Manufactured Apparitions: Materiality and Postsocialist Memory in Contemporary Chinese Visual Art

Mengyao Liu

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Madeleine Yue Dong
Sasha Su-Ling Welland

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Mengyao Liu

University of Washington

Abstract

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Mengyao Liu

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Madeleine Yue Dong
History, International Studies

Through representation of material objects, artistic integration of commodities, and engagement with materiality through medium, the six contemporary Chinese visual artists analyzed in this project convey an unsettled liminality between socialist and global capitalist value regimes. Unlike their predecessors who operated within the field of socialist vision, the six artists examined in this project are no longer officially tethered to a national audience or Maoist iconography. Nonetheless, the historical and political valences once associated with Chinese socialist visual art remain a spectral force in the perceptual layers that comprise contemporary Chinese society. Functioning as sites of postsocialist memory, the installations discussed reframe societal issues of labor, class, geography, and gender with an attention to historicity and affective resonance. They explore how China's economic and political transition over the past thirty years has displaced revolutionary imaginaries, while also placing the radically egalitarian politics of the past as future possibility once again. In their experiments in materiality, the artists at the center of this study make visible the contradictions and obfuscations at play in the relays between contemporary Chinese visual culture and the global capitalist art market.

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My M.A. thesis draws primarily from the disciplines of art history, cultural theory, anthropology, and history. It is a tremendous departure from the topic of my undergraduate thesis in the field of political science, which examined China's village elections in the 1990s. This piece of writing, as well as my academic transition from the social sciences deep into the humanities as a whole, would not be possible without the guidance of my supervisory committee, Prof. Madeleine Dong and Prof. Sasha Welland. This project is the outcome of my coursework and conversations with both them. I look forward to making use of their insights in developing my research further.

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Part 1 | Postsocialist Materiality in Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture

I. The Demystifying Illusion of Xu Bing's *Phoenix*

Between January 2014 and March 2015, many of those visiting the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan came to observe the twenty-four tons of discarded construction equipment and industrial detritus suspended from the vaulted ceiling. Hung from a carefully designed rigging system, objects such as jackhammers, wooden planks, and wheels appeared to float. Meticulously configured to form a couple of mythical birds frozen in mid-air, the components of Xu Bing's *Phoenix*, mossy with rust, contrasted with the immaculate gothic architecture and the radiant stained glass windows of the cathedral. The installation, nonetheless, exuded its own luster. Covered with glimmering blue lights that illuminated their hovering silhouettes, the phoenixes came across from afar as heaven-sent, but perhaps in a manner more akin to Xu's 1991 installation *Book from the Sky* than the Judeo-Christian setting of *Phoenix*. In the making of *Book from the Sky*, the artist assembled a tome in the style of fine editions from the Song and Ming dynasties and authored a text completely comprised of glyphs that resembled, yet did not accord with, traditional Chinese characters. As Lydia Liu observes, both of these works reflect Xu Bing's inclination towards the "play between illusion and the material that produces the illusion."[1] Her remark alludes to the centrality of material objects in the interpretation of this piece, which vacillates between emblem and the everyday. It also introduces the notion of illusion as emerging from the concrete, particularly in the context of present-day Chinese visual culture.

[1] Liu, Lydia, "Columbia professor Lydia H. Liu on Phoenix and the art of Xu Bing," *Weatherhead East Asia Institute Blog*, (2014), http://weai.columbia.edu/professor-lydia-h-liu-on-phoenix-and-the-art-of-xu-bing/.

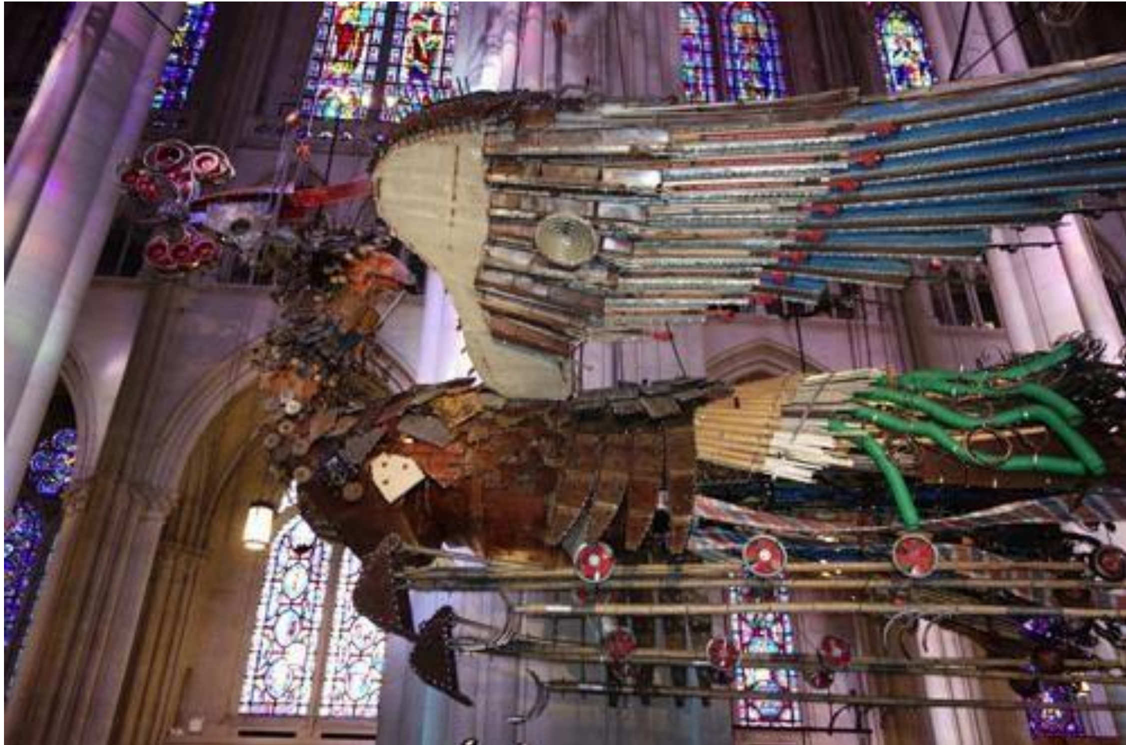

Fig. 1. Xu Bing's *Phoenix* on display at the Cathedral of St. John in Manhattan. Photograph by Miguel Benavides.

Fig. 2. A selection of construction tools included in the composition of *Phoenix*.

Commissioned by a Hong Kong investor in 2008, the two phoenixes that comprise the installation were originally meant for an atrium in the Fortune Financial Center in Beijing. The materials that comprise the two phoenixes, *Feng* and *Huang*, were salvaged from the construction of that building, as well as from other industrial waste depots in China.[2] The beginning stages of the installation coincided with his return to China to serve as the vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Until that point, he had resided in the United States since 1990. In those eighteen years, the highly publicized processes of urban development and expansion transformed major Chinese cities into spectacles in and of themselves.[3] As Meiqin Wang's recent study conveys, a number of contemporary Chinese artists engaging with the nation's rapid urbanization represent the city as a carnivalesque space, both irresistible and profoundly alienating.[3] *Phoenix* certainly reflects these processes of terraforming as well, but the provocative composition of the installation indicates Xu Bing's engagement with broader critical relays between labor, commodity, and art in a cultural context that once centered around the promulgation of socialist ideology. When Xu Bing left China shortly after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the question of China's socialist legacy, particularly the impact of economic liberalization on employment, was paramount. In the historic moment of his return, that problematic has largely been relegated to the periphery of social discourse. The installation, then, redirects public attention to the abiding issue of labor and its history in China.

As Wang Hui contends, *Phoenix* is not an outright protest against the working conditions of migrant laborers, nor is it a nationalist manifestation of twenty-first century Chinese economic

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[2] Due to the restrictions on urban construction during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Xu Bing did not have enough material from the site of this building alone. This issue contributed to the delayed completion of the project. [3] Gao, Minglu. *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*. Beijing and New York: The Millennium Art Museum and The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 2005: 212.
[3] Wang, Meiqin. *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York: Routledge, 2016: 7.

progress.[4] Rather, the installation addresses the incommensurability between visual art, a fundamentally political medium during the socialist period, and the role of the artist in the heavily commercialized present. Indeed, the commissioning of *Phoenix* itself underscores an inevitable complicity between art as a profession and China's emergence as a consumer-driven nation in the global marketplace. Nonetheless, Xu Bing has repeatedly referred to his Maoist artistic training as an enduring influence,[5] despite his prominence within an international art market that values appraisement over ideological adherence. These contradictory circumstances do not unite in a singular conclusion, but it would be a mistake to read them as nullifying each other or as a vacated incoherence. Some existing scholarship surrounding this piece suggests that its recycled components compel viewers to recognize the high cost of China's ascendancy as a global superpower.[6] Other commentators connect this installation's use of the phoenix as a motif with Xu Bing's previous work that has explored the protean iteration of language and symbols.[7] These perspectives offer valid observations, but they lack a comparative thematic framing that places this work, as well as contemporary Chinese visual art as a field, in conversation with socialist visuality and its present-day implications.

In my exploration of *Phoenix*, as well as other works of contemporary Chinese visual art in this paper, I discuss the formal materiality and representation of material objects in installations that engage with notions of postsocialist memory. Through representation of material objects, artistic use of commodities, and engagement with the materiality of medium,

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[4] Wang, Hui, "Fenghuang ruhe niepan? — Guanyu Xu Bing de 'Fenghuang,'" *Hubei Meishu Xueyuan Xuebao* 2, 2016: 39.
[5] Eschenburg, Madeline and Ellen Larson, "The Round Table 3: A Conversation with Xu Bing," *Contemporaneity* 4, 2015: 205.
[6] Wu, Xiaodong, "Hou gongye shidai de 'Fenghuang,'" *Ziyuan Zaisheng*, 2010: 55.
[7] Jansen, Chiu-ti, "Xu Bing's Phoenixes Rise in New York Cathedral," *Sotheby's*, 2014. Accessed December 3, 2017. http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/chinese-elements/2014/03/xu-bings-chinesephoenixes-rise-in-new-york-cathedral.html.

the six contemporary Chinese visual artists analyzed in this project convey a teeming liminality that reflects socialist and global capitalist value regimes at work in Chinese society today. Encapsulating this tension, the objects that comprise *Phoenix* underscore the ease with which a commodity's aesthetic significance transforms from utilitarian tool to genre-defying readymade. Examining these items separately introduces the dynamic negotiation of use-value in the installation: wooden hammers, paint-flecked drills, and steel hooks change from discarded implements into the plumage of phoenixes and, in a broader sense, into images. Xu Bing's arrangements of these objects into images is indeed a high-conceptual move, but it also exhibits the rewiring of public art, labor, and national culture that has taken place in China since the 1980s. Instead of pictorially glorifying workers who use tools to build a new nation, *Phoenix* reveals a grand design, seemingly symbolizing China's ascent to global prominence, to be made of steel panels and dented plastic. It emphasizes the new invisibility of labor in developing urban spaces, as well as in crafting other faces of Chinese society on the world stage.

In her examination of deterritorialized Sinophone visualities, Shu-Mei Shih defines the "new object in Marx's classic notion of commodity fetishism" as "[obscuring] relations of labor by projecting an illusory value-relation between things." In this "global culture of images," a limitless spectatorial consumption drives economic value.[8] Xu Bing, as well as the other artists discussed in this paper that experiment with the readymade, cannot avoid playing into this "illusory value-relation" facilitated by the global art market, nor can they recuperate productive labor as the determinant of economic value. The depiction of material objects as opposed to the migrant laborers themselves speaks to the indirect manner by which *Phoenix* evokes that social

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[8] Shih, Shu-Mei. *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007: 15.

legacy. In her assessment of contemporary Sinophone cultural production as unraveling and remaking the totality of Chineseness, Shih explains the process of "articulation," defined as a "social practice that participates in the larger discursive field by constructing new differences and interjecting contingency to necessity."[9] Similarly, the transparent reference to labor embodied by the visible composition of the installation puts forth a "new difference" that troubles the position of the artist as a single actor serving as a hollowed conduit for the transmission of spectacle. This articulation possesses a unique resonance in the Chinese context, considering socialist understandings of the relationship between the artist as/and the masses. A deeper comprehension of this history and its significance in the contemporary Chinese cultural imaginary, then, is required before continuing the conversation on material objects as a form of "articulation" in postsocialist visual art.

II. The Production and Aftermath of Chinese Socialist Visual Culture

At this thoroughly globalized and poststructuralist juncture, an examination of Chinese socialist visual culture requires the recognition that categorizations tied to national ascriptions serve more as a grounding qualifier as opposed to a limit. All of the artists examined in this project originate from mainland China, though not all of them still reside there currently. They are thematically linked not by nationality, but by their remembering of socialist culture, practices, and beliefs in their work. Taken together, they construct an alternative vantage point on which to evaluate changes in history, ideology, and affect in their sculpting of contemporary Chinese society. Especially in the Chinese context, cultural production has never been solely reflective. In determining and promulgating ideologies, it has been monumentally constitutive.

