

“A Home Is...”

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Figure 1. Yshao Lin 林意道. *As I Wonder, As I Dream Of It*, film still.

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.¹

Such is the well-known line from American poet and playwright Gertrude Stein's 1931 poem *Sacred Emily*. The author later explained: "When I said. 'A rose is a rose is a rose.' And then later made that into a ring I made poetry, and what did I do? I caressed, completely caressed and addressed a noun."²

The caressing was achieved through repetition, through going back to the same word, uttering the same sound—each time with a different tone perhaps—hearing its sound, its echo, making it at once the most familiar and the most strange. Stein gave Rose (the first Rose is a name and a person) full attention, with each repeated *rose*, the word refers to an earlier iteration of itself in a marvelous act of *mise en abyme*.

With each utterance of *rose*, the reader's voice cannot help but soften, as if encountered with the author's tender gaze. This act of repetition—the constant moving back, recalling and revisiting—finds itself in the works of many others, among which is Yshao Lin, a young artist who is now writing his story in the very city Stein, too, lived in.

Lin comes from an island called Huijiang (壺江), located in the province of Fujian, adjacent to the southern border of Mainland China. The artist grew up in this town, historically a fishing community, surrounded by seafaring tales brought home by adults who departed and returned. In Lin's film *As I Wonder, As I Dream of It*, Lin, as someone who grew into an artist and now holds the skill of constructing visuality, finally materialized the countless tales that composed his childhood.³ (Fig. 1) With its mesmerizing sonic texture that synthesizes the unlikely pairing of both birdsong and sounds from the bottom of the sea, *As I Wonder's* dream-like seascape invites its viewers into the most intimate of Lin's memories—a fantasy the artist constructed, once for himself alone.

1 Gertrude Stein, "Sacred Emily," first published 1913; repr. in *Geography and Plays* (Four Seas Co., 1922), 178–88; repr. in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Vintage Books, 1990); repr. in *Writings: 1903–1932*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (Library of America, 1998), 387–96.

2 Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, 1985), 231.

3 Yshao Lin 林意道, "As I Wonder, As I Dream of It," *Yshao Lin* 林意道, n.d., accessed February 2, 2026, <https://yshao.lin.com/as-i-wonder-as-i-dream-of-it/>.

He tailors the scene with an openness for collective viewing, for Lin's story was his, but also that of many others. As Yshao Lin recounted, those from his hometown, Hujiang, shared strikingly similar migration trajectories, or as he put it, "My story is no different from the others from my hometown."⁴ Migration from coastal rural China, of which Fujian is exemplary, to the United States since the latter half of the twentieth century is by no means a new area of research.⁵ As sociologists Zai Liang and Miao David Chunyu have noted, the dramatic increase in international migration from Fujian to the USA and Europe, particularly after the late 1970s, has commanded critical

attention for quite some time.⁶ By employing the network theory of migration, Liang and Chunyu uncover the communitarian dynamism within the international migration of Fujian. Such migration tends to work as a chain reaction depending on the link between those who settled into their destination and those who are potential migrants from the migrant-sending communities.⁷ In the words of our artist, "It all started with one family member, then another, and eventually the entire village emigrated to other countries and left babies and the elders behind."⁸



Figure 2. Yshao Lin 林意道, *The Abandoned School Where My Mother Taught*, in documentary photographic series *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*, 2019 – ongoing.

