

# Metempsychosis & Reincarnation

by

Yichen Kerry Guan

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Director of Thesis: Timothy Lazure

Major Department: School of Art and Design

A flower's beauty does not last forever; the leaves wilt, and the petals fall to the ground until next season when the cycle begins. The moment a flower blooms is the beginning moment it starts to fade away. Metempsychosis (reincarnation) has always interested me. This concept has helped me reduce the fear of death, giving me the strength to recognize that death is not a final destination because our lives are going to repeat in another modality. The impetus for this body of work comes from noticing Chinese social and political events repeating themselves throughout history.

My thesis exhibition consists of a series of small-scaled enameled wearable artworks. The imagery I create with flowers falls into three different categories: seeding, blooming, and decaying. These flowers illustrate the concept of reincarnation: birth, growth, death, and returning to be reborn. The flower represents Chinese history and political protests; its life cycle is used to discuss this history, with hopes for a progressive future.



Metempsychosis & Reincarnation

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Yichen Kerry Guan

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Yichen Kerry Guan

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS:

---

Timothy Lazure, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Mi-Sook Hur, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA

DIRECTOR OF THE  
SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN:

---

Kate Bukoski, PhD

DEAN OF GRADUATE SCHOOL:

---

Paul J Gemperline, PhD

## DEDICATION

To my Father and my Stepmother:

Thank you for supporting me while studying abroad and for your encouragement to think critically about life. Our conversations about sharing and your constant encouragement have been a meaningful motivation to be creative throughout this journey.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
LIST OF PLATES .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: <i>Reincarnation in Art and Religion</i> .....	3
CHAPTER 2: <i>Reincarnation in History</i> .....	9
CHAPTER 3: <i>Reincarnation in Nature</i> .....	12
CHAPTER 4: <i>Wearable Enameled Work &amp; Techniques</i> .....	13
CONCLUSION .....	20
PLATES .....	21
GLOSSARY .....	30
REFERENCES .....	31



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: <i>Wheel of Life</i> .....	5
Figure 2: <i>Changing Time with Changing Self</i> .....	6
Figure 3: <i>Life Cycle - Wax Carving Process</i> .....	8
Figure 4: <i>Life Cycle – Finished Pieces</i> .....	8
Figure 5: <i>Conclusion about China’s Historic Pattern</i> .....	10
Figure 6: <i>Thesis Exhibition: Metempsychosis &amp; Reincarnation Gallery Shot</i> .....	14
Figure 7: <i>“404 Not Found No.1” Brooch</i> .....	14
Figure 8: <i>“404 Not Found No.1” Brooch, back</i> .....	14
Figure 9: <i>Lifecycle Ring</i> .....	15
Figure 10: <i>Cycle Ring</i> .....	17
Figure 11: <i>Cycle Ring, detail</i> .....	19

## LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1: “404 Not Found No.2” .....	21
Plate 2: “404 Not Found No.3” .....	22
Plate 3: “404 Not Found No.4” .....	23
Plate 4: “404 Not Found No.5” .....	24
Plate 5: “404 Not Found No.6” .....	25
Plate 6: “404 Not Found No.7” .....	26
Plate 7: “404 Not Found No.8” .....	27
Plate 8: “404 Not Found No.9” .....	28
Plate 9: “404 Not Found No.10” .....	29