[9] *Ibid*, 35.

As Lydia Liu demonstrates in her study of translingual signs and imperial sovereignty in the nineteenth-century, the making of modern China occurred along grammatical, as well as colonial, lines. Illustrating the imbrication of these two dimensions, Liu contends that "when the British and the Manchus disputed the particular meanings of a hetero-linguistic sign in translation…they were simultaneously disputing each other's sovereign claim to China and turning the diplomatic negotiations into a veritable semiotic event."[10] Liu's study focuses on a single sign on the world stage, but her conclusion is not that any individual word contains the capacity to invent territories and identities. Rather, it indicates that modern Chinese nationality, since its inception, has been a representational negotiation. As such, any stability in symbolism should be taken not as an indication of veracity, but rather as an indication of sovereign intentions.

In the Republican Era following the "semiotic event" that Liu examines, an intellectual fixation on culture and political revolution began to take shape. In his genealogical account of twentieth-century Chinese aesthetic history, Kang Liu observes that the bifurcation of Lu Xun's "aesthetics of negativity" and Qu Qiubai's nativist, rural-centered view served as dual predecessors to the Chinese socialist cultural imaginary.[11] These pairings illustrate the fundamental contradiction inherent in the Chinese project of socialist modernity, which was both a necessary disruption of the status quo and an establishment of ideological orthodoxy on the basis of class identity. The maintenance of this bifurcation propelled the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) cultural production as it transformed from a guerrilla battalion to a governing body at the helm of national policies. The cultural realm functioned as a mode of disseminating

[10] Liu, Lydia, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006: 30.
[11] Liu, Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2000: 6-7.

the ideological endeavor of class struggle to the masses, whose everyday lives became saturated with the pursuit of a socialist ideal. The commitment to a continuous revolution, in turn, influenced understandings of individual identity and social belonging during this period in a deterministic manner. As Yiching Wu details, spirals of violence directed against "social aliens" occurred on the basis of bloodline theory, which posited counterrevolutionary class identity to be intergenerational.[12] These socially constructed convictions informed rituals of public humiliation, which caused irreparable damage to the collective social fabrics of families and villages. Though the socialist ideals enumerated by the CCP in the 1940s were undoubtedly distorted later on in the twentieth century, they nonetheless profoundly impacted the lives of the most marginalized segments of Chinese society. Socialist political culture allowed for the invigoration of identity categories that had been oppressed during the dynastic era, such as the status of women. In the case of the publication *Women of China*, the portrayal of rural women and female laborers presented layered interpretations of notions such as femininity, motherhood, and citizenship.[13]

In line with Mao Zedong's sentiments expressed during the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the visual media of the 1950s and 1960s exalted peasants, workers, and soldiers as they built the new Chinese nation. The nexus of cultural production, then, relocated to the countryside and the factory, as opposed to the heart of a cosmopolitan city.[14] According to this doctrine, the purpose of literature and art was to prescriptively advance socialist ideologies and depict optimal societal outcomes. The scenes depicted in films and public posters often

[12] Wu, Yiching. *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014: 54.
[13] Wang, Zheng. *Finding Women in the StateA Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016: 78-112.
[14] Liu, Kang, "Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China," *boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (1997), 113.

reflected the collective enactment of recent government policies or decisive moments in Chinese socialism's history that held implications for viewers' conduct. At once "emergent and dominant,"[15] these works functioned both bolstering state legitimacy in the eyes of its citizenry and radically reconstructing national culture with an attention to those disenfranchised by the capitalist system. In terms of artistic practice, a spirit of experimentation revolutionized the process of creating art and the role of the artist. As Xiaobing Tang elaborates, the development of a public-oriented "national form" engendered "new production modes and relationships: for instance, in redefining the status of an artist, in the promotion of amateur artists, and in programmatic efforts to bring art closer to life."[16] In this vein, the role of the artist was that of a political vanguard who actively performed the labor of cultural transformation through learning from and collaborating with the masses. Undoubtedly, Chinese socialist visual culture reinforced the consolidation of state power, arguably to an indiscriminate extent. Nonetheless, this collective network of artists and audiences remains a compelling subject of theoretical inquiry for its mass mobilization of cultural production outside the purview of the commercial market.[17]

Mass subjectivity not only manifested in the viewership of socialist cultural production, but also in its authorship. According to the parameters established by Mao at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the objective of representational work was to drive social change, primarily by elevating the peasantry and the proletariat in a "collective heroic role."[19] Unlike the

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[15] Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 23.
[16] *Ibid.*, 24.
[17] Though often dismissed as mere propaganda, the conceptual underpinnings of this cultural undertaking suggest possibilities for the role of art in society that transcend some of the most celebrated and radical of the European and American avant-garde. Echoing Winnie Wong's comparison, the socialist aesthetic vision proposed that "peasants became art teachers and vice versa, one half of which was echoed in Joseph Beuys' mantra, 'Everyone an Artist.'" [19] Tang, Xiaobing, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 26.

contemporary commercial art market, a socialist artist was not credited through financial gain dependent on the sale of their work or intellectual property patents. As such, the source of the artist's creative capacity originated in the revolutionary state and the redistributive justice enacted by heroic collectives, rather than a unique stroke of aesthetic insight. The duty of an artist was necessarily multifaceted: a creative worker, a political vanguard, a communicative vessel, a cog in a signifying machine that pervaded the entire nation. In this way, artists were enmeshed in a "multi-leveled identification network, both resisting and reinforcing." Their works unavoidably concerned state directives and nation-building, but they were not fully autonomous political subjects by the standards of Western liberal democracies. Although certain artists and performers attained notoriety, their status that arose from this network also dissipated with successive waves of political change in the upper echelons of the Party, as well as with China's economic liberalization. It is worth noting, however, that most of contemporary China's most internationally recognized artists received their training under the socialist system. Despite this upbringing, or perhaps because of it, they have obtained an incredible degree of global commercial success.

China's "reform and opening-up" in the 1980s was not unlike the political transformations that occurred in a number of Latin American countries formerly led by socialist governments and post-Soviet states after the disintegration of the USSR. For prominent scholars of postmodernity,[18] these shifts in world history attested to the emergence of globalized neoliberalism as a universal condition. In the context of China's transition into a highly involved participant in the international economy, however, these observations appear more complicit

[18] Examples include Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, among others.

with the rationality of global capitalism, as it overlooks the historically specific circumstances from which the present arises. As Rebecca Karl explains, the "magic of concepts" ascribed uniformly to China's current economic circumstances "endows the global with intrinsic, inevitable, and ahistorical characteristics, spatialities, and temporalities that predate any historical materialization of the logic of globality itself."[19] This is not to say that these economic changes have not driven unimaginable metamorphoses in China, but rather, that they occurred in a particular historical moment that can must be examined further and with attention to detail. Expressing a similar apprehension towards "neoliberal" as a sweeping descriptor of Chinese society, Zhang Li and Aihwa Ong problematize China's state-sanctioned privatization as indicative of political freedoms for its citizens. The widespread commodification of everyday life has resulted in an "individuation" that "does not necessarily mean the growth of liberal individualism." Instead, it describes "an ongoing process of private responsibility" that extends to consumer choices, professional life, and social networks.[20] In facilitating the development of individuation, contemporary Chinese visual culture is part and parcel of this process of manufacturing discrete identities and desires.

If socialist visual culture facilitated "the denaturalization of marketplace logic,"[21] then the rampant individuation and commoditization of postsocialist life insists upon this logic as undergirding all aspects of creative production. Indeed, graduates of mainland Chinese art schools no longer depict heroic collectives for the purpose of advancing socialist ideology. But they are involved in the construction of material life to an arguably greater extent in the

[19] Karl, Rebecca, *The Magic of Concepts: History and the Economic in Twentieth-Century China*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2017: 25.
[20] Zhang, Li and Aihwa Ong, "Introduction," *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*, ed. Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008: 16.
[21] Tang, Xiaobing, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 6.

conceptual design, mass marketing, and packaging of widely used commercial products. These contemporary processes of individuation place a great deal of social and relational import upon selective and self-reflective consumption. These purveyors of aesthetic sensibility, then, continue the societal role of the artist under socialism: shaping the development of individual identities and differences. Under the system of "market socialism," however, consumers progress towards the status of neoliberal subject as opposed to the mass subjectivity described above. In this network of aesthetic appeal and commercial consumption, the demands placed on visual artists thrust them into the ambiguous circuitry of "self-styling." As Lily Chumley elaborates, the manner in which artists must present their work must be "both recognizably their own and also available to others, and thus appropriately able to circulate independent of them, to engage audiences and produce affect." Even for artists whose work appears to run counter to state prerogatives, this inherent slippage looms.

III. Spectrality as a Method of Postsocialist Visual Analysis

In approaching the dazzling and bewildering pastiche that constitutes postsocialist culture, it is tempting to classify the work of contemporary Chinese fiction writers and artists as eminently postmodern, their "Chinese characteristics" notwithstanding. However, to reiterate Rebecca Karl's point, such a conflation risks flattening social and historical contingencies for the sake of an all-encompassing navigation of cultural space. In line with Kwame Anthony Appiah's contention that the "post" in "postmodern" arises from a distinct, if overlapping, context than the "post" in "postcolonial," the "post" in "postsocialism" does not necessarily signal the undoing of socialism in the same way that the "post" in "postmodern" unravels many assumptions of regarding universality, objective rationality, and social progress. The antecedents and political

concerns that underlie postsocialist cultural production stem from a society that has grown increasingly unimaginable since China's reform and opening in the 1980s. Representations of socialist culture such as propaganda posters or model operas strike the viewer as strange in their valuation of collectivist ideals over individual self-expression, but familiar in that the need for social equity grows more urgent as China's rapid economic development continues. Despite the glossy exterior of Chinese cities and commercial media, the permeations of the global market and the Chinese state's rigid ideological control generate an electrifying and protean cultural landscape in which certain socialist tendencies remain rooted. As Xudong Zhang explicates, "It is in the ecstasy and frustration, obsession and suspicion with which capitalism makes in roads into concrete Chinese economic, social, political, and cultural life that the discourse of postsocialism gains its traction in history."[22] But the visibility of this half-buried past is not immediate. In ordinary conversation, many who lived through the dire circumstances of the Cultural Revolution themselves are quick note an improved quality of life over the past few decades and hope for a more harmonious society in the future. In social scientific assessments, the triumphs of the "Asiatic mode of production" informed by Confucian thinking takes center stage over socialist history. It is necessary, then, to interpret literature and visual media with an attention to anachronism.

As a descriptor, "postsocialist" is by no means the characterization used by Chinese Communist Party or the National Assembly in characterizing contemporary Chinese society.

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[22] Zhang, Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008: 11. [25] "Socialist Market Economic System," People's Republic of China Ministry of Commerce, June 25, 2004. http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/topic/bizchina/economicsystem/200406/20040600239133.shtml.

Indeed, the term commonly employed is a "socialist market economy" based on both stateowned and private enterprises that function within a market economy.[25] This official classification reflects the importance of maintaining a nominal degree of ideological coherence in the face of China's urbanization, commercialization, and economic development over the past thirty years. Given the degree to which such processes of change facilitate the abrading rhythms of the global capitalist economy, the phrase "socialist market economy" comes across as an effort to "restore some measure of coherence to an inherently incoherent situation," which has made the notion "more exclusive, and oppressive, than it would be if it were to be recognized as a historically fluid marker."[23] The historical fluidity with which postsocialist memory and materiality emerge from the installations discussed attests to the socialist past, particularly its system of social and commodity valuation, as simultaneously recollection and the object of pursuit. As demonstrated by the varied amalgam of items carefully arranged in Xu Bing's

Phoenix, the state's maintenance of its political and historical narrative relies on the illusory lure of spectacle. Once examined more closely, with each individual component evaluated as a discrete object, the installation becomes incoherent in its unstable valuation as parts and a whole. The tools of migrant laborers evokes an absence of social security and institutional consistency, producing an encompassing sense of precariousness that suffuses the grandeur of *Phoenix*. If a "socialist market economy" embraces profit-motivation as a driver of societal development, then the Chinese postsocialist condition is defined by an abrupt dispossession of political, economic, and social tenets once regarded as true.

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[23] Dirlik, Arif, *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012: 304.
[27] Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International.* New York: Routledge, 2006: 97.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida puts forth the concept of spectrality as immanent to the post-Marxist moment. Discussing the implications of a radical political inheritance, he argues that the global capitalist present remains haunted by the past. There is a particular inevitability implicit in this formulation, as the "magic of concepts" relies upon an obfuscation of history. Discussing the revolutionary philosophies heralded by communism, he compares them to "the very anessence of a ghost" in the present day, occupying a deferred non-presence in the world's collective political consciousness that interrupts the temporal synchronicity of a progressive history.[27] Derrida ascribes in broad strokes, but his conclusions resonate deeply in the postsocialist Chinese context, especially with regard to visual culture. I apply the notion of spectrality as a lens through which to interpret contemporary works of Chinese visual art. It identifies materiality and representations of material objects as visible sites of this spectral valence, which alludes to the incomplete severing of the socialist ideals and valuations, particularly in the intimate recesses of memory. Such an attention to material introduces a visual approach that parallels scholarship centered on postsocialist subject or the status of imagined communities, but with less emphasis on the narrativization of history. Rather than suturing together moments of disjuncture or distortion, my analysis of material examines the accumulative quality of history through its spectral continuity. Materials evoke affective currents untethered to an exact sequence of events, allowing for more expansive and nuanced ways of investigating postsocialist memory in visual culture.

IV. **Return to *Phoenix*: On Memory and Materiality**

The thematic prevalence of nostalgia is by no means confined to the contemporary Chinese cultural imaginary. In both the most seminal works of Chinese modernist literature at

the turn of the twentieth century and avant-garde films of the 1980s, yearnings for national belonging and contemplations on homesickness surface as especially poignant descriptors of the protagonist as a historical subject. These reflections of the past, however, do not serve as a means of recordkeeping. Rather, this "the spectacle of history" functions as "the central means by which the narrator satisfies his longing for meaning and self-identity."[24] In the same way, these nostalgic visions permit the recuperation of the individual, fragmented by the seductions and disturbances of the postsocialist quotidian. As Dai Jinhua points out, these nostalgic episodes are highly susceptible to state distortion and market cooption. In her critique of "imagined nostalgia," Dai argues that this fabrication of subjective wholeness occurs through the marketing of commodities and the promotion of Chinese nationalism.[25] As such, this project considers the manner by which memory-infused materials trouble the spectacularity of nostalgic coherence. As Ban Wang elaborates, such an analytic strategy operates as a "counter memory" that "brings discontinuity into pretended continuity, opens up multiple, competing discourses and representations, and deprives the subject of the consoling mirror of self-recognition."[26] The purpose of a countermemory is not to disprove, but rather to acknowledge the discordant and amassed currents of historical syncretism as constituted by cultural production.

By shattering the "consoling mirror of self-recognition," however, the articulation of countermemory does not demonstrate, by any means, a universal prescription on (in)communicability or the status of the subject. Indeed, their representation of material objects amplifies, rather than detracts from, the uniquely Chinese postsocialist context from which they

[24] Tang, Xiaobing. *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000: 226.
[25] Dai, Jinhua, "Imagined Nostalgia," tr. Judy T.H. Chen, *boundary 2* 24, No. 3, 1997: 152.
[26] Wang, Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997: 22.

originate. Warning against the seeking of "a 'global approach' to reconstruct a complex neoartistic environment," Guy Debord states that such is the avenue by which the "project of advanced capitalism is translated onto the plane of spectacular pseudo-culture — that project being the remolding of the fragmented worker…to *restructure society without community*."[27] As reflected in Xu Bing's *Phoenix* and the other works in this paper, material objects can also signify, in a spectral rather than definite manner, the constructive labor made invisible by capitalist spectacle. In thinking through the intended contexts and purposes of anachronistic materialities, I trace the remnants of unfulfilled visions that derive from the socialist period. It is not uncommon for such items, often heaped in landfills or hoarded in apartments, to figure as waste in contemporary society. By relocating them to the realm of the avant-garde and marking them as a locus of speculation and sight, these works call into question the process of postsocialist subject formation. It does not lie completely in the mass subjectivity of socialist visual culture, nor in the commodified individuation imposed by hegemonic actors. By making certain historical specters visible through material and memory, these works imagine lost futures characterized by a buried collectivity.

Phoenix is not a nostalgic work of art. Its portrayal of the traditional iconography looks forward toward a widely-held expectation of national prosperity, rather than reflecting upon the practices of dynastic or socialist China. The installation is firmly grounded in the postsocialist moment, through the circumstances of its original construction and its global exhibition in China, the United States, and Europe. Given the pressing issues of migrant labor and urban expansion that have grown increasingly dire over the last decade, it is difficult to picture this installation on display at any other historical moment. But it is nonetheless a reflective work that

[27] Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, tr. Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press, 2004: 137.

draws upon the history of socialism in China, highlighting the transformation of art and labor in the postsocialist period. It is through the material composition of *Phoenix* that the viewer arrives at these recollective associations, even though the objects themselves do not date back more than a few years. As shown by the complexities of the installation, visual art serves as a unique lens for observing the intersecting institutional machinations and overlaid interpersonal valuations that constitute postsocialist cultural imaginary, which Ban Wang specifies as "a wholesale shattering of the symbols, affective linkages, and language that [sustained] the bonds of the individual with community" under the socialist system.[28] Without coming to terms with the chaotic reconstruction of class, gender, spatiality, and other power relations, attempts at piecing together an intact historical narrative will always drift into the realm of myth and illusion.

Xu Bing's *Phoenix* serves as an ideal starting point for an extensive discussion concerning the status of meaning-making across the multiple and oftentimes contradictory symbolic registers that constitute present-day Chinese culture. Though it is the grand illusion of Xu Bing's enormous phoenixes that catches the viewer's eye at first, Lydia Liu's emphasis on "the material that produces the illusion" identifies the presence material objects in this installation as complicating the frictionless consumption of spectacle. Despite its meticulous arrangement, the industrial debris that makes up the installation is unmistakable in its evocation of migrant laborers and the economic inequality that propels urban expansion in China. These objects, nonetheless, are subsumed in the spectacle of the installation itself. This complicity comes across not only in exhibiting the installation for international recognition and commission, but also in the fact that migrant laborers were contracted to assemble *Phoenix* in Xu Bing's

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[28] Wang, Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997: 95.

studio. The work cannot be assessed as protesting their conditions or calling for their reversal, given that the same precarious mode of labor also served as the vehicle for the installation's construction. However, that fact does not detract from the installation as a thoughtful rendering of the uneven hierarchies that structure everyday life in China. Rather than folding this form of labor into a caustic exposition on the perils of late capitalism, *Phoenix* actually demystifies the supposedly ineluctable linkage between image and commodity by fixating on labor as an essentially tangible and human relationship.

Part 2 | Dislocations: Material Recollections of Rural China

"None of these women or children looked really healthy. Since the coming of spring, they had been eating only half their fill; their clothes were old and torn. As a matter of fact, they weren't much better off than beggars. Yet all were in quite good spirits, sustained by enormous patience and grand illusions. Burdened though they were by daily mounting debts, they had only one thought in their heads — If we get a good crop of silkworms, everything will be all right! … They could already visualize how, in a month, the shiny green leaves would be converted into snowwhite cocoons, the cocoons exchanged for clinking silver dollars. Although their stomachs were growling with hunger, they couldn't refrain from smiling at this happy prospect." — Mao Dun, "Spring Silkworms"

I. Uprooted Origins: The Disappearance of the Revolutionary Countryside

Not only is it difficult to describe contemporary Chinese art as a consistent genre, but it is also questionable whether it can be categorized as entirely Chinese. The assignment of nationality in literary and cultural realms can, at times, come across as essentializing the multifaceted population of a particular landmass and their diverging practices. Considering the colonial violence under which designations of nation and origin came to form, it would be a mistake to rely merely on the birthplace of an artist or a phenotypical assumption in making the determination of whether their work falls under the category of contemporary Chinese art. As such, "postsocialist" as a modifier for visual media and cultural production becomes a useful term in its linkage of works of art to a particular social and political history. As discussed earlier, the ideological architecture of Chinese socialist culture privileged the countryside as not only an economic resource, but also a wellspring of virtuous livelihood. Peasants laboring in the fields

populated socialist visual media, cementing the revolutionary countryside as a defining scene in the minds of those who lived through that period.[29] "Postsocialist" implies a departure from this iconography, though its continuous influence is present not only in the culture industry, but also in the memories of the millions of people whose lives were visually scripted by socialist imagery. In light of this twentieth-century artistic heritage, which grows increasingly invisible as urbanization continues its expansion outward from city centers, it is evident that the meaning of Chinese identity stems from a human relationship to the countryside.

This paper analyzes a woodblock print series made by Chen Qi, *Twenty-Four Solar Terms* (*Ershisi jieqi*), and a sculptural installation directed by Cai Guo-Qiang, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (*Weinisi Shouzuyuan*). Their current work today is very different from the pieces studied in this section, both of which were created at the end of the 1990s. In the pieces examined, the two artists both capture an aspect of the Chinese countryside, specifically the socialist aesthetic that drew from folk art and culture. In this respect, *Twenty-Four Solar Terms* and *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* contrast strikingly with the majority of experimental Chinese art of the 1990s, which tended towards portrayals of cityscapes and the bodies of urbandwellers, many of whom were the artists themselves. This shift in subject matter emulates official economic policy after China's era of reform and opening, under which the development of major cities as commercial, residential, and political hubs began to take shape. Art historian Wu Hung describes visual art emerging from this period as "the consequence of a double intensification" in that it responded to China's rapid urbanization in the postsocialist era, as well as further enhancing "the feeling of speed, anxiety, and theatricality inherent in this external

[29] Landsberger, Stefan. "The City's (Dis)appearance in Propaganda," *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Jereon De Kloet and Lena Scheen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013: 125.

transformation through artistic representation."[30] In demographic terms, this change occurred because many aspiring Chinese artists migrated from provincial areas in order to exhibit their work in internationally attended urban galleries. Though the significance of returning to an ancestral hometown in the countryside had long existed as a tradition among Chinese intellectuals and artists even before the socialist period, artists in the 1990s have largely "embraced urban life as their destiny."[31] Whether visually parsed as an embrace or as resignation, experimental artists of the 1990s set the stage for an obsession with the endless metamorphosis of the city. The choice on the artists' part to anchor their imaginaries in the countryside, then, demonstrates an unusual recollection of a fading reality.

Despite mass migrations of artists to large urban centers, namely Beijing, cultural production nonetheless continued in rural areas. Following the commercial and political changes heralded by China's reform and opening, practitioners of folk traditions adapted their art forms to suit the events held by work units and businesses. In his anthropological study of rural cultural production in Yan'an, Ka-Ming Wu notes that promotional events and campaigns served as a new platform for theater troupes, paper-cutting, and traditional storytelling. Wu continues, "The fading of class politics and the inclusion of more entrepreneurial, corporate, and marketing elements in late socialist folk cultural production, certainly, corresponds to the similar socioeconomic change of contemporary Chinese society."[32] The folk art forms that once informed the aesthetic of Chinese socialist visual culture by no means vanished from the cultural landscape of the 1990s. But the dilution of their revolutionary overtones attests to a purposeful

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[30] Wu, Hung. *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2008: 27.
[31] Wang, Meiqin. *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York: Routledge, 2016: 41.
[32] Wu, Ka-ming. *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015: 121.

dislocation of the rural as guiding ideological understandings of morality, identity, and social development. The work of the two artists examined in this chapter employ memory and reiteration in their explorations of that imagined dislocation, though neither of the two prescribes a return to class politics as a paradigm for contemporary art. Instead, their works contemplate the changing role of visual art in the beginnings of the postsocialist period and how that reconfigures the subjective position of both artist and viewer. In doing so, Chen Qi and Cai Guo-Qiang revisit the revolutionary countryside through their artistic engagement with medium, as if setting it aside for the future.

II. The Radical Tranquility of Chen Qi's *Twenty-Four Solar Terms*

Of the water-based woodblock prints that comprise Chen Qi's *Twenty-Four Solar Terms*, only a few depict human figures. In the few that do, the figures are shadowy and faceless, in contrast to the detailed blades of wild grass or the dreamily shaded pools of water that surround them. Drawn from the artist's recollections of Nanjing's rural outskirts, the series freezes these landscapes in time. The manner by which this series depicts individuals as interwoven with the land, particularly in such a reflective tenor, emphasizes the importance of geographic orientation as profoundly shaping postsocialist collective memory and social relations. Mediated through discursive and cultural production, the subjective privileging of the urban entrepreneur in the post-Mao period signals a purposeful omission of a rural spatiality defined by socialist ideals.[33] In spite of the social antagonism that defined the class-status system in socialist China, visions of the rural once served as a unifying moral and political center in mass-produced media.

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[33] Yan, Hairong. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008: 25-53.

Fig. 3. Print of Chen Qi’s *The Beginning of Spring*. Courtesy of Amelie Gallery.

Fig. 4. Print of Luo Yingqiu’s *Dedicating One’s Youth to the Farm*. Courtesy of the National Art Museum of China.

Propaganda posters and state-sanctioned films of the era bustled with human activity and agricultural prosperity. In contrast to Chen's introspective prints, socialist woodcuts were bound up in the promotion of collectivized national development in terms of form, content, and authorship practices. By centering the series on the twenty-four solar terms, a system of telling time created by Chinese farmers in accordance with agricultural cycles, Chen evokes the gravitational influence of the rural on artistic and societal development. At the same time, the muted scenes he presents enunciate the vacated status of the countryside in the contemporary Chinese cultural imaginary.