Indeed, as Yshao Lin reminds us, "babies and the elders" have often been excluded from this network, at least at its initial stage, and instead tasked with the job of staying behind.⁹ For Lin, in his own lucid recounting, "My parents left me to my grandparents when I was five years old, and followed every other young person's footsteps to the United States to seek better lives. I reunited with my parents when I was fourteen."¹⁰ Repeatedly, Lin emphasizes that his story is not unique. In a Master's thesis titled "From the Lucky Land to the Beautiful Country," the author Miao Lin included the words of a child, who, similar to the artist, watched his father compose part of the Fujianese migratory network: "When my father left, I was twelve. I felt sad for his leaving because he was such a good father. I did not know exactly where he was going. I was told he would travel far away from home to make money. After he earned money, we could live a better life."¹¹

When They Ring Those Golden Bells is an early series within Yshao Lin's body of work. (Fig. 2) When speaking of the series, even the maker's own memory took time to be activated. The faded colors of the photographic series mirror the artist's effort in excavating this memory of a place and time that now feels quite distant. As the artist ventures into new areas of inquiry concerning gender, sexuality, and masculinity, home no longer features explicitly in the artist's more recent works, although it arguably never faded away. Perhaps under the sweeping romanticizing force that sometimes comes with time, traces of the past—of a once-intimate place and a childhood spent in waiting—now seem tender yet blurry. These memories excavated from fringe consciousness—the aftertaste from a once all-too-clear time—are revisited, recalled, and reassured.

I am not interested in victimizing the artist, or the countless others who waited as their caretakers left home in search of a better life, nor do I wish to vilify the parents who left

4 Yshao Lin 林意道, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells," *Yshao Lin* 林意道, n.d., accessed February 2, 2026, <https://yshaolin.com/when-they-ring-those-golden-bells/>.

5 Zai Liang and Miao David Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA: The Effects of Migration Networks, Selectivity, and the Rural Political Economy in Fujian Province," *Population Studies* 67, no. 2 (2013): 209–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2012.756116>.

6 Liang and Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA."

7 Liang and Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA." See also Douglas S. Massey, Luin Goldring, and Jorge Durand, "Continuities in Transnational Migration: An Analysis of Nineteen Mexican Communities," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 6 (1994): 1492–1533.

8 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

9 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

10 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

their families in search of a better life—such is a noble pursuit. Time, I would argue, is the unnamed protagonist in *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*. (Fig. 3) Burning incense, drying shrimps, gathering dust, time was (and is) flowing and passing, eternally present. In the words of T. S. Eliot, “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.”¹² Time’s eternal presence, perhaps, can be found in its aftertaste.

Lin’s photographic series complements broader, largely quantitative research in migration studies with a piece of personal archive. Amidst ongoing conversations questioning the truth scheme of “History” with a capital H—that is, a narrative (often consciously) mediated by uneven discursive, political, economic, and social power structures yet misleadingly presented as a neutral *mainstream*—a micro-historical approach that takes seriously previously overlooked pieces of evidence has gained significantly more traction in the past few decades.¹³ Following the methodological shift, the practice of history writing has indeed seen its decolonial reflection, and increasingly recognizes forms of

documentation, such as oral history traditions, that have been established and valued beyond the post-Enlightenment Global North. However, it is worth noting that such a shift towards Historically dismissible—and indeed dismissed—micro-narratives should not be understood as a blind endorsement of a multiplicity of what are often called *personal truths*. While the turn toward personal truths disrupts History’s fixation on macro narratives, it risks losing itself in the other extreme: absolute relativism, which could potentially negate attempts at a narrative that hopes to account for more than one individual.

The story animating Yshao Lin’s *When They Ring Those Golden Bells* belongs to him, yet accommodates many more. Lin’s story resonates beyond his island, his country, his language, his generation... Revisiting the story today, amidst renewed discussions of the (il)legality and criminalization of migration, it will matter for many more years to come.

A home is a home is a home.

11 Miao Lin, “From the Lucky Land to the Beautiful Country: Illegal Immigration of Fujianese to the United States” (master’s thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2005), <https://commons.emich.edu/theses/25>.

12 T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets* (Faber and Faber, 1943), 13.

13 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, “Introduction: Against Simple Truths,” in *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013), 1–18.



Figure 3. Yshao Lin 林意道, *Praying For Good Fortunes*, in documentary photographic series *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*, 2019 – ongoing.

Aftertaste

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