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, people have always been interested in questions of life and death. What happens to a person after death? People have given different answers to these questions. A universal question has been whether or not the soul will continue on its path or whether it will be revived in the guise of another person. One answer is the idea of reincarnation, the transmigration of the soul. Reincarnation is also called metempsychosis; it is the concept that a soul can be reborn into new lives. The difference between these two terms is that metempsychosis is the philosophical and metaphysical belief where a rebirth of a soul after death is in another embodiment; and reincarnation is more focused on the movement of a soul from one body to another physical life form. According to some religions and philosophers, prophets believed the soul could appear to incarnate in humans, animals, or plants as it works its way toward an eventual escape from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (DOWDEY). Many people are convinced that human life is not limited to earthly existence and continues after the death of a body. The soul incarnates again and again. Some believe that the soul can move not only to a person but also to an animal. Some believe that with each new life, one raises their spiritual level, accumulates experience, and can achieve more in their future life. The word "reincarnation" came to us from the Latin language. There was a similar concept among the ancient Greeks, only it was called metempsychosis - "transmigration of souls" (Infoplease Columbia Encyclopedia). The essence of this phenomenon is that after physical death, the soul continues its path in a new incarnation while retaining some of the memory of what happened to the creature in its the past life. In some beliefs, it is considered that "the soul remembers

everything" (Infoplease Columbia Encyclopedia) – claiming that the road to the previously accumulated knowledge is open only to the select.

This thesis body of work utilizes enameling to create imagery depicting different moments in a flower's life. Enameling is the process of applying powdered glass to a metal substrate. It is then heated until the powdered glass melts and adheres to the metal. Within the enameling arts, Cloisonné is one of my favorite techniques to use. This method consists of using metal strips bent to the outline of a design, which creates cells, and is fired onto the substrate's surface. These cells are then filled with powdered enamel, fired, ground smooth, and polished. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

## CHAPTER 1: REINCARNATION IN ART AND RELIGION

Buddhism discusses life and what happens after death. Buddhists believe in a cycle of death and rebirth called *samsara*. Through karma and eventual enlightenment, they hope to escape *samsara* and achieve nirvana, an end to suffering. (Oliveto) Thoughts of reincarnation make me reflect on all living things and their cycles. Flowers' lives are fleeting and filled with bright colors and fragrances, but death always comes in the end. A flower loses its former beauty, becomes nondescript, and no longer pleases your senses with its aroma and beauty. Does this mean the end of its existence? Far from it. A flower wilting is just a sign, the beginning of a new life. Time will pass, and the hour of flowering will come again.

In the Eastern culture, Buddhism has had a profound influence on the arts. For example, in Tibet, Thangka is a traditional cloth painting that is framed with embroidered silk. It is a distinctive art form of Tibetan painting, covering Tibetan religion, history, politics, culture, social life, and many other fields. One of the more famous paintings of Bhavacakra, the symbolic representation of *samsara*, is called *Wheel of Life* (Figure 1). It illustrates the theme of life and death that has often been present in paintings. The *Wheel of Life* is a very literal example of how reincarnation was expressed in religious art. The circle in this painting is divided into sections and depicts poignant moments during life. It shows the wheel of *samsara* as the cycle of constant rebirths in different worlds, as well as inevitably associated with suffering and reincarnation. The drawing of the *Wheel of Life* depicts the different classifications that reincarnated beings will experience as animals, ghosts, humans, gods and hell beings. Moreover, this work reflects the artist's deep philosophical reflections and experiences regarding the meaning of human existence, the purpose of man, the cyclical nature of life, and the frequency of death and birth.

Flowers have always held a sacred significance for people. The use of flowers in art is seen as a symbol of the awakening of nature, a symbol of life, prosperity, and spiritual and physical health. There are countless images of a lotus on the walls of Egyptian temples and pyramids. They can be considered one of the most ancient examples of paintings depicting flowers. The lotus was considered a sacred flower; the Egyptians believed that the lotus contained divine power, and a man could be filled with divine energy through inhaling the scent of the lotus.