In twentieth-century China, woodblock prints constituted a revolutionary art form throughout the transition from a leftist movement led by urban intellectuals to state socialism that valorized agricultural production in the countryside. As a medium, Yan'an woodcuts symbolized the hardships faced by Communist Party forces in the 1930s as they opposed the Japanese military. Lacking oil paints, canvases, clay, kilns, and other implements for creating art after fleeing the Nationalists in urban areas, Communist Party artists were materially limited in their avenues for visual portrayals of New China. Furthermore, the synthesis of Western-influenced woodblock styles with imagery rooted in traditional Chinese folk art solidified its association with socialist reforms in the countryside. As Zhou Aimin's survey of Yan'an woodcuts demonstrates, the "red classics" illustrated the social transformations envisioned by Communist leaders, such as "the campaigns to reduce tax and interest rates, to expand production, to establish rural democracy, to provide health care, to wipe out illiteracy and provide education, and to liberalize marriage."[34] These prints, featuring deliberate and didactic

[34] Zhou, Aimin. "Red Classics: Yan'an Woodcuts during the War of Resistance," tr. Matt A. Hale, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, No. 3, 2006: 492.

images catering to an illiterate peasant audience, served the larger ideological aim of reshaping modern Chinese subjectivity around the socialist collective, rather than the liberal individual. During the ascent of the socialist state in the 1940s and 1950s, woodcuts promoted agricultural production and rural development. In his representation of rural landscapes, Chen Qi's woodblock prints echo the work of Luo Yingqiu, whose renderings of his rural hometown integrated Chinese *shanshui* techniques with the political charge of socialist construction.[35] Luo's prints populate fields and mountainsides with laboring agrarian masses. They exemplify, in terms of material composition and visual representation, the coalescence of spatiality and psyche in the making of Chinese socialist subjectivity.

A particularly striking comparison emerges between Luo's 1957 woodcut titled *Dedicating One's Youth to the Farm* (*Ba qingchun xiangei nongzhuang*) and the first print in Chen's series, *Beginning of Spring* (*Liqun*). In terms of backdrop, the two could be interchangeable. They both depict manmade waterways carving out the land into oblong shapes, as well as a diversity of vegetation sprouting throughout the scene. In Luo's print, several young people take center stage. With their sleeves and trousers rolled up, they busily harvest ragweed, forming clumps of uprooted plant matter on the left side of a pathway that cuts through the water. On the other side, the sun shines down on an untouched reservoir, as if suggesting the further work to be done. *Beginning of Spring* also features pools of water separated by land, but they contain scraggly stems that protrude out of the water's gleaming surface. Though three farming canopies are visible in the distance, the unattended reservoirs imply their disuse. It is a peaceful scene. But

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[35] Fan, Di'an. "Luo Yingqiu ba shanshui yijing he shuiyin muke xiang ronghe, kaichuangle 'banhua shanshui' de keti yanjiu" *Yishu Kongjian*, last modified February 14, 2017. http://chuansong.me/n/1567544952235.

Chen's landscape also comes across as emptied or distorted to the viewer in the manner by which it hollows an iconic setting of vigorous human activity. As such, the absence of people reflects, in Yan Hairong's terms, "epistemic violence against the countryside that spectralizes the rural in both material and symbolic practice" that has characterized the postsocialist phenomenon of

labor mobility in China.[36] The mass migration of rural residents to urban centers seeking jobs has not only troubled demographic projections, but also the "spatial circumscription" that informed the unique trajectory of Chinese socialist praxis. Yan's use of "spectral" as a descriptor communicates the enduring presence of the countryside as a driving dimension of Chinese societal development and its simultaneous dilution of its formerly revolutionary association.

Observers have commented on Chen Qi's use of the water ink woodblock form as a technically impressive allusion to this medium's significance in twentieth-century Chinese art history. Chen's work strikes contemporary Chinese art critics as ambiguous in its messaging, yet "as tranquil as water, as pure as ice" due to its precise realism and muted style.[37] These descriptions contrast greatly with the political function of the woodcut movement in China, which promulgated leftist ideology through expressively representing the social ills faced by the most marginalized. Discussing the enunciative quality of these early prints, Xiaobing Tang states that the "explosive potential of aurality was instinctively grasped by the woodcut artists who, in imaginatively representing passionate human voices, charged their artworks with explicit politicality."[38] If "passionate human voices" characterized leftist and state socialist woodcuts,

[36] Yan, Hairong. "Specialization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in PostMao China," *American Ethnologist* 30, No. 4, 2003: 579.
[37] Ai, Hongjun. "Anjing ru shui, titou ru bing — Chen Qi banhua shanxi," *Qingchun suiye*, No. 21 (2012): 106-107.
[38] Tang, Xiaobing. "Echoes of Roar, China! On Vision and Voice in Modern Chinese Art," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 14, No. 2, 2006: 483.

then the tranquility of Chen Qi's technique is a radical interruption within the historical parameters of the form. As opposed to calling out against the spectralization of the rural, the *Twenty-Four Solar Terms* series meditatively resists the urge to demand outcomes. Although the origins of the woodblock movement in China stemmed from anti-imperialist sentiment, the form eventually served as a vehicle to further the productive needs of the state. The planned utilization of labor and resources from the countryside operated as process of primitive accumulation that would enable the transfer of surplus necessary to begin industrialization in the cities.[39] In carrying out this process, the state media apparatus made use of the "explosive potential of aurality" encapsulated in woodblock prints to model lively and heroic scenes of agricultural production. The decisive silence of *Twenty-Four Solar Terms*, then, investigates the possibility of separating the countryside from its historical status as a site of extraction.

The memory of the Chinese countryside as encapsulated by *Twenty-Four Solar Terms* alludes to human devotion to a broader societal mission. The rhetoric of rural populations embracing sacrifice and hardship is consistent throughout accounts of the socialist period, especially in the extent to which those maxims were embodied in everyday life.[44] This framing of sacrificial devotion has circumscribed the manner by which the countryside emerges in popular media and official discourse in the contemporary period, though without the heroic valence tied to socialist praxis. Discussing the commodification of blood in the post-Mao countryside, Ann Anagnost explains that the value system constructed around market rationality

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[39] Day, Alexander. "The End of the Peasant? New Rural Reconstruction in China," *boundary 2* 35, No. 2, 2008: 54.
[44] Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings After Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999: 131. [45] Anagnost, Ann. "Strange Circulations," *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, ed.
Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011: 216.

"produced the Chinese countryside as the constitutive outside of capitalist economic relations by making it bear the hidden costs in the reproduction of labor for a global labor regime."[45] Within this system, rural residents are expected to sacrifice their families and livelihoods to make a living as migrant laborers or displaced households. Rather than aligning with either past or present cultural milieu exactly, however, the radical tranquility of Chen Qi's prints makes a more indeterminate suggestion that positions certain aspects of rural-centered socialism as possibility once again. The series makes visible the immense changes in landscape wrought by the selfsacrifice and labor of the past, but omits the people of the countryside that would have reaped the rewards of their embodied devotion. In this way, Chen Qi conveys the unmet expectations of those who collectively altered the face of the earth for the sake of a socialist future. By dashing the imagined hopes of the peasants depicted in Luo Yingqiu's print against the silence of empty and overgrown farmland, Chen Qi directs the viewer's attention to the land itself. This evacuation raises the issue of constructing a system of social relations and valuation that does not lend itself to the machinations of exhaustive production.

In terms of how the material composition of the woodblock print facilitates its specific artistic deployment, Tang elucidates that leftist practitioners in the 1930s advanced the form as "a new public art that was predicated on rejecting a fetishistic possession of art objects." Twentieth-century Chinese woodblock artists created images that could be disseminated in mass quantities, with legibility taking priority over artistic refinement or market value. The *TwentyFour Solar Terms* series differs from these early woodcuts in its intricate detailing and ambiguous messaging. They nonetheless possess the same reproducibility, as evidenced by Chen Qi's pressing of each representative print at the change of the solar term after the completion of the series. Though he finished the woodblocks between 1991 to 1994, Chen's cyclical returning

to each print reflects a certain material engagement outside of the temporal boundaries that dictate the present-day market economy. The solar terms connote farming for a family's or a village's subsistence, as opposed to meeting imposed productive quotas. Chen's work does not exist outside of the global art market, but this mode of material engagement denaturalizes its transhistoric scope by suggesting the possibility of other value systems embedded in memory. In Ban Wang's analysis of how contemporary Chinese cultural production visualizes the socialist period through memory, he cautions observers against presuming that memory work possesses the capacity to escape from the machinery of global consumption. It expresses, instead, "a desire to transcend the increasingly bleached and flattened social existence."[40] As Chen Qi's series demonstrates, that desire arises not only in images themselves, but also in the interplay between artist, form, and material.

III. Cai Guo-Qiang and *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*: Replication as Return In June of 1965, a team of sculptors from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts began work on an installation commissioned by the provincial government called *Rent Collection Courtyard* (*Shouzuyuan*), which would come to be comprised of nearly a hundred and twenty individual sculpted figures. The original location of the piece formerly belonged to a landlord named Liu Wencai, whose manor house in Dayi County had been converted into a display site (*chenglieguan*) and later a museum (*bowuguan*). Divided into six parts, the installation as a whole portrays scenes of a landlord exploiting peasants before Communist Party rule, which

[40] Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Pres, 2004: 12.

progresses into a collective revolt across the different areas.[41] One of the most emblematic depictions of class struggle emerging from the socialist period in China, *Rent Collection Courtyard* was reproduced across the nation in the years that immediately followed, as well as in Vietnam and Albania.[42] And then, in 1999, it was reproduced under the name *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* at the forty-eighth annual Venice Biennale by a team of sculptors led by expatriate Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. In the view of some Chinese art critics, Cai's

[41] The parts are titled as follows: *Bringing the Rent*, *Examining the Rent, Measuring the Grain*, *Reckoning the Accounts*, *Forcing the Payment*, and *Revolt*. After its initial completion, it was later publicized and revised. The last section, *Revolt*, largely came out of that revisionary stage.

[42] Erickson, Britta. "*The Rent Collection Courtyard*, Past and Present," Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, ed. Ralph Crozier. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010: 126.

Fig. 5. Sichuan Art Academy’s *Rent Collection Courtyard* on display in Beijing. Photograph by Zhou Wenhan.

Fig. 6. *Venice’s Rent Collection* Courtyard by Cai Guo-Qiang. Photograph by Elio Montarani.

replication of the original amounted to “opportunism” and flagrantly catered to the commercial

tastes of the global art market.[43] [44] Others interpreted the installation as "advocating the return of art to society" in its subversion of formal narratives.[45] By Cai's own account, he intended to bring the viewers into the original historical moment during which the original piece was assembled, with particular attention to the act of sculpting the figures.[52] His brief explanation evokes the imbrication of art objects and historical subjectivity, in addition to the notion of replication as an active form of artistic engagement.

It is difficult to say for certain whether the work resists or succumbs to the commercialization of Chinese socialist art. Such a dichotomy assumes the dialectical materialist end of Chinese socialism's influence on cultural production, as it suggests Cai could be dishonoring its legacy by returning to it. But in making visible the troublesome clash of ideological political culture in the global capitalist context, Cai's reproduction underscores the efficacy of materiality in complicating the smooth reconfiguration of class and social identity under global capitalism. *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* insists upon the enduring influence of Chinese socialist culture, albeit manifesting as anachronistic and geographically out of place, considering its European backdrop. Given the manner by which the replication operates as a unit comprised of many scenes, it is useful to consider the entire installation as a readymade. By Martha Buskirk's definition, the "multiple gesture" of *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* involved the selection of the original work to be reproduced, the designation of Cai as its author, and its recontextualization not only in terms of geographic location, but also as a commodity as

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[43] Wang, Guanyi. "Dui Cai Guoqiang 'Weinisi Shouzuyuan' guoji jinjiang de san dian zhiyi," *Yishu juji* 6, 2000: 67.
[44] Some proponents of this view cited chief curator Harald Szeemann's unsuccessful attempt to bring *Rent Collection Courtyard* to West Germany in 1972. They accused Cai of leveraging *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* for media attention and prize money.
[45] Gao, Shan. "Qian xi Cai Guoqiang zuopin 'Weinisi Shouzuyuan' de dangdaixing," *Shiji lilun* 2, 2013: 222-223. [52] Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, "Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe - Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard, 1999," Youtube Video, 1:34, April 30, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBqqqrB1hQ4.

opposed to state-sanctioned promulgation.[46] Discussing the representational tenor in which the readymade conveys meaning, Buskirk continues, “the suspended process of assimilation…is contingent and mutable, based on the relationship between a given element and the context of its presentation.”[54] Though its deliberate misalignment with the context of its display, the installation invites disorientation, compelling the viewer to consider irreconcilable paradigms that overshadow postsocialist cultural production.

Like other works of official media created during the 1960s, the original installation in Sichuan served as a vehicle of interpellation. After consulting peasants who had lived through feudal hardships, the sculptors conceived of a “red thread” that would connect the viewership of the piece to virtuous peasants struggling against an oppressive ruling class.[47] In the contemporary period, however, this mode of class antagonism has given way to the acclimatization of a hierarchal social strata that enshrines a competitive, cosmopolitan individualism. As part and parcel of the transition, the rural context and peasant morality by which Mao defined revolution has been dispersed both economically and representationally. Mirroring this phenomenon, Cai’s relocation of the installation demonstrates the alienation of Chinese socialist art without the parodic hues of the Political Pop genre. By way of replicating of the intensely emoting clay figures that populated *Rent Collection Courtyard*, Cai places the learning and unlearning of class identity, as informed by this iconic Chinese countryside scene, on display. This process, occurring both societally and at the level of individual psyche, has been uneven and persistently inumbrated by recollections of the socialist past. Li Zhang’s anthropological studies of selfcultivation and “therapeutic governance” in post-Mao China

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[46] Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003: 10. [54] *Ibid.*, 88.

[47] “We Must Revolutionize Our Thinking and Then Revolutionize Sculpture,” *Chinese Literature* 4, 1967: 97-110.

speaks to the purposeful construction of an entrepreneurial subjectivity to suit the precariousness of present-day circumstances.[48] Her analysis underlines the necessity of channeling individual desires in maintaining the primacy of market logic, as well as the artificiality of this subjective shift. In Zhang's study, as well as in other cultural and anthropological investigations, this conversion often occurs within closed circles, whether in a psychotherapist's office, in a training school classroom, or through the social media channels. By placing *Rent Collection Courtyard* at the center of cultural visibility, Cai nominates this problematic for global interpretation.

The installation as public spectacle, however, is not a novel development on Cai's part. Indeed, the artists who sculpted the original were careful to create a work that propitiated, through image, a set of social relationships that orbited around the abolition of wage labor. In 1958, the Sichuan provincial government had decreed for the entirety of Liu Wencai's former manor house to be converted into a display site (*chenglieguan*), where crowds of visitors observed the cruel oppression of the peasant class that occurred under feudalism. The two earlier on-site exhibitions, the Hundred Crimes dioramas and the Water Dungeon, conveyed the indiscriminate violence and purported torture enacted by landlords through inducing fear. By contrast, the widely publicized *Rent Collection Courtyard* was more didactic in its "intent on showing tenant farming as an exploitative system analogous to the wage labor system, thereby mapping the Marxist Law of History onto rural Chinese society."[49] It visually clarified, in localized terms, the exploitation inherent in an economic that dispossessed workers of the product of their labor. The paradigm of cultural production emblematized by Chinese socialist

[48] Zhang, Li. "The Rise of Therapeutic Governing in Postsocialist China," *Medical Anthropology* 36, No. 1, 2016: 618.
[49] Lee, Haiyan. "Figuring History and Horror in a Provincial Museum," *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, ed. Axel Schneider and Viran Murthy. Leiden: Brill, 2013: 243.

visual art reflects, in Guy Debord's phrasing, a "[consciousness] of desire and the desire for consciousness" that informed socialist art internationally. In the postsocialist moment, a different sort of spectacle pervades everyday life, constructing a mediating ecosystem "where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making."[50] The question, then, is the function of artistic replication in light of this change.

According to Debord's definition, "spectacular time" refers to how "the consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as raw material for the production of a diversity of new products to be put on the market."[59] In its status as a commissioned work of art, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* is indeed a product on the market, made "new" as a result of a deliberate epochal misalignment. In a certain light, Cai's reproduction could be considered opportunistic. But such a conclusion overlooks the reanimative quality of the installation, brought about by Cai's precise parameters of its material construction. In statements made about the piece, Cai clarified that the work of art on display was not a sculpture, but the performance of "making a sculpture" by his studio of consultants and artists, one of whom had actually been an art student at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts during the sculpting of the original *Rent Collection Courtyard*.[51] In highlighting the act of replication, Cai communicates a specifically postsocialist framing of this work of visual art as a forged material object. This understanding insists against defining *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* as a pictorialized relic made extraordinary by the passage of "consumable time." Implicit in the great degree of public recognition that *Rent Collection Courtyard* initially received, the labor of research, design, and sculpture only served

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[50] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994: 34. [59] *Ibid.*, 111.

[51] Qi, Zhu. "We are all too sensitive when it comes to awards! — Cai Guoqiang and the copyright infringement problems surrounding *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*," tr. Krista Van Fleit, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung. Hong Kong: New Art Media; London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001: 56-65.

to enunciate the class identity as the predominant mode of social organization. The spirit of labor embodied by the sculpture was that of the peasants represented, as opposed to the sculptors who transmuted raw material into an interpellative visualization. Described as a performative replication, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* echoes John Roberts's discussion of the readymade, in its initial appearances in Marcel Duchamp's work, as "an attack on the peaceable identity of objects." In a similar vein, Cai replicates the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* in order to refocus critical attention on craft, as opposed to outcomes.

Nonetheless, the reverberations of *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* extended well beyond the field of contemporary art. Less than a year after the exhibition of Cai's work at the Venice Biennale, a group of instructors at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts who had participated in sculpting the original piece accused Cai of violating copyright laws by recreating the piece. As compensation, they petitioned that he divide his prize money accordingly among himself, the artists of his studio, and the original team of artists that created *Rent Collection Courtyard*. While unconventional, such an occurrence has become increasingly common as the proprietary ambiguity of works of art made during the socialist period remains a legal gray area. Over the last couple of decades, a number of socialist artists who took part in creating "red classics" have leveraged copyright infringement lawsuits against the unlicensed reproduction of their work. As Xiao Lu's recent research indicates, however, there were no laws tying authorship to a work of art as property prior to the 1980s that adequately translate to the present system of copyright, which thereby confounds any legal claim against *Venice's Rent Collection*

Courtyard.[52] Regardless of its resolution, the legal dispute itself illustrates the changing regimes of value that condition postsocialist China's culture industry, as well as "culture's resistance to being completely incorporated into the realm of economics."[53] In provoking questions of appropriation both within and outside of its artistic reception, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* as an act of performative sculpture materializes the fundamental alienation of artistic labor in both socialist and global capitalist contexts. As such, Cai's project moves to resuscitate *Rent Collection Courtyard* from a purely spectacular condition by displaying sculpture as a practiced craft. The ensuing controversies that the work has weathered speak to the difficulty of phrasing art as labor, despite the assumption of that equation during the socialist period. In its constellation of cultural production and materiality, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* confronts the viewer with a spectral history embedded in the very act of making postsocialist visual art.

IV. Visualizing Absence, Material Reinventions

Though inflected by the nascent commercialization and globalization of the Chinese art market during the 1990s, Chen Qi's series and Cai Guo-Qiang's installation do not imagine the countryside as a nostalgic symbol of simpler times. This is evident in the nature of their reproductions, which purposefully omit certain hallmarks of the revolutionary countryside as portrayed in visual media. Both works contain very little color, which drastically departs from the aesthetic of the propaganda posters that once glorified rural land and people in vivid crimson

[52] Lu, Xiao. "Claiming Authorship: Red Classics and Copyright Contentions in Postsocialist China." Lecture, Berkeley-Stanford Graduate Student Conference in Modern Chinese Humanities, Berkeley, CA, April 14, 2018.
[53] Pang, Laikwan. *Creativity and Its Discontents: China's Creative Industries and Intellectual Property Rights Offenses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012: 22.

and golden tones. The prints that comprise *Twenty-Four Solar Terms* come across to the viewer as ghostly in their rendering of monochromatic farmland and small towns. The fields and skies are empty, save a flock of birds dotting a corner or a silhouette walking along a path in the distance. In Cai's *Venice Collection Courtyard*, the agonized and dejected faces of sculpted peasants populate the installation. As Laikwan Pang points out, Cai's decision to use unfired clay resulted in the deterioration of these sculptures during the exhibition at the 45th Venice Biennale.

A number of figures were unfinished and their silhouettes were put on display among the completed sculptures.[54] The skeletal, decaying figures placed alongside those expressing deep suffering articulate a wraithlike quality that complement Chen's cinereal prints. In both representations, there is a certain liminality that does not denote life or death, but rather a space of contemplative potentiality in between those two polarities. In these distorted representations of the rural, the viewer detects something missing or something that has not quite formed.

Observing a similar parallel transformation of urban psyche in the postsocialist period, Sheldon Lu details that the market economy has fostered an "obsessive and excessive impulse toward material acquisition," which has led to a societal impoverishment that manifests in "the loss of touch with the *materiality* of things, namely, with what really matters to urban folks in the soulful realms of the personal, the natural, the private."[55] Meditating upon this impoverishment, the portrayal of the countryside in these two works acknowledge that societal drive towards development, which has effectively uprooted the countryside representationally, is more or less inevitable. But in their depictions, they utilize visual art as a mode of social

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[54] *Ibid*., 219.

[55] Lu, Sheldon. *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007: 190.

engagement and memory, posing the question of what consequences and excesses accompany this unchecked human desire and how to transpose those effects in visible terms. To reiterate Derrida's characterization of the post-Marxist global condition, the "anessence of a ghost" exudes from certain sites of political crisis. These two installations, to the extent that they can be interpreted as providing responses to direct lines of inquiry, articulate an answer to the question: a ghost of what? The spectral appearance of both installations, as well as their references to replication, convey the centrality of material engagement in representing the countryside and in theorizing visualizations in the postsocialist period both new and old at once.

The formal choice of woodblock in Chen Qi's series and clay sculpture in Cai Guo-Qiang's installation reflects a fascination with the material components of socialist visual culture. Unlike the traditional customs, both highly susceptible to commercialization and adaptable to the contemporary cultural marketplace for the sake of preservation, the mediums selected by Chen Qi and Cai Guo-Qiang are associated strongly with socialist dissemination of ideology. As opposed to articulating a return to a bucolic past, the two artists specifically recall hybridized folk art and the political vanguard of the socialist era. In other words, it is no coincidence that their allusion to the countryside does not manifest in the form of paper-cutting or performative storytelling. Furthermore, the materiality of each installation evokes the act of replication in a distinct manner. In the context of Chen Qi's woodblock prints, the repetitive nature of their printing in accordance with solar terms emphasizes a mode of recording the passage of time that exists within, yet still distinct from, the temporal norms of the market economy. The capacity of his series to convey notions of memory and historical erasure is tied inextricably with the materiality of woodblock printing as a medium. In contrast, Cai Guo-

Qiang's work itself is a replica of an earlier sculptural exhibit completed during the socialist period. By radically altering the location of display, viewership, and circumstances of its exhibition, Cai refashions a work of socialist iconography into a internationally recognized conundrum in both artistic and legal terms. In both cases, the evocation of mass production as enabled by medium and materiality underscores the inherent misalignment of Chinese visual media that recalls the socialist era and the contemporary culture industry.

Examined against the backdrop of China's urbanization and the globalization of the art market, it is clear that materiality is an operative factor in assessing visual media. This is especially true in the context of understanding the disappearance of the revolutionary countryside in the 1990s and beyond. Although this period ushered in an unprecedented amount of commercial interest in rural areas and folk traditions, the spatial connotations of the countryside faded. Amidst agrarian decline and widening inequity between rural and urban areas, the cultural production of the time visualized rural life as "idyllic, spiritually wealthy, and powerful."[56] These understandings were bolstered by the commercial market for traditional folk performances and crafts, which catered to work unit and business gatherings. Though such practices did serve to preserve these traditional ways of engaging with the world through representation and performance, they nonetheless present a sanitized version of rural life that avoids mention of issues such as mass migration, destruction of homes for industrial development, and widening inequality between the countryside and the city. That is not to say, however, that the works of Chen Qi and Cai Guo-Qiang posit concrete solutions to these pervasive national crises. They challenge the viewer to

[56] Wu, Ka-Ming. *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 18.

understand such social problems related to the countryside, as well as the status of the rural in Chinese society in general, as historically multidimensional.

Comprehending the cultural erasure of the revolutionary countryside is a prerequisite to making sense of its emaciation in economic and social terms.

Part 3 | The Spectral Interior: Gender and Representations of Household Objects

It is winter in the city of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province. Sunlight passes through a thirdstory apartment window and through the translucent lobes of mu'er clustered in a white bowl. In another room, my grandfather sprays water on his potted chili pepper plant from a faded plastic bottle. He wears a padded jacket over a thick wool vest over a button-up shirt over a threadbare undershirt. In the central room, my grandmother and I sit at the table. She carefully peels a hard-boiled egg while telling me a story. It is the one about how my mother, in her youth, once aced a vocabulary exam by catching sight of the final character on a sign outside of her classroom window. The year is 1994. The year is 1999. The year is 2004. And so on, and so on.

