

Untying knots of emotions with threads: A reflection on the curative powers of memorialisation with yarn

Li June Han

Abstract

Reflecting on the author's art-making practice with threads, this article seeks to answer what underpins her therapeutic experience. The role of curative memorialisation and attachment in artmaking is central, bringing about self-empowerment and emotional healing. The unique haptic quality of textiles, fabric, and thread materials creates a sense of comfort and well-being, enabling the expression of difficult emotions. The medium also facilitates meaning making with the larger social community. The article concludes that textile-based materials hold immense potential for use in self-care and art therapy, especially in their ability to create a safe space for memorialisation and emotional processing.

Keywords

Threads, yarn, memorialisation, attachment, haptic function, safe space



Figure 1. Li June Han, *Home*, 2023, crochet in yarn, 120 × 80 × 120mm.

Introduction

Threads have a special significance in my life. They are a metaphor for the state of my emotional being, like a pile of threads, jumbled, knotted, and unrealised. Over the years, the effort to straighten them out by mental reasoning has failed. Hence, the tangled pile grows.

Catalysed by life's losses and challenges, in particular, the death of my grandmother in recent years, I began to unravel the hill of knots over time through thread work, one stitch, one pull, one knot at a time.

I sought to understand why I was so drawn to yarn, and the sudden descent into comfort I felt in working with threads. The experience was familiar yet novel. As I reflected and researched, I took a journey into my memories, to a time before. To a time when life was simpler and where relationships were more firmly anchored.

The artwork *Home* (Figure 1) struck me profoundly when it appeared in my hands. It's a crochet bird that has found a resting place in a nest filled with eggs. In art therapy, the metaphor of birds' nests reflects the unconscious schemas we have toward early attachment figures (Kaiser & Deaver, 2009). In my artwork, the nest is thick, warm, and soft. A nurturing bird protects the vulnerable eggs. Like a three-dimensional drawing of a bird's nest, the representation appeared to relate to my secure relationship (Goldner & Golan, 2016) with my grandmother.

It dawned on me what working with threads succinctly meant for me – a place of calm, shelter, and home. A place where I could jump off to any adventure, yet return. It was an ode to my enduring relationship with her. Through yarn, I had reconnected with my attachment figure, my safe place.

Symbolism of threads

Threads, in particular yarn, took centre stage as a medium of therapy for me. They embodied the lustre, density, and fluidity of my heavy thoughts. They were colourful, just as my menagerie of emotions was. Like many who embrace yarn work, I was drawn by its texture, radiating an inviting warmth and assurance from a long time ago (Burns & Van De Meer, 2021).

As a child, I observed that only women worked with textiles, fabric, and threads in my family. I was born in Singapore in the 1970s, shortly after Singapore's independence from colonial Britain and separation from Malaysia. It was a different era. Singapore was in the throes of trying to define its own identity and economic destiny.

As second-generation immigrants from China, my maternal grandparents grew up in Chinatown. They carried vivid memories of World War Two and the Japanese Occupation from the 1940s. History imprinted on them a life of hardship and lost opportunities. Their education was thwarted by the war and ensuing post-war poverty.

Men's incomes were insufficient to feed large families, hence women undertook sewing or craftwork such as embroidery and weaving to supplement their incomes. For traditional Chinese families, it was improper for women to work. Men helping with domestic responsibilities borne by women was frowned upon. Therefore, working with thread-based craft was strictly in the realm of Chinese women at home. Formally trained tailors then were mostly men but the garments they made were too expensive. Women, hence, doubled up to make clothing for their families.

Later, my grandparents moved into suburban public housing, which encouraged more interaction between the different races in Singapore, away from their distinct immigrant enclaves. I recall having Malay neighbours who hosted large weddings, and enjoying colourful Indian religious processions. What tied people together were the virtues of hard work, frugality, and sheer perseverance, as Singapore was then a developing country with few luxuries. My grandmother made clothes for herself and all her six children. My grandfather focused on his job. They both worked tirelessly to make a living. My mother was the third child, and I remember seeing many photographs of her and her siblings dressed in coordinated fabric and colours, all made by my grandmother. This was common for many working-class Singaporean families.

I recall this period with great fondness despite the financial challenges we faced. My parents were often overseas for work and my grandmother became my main caregiver. Though she had little formal schooling, she was very capable of running a large household with six children plus me in her tiny flat. Within the small spaces, she provided me with warmth and regaled me with many stories from her childhood. I shared many happy and sad moments with her – sad when we both felt overwhelmed by our circumstances. If she was not cooking or cleaning, she would spend much time on her Singer sewing machine, a prized item in the small dwelling. She made clothes for me and, later, my sister on our birthdays. As our parents were absent, she tried to make us feel special and loved.