Figure 1: *Wheel of Life*  
28 x 37 cm  
Tangka-Mandala Buddhist Art Gallery

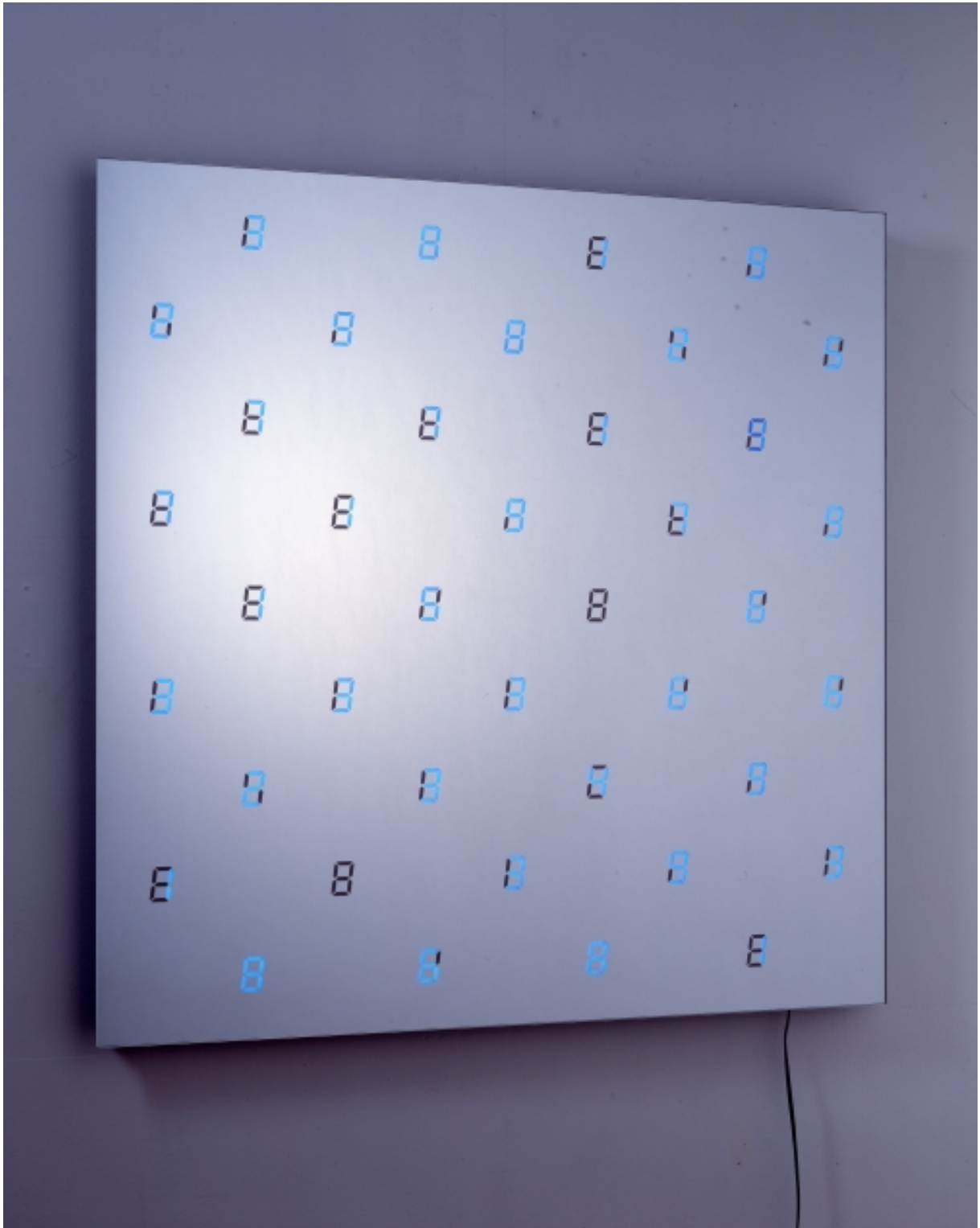


Figure 2: *Changing Time with Changing Self*  
Tatsuo Miyajima  
Courtesy Buchmann Galerie, 2001



The concepts of reincarnation and life cycles are also used in contemporary artworks. Tatsuo Miyajima, one of Japan's foremost sculptors and installation artists, employs contemporary materials such as electric circuits, video, and computers to create technological installation works. His work's theory derives partly from the humanist ideas of Buddhism.