I. The Postsocialist Chinese Household as History and Haunting

Both obscured by and submerged in the widely-accepted chronology of China's frictionless entrance into capitalist modernity, collective memory operates as chiasmus. In their subjective and circuitous quality, imbued in specific moments or materials as opposed to developing in a linear fashion, memories contain the potential to reconfigure readings of historical evidence. This process occurs not by introducing wholly new concepts, but through returning to that which constitutes history in and of itself. Selecting a few noteworthy artistic rereadings in the postsocialist context, the following chapter examines the depiction of household objects in the work of three contemporary Chinese visual artists. The most widely recognized of these three is Song Dong, whose project *Waste Not* is a sprawling accumulation of his mother's possessions that run the gamut from sofas to scraps of fabric. The display is accompanied by the artist and his mother's joint narrations of the individual objects. A variation

on this theme of the readymade, Gao Rong's *The Static Eternity* is a replica of her grandparents' strikingly spare home furnished with embroidered sculptures of household objects. Her choice of medium exists at the intersection of performance, reproduction, and labor as those themes relate to gender. Also recreating her grandmother's home, Dong Yuan paints kitchenware and prepared dishes in photorealistic detail. She juxtaposes these canvases with facsimiles of individual creatures from Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* to create the series *A Short History of Everything: Grandma's House and Bosch's Garden*. Her work imagines an intimately maternal space punctuated by phantasmic figures. In spite of the variegation among and between installations, important commonalities arise from the three projects. The objects portrayed are not strictly artifacts. Yet, they carry a similar evidentiary quality in their material status. As a collection, they convey which aspects of socialist culture have been cultivated by official histories and which have been subdued. For those who have spent time with families in mainland China, they are familiar to the extent that they signify the Chineseness of a household. These three collections cohere through metonymically specifying a generation of women whose personal histories discursively constituted Chinese modernity. In ideological terms, the efficacy of Chinese socialism hinged upon the institutional codification of women's emancipation from feudal society.[57] Undoubtedly, the teleological foundations of state feminism aligned with the militaristic and nationalist aims of the Chinese Communist Party. But for women who recall the 1950s and 1960s as they lived it, their valorization as political subjects most characterized that time period. They held roles as local leaders, model workers, and mothers cognizant of

[57] Early Communist Party reforms include the abolition of arranged marriages, banning foot-binding, and instituting mass literacy programs for women as well as men.

communal welfare[58]. Their testimonies underscore the empowerment of women in China out of the feudal past as inseparable from the industrialization of China's economy and collective national advancement, which solidified a feminist praxis tied to materialist progress. Indeed, the reflections of these women further an understanding of the

Chinese revolution as "notwithstanding grave limitations, simultaneously a revolution by, of, and for women."[59] In this way, institutionalized socialist feminism in China is distinct from both feminist movements in the United States during this period and contemporary strains of postcolonial feminist thinking. For some Chinese feminist theorists, the state-sanctioning of the movement amounted to an erasure of gender difference in the socialist cultural imaginary that ultimately stymied the expression of femininity.[60] For others, gender expression simply took on different forms in the midst of revolutionary upheaval.[61]

In contemporary China, however, the "market socialist" state has receded from its farreaching promotion of gender equality. In the spheres of private industry and personal life, the discourse of biologically determined gender roles has eroded the emancipatory spirit of early socialist feminist organizing. The state, informed by governmental priorities of capital accumulation and nationalist development, funnels the mass consumerism manufactured by the globalized market into producing an uneven cultural terrain that plays out visibly in societal assignments of femininity and masculinity. As Lisa Rofel further discusses, "Visions of

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[58] Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011: 65-128, 182-209.
[59] Lin, Chun. "On Feminism and China: Foot-binding as an Aesthetic, History and Dialogue," *ASIANetwork Exchange* 15, No. 3, 2008: 15.
[60] Li, Xiaojiang. "With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China," tr. Zhang Yajie, *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair MeiHui Yang. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998: 263-269.
[61] Li, Lan Angela. "The edge of expertise: Representing barefoot doctors in Cultural Revolution China," *Endeavour* 39, No. 3-4, 2015: 160-167.

modernity thus must be continually reiterated to ward off possible destabilization when confronted with the contingent politics of gender."[62] The "continual reiterations" that Rofel identifies refer not only to the fabrication of individual desires that often align with heteronormative specifications, but also to the maintenance of a historical narrative that suppresses the feminist revolutionary culture of the socialist period. In the three installations, a discerning remembrance unsettles those erasures by recovering the past with an unmistakable palpability. Across three distinct mediums and maternal histories, the purposeful atomization and rearrangement of these objects in these installations mirrors processes of historical forgetting and remembering. For all of the breakages between the designated socialist and postsocialist periods, the twentieth-century Chinese cultural imaginary has consistently tied femininity to material development. In their exploration of household objects, the three artists explore the ramifications of that association in the visual realm.

The household, then, emerges as a site of temporal interplay in which gender might be unwound and recuperated in more culturally specific terms. It evokes the memory of women as a means of investigation, but as a still life rather than as a portrait. Which is to say, the avenues of depiction are assembled from various sources, as opposed to a direct expression. Distinct from factual memorization or a memorial to the immutable past, the act of remembering stages a historical catachresis that explores Chinese womanhood as future anteriority or the notion of "what I shall have been."[63] Remembrance engages with the women at the heart of these projects and how they envisioned their futures, particularly as those imaginings stand in contradistinction to the present. Such sentiments are transmitted through the comings and goings of everyday life:

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[62] Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999: 254.
[63] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 30-36.

objects, practices, and private spaces. It is evident in the materiality of each project that the channels through which viewers may access those imaginings exist in plain sight. The aestheticization of this material makes visible a ubiquitous lived interiority that is “out of joint” against the backdrop of the neoliberal status quo. In his seminal *Specters of Marx*, Derrida defines this state of incongruity as haunting the smooth uniformity of the global capitalist present while retaining the spirit of Marxist critique.[64] This concept aptly describes the anticipatory valence of socialist feminism, which tied a Marxist feminist identity to labor power, as spectral in the present-day. The memory of this ideology permeates the abatement of socialist feminism in postsocialist China as sociohistorical antecedent, as well as intimation of how the postsocialist production of gender difference and economic arrangements is no less constructed. The three artists portray the era in which they exist as irreducibly composed of a fragmentary past and overflowing with displaced imaginings. This performative remembrance constructs a historically responsible and uniquely Chinese feminist inheritance.

II. Matrilineal Heredity as Performance in Song Dong and Zhao Xiangyuan’s *Waste Not*

Wujinqiyong is the original Chinese title of Song Dong’s *Waste Not*. Both titles allude to idiomatic phrases expressing the importance of making the best use of everything. The former was a phrase that Zhao Xiangyuan, Song Dong’s mother, had taken to heart ever since her childhood. Having faced extreme material scarcity as a young mother during the Cultural Revolution, she persistently saved up anything and everything in case of future shortages. After her husband passed away in 2002, Zhao Xiangyuan’s preservation efforts took on a new

[64] Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Rutledge, 2006: 107-108.

emotional heaviness. Her gathering intensified to the extent that areas of her apartment were inaccessible due to the piles of objects. Song Dong proposed that they make an installation out of her possessions and a section of her apartment that was scheduled to be remodeled. During the initial display and performance of *Waste Not* in Beijing, the two creators walked among gallery-goers and discussed their memories associated with different objects. Some of Zhao Xiangyuan's recollections included mending a jacket for her daughter's first day of school, sharpening old popsicle sticks to clean out crevices, and how her husband had always watered his plants early in the morning. Through these conversations, Zhao Xiangyuan shared details about her life that even her son had not heard before. Discussing the transformation of her belongings into an installation, she remarked, "You see that keeping them was still useful!"[65]

Ideas about what is "useful" and what is not have been completely reconstructed in China over the past few decades, whether speaking in terms of political ideologies or housewares. Given the availability of more technologically advanced consumer goods in urban areas especially, it would also be unsurprising to find many of the objects displayed in this exhibit in a landfill. Discussing the way in which societies affix exchange value to commodities, Arjun Appadurai observes that "desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations."[66] The objects of *Waste Not* demonstrate the manufactured distinctions between different regimes of value. Indeed, many of Zhao

[65] Song, Dong. *Waste Not: Zhao Xiangyuan and Song Dong*, edited by Wu Hung. Beijing: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 2009: 17.
[66] Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadruai. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988: 4.

Fig. 7. *Waste Not* on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Photograph by Jon Wronn.

Fig. 8. Photograph of some of the objects making up *Waste Not*. Photograph by Jon Wronn.

Xiangyuan's possessions remain usable, but that quality is overridden by the overarching assumption that individuals will unquestioningly seek out improved, more desirable commodities. Nonetheless, Zhao Xiangyuan refused to part with her possessions. The social forces that Appadurai names also marks objects as valuable for reasons outside of their intended use or market price. He further elaborates that the "social life" of an object, meaning its path from novelty to obsolescence as a commodity, may be diverted by a certain signification, such as through gift giving. The poignant attachment to household objects constitutes another mode of signification that plucks a commodity from its economic arc, deeming it indispensable. In doing so, the object becomes permanent, a seemingly impossible state of being in the ever-changing postsocialist present.

Art historian Lu Mingjun observes that *Waste Not* places an ordinary household under an anthropological lens, compelling viewers to identify themselves as historical and political subjects.[67] Lu's anthropological reading also takes into account the mentality of compulsive preservation that was prevalent throughout the socialist period. Undoubtedly, Zhao Xiangyuan's accumulation was beyond what a single person or even a family could use. But in this particular aestheticization, her preservation efforts reflect the ideological underpinnings of the socialist period, which stipulated that everything be made useful. From the architecture of this period to the structure of communal life, there would ideally be nothing that was ornamental or superfluous.[77] The material details of the collection reflect the extent to which this pattern of thinking permeated to everyday life. For instance, one segment of the installation is comprised of

[67] Lu, Mingjun. "Yongju jiyi yishu: cong richang qinggan dao lunli zhengzhi," *Rong Bao Zhai,* No. 8, 2011: 8. [77] Goldstein, Joshua. "The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing," *Everyday Modernity in China*, ed. Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Goldstein. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006: 260-302.

an array of bottle caps of various colors. In her narrative of these bottle caps, Zhao Xiangyuan remarks that she eventually had planned to recycle them. Other parts of this installation, however, illuminate the misalignment between this line of thinking and the consumerism of present-day China. One striking example is how Zhao Xiangyuan's collection of empty toothpaste tubes could have also been recycled if she had done so in the 1970s or 1980s, when they were still made of aluminum. But the more recent tubes in the installation, now made of a plastic as to cut manufacturing costs, can only languish in a home or in the garbage. These objects and the memories associated with them reveal how the official writing of history relies on deeming certain pieces of the past anachronistically obsolete. *Waste Not* represents a point of comparison for postsocialist Chinese viewers, concretizing the enormity of what is eliminated by the tunnel-vision of neoliberal commoditization.

Another dimension of this unraveling emerges in the installation's attention to a maternal, rather than paternal, writing of history. *Waste Not* veers away from these interpretations by exploring not the deaths of fathers, which often pervaded works of visual media produced shortly after China's reform and opening in the 1980s, but the lives of mothers. For example, when discussing a cabinet full of fabric scraps, Zhao Xiangyuan recalls how her own mother used to save fabric and endlessly patch up old clothing. She, in turn, did the same during the Cultural Revolution, when she could not afford to purchase new clothes for her family. Her narration articulates a matrilineal genealogy of struggle and survival that extends beyond the boundaries set by a dominant patriarchal discourse. *Waste Not* engages with the issue of women's

"masculinization" during the Cultural Revolution by materializing the array of gendered obligations for which they were accountable. While official writings of history acknowledge

women's labor in state industry, they downplay the fact that they were still expected to raise children, care for elders, and maintain the household during this period. The installation concretizes the immense weight of this lived dimension of Chinese women's lives, from the gendered divisions of labor during the socialist period into the present day. Blurring the distinction between domesticity and labor, Zhao Xiangyuan's recollections of a precarious Chinese womanhood still resonate to this day. To define this period as an abyssal rupture disregards the gendered inequities that Chinese women have always endured under the hierarchies that have persisted into the postsocialist present.

Zhao Xiangyuan passed away on January 21, 2009. After spotting a bird caught in a tree, she leaned a ladder against the trunk and attempted to free it. She lost her balance and suffered a severe injury from the fall. In the exhibition of *Waste Not* immediately following his mother's death, Song Dong pinned a picture of her to his lapel and carried on the narration of her possessions. His act of wearing her visage were not in accordance with traditional Chinese customs following the death of a parent.[68] His act honors his mother's sacrifices while acknowledging that the burden of her preservation efforts cannot come to fruition in the postsocialist present. This crucially differs from prevailing articulations of sentimental reflection in Sinophone media, which often meditate upon the surfeit of cultural authenticity contained in traditional kinship arrangements, which serve as a bulwark in the globalized present. In her assessments of such portrayals, Rey Chow argues that representations of realities outside the bounds of a traditional Sinophone cultural imaginary, such as sexually liberated women and

[68] Wu, Hung. "*Waste Not: Zhao Xiangyuan and Song Dong*, edited by Wu Hung. Beijing: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 2009: 60-61.

extramarital affairs, are suffused with “sentimentality” as “a predominant affective mode.”[69] Though these depictions appear avant-garde in their subject matter, their filmic phrasing reinforces accommodation with the paternalistic authority of tradition through sentimentalism. Posing a reversal of this formula, Song Dong’s performance ruminates upon the assumptions of the past that are now impossible. He does not articulate nostalgia for a period of his mother’s life by wishing for a return to its values or conditions, but rather gives credit to her collecting as more than hoarding or living in a vanished past. The power of his performance stems from a future-oriented vision of his mother’s life as unfinished, as opposed to relying on the judicious authority of tradition to make sense of contemporary life. In placing his mother’s face over his heart, Song Dong conveys an affective mode rooted in memory. It postpones the complacency of sentimentality and continues striving for circumstances worth such reverence.