The tradition of working with threads and textiles carried on with my mother and aunties. They made craftworks of crochet, knitting, blankets, and furniture coverings. By the 1980s, their venture into craft was for domestic leisure, self-mastery, and home decoration, more than economic necessity.

I often wondered whether my grandmother was truly fulfilled, as her life was largely defined by her domestic responsibilities. Could she have done more if she'd had the opportunity to

work outside her home, if she hadn't grown up with so little? The womenfolk relied on men for their incomes in my family, as was common in traditional Chinese families of that period. Females were accorded significantly fewer opportunities than males. This contrasted with the education I was given, where women shaped their own lives and had careers. As Singapore grew in affluence and became more economically successful, I was swayed by the importance of financial independence and equal status for women. I began to associate women's craft with hardship, and constraining domestic responsibility, and swore not to be enslaved to such a life.

However, as I grew older, as a woman, I realised my grandmother's position as a creator, maker, and builder was her source of enduring power. The meaning and process of her making transcended time and space. She personified strength, protection, safety, and all the tenets of maternal love. This aspect of family life created by women like her did not constitute paid work but laid the essential foundations of care, attachment, and homemaking. It also made space for women to express emotions otherwise difficult to convey in words. The less time I spent in these roles, the more I missed their gravity.

As I became a wife and working mother, this was felt even more acutely. I saw that my emphasis on career, work achievements, and financial privilege had led me far away from what used to bring me peace and a sense of self. A balance needed to be restored in my life once again. Threadwork, with its emotional symbolism in my life, seemed to arrive at the right time, as the right medium to reacquaint myself with that rejuvenation. What I thought might have been irreversibly lost with my grandmother's passing was not gone. Each time I worked with threads, I felt that she was right there with me. And a reemergence of purpose, meaning, and stability returned to my spirit.

Threadwork can be highly emotive for makers who associate making with precious memories of loved ones, coming from a rich heritage and tradition (Kenning, 2015). Like my story, this symbolism of feminine empowerment and the medium's potential for emotional expression has grown over time. In this digital age characterised by a growing feeling of emotional detachment and falling away from cultural traditions, the need for reattachment and connection is ever growing. Contemporary artists and art therapists have used textile art and yarn creations as versatile materials to articulate social-political messages, initiate community healing, and inspire social action (Fisk, 2019; Garlock, 2016, Kaimal et al., 2017).

Curative memorialisation and emotional healing

I found myself forming an attachment to yarn and soft objects made from crochet, akin to security objects. Yarn suddenly awakened implicit memories of attachments from my childhood, like a proxy for touch, which is inherent in intimate interpersonal relationships

(Hass-Cohen et al., 2015). Yarn objects served as transitional objects that increased security and comfort, reducing my anxiety (Winnicott, 1953). Crochet, I discovered, allowed me to feel safe and I began on a creative restorative journey.

Through crochet, I noticed memorialisation beginning to take root. Memorialisation is defined as a seeking of connection with what is perceived to have been sacred and lost, be it people, time, or places (Fisk, 2019). Immersion in this process can impart strength, reminiscence, and a positive transformation in emotions cum memories. I felt once again connected to significant maternal figures in my life, although some have passed on.

The time-intensive, rhythmic, and repetitive process of crochet enables a curative memorialisation process. Memorialisation through yarn working is a meditative undertaking in reflection, involving the whole sensory and emotional being. It translates memories into a narrative in the present, extending intimate bonds and rituals from time past. This is reparative, helping people move onwards to the future, but enriched by the past, instead of feeling detached from it (Fisk, 2019).

The unravelling, stretching, stitching, hooking, and assembling of yarn in the crochet process is like a systematic smoothing of emotional kinks in my mind. It organises memories, feelings, and thoughts (Pöllänen, 2015), causing a kind of unconscious sublimation of emotional pains previously buried. These emotions are freed, they flow and get reconstructed into new forms – stories written in the language of textiles, threads, and comfort objects (Garlock, 2016).

Along with crochet, knitting, quilting, embroidery, and other textile-based work share accolades of being regulators of well-being, with significant psychological and social benefits (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Garlock, 2016). They carry processes that calm, reduce anxiety, and are known to alleviate depression (Riley et al., 2013). These materials can hold strong emotions, allowing anger, sorrow, joy, and grief to emerge in imagery through art-making (Garlock, 2016).

In addition, textile-based skills restore confidence, and give a sense of accomplishment and mastery (Burt & Atkinson, 2012; Howie et al., 2004; Rusiñol-Rodríguez et al., 2022). I believe the curative memorialisation process and the haptic quality of the materials (Urquhart et al., 2020), together, underpin the emotional comfort, safety attachment, and reassurance felt by makers when using threads. Many makers report being compelled or addicted to making, experiencing tremendous emotional support in the process (Kargól, 2003).