Numbers are Miyajima's unique artistic language. Since the 1980s, he reuses numbers 1 to 9 in different mediums to represent three concepts: 'Keep Changing', 'Connect with All', and 'Goes on Forever'. (Miyajima) These numbers, flashing in continual and repetitive cycles from 1 to 9, express the journey from life to death. *Changing Time with Changing Self* (Figure 2) depicts numbers on a timepiece that change from 1 to 9 or from 9 to 1 over and over again, and the alternation of numbers serves as a metaphor for the cycle of life. He avoids using the number 0 in his work which gives homage to the idea from ancient Chinese and Buddhist philosophy of "returning to zero after nine". Miyajima believes in the Buddhist philosophy that change is natural and consistently happening. "As humans and living beings, expressed through the perpetual cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. On the macro level, you have not just one human but all living things. The conglomerate has a life cycle of its own, whether it is a country, or a planet, or a universe." Miyajima concludes. (Kent)

Another artist whose work addresses the life cycle of a plant is Jen Townsend. Townsend recorded a video showing the lost wax casting process and created a series of pendants illustrating the life cycle of a plant inspired by her garden. What begins as an abstraction transitions into the life cycle of a poppy. (Figure 3) She carved waxes depicting the different stages of a plant; these waxes were then cast into individual pendants. (Figure 4) The first pendant illustrates a seed hiding in soil and trying to break through the ground. As the series progresses, it depicts the process of a seed growing into a budding flower, and lastly withering. I

am intrigued by the act of a flower dropping its seeds before it withers. I find a strong connection between this series and how it directly illustrates reincarnation.



Figure 3: *Life Cycle – Wax carving process*  
Screenshot from video  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HWeoQ7DEXk>



Figure 4: *Life Cycle – Finished pieces*  
Screenshot from video  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HWeoQ7DEXk>

## CHAPTER 2: REINCARNATION IN HISTORY

I am originally from China and have always been interested in its history. My fascination deepened when it came to realizing the truths of Chinese history and culture. From this personal interest, I have learned that China's history parallels with the Buddhist notion of reincarnation.

It is well known that there is a cycle of dynasties that are difficult to eradicate in Chinese history. History repeats itself continuously, but civilization progresses slowly (the regularity of historical cycles). From a macro perspective, Chinese history shows that almost all Chinese dynasties followed this model: uprising-building dynasties-prosperity-corruption-revolt (Figure 5). It circles itself at the same spot repeatedly, each dynasty with different people to fight for it, but every dynasty following the same pattern as the previous one. For thousands of years, the cycle remained the same. If you take a close look at Chinese history, it repeatedly returns to its toxic pattern. Regardless of what people were fighting for, they ultimately made the same mistakes and never learned from them.

Every new force that overthrew the old court declared that the previous dynasty was corrupt, swearing that it was different from the past and wanting to establish a foundation for eternity. Still, as the descendants gradually degenerated from generation to generation until they collapsed, no one changed this process. It seems that it is not a cycle caused solely by the nation. Why does it loop? There is a saying in Chinese that translates to English, "Every inch of the Chinese continent belongs to the emperor, and every citizen must obey his authority." (Shijing) The country has never served the people, but the people always had to contribute to their country. Despite the monarchy's disappearance after the Qing dynasty and the drastic change in government structure, the current Chinese government still shares very close similarities to the

previous monarchic dynasties. The power was disproportionately concentrated into a single entity. The country still does not serve the citizens. The ruling cycle in Chinese history consistently repeats through similar events.

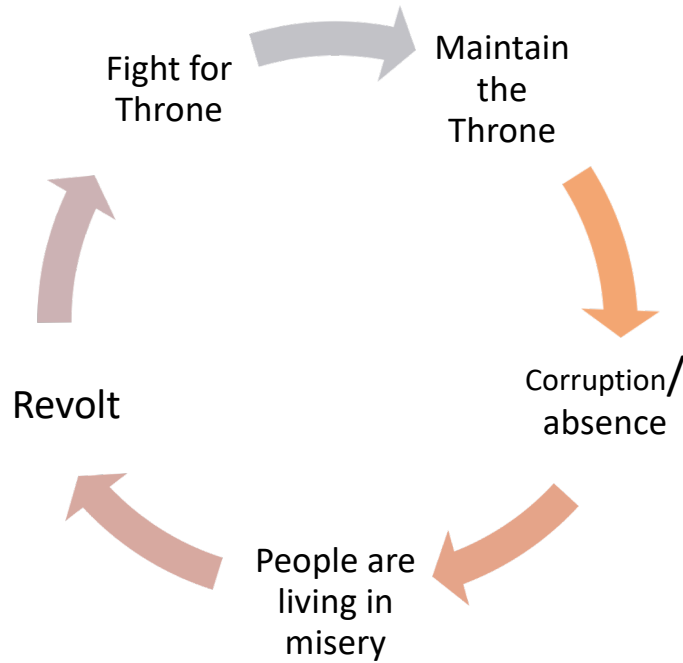


Figure 5: *Conclusion about China's Historic Pattern*

Thousands of years living under a monarchy has imprinted an idiosyncratic belief in Chinese people's minds. They sincerely look for a strong leader and an empire without any concern for their human rights. This tendency is a consequence of the toxic cycle that was mentioned earlier. At the end of every dynasty, people suffered from severe famine, which led them to desire a strong ruler to rise as a savior even if it would cost them their human rights. Through this research, I learned that the Chinese developed an archetype: panic-stricken due to a fear of hunger, which was influenced by the famines at the end of each dynasty. This mentality has influenced Chinese people's thoughts throughout the entire history of Chinese civilization. If

people in China do not wake up and realize what true liberty is, they will fall into the toxic pattern forever, continuing its cyclical pattern.

Nowadays, building a democratic institution is a dominant approach in developing countries. Democracy is not without flaw in this world; however, it is the best institution to be propitious for a society's success. Historical causation is the process of cause and effect evident throughout the flow of history. Almost all developed democratic countries have been through extraordinary protest and revolution that led the country to become a democratic society. For instance, the South Korean June Struggle, The Monday Demonstrations in Germany, and the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic have marked their country's history. In essence, critically evaluating these three events within the flower cycle context makes it clear that many differences and similarities bind each of them. Despite the differences in locations, periods, and final resolutions, all three events are bound by significant similarity, which share a similar motivation: the struggle for liberty and freedom. While the exact nature of the freedoms and liberties, as well as reforms, varied in nature across all three events, it is abundantly clear that none of the events represented a movement arguing in favor of greater tyranny and authoritarian control. Ultimately, all three events mirror the conceptual seeding, blooming, and wilting of flowers. They undoubtedly embody the cycle of history, as these three events are hardly the first to occur against various forms of tyranny but are steppingstones towards a democratic society.

### CHAPTER 3: REINCARNATION IN NATURE

In Japan, the sakura season, also known as the cherry blossom season, is one of the nation's most revered events. Blooming of the cherry blossoms across the entirety of the country commences in the south. It culminates in the Northern island of Hokkaido, a magnificent sight. It is also highly symbolic in Japanese culture. Specifically, once the cherry blossom begins blooming, it lasts for a period of a few weeks before the leaves fall and the flower dies, to be born anew the following year. Cherry blossoms' magnetic beauty symbolizes the ephemerality of life, which is perceived as ultimately circular, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Nikoru 111). Much like the cherry blossom, the political revolutions that took place in South Korea, Germany, and the Czech Republic originated from the latent seed of discontent and unrest, ultimately blooming into the full manifestation of citizens' collective frustrations. Eventually, these movements subside into either resolution or continued dissatisfaction. The similarity between these conclusions is that no sustained manifestation can last forever, which is evident when critically analyzing the history that is repeating itself. Despite historical differences, all events embody the flower cycle present in sakura season, from the latent seed of revolution to the bloom of its visible manifestation, ultimately culminating into the cycle of history, whether or not the conflicts are ultimately resolved.

The lotus is also a unique symbol expressing the life cycle. In Buddhism, the lotus symbolizes a pure mind, body, and speech. The lotus is also the symbol of immortality and rebirth. With its roots latched in mud, it submerges every night into river water and miraculously re-blooms the next morning. This process associates the flower with rebirth and spiritual enlightenment.

## CHAPTER 4: WEARABLE ENAMELED WORK & TECHNIQUES

Metempsychosis & Reincarnation consists of three pedestals in a triangular formation, each containing a group of wearable enamel pieces (Figure 6). Each group depicts a different moment in a flower's life cycle: the flower germinates, blooms, fades away and goes to seed.

Some of the enameled brooches have secret text in braille on the back. There is a tradition among jewelers to embellish the back side of a piece of jewelry with a design element or a "secret" for the wearer. I took this convention to apply my moral support to the groups protesting the government in their struggle for liberty. I created text using braille on the backside of the brooch spelling out terms like "democracy" and "free speech" which are banned behind the internet firewall. In some countries, the government imposes strict censorship of the internet's media content. If people search for sensitive content online, the page shows one sentence: 404 Not Found. I have named each brooch in my exhibition starting with this phrase to highlight China's overreaching censorship.

The brooches displayed on wood stands, have a recess cut with a CNC router in which the work is seated. Acrylic mirrors were laser cut to fit at the base of the stand, reflecting the back of the brooch (Figure 7). This allows the viewers to see the secret message. The specific dates were laser etched on the mirror to commemorate the people who died in each of the different protest events (Figure 8).



Figure 6: *Thesis Exhibition: Metempsychosis & Reincarnation*, Gray Gallery, School of Art and Design, East Carolina University



Figure 7: *"404 Not Found No.1"*  
Brooch  
2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver  
sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 2" W x 0.3" D



Figure 8: *"404 Not Found No.1" Brooch, back*  
Brooch  
2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver,  
sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 2" W x 0.3" D



In this body of work, I employed images of flowers as an ideological reference to explain the idea of reincarnation. The ring *Lifecycle* (Figure 9) embodies a fully visualized expression of a flower's journey from seed to wilting. The life of a flower is ephemeral; the blossoming and wilting of flowers is the cycle of life, sometimes fleeting. There is a strange and subtle beauty in each stage of the flower's life: the seed breaking through the soil, the growth of a bud, the flowering, the production of fruit, its withering, and finally, its decomposition, which nourishes the new plant.



Figure 9: "*Lifecycle*"

Ring  
2019

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
5" H x 5" W x 5.5" D

Part of the content of my work addresses the politics of China. Subverted elements in my work express my moral support to the groups protesting the government in their struggle for liberty. *Cycle* (Figure 10) continues to address the concept of reincarnation. The ring consists of four enamels with imagery representing a flower in a budding state, bursting into bloom, and withering away and lifeless. The last lifeless stage completes the cycle and continues infinitely repeating because of its circular composition. As noted in Chapter 2, Chinese history is a cycle repeating continuously from previous dynasties, never breaking away from the cycle to have a genuinely progressive government. I used fine silver wire to create the line and used dark grey opaque enamel to fill the image. From a macro point of view, Chinese history has not progressed beyond the previous dynasty's framework. Instead, the same narrative has played out through generations. The four framed pieces of *Cycle* signify repetition of the continual path. I applied gold foil to the surface of the enamels in random spots to highlight people embracing democracy.