III. Refiguring Gendered Embodiment in Gao Rong’s *The Static Eternity*

At first glance, Gao Rong’s *The Static Eternity* (*Jingzhi de yongheng*) appears to be a plainly furnished room. Two mugs sit atop a weathered cupboard. There are identical chairs on either side of the cupboard and a larger cabinet in the corner. On the longest wall, a stopped clock and a small calendar hang among portraits of family members. Upon closer inspection, the viewer can see that all of objects in the room are made from cloth, thread, sponge, and steel. Every detail, from the floral designs on the mugs to the chipping paint on the cabinet, is part of a hand-embroidered sculpture. The installation is a replica of the artist’s grandparents’ home, which was demolished shortly after she began the piece. Gao Rong recreated it from some of the

[69] Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulation, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007: 15.

possessions she was able to keep and photographs of the space. She describes her use of embroidery as a mode of sculpture, rather than a continuation of the traditional medium, which once signified feminine virtue (*guixiu*). Elaborating further, she specifies that she learned to embroider from her mother and grandmother, who hand-sewed garments for their neighbors during the Cultural Revolution in exchange for enough food to support their family. Her grandmother's practice of embroidery demonstrates a changed association from a marker of feminine refinment to a provision of basic livelihood under socialism. Gao Rong articulates the weight of this experience and its immense influence on her by rendering the place where her grandmother lived as eternal, even if it no longer stands in brick and mortar form.

Compared to the narrated memories brought up by family possessions in *Waste Not*, the components of *The Static Eternity* convey an afterimage of bodily performance. Embroidery in contemporary Chinese art, by way of both the physical motion of stitching and its traditional association with clothing, connotes a bodily act.[70] Gao Rong describes embroidery as a principally tactile medium with the capacity to produce a felt affinity with her viewers. This impression is related to but distinct from the more immediate experience of watching a piece of performance art that involves the artist's body, which vividly maps sensations onto the viewer's. Employing that signification to delve into and share their memories, many Chinese performance artists in the 1990s used their bodies as a point of confrontation, articulating the pain and endurance of their families during the Cultural Revolution.[71] In the case of *The Static Eternity*, the effect of the installation occurs after both the act of embroidery and the demolition of the

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[70] Chen, Weihong. "Yanjiu cixiu zai dangdai yishu zhong de zuoyong jiqi yuyan zhuanhuan," *Yishu keji* 6, 2017: 223.
[71] Fok, Silvia. *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013: 8.

residence, producing a viewing experience that is felt, yet spectral. If the use of the artist's body in contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s orchestrated a reliving of the past in the midst of its being forgotten, then an embroidered sculpture of a once-existent object functions as an imprint of a time already lost. Gao Rong and her contemporaries, as a generation, did not live through the trials of the Cultural Revolution firsthand. Instead, they have witnessed its systematic expunging after the fact, much of which has taken family and feminist histories along with it. The installation rebukes that process in its continual acknowledgement of lived experiences through the repetition of a particular practice, with every stitch a signal of revisitation. In its stillness, *The Static Eternity* conveys a potent dormancy in the face of an imposed antiquity.

The Static Eternity articulates the notion of future anteriority in its use of a medium that emblematizes femininity, but does not bind it to the conventionally conceived female body. This approach differs from both the socialist feminism absorbed into a masculine state machinery and the "market feminism" that emerged in the post-Mao period, which reasserted the gender binary as rebuke.[72] The remembrance of Gao Rong's grandmother through her home and her means of livelihood fosters the notion of cultural perpetuation through lived practice. It offers a glimpse into how the construction of interiority and everyday tactics of survival were indeed gendered during an era understood to be without such distinctions between men and women. But through embroidery as a craft, the installation also establishes a foundation of mutual assistance among women. The material exchange between women demonstrates a futurity oriented towards common welfare and constituted along a matrilineal line. At the same time, this position does not rely on the assignment of a female body. Chinese feminists in the 1980s argued that women's

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[72] Yang, Mayfair Mei-Hui, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998: 36.

empowerment under socialism was dictated for women by men in a manner that disassociated women from their femininity. In the era of market reforms free of this denaturing imposition, then, they were able to embrace sexual and reproductive identities.[73] *The Static Eternity*, in delineating femininity as a private dimension, echoes their necessary dismissal of statesanctioned feminism. But in focusing away from the sexed female body, the installation avoids complicity in a rigid gender binary that enables patriarchal voyeurism and consumerist exploitation.[74]

Gao Rong's extraction of embodiment from corporeality also evinces a broader critique of capital investment as generating the inherent quality of a person. Ann Anagnost defines this prevalent notion of quality (*suzhi*) as a "coding that moves from embodied value to power to desire," culminating in the attainment of middle-class social mobility.[75] The "power to desire" manifests in consumption, which relies on visibility as much as it does the expenditure of capital. While an individual's *suzhi* is changeable, its improvement hinges upon the conspicuous commoditization. *The Static Eternity* reverses this sociocultural formula in its highly invested representation of objects that signify low *suzhi* in both their market value and the type of livelihood they connote. In doing so, it confuses the logic of expenditure and and desire on which *suzhi* is predicated. In the context of "embodied value," determinations of *suzhi* most perceptibly play out through Chinese women's bodies and the objects that they consume.[76] Aesthetic judgments, with female body as a conduit, are closely bound up in economic value. The beauty of this installation, then, serves as a counterpoint. From the meticulously stitched

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[73] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 253300.
[74] This flexibility also aligns with contemporary theoretical understandings of both gender and sexuality as spectra. It acknowledges the social construction of gender in its own visible assembly while illustrating the historicity of that concept in China specifically.
[75] Anagnost, Ann. "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)," *Public Culture* 16, No. 2, 2004: 190.
[76] Rofel, Lisa. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007: 111-133.

numbers on the clock to the bright hues of the flower patterns on the hot water containers, Gao Rong's precise imaging floods the consciousness of the viewer with a stimulating nostalgia. She wields the visual as an postsocialist technology of disruption, fluidly extracting femininity and aesthetic beauty from bodied consumption. The portrayal of household objects as subject matter does not reduce her or her grandmother to their possessions, but rather forgoes representing the overdetermined body of the Chinese woman.

Gender figures crucially in this project, but not as a singular category. As it unfolds in everyday life, it is woven with other hierarchies: class, ethnicity, demographic status (*hukou*), among others. In this project, the quantitative contrast between the crammed accumulation in *Waste Not* and spartan furnishings of *The Static Eternity* underscores a differentiation between urban and rural. For Zhao Xiangyuan, who lived in Beijing, preparative collection was her mechanism of survival. But such an array of material possessions was not accessible in Inner Mongolia, where the original residence that *The Static Eternity* replicates once stood. As such, the installation disquiets paradigms of Chinese feminism that frame middle-class, urban woman as a linear endpoint and impoverished rural women as in need of institutionally facilitated reform, whether through socialist education or market-based migration to the city. This indicates not only a geographical distinction, but a classed one between systems of value for urban and rural women. A monolithic definition of Chinese femininity comes across as insufficient in the comparison of these two projects. As a custom passed down from mother to daughter that lacks the urgent necessity it held in times of material deprivation, embroidery resembles other types of Chinese folk practices that have been displaced by a readily available supply of commercial goods. Practitioners of customs deemed as traditional, most of whom are women, now parlay their expertise into upward mobility through local tourism. Paradoxically, the rhetoric of folk art

as a path to autonomy for women echoes the promises of the socialist period, during which rural imagery served the greater societal mission of wealth redistribution.[77] Redirecting embroidery as a practice to reflect upon a family history rather than a nation's developmental ideology, *The Static Eternity* constructs rural femininity as knowledgable and venerable in its own right, as well as constituting a heritage spanning multiple historical periods.

[77] Wu, Ka-Ming. *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015: 59.

Fig. 8. Gao Rong’s *The Static Eternity*. Photograph courtesy of the White Rabbit Gallery.

Fig. 9. Dong Yuan’s *Grandmother’s House and Bosch’s Garden*. Photograph courtesy of the White Rabbit Gallery.

IV. Women's Authorship of History: The Works of Dong Yuan

Most of the oil paintings that comprise Dong Yuan's 2013 exhibition *A Short History of Everything: Grandmother's House and Bosch's Garden* (*Wanwu sheng: Laolao de jia yu Bosi de leyuan*) depict the minutia of an ordinary Chinese home: half-empty containers of cooking oil, stacked bowls, ornamental scrolls on the wall. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer notices that there are a few inconsonant characters interspersed between the photorealistic cabinets and clusters of garlic cloves. One of these canvases displays a minuscule figure in a silver cloak reading a book while seated on the back of another person. In another one, a hog wearing a nun's habit and a lascivious expression appears to be whispering into a naked man's ear. Depending on who the viewer is, these creatures from Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* may be more familiar than the Chinese characters posted on the wall or the sight of dumplings laid out on a woven wicker plate.[78] Dong Yuan attests to how both visualities heavily influenced her artistic development. During her time studying at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, she pored over the indulgently detailed scenes in Renaissance and Flemish art. While living in Beijing after graduation, she learned that her grandmother's house in Dalian was slated for demolition. She then embarked on the project of recreating the objects of her household on hundreds of separate canvases. When arranged for exhibition, the trompe-l'œil effect of the paintings transforms this collection of paintings hung on walls into a multidimensional space conceived from Dong Yuan's imagination and memory. To suggest that everything might be contained in the space of a grandmother's home amplifies the viewer's relationship to domestic interiority, as notion and physical space, beyond the mundane.

[78] The exhibition has traveled to many places outside of its initial location in Beijing, including London, Busan, and Yokohama. As such, its viewership could range from those who live or once lived in a similar Chinese household to those that have studied this major work in European art history. For some viewers, both of these may be the case.

Segments of the Western feminist imaginary maintain an assumption of domesticity as a conceptual instrument of confining women and manufacturing their economic dependence. This association, however, does not take into account the historicity of the Chinese household in the twentieth century, which operated less as a cloister of femininity and more as space of familial interplay. Anthropological studies of private life during the socialist period attest to how changes in desire, ethics, and ideas of individual responsibility over time all manifested in the household[79]. As such, Dong Yuan's installation envisions the household as a site of heterosexual and intergenerational interaction. It is not solely constituted by discrete categories of identity, such as women, but the forged connections within it define societal understandings of gender and other hierarchies. Broader systems of power, simultaneously originating from and existing exterior to the household, shape the linkages that occur in it. As the installation demonstrates, such interiority is predominately constructed by maternal figures. The installation, in other words, suggests that this line of matrilineal descent profoundly structures everything on earth.

At first, the juxtaposition between denizens of Bosch's garden and a grandmother's possessions strikes the viewer as mismatched or even perverse. However, the two spaces converge on the question of desire and fulfillment, particularly for the woman as historical subject. Bosch's vision of hell as excessive and pleasurable evokes the notion of *jouissance* as formulated by écriture féminine theorists of the 1970s.[80] As Tani Barlow elaborates that *jouissance* guarantees that "subjectivity for men is and always will be illusory, that an exterior to

[79] Yan, Yunxiang. *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 19491999*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univeristy Press, 2003: 1-17.
[80] In the theorizations of Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and others, *jouissance* refers to a multiple and feminine mode of sexual pleasure that exists outside of language, which is dictated by masculine desire.

male domination will always exceed the capacity of men to dominate."[81] This strain of feminist literary theory, in turn, informs prominent poststructuralist feminist readings of Chinese history. Cultural critics Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue contend that the alternate suppression and condoning of women's liberation at various junctures throughout China's feudal, colonial, and socialist history have maintained an institutional regulation of feminine subjectivity and desire.[82] The residents of Bosch's garden reflects one aspect of this desire, which is otherworldly, transgressive, and beyond comprehension. But they are subsumed in an intensely domestic setting, in which candlesticks and cabbages dwarf the alien figures. This dynamic conveys feminine interiority and private space as comparably vast, intricate, and incomprehensible. Like Bosch's garden, it embodies a locus of desire outside of complete patriarchal state control, particularly in the contemporary Chinese context. However, it is perhaps an even more critical space because it also constitutes that authority as material and symbol.