My crochet practice

My crochet-making process taps heavily into emotional association and is free form. I am led by my feelings and intuition to select colours, textures, and forms. Textiles, fabric, and

threads possess a haptic quality for healing and self-empowerment, though they have not been explored as extensively as clay in literature (Hass-Cohen et al., 2015; Garlock, 2016; Moon, 2010; Urquhart et al., 2020). My hands seem to converse with the material and texture, leading me where I need to go. This autonomous process binds my psychological, physical, and spiritual needs harmoniously. Crochet is a form of haptic art that leverages the sense of touch and the use of hands to manipulate objects for therapeutic outcomes.

My favourite crochet forms are drawn from natural scenes, like fluid forms inspired by the sea, rounded forms that convey wholeness, or the creation of landscapes reminiscent of emotions. These processes fill gaps in my memories and help me work through unresolved fragments from past and present through a meditative rhythm. I create art forms that express my fond attachments to people, places, and things thought lost. Experiences can hence be memorialised and drawn upon in my spirit for strength in the present.

Home (Figure 1) is a significant and symbolic piece of artwork that emerged last year. The work piqued my interest, and initiated the research and writing of this reflective piece. This year, it inspired an extended collection of artworks made in yarn. My experience of security propelled me to take risks. A desire to share my artwork began to take shape; *Home* will be part of a collection to be shared with others.

Meaning for self and others

On top of being transformative for individuals, thread working has a history of influencing larger social communities and relationships. The act of sharing and gifting, which is common in textile-based crafting practice, allows makers to savour community connection and a prosocial cause larger than themselves (Batson et al., 2008; Rusiñol-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Often, womenfolk would make clothes, toys, and blankets not for themselves but for others, to instill a culture of belonging to the community. Certainly, within the Chinese immigrant community where my grandparents and parents lived, where everyone had little, taking care of one another through sharing of food and coverings for warmth meant so much. My aunts had a practice of making patchwork blankets. They shared tips, techniques, and fabrics, forming what might have been therapeutic support groups, helping them get through the challenges they faced raising families. I recall the vibrancy of their exchanges. I still possess these family-made blankets with a riot of colours created from recycled fabrics. They are distinctively from the 1980s in terms of the textile patterns and type of materials used – a record of a time in family history.

Apart from the desire to share my artwork and making process, I found myself eager to create presents in crochet for people around me. By gifting them something made from my hands and touch, I seemed unconsciously to wish for their well-being. The recipients returned in kind, expressing their appreciation for handmade objects steeped in personal meaning and

effort, cementing the relationships. This caring for the well-being of others and the forging of authentic connections through artmaking grants greater meaning to life (Adey, 2018). Makers experience a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Furthermore, it is a remedy that anyone can easily engage in every day, opening a door for them to depart from isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness to purposeful engagement (Garlock, 2016; Kargól, 2022).

The longevity of contact and pleasant attachment with crafted objects over varied periods of lifespan is a special quality of thread-based textile materials – from baby blankets to children’s soft teddies to warm scarves. It connotes a sense of continuity and provides needed comfort that can bring people through difficult changes and transitions in life (Kenning, 2015; Kargól, 2022). In my journey, yarn work allowed me to cope with grief for loved ones and address challenging emotions. I also transcended my private grieving to share with others my healing process, finding much solace in being part of a community.

Arriving home

What started as a curiosity towards yarn, and an impulse to reduce my pile of tangled emotions, led me to a fascinating therapeutic journey. It was emotionally captivating and compelling, and led me home. I found myself enthralled by the world of crochet, emerging fulfilled, nourished, and more buoyant in my spirit. My spirit, which gave me meaning and innate energy, had become subdued for a time when life’s concerns began to overpower me, and I drifted from my roots. I am glad that, with art-making and a reconnection to thread work, I am slowly finding a way back. The passing of my grandmother, in her amazing legacy, has gifted me a precious chance to redefine my priorities and reshape my role as a woman, wife, and mother. She sent a reminder for me to pursue a life that is whole and beyond myself.

As an art therapist, I benefited from using this unique mode of creative expression for self-care. I learned to navigate my losses and gained emotional regulation (Arnold, 2020). I was grounded back into my cultural heritage. I hope research on the impact of thread working in art therapy continues to expand. I am inspired to translate my learnings to my work with clients in art therapy, especially in leveraging textiles, fabric, and threads to create a safe space for memorialisation and emotional processing.

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About the author:

Li June Han

MAAT, BA(Hons), AThR

Li June is the founder of A Little Blue Studio, where she collaborates with artists and mental health professionals to bring art to the community, fostering creative expression, emotional growth and social diversity. She is concurrently an art therapist at the University of Social Sciences, Singapore, where she is part of an inter-disciplinary team at the University Counselling Centre. Li June's art practice is inspired by memories and experiences of people and places. Writing about the travails of her life and sharing her art connects her with people from all walks of life. Li June lives and works in Singapore.



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