm 95s.

L: Thank you very much for the interview, and finally, I wish you good luck in your future creation and continue to produce excellent works.

D: It's okay, I usually don't talk about controversial topics. I am also more cautious when answering your questions. Some time ago, Mr. Cai was sprayed on the Internet, and he was scolded for many things that I did not dare to say. I also hope you understand.