Just as Gao Rong eschews a representation of Chinese women as primarily corporeal, Dong Yuan destabilizes the bodied reproduction of national culture by introducing a diffuse maternal inheritance that defines history as constructed and discontinuous. This perspective is particularly urgent in light of social scientific assumptions that purport a paternalistic "Confucian revival" in urbanized Asian economics and the rise of *guoxue* in contemporary Chinese society, both of which assume the narrative of Chinese citizen-subjects hewing to a time-honored tradition in their pursuit of national development.[83] The very trajectory of this civilizational advancement hinges on the confinement of women to the role of reproductive vessels and

[81] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 311.
[82] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 313.
[83] Dirlik, Arif. *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China: The Perspective of Global Modernity*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012: 100-155, 269.

domestic attendants, yet lacking the weight of motherhood. That constructive authority, in the present day, rests in globalized capital, which is profoundly linked to gender inequity.[84] In her depictions of "everything," Dong Yuan undercuts this cherry-picked chronology by displaying the immensity of an epochal, interior space assembled by her grandmother. Like contemporaneous renewals of the past, the installation superimposes a cultural genealogy onto the present. But its dedicated aesthetic rendering of incongruities and ambiguities emphasize lineage as nonlinear. In the installation, red household altars, suggesting a spirituality that the CCP aimed to eliminate, gleam beneath an iconic print of comrades Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhu De together.[85] The adjacency of these contradictory visual markers of particular times and places underscores a feminist premise of history as constantly reassembling the past, as to resist the sedimentation of tradition.

The fact that the actual residence of Dong Yuan's grandmother has been demolished speaks to the urgency with which she carefully and expansively works. In its heightened attention to detail, the installation demonstrates how critically a feminist paradigm of noncorporeal inheritance relies on deliberate self-authorship. The status of Chinese feminism as "future anterior" denotes that "its emergence out of the historical unconscious rests in the end on ex post facto evidence."[86] In the context of the installation, Dong Yuan's choice to preserve the space as her grandmother's house rather than a room of her own speaks to a cultivation of Chinese femininity that operates most cogently in retrospect. The ordinariness of the setting

[84] Lu, Sheldon. *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002: 94.

[85] Fascinatingly, this particular poster was made during the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping declined to appear on political posters the way Mao Zedong had in the 1960s and 1970s. This image attests to the blurring of officially conceived historical periods, both impressed by the contemporary CCP and upheld by international understandings of Chinese history.

[86] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 350.

forestalled its preservation until news of its impending demolition, which imbues memory as a means of seeing with an incomparable veracity. In Dong Yuan's memory, her grandmother emerges as capable of traversing the bounds space, time, and nation through the structuring of her apartment. That space, then, came to inform the artist's own subjectivity and personal development. Absent this act of meticulous preservation, however, there is a risk of forgetting or distorting those experiences. The installation illuminates how the staging of Chinese history that eventually leads to the attainment of women's subjecthood, as per Meng and Dai's analysis, occurs "ex post facto." The viewer can assume that Dong Yuan's grandmother lived the life of an ordinary Chinese woman, whose experiences were undoubtedly affected by patriarchal institutions. But in Dong Yuan's authoring of her space, she appears to be everything — all of history, all living things — contained in the figure of her grandmother.

V. The Shared Phenomenology of the Contemporary Chinese Quotidian

Although Song Dong precedes Gao Rong and Dong Yuan by a generation, all of them seek to preserve the material belongings of ordinary women whose habits and beliefs were formed by socialist culture. In the most internationally prominent filmic portrayals originating from mainland China, the era figures as societal rupture that permeated to an individual scale. In her feminist criticism of the genre, however, Dai Jinhua argues that acclaimed Fifth Generation filmmakers defined history as "the discourse of and about Fathers."[87] Their work represents the socialist period, specifically the Cultural Revolution, as societal aberration through masculine impotence. These stories of emasculated fathers and intractable sons reflect common conceptions

[87] Dai, Jinhua. *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, tr. Tani Barlow and Jing Wang. New York: Verso, 2002: 22-27.

of the socialist period as "unnaturally" masculinizing women and feminizing men.[88] This narrative still dictates how feminism is often understood in twenty-first century China: as a masculinizing, state-sponsored practice that stripped women of their embodied femininity. Even though state apparatuses of feminism that originated in the socialist period have largely retreated to perfunctory operations, feminism's association with the state remains. It is perhaps due to a reticence to fall under that purview that Gao Rong and Dong Yuan have both avoided an identification with feminism, despite the fact that their creative work engages with gendered practices and spaces. This indicates not a lack of consciousness on their part, but rather the insufficiency of the term in encompassing heterogeneity of Chinese woman as a theoretical and cultural problematic.[89]

As the works of all three artists demonstrate, the evocation of historical Chinese femininity or a sense of matrilineal inheritance does not necessitate corporeal representation. Through alternative networks of association, the household operates as a space that, through the act of future-oriented memory, holds such connotations in place. An empathic interchangeability emerges in the repetition of certain mass-produced objects in each of the projects: cylindrical hot water containers, New Year posters, bolts of fabric. This impression, in part, originates from the readymade subject matter. In her study of China and the readymade, Winnie Wong discusses the reproducibility of an image or object as deconstructive, disturbing conventional understandings of authorship and creative agency.[90] In contrast with the artistic processes examined in that project, which explored the dizzying circuitry of the global art market, these installations

[88] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 311.
[89] Welland, Sasha Su-Ling. "What Women Will Have Been: Reassessing Feminist Cultural Production in China: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31, No. 4, 2006: 960.
[90] Wong, Winnie Won Yin. *Van Gogh On Demand: China and the Readymade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013: 235-237.

thematize a disordered postsocialist present. They make use of mass-produced commodities within a specifically Chinese cultural context, which in and of themselves have distorted the distinctions between art object and commodity. Their intricate constellation in a domestic setting, however, sets their representation apart from those of Warhol or Duchamp. It is more the arrangement of them that makes the objects are all entirely familiar. The reproducible readymades at the center of each project intensifies the viewer's empathic response, as so many Chinese households are comprised of these items. The most salient of the unifying notions that come across are the reverence for individual sacrifice for the sake of the collective and an abiding concern for future generations, both of which stem from the familial space of the household.

In his examination of interiority as portrayed by Chinese visual artists in the 1990s, Wu discusses the portrayal of private space as a reaction to the unprecedented changes occurring outside of the home. Furthermore, the anchoring domesticity of the interior compounded with a great sense of emotional investment in high-end belongings which, during that period, were well beyond what an average family could afford.[91] He concludes that "the interior space, with its fragmentary figures and things, is always in a perpetual present."[92] The three works examined in this section, to some extent, follow this delineation in that they cannot be placed exactly in time. Though there are time-telling implements represented in each of the installations, they are frozen in memory. As such, there is no sense of coherent linear development in the material objects represented, nor in the separate installations. The "perpetual present" of these works, then, is an

[91] The 1994 film *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen) exemplifies the immensity of affective attachments to newly introduced commodities to be placed in the home. Ermo's preoccupation with owning the largest television set in the county without knowledge of its function or relevance to her daily life attests to the illusory connection between postsocialist Chinese consumers and the objects of their desire.
[92] Wu, Hung. *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2008: 10.

accumulative one that contains an assembly of objects from vastly different time periods, which imbues the present with a spectral weight. Furthermore, as fragmented as these commodities are in isolation, they are united in their selection and maintenance by a maternal figure. Though domestic responsibilities were not accorded to women in the same manner as Western arrangements of society and kinship, the recollections of these three artists through their work intimately tie the space to a gendered association. Amidst the fracturing of Chinese social life that has manifested in demolition of residences and the desecration of previous held values, the steadiness of the interior has remained. Through their crystallization in memory, artists and viewers can more carefully calibrate their historically informed subjectivities.

It is in this precarious and ever-changing societal atmosphere that the works of Song Dong and Zhao Xiangyuan, Gao Rong, and Dong Yuan resonate as profoundly necessary. Each work is an accumulation, visualizing building the present as a teeming amalgamation of attachments and materials from the past. They reimagine the past and in doing so, reassess practices of remembrance, grief, and heritage. These installations also demonstrate the specificity of memory tied to anachronistic material objects, which signify their circulation in a fundamentally different economic systems. Despite their representations of everyday commodities, the installations discussed in this chapter do not overlap much with the conceptual messaging of other readymade gestures in postmodern or avant-garde visual art. This is in part due to the fact that the objects depicted were not mass-manufactured with the same market-driven value in mind. As such, rather than registering to the viewer as antiques or outdated models in a series, they access a sense of public affect across national and generational lines. These installations understand Chinese identity as ambiguous, yet historically specific and tied to an era that witnessed the eradication of certain gender-based marginalization, or at least the

widely-held expectation of such a reality. The three works of art examined diverge from a complacent sentimentality that would allow the struggles and triumphs of twentieth-century Chinese women to gather dust or decompose. They demonstrate that memory is an action — one that must be continually acted and reenacted as time goes on.

Epilogue | The Objects of a System

The circulation for literature and art during the socialist period, implemented by the state for the education and indoctrination of the masses, precluded the conflation of a work of art as a marketable commodity. Consequently, widely accepted theorizations of social differentiation through cultural consumption run into complications when confronted by a singularity in tastes and everyday practices.[93] As Laikwan Pang clarifies, the reception to socialist visual art and popular performances reflects a kind of "social mimesis," which she defines as "a difficult process of individuals being coerced into the political order and individuals longing for identification with others in the midst of fierce competition and antagonism."[94] Under such a system of self-definition largely divorced from the socially coded possession of objects, the boundaries of the individual subject become tractable. From early public posters encouraging literacy in the countryside to Jiang Qing's model operas, socialist cultural production centered on the enunciation of a mass subjectivity in which individuals functioned both as valuable contributors and replaceable parts. This mode of emancipatory mechanization under Mao "was enmeshed within a form of mass subjectivity released from individual limitations and thus able to become an expression of humanity."[95] Even when cultural production focused on an individual's achievements as a model, the intention was "not for others to look upon, but for them to actively transform themselves accordingly."[96] In a social fabric woven by persistent

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[93] In her study of Chinese cultural production during the 1960s and 1970s, Laikwan Pang uses the term "singularity" as opposed to "uniformity" for its doubled meaning of following a single standard as a means of differentiating between social groups.
[94] Pang, Laikwan, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2017: 10.
[95] Chen, Tina Mai, "The Human-Machine Continuum in Maoism: The Intersection of Soviet Socialist Realism, Japanese Theoretical Physics, and Chinese Revolutionary Theory," *Cultural Critique* 80, 2012: 155.
[96] Pang, Laikwan, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution*, New York: Verso, 2017: 88.

imitation and reproduction, subjective formation occurred through the labor of this transformation and the differences between individual iterations.

The distribution of material objects during the socialist period also followed this trajectory, as evidenced by the commonalities between the items represented by the three artists in the third chapter. Forty or fifty years ago, the floral-patterned hot water containers and porcelain bowls, hand-polished with the assumption that they would last throughout generations, were a symbol of "social mimesis." Their pervasive presence in Chinese households was not associated with market-based calculations or persuasive advertising. Rather, they demonstrated a family's personal identification with the mass subjectivity of socialist political culture. As such, critically approaching the status of material objects in postsocialist China deepens and expands analyses of commodity consumption propelled by commercial value. As discussed by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, consumption of objects in a market economy is produces "the organization of all these things in a signifying fabric...consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs."[97] Consumers do not purchase and accumulate material objects out of necessity, but rather as an attempt to construct social totality and the self through their commodity preferences. It contemporary China, the mass subjectivity of the socialist past is overlaid by the consumptive logic that Baudrillard conveys. The representation of material objects and material engagement in the six works of art discussed in this project cannot change this dominant system of valuation, given that each installation in and of itself is a commodity on the global art market, made possible through a transactional process of compensation. But in their signification of a social fabric that existed as precedent and haunts as history, the materials of these installations underscore the utterly constructed nature of both mass subjectivity under

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[97] Baudrillard, Jean, *The System of Objects*, tr. James Benedict. New York: Verso, 2006: 218.

Chinese socialism and autonomous personhood under global capitalism.

Taken together, the installations examined in this study of materiality and postsocialist memory in contemporary Chinese visual art reflect the process of "revaluation" in the spheres of economic organization, residency, welfare, and daily activities. As Joshua Goldstein explains, this transformation entails "not only how China's merging into the mainstream of global capitalism…[commoditized] a whole array of goods and services that were previously not for sale...but also how these economic revaluations are linked to profound changes in people's social values and perceptions of self."[98] Within that category, visual art serves the dual purpose of emblematize that change in its shifting role during the socialist and postsocialist eras. Unlike material objects in isolation, however, the representation of objects and artistic engagement with materiality actively emphasizes the extent to which revaluation in economic and cultural terms mutually reinforce each other, shaping the direction of societal development. Despite the imposition of coherence through historical narratives, whether dictated from the state or theorized by scholars, lived experience ultimately presents conflicts and exceptions to sweeping empirical descriptions. As articulated through visual art, this sort of quotidian history directs the viewer to the rhetoric, economic circulations, and hierarchies that determine the postsocialist revaluation described above. The works of art at the center of this project visualize the present as disordered assembly of past convictions, incomplete erasures, and overlapping displacements. But by the same brushstroke, the present is also mutable and intricate, more and more open to interpretation.

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[98] Goldstein, Joshua, "Introduction," *Everyday Modernity in China*, ed. Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Goldstein. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006: 18.

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