

**Wen-hao Tien: Home On Our Backs** is distilled from Boston Chinatown stories learned during the artist's 2020 artist-in-residence at the Pao Arts Center. With much personal reflection, enlivened by Chinese folklore and culture, this interdisciplinary work is a refreshing take on nomadism, and on Asian American stories.



*Red Dress*, digital print, April 2020



I never miss someone carrying a red plastic grocery bag on a subway ride. They've been to Chinatown," Every red plastic bag holds the familiar taste of home food. While the *Red Dress* is perfect for the party, due to the pandemic, there will be no banquet for an extended period of time.



***Home on Our Backs***  
installation, Chinese vintage animal shaped wooden object, likely a decorative part from roof, lego sculpture, projection on wall



別有洞天， Laundry Rocks  
Image transfer and painting on paper



Study of a Chinese laundry  
Ink on paper

The Chinese laundries of the 1800s were the first wide-spread business enterprises developed by early Chinese immigrants. Over time, they became a significant part of everyday life for Boston Chinatown families, and a means to send money back home. Astounded by these family histories, Tien reimagined piles of shirts into Chinese “scholar rock”. One can see a world through a rock, and imagine a new world despite one’s current situation.



沙子造山 · *Dust to Mountain*

*Vintage crate for explosives, circa 1900, sawdust, calligraphy*

Triggered by the harsh environment of the building the Transcontinental Railroad, this work is made out of materials to be found at railroad construction sites. On the wall, 鄉愁 *Nostalgia*, by the late exiled poet, Yu Guangzhong, was written and smeared.

Legend has it that a determined 90 year-old *Yugong* (foolish old man) mobilized his community, and eventually the Lord of Heaven, to move a mountain. Can we shake enough dust to build a mountain today?



關公, GuangGong  
Red herbs, thread in resin



*Am I Really Here*, video  
<https://vimeo.com/407844607>

Visiting Mount Hope Cemetery Boston, where many early Boston Chinatown immigrants are buried, Tien sensed the complex feelings of homesickness, pride, and regret. Regarded as a virtue in Chinese social thinking, all things return to their source in old age, much like expatriates returning home. Her video, “Am I Really Here,” pays homage to a class of people forgotten.

## About the artist

Wen-hao Tien

MPH (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health)

MFA in visual art (Lesley University College of Art and Design)

Three decades ago, Tien came to the US as a graduate student from Taiwan and a northern Chinese family displaced by WWII and the Chinese Civil War. Her work often addresses nomadism, and being out of place in a “life in-flux.” Trained in biomedical sciences, public health, and Asian studies, Wen-hao’s work merges concerns of art, science and culture.

Wen-hao is also Assistant Director at Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies. In her professional role, Wen-hao builds interdisciplinary scholarly communities.



Installation image @Pao Arts Center, 2021 by Warren Patterson