



Song Dong
Wall Texts

Ground Floor

***Family Member Photo Studio (1998)*, c-type photograph. Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing**

Family is the basic unit of society. It is the centre of our lives.

***Father and Son with my Daughter (1998/2010)*, single channel video (no sound). Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.**

My daughter never met my father. However, Art has compensated for my regret about this. It has reconnected me with my father through the next generation: the continuation of life and our bloodline.

***Listening to My Parents Talk About How I Was Born (2001)*, single-channel video projection. Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.**

I am curious about the circumstances and situation around my birth. It is a unique bond between my elderly parents and myself as an adult.

***Touching My Father (1997-2011)*, c-type photographs with single-channel video work (no sound). Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.**

When I was young, my impressions of my father were taken from photographs; sometimes pictured alone, sometimes standing among a group of people. I was aware that he was always on business trips, while I was attending kindergarten. We hardly saw each other. During the late 1960s, my father was sent to Wu Qi Carder School in Hubei. (Carder Schools were set up by the Communist Party to “re-educate” citizens to transform their thinking to align with the ideology of the Cultural Revolution). He was gone for a long time. My mother once brought my sister and I to visit him. I did not know that he was denounced as a counter-revolutionary. I have a very blurred memory of the Wu Qi Carder School. All I can recall was the “scorching weather,” “a dog named Xiao Huang,” and “a big trench” we had to cross in order to watch outdoor movies. What was left in my memory about my father’s appearance was a man wearing “the yellow uniform used during the war to resist U.S. aggression and aid South Korea” with “a face with a prickly beard.” I knew that he had never joined the military but I still had a moment of fear. During that time, soldiers were symbols of veneration and dignity. I knew he loved me so much. While his beard was poking my face, I felt warmth, affection and pain. I seem to still be able to feel all these sensations today. One day in 1973, I saw my father walking towards me from the entrance of the *hutong*. I did not step forward to welcome him but turned around and ran home instead. I knew it was because of the double effect of happiness and fear. My father was finally home! Then there was my unlimited admiration for my father. I loved to listen to the stories he told me, to play with all kinds of wooden guns and knives that he made for me. I thought that there was nothing he could not make. I was trying so hard to imitate him. My father was the authority and my idol. But there was still a quality of fear within me, accompanied by

strangeness and respect. I gradually grew up and my feeling towards my father greatly changed. I started to challenge what he said and started to make my own decisions. I realised that there was a very deep generation gap between us. I was still scared of him. I always knew that he was my father and he never lost his dignity as a father in front of me. Whenever I had disagreements or conflicts with him, I kept silent and “refused to confess to the enemy” as if I was the little hero from the Eighth Route Army. I was rebellious and passive aggressive. In 1996, I was thirty, an age when a man is supposed to have matured and have an established career. In Chinese culture, we have a term for this, “san shi er li.” I made a work entitled “san shi bu li,” which literally means “not being mature and established,” the opposite of “san shi er li.” I asked my mother about things that had happened every year since I was born. I wrote down these stories told to me by my mother and my own memories throughout those thirty years using Chinese calligraphy, accumulating a total of thirty pages. But I never asked my father about anything. I knew I was trying to do things my own way and to be special. But my father was still awe-inspiring to me. “Father guides son” is one of the three cardinal guides (the other two are “ruler guides subject” and “husband guides wife”) in the feudal family ethical code, which is still emphasised in China today. I also grew up in a tradition that believed in this. I went to Berlin in 1997. I was solitary and homesick in the midst of a strange language and cultural environment. I re-thought the communications I had had with my father. I started to realise that my father had his own reasons for what he did and said, which was, in many aspects, his truth. My respect for him was gradually restored. I wanted to express my love for him. I wanted to touch him many times. I understood this would be very difficult because there was a big gap between us. Finally, I came up with the idea of using video with the image of a hand that is “visible but not in a materialistic form.” I projected the video of my hand touching the air onto my father’s body. I used my “virtual hand” to touch my father. He accepted this “hand” and I experienced a complex feeling. It was very hard to explain and my father was experiencing a complex feeling as well. We did not have any conversations about it. But my “virtual hand” was breaching that invisible gap between us. I truly felt the power of, and am truly grateful for, art. In “touching my father,” we had built a bridge between the still deep generation gap. We began to try harder in our communication. We did not define each other by each other’s ideas anymore. We both had our own way of living. Although father still did not agree with my choices in many aspects, he told me, “You’ve grown up. My opinions are only suggestions. Your choices need to be your own.” While before he often used imperative terms such as “you should” or “you must not,” he started to change his vocabulary to “I suggest” or “I will keep my opinion to myself.” I was moved. I felt my father’s strength. *Touching My Father* became the most important event in my life. Although the work has never been shown before, it opened the door for Art to enter my family life, becoming the centre of our lives. It also turned into the lifeline that brought the relationship between my father and myself into a new era.