Figure 10: “*Cycle*”  
Ring  
2019

Cloisonné enamel, copper, gold foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
5” H x 5” W x 5.5” D

Based on history, I believe that every democratic country has undergone changes that propelled their entire society into democracy. Every country goes through its cycle, but the peoples’ goals and hopes of the people are on the same page. It takes time and opportunity to change into a better society. On the interior of *Cycle* (Figure 11), I used blue and yellow for a background color and laser etched images from different protests for liberty and democracy. In some democracies, these colors stand for conservative and liberal parties, respectively. Two groups are held in tension with each other, like the left-wing, and the right-wing politics of western cultures. Blue and yellow also represent the demands of the people. For example, during the Umbrella Revolution, peaceful protesters used yellow umbrellas to defend themselves against

pepper spray in Hong Kong, 2013. Even though my concept's driving force is derived from China's political state, I embrace and emphasize how the flowers I use represent people's lives.

Cloisonné and Limoges (enamels painted on the surface) are my favorite enameling methods to create work. I also chose to make several different pieces to represent different states of a flower's lifespan, ranging from the germination period to its blooming moment and then capturing its decay. I used the CAD/CAM to create frames to set the enamel pieces. This printing medium I used is a versatile plastic that visually frames the enameled element. I created this body of work in the form of brooches and rings because I wanted more intimate interaction with my audience.



Figure 11: *"Cycle", detail*

Ring

2019

Cloisonné enamel, copper, gold foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel

5" H x 5" W x 5.5" D

## CONCLUSION

“Natural life is cyclical. Day fades into night and turns back into a day as the sun rises. One season gradually gives way to the next. Over the time, new generations are born, and old ones die. The continuous succession of birth, death and rebirth permeates nature even though our own lives seem linear. So it's no surprise that some ancient observers looked at the seeming linearity of human existence and decided that life, like the natural world, might be more cyclical than linear. Multiple religions, philosophies, and movements adopted this belief in cyclic life or reincarnation. (DOWDEY)”

A flower's life cycle is used as a metaphor for a person's lifespan. Budding, blooming, fading away, just like everyone since birth, growing until one passes. Flowers do not look pretty all the time; they will wither and decay, but they will come back after a season. Today is the day of flowering and tomorrow may be the day of withering, but this does not mean we should fear that day. This research uses history to explain the concept that helps me reduce the fear of death. Death is not a final destination because lives will repeat in another modality, reincarnation.

PLATES

Plate 1



*"404 Not Found No.2"*

Brooch

2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 3" W x 0.2" D

Plate 2



*"404 Not Found No.3"*

Brooch

2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 2" W x 0.3" D



Plate 3



*"404 Not Found No.4"*

Brooch

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 2" W x 0.5" D

Plate 4



*"404 Not Found No.5"*

Brooch

2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2.5" H x 1.5" W x 0.3" D

Plate 5



*"404 Not Found No.6"*

Brooch

2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel

1.5" H x 3" W x 0.3" D

Plate 6



*"404 Not Found No. 7"*

Brooch  
2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2.25" H x 1.5" W x 0.2" D

Plate 7



*"404 Not Found No.8"*

Brooch  
2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2.25" H x 1.5" W x 0.2" D

Plate 8



*"404 Not Found No.9"*

Brooch

2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2" H x 1.5" W x 0.3" D

Plate 9



“404 Not Found No.10”

Brooch  
2020

Cloisonné enamel, copper, silver foil, fine silver, sterling silver, stainless steel  
2” H x 2” W x 0.5” D

## GLOSSARY

Metempsychosis: the supposed transmigration at the death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species. In philosophy, it refers to the transmigration of the soul, especially its reincarnation after death.

Reincarnation: Reincarnation is the philosophical or religious belief that the non-physical essence of a living being starts a new life in a different physical form or body after biological death. It is also called rebirth or transmigration.

Cloisonné: an enameling technique, decorative work in which enamel, glass, or gemstones are separated by strips of flattened wire placed edgewise on a metal backing.

Limoges: A technique called enamel painting in which several layers of molten glass are painted over, and then over-painted with white and various colors being juxtaposed.



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