

Suffocating Softness

Conceptualising Cuteness to Address Unspoken Emotional Wounds in East Asian Intergenerational Relationships



Work in Progress: Rabbit Exhibit B, Mixed Media, 2022

In a typical Hong Kong household, love is mainly expressed in material provisions. Cute objects are given as gifts, rewards, and comfort objects, along with high expectations and “tough love”. Cuteness is ingrained in the perception of care and discipline – it becomes a sensibility that permeates beyond cute objects and its effects beyond childhood.

This practice research develops existing theories of cuteness by conceptualising it as a sensibility.

I explore how intergenerational unprocessed experiences contribute to our emotional wounds and shape our sense of belonging, and cuteness’s entanglement within, through an autoethnographic practice of creative writing, wearable soft sculptures, and photography.

Researching Cuteness as a sensibility

As we receive cute objects that embody care and high parental expectations, cuteness becomes part of how we lastingly understand care and discipline – it becomes an abstract, tactile, and emotional quality existing beyond explicitly cute objects.

This understanding of cuteness is inseparable from the cultural experience of “tough love”, and the norm to shy away from emotional openness. Investigating what roles cute objects have in such relationships thus provides a way to probe the difficulties in communicating our emotions in East Asian cultures.

Through conceptualising cuteness as part of how we understand love and hurt, what can we uncover about the effects of intergenerational unprocessed experiences on one’s emotional woundedness, sense of belonging, and self-image?



Detail of work in progress, soft sculpture, 2022

Methodology

Subjective accounts of my upbringing and cultural background as a Hongkonger underpin this research, which expands into autoethnographic observations on the social commonalities of East Asian cultures.

My reflexive practice incorporates creative writing, narrative photography, and body pieces at the intersection of soft sculptures and conceptual jewellery. They collectively form autoethnographic questionings; each method brings its context into, and is examined via the research.

Proposed Outcomes

This research should contribute to the knowledge gaps in cuteness studies regarding the cultural-emotional bonds shared by the cute and their perceivers, and the nuanced roles of sentimental objects in our becoming.

It provides an autoethnographic reading to our collective emotional wounds, which generates cultural insights into how our intergenerational relationships are shaped by it, and subsequently who we become.

By showing how we relate to one another, it also extends companionship to those who grew up with similar internalised struggles. Even though it focuses on East Asian familial relationships due to time limits, the difficult emotions we feel in our home can be universal.