1997

While I was touching him with my video projected hand, he was smoking. Unexpectedly, with his eyes on my “hand”, he started to take off his jacket, shirt and vest until he was half naked, feeling my hand with his bare back...

2002

I was not brave enough to touch my father with my real hand until he passed away. But he could not feel me anymore. His body was cold. So was my heart and the ineffaceable sadness...

I recorded this touching with video. The forever-lasting sorrow has caused me

incapable of watching the video. The touch therefore has been sealed up in the videotape and will never be opened up.

2002/2011

In the video, my father was teaching my sister's daughter Zhu Mo how to play a peg top, a game he played during his childhood. This was the last family video before he passed away and it was happen to be shot at the Ancestral Temple. Since father's death, I had always wanted to do this third "Touching Father." But it was 8 years later when I first had the courage to face father's image. This time, the touching was so hard.

FIRST FLOOR GALLERY

Cut One Fen into Two Parts With My Mother (1998), coin and c-type photography. Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.

"Fen" is the smallest unit in the RMB currency. To "cut one fen into two parts" is a metaphor for being frugal as a value system. During times when there was a great lack of material goods, "cutting one fen into two parts" was a guideline for strict household budgeting. During times of plenty, it is a concept for not wasting anything and being environmentally friendly.

Father and Son in the Ancestral Temple (1998), c-type photographs (series of seven), handwritten correspondence and photographs (series of twelve). Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.

I think of the "Ancestral Temple" as an important place that refers to the relationship between father and son. The father and son relationship is fairly simple in China. It is the refraction and reflection of hierarchical social relations, such as the supreme power structure, which has endured throughout our long history.

Father and Son Face to Face with a Mirror (2001), two channel video projection (no sound). Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing

My father and I were looking at each other's mirror images melting. When the mirror images burned completely, we were truly face to face.

Chinese Medicine Healing Story (2004), three-channel video and two heads sculptures (no sound). Courtesy of the artist, PACE Beijing.

In 1976 an unexpected accident happened that affected my face and created an unforgettable memory. There is "pain, love, beauty, and dignity" in this memory. Chinese medicine was the medium that cured my body and spirit. It was also the conveyor of my parent's love, reflecting memory of that love like a mirror, trickling down deep into my heart.

Dad and Mum, Don't Worry About Us, We Are All Well (2011), neon. Courtesy of the artist and PACE Beijing.

I look forward to the reunion with my parents. I don't know how long I will have to wait before I can meet them again in heaven. But I believe their spirits will guard us, care

for us and worry about us... I owe a deep gratitude to Art. It was Art that brought us together in a way that goes beyond the mundane life of a common family when my mother and father were alive. Art is the centre of our family life. Art enables us to meet my parents again after they have departed. In my art, they have never been away, and will live with us forever. I think they might still be worrying about us and our children. I wanted to have an exhibition where we would bring them back to us and tell them, "Dad and Mum, Don't Worry About Us, We Are All Well." I wrote these words in neon, facing my parents who are now in the sky. Their gaze pass through the windows to reach us and to reunite with us. I hope they will truly be at ease. We will be together forever.