Embodied Narratives: Body Politics in Contemporary Chinese Artistic Discourse

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the visual construction, politicization, and transformation of the body in Chinese contemporary art from the Cultural Revolution to the present. Using a Foucauldian genealogical approach combined with theories of embodiment and art theory, it explores how representations of the body reflect shifting regimes of power within China's evolving social landscape. The dissertation is organized into two main parts. The body here does not appear as a static subject; instead, it emerges as a dynamic site continually shaped by state control and sensory experience.

In the first part, the study traces the evolution of bodily representation across distinct historical stages. It begins with the figure of the "Socialist New Man" during the Maoist era, demonstrating how bodily images enforced ideological discipline and collective identity. In the 1980s, as state cultural controls relaxed, artists began to treat the body as a medium of individual expression and sensory exploration, signaling a shift from political instrumentality to sites of new subjectivities. The 1990s witnessed performance artists pushing the body to its physical and psychological limits. Using pain, these artists challenged institutional violence and articulated dissent transcending spoken language. From the 2000s onward, artists have reimagined the body in digital and virtual forms, negotiating identity within state-regulated, algorithmic environments. This section demonstrates how visual art in China has continually redefined the body in terms of shifting structures of power and perception.

The second part focuses on two recurring figures within contemporary Chinese art. The first is the mutable image of Mao Zedong. Contemporary artists destabilize this political icon through repetition, parody, and ironic citation. By fragmenting and recontextualizing Mao's likeness, these artists reveal the mechanisms of visual authority, historical memory, and ideological control surrounding his figure. The second is the representation of the woman's body, which emerges as a contested arena for negotiating the tension between objectification and agency. Through experimental media, performance, and self-representation, women artists confront the legacy of the male gaze and assert new forms of bodily autonomy and subjectivity. This analysis examines how gender, nationalism, and visual control intersect in contemporary Chinese art, revealing how artists mobilize the body as both a material and symbolic resource for challenging dominant narratives, renegotiating identity, and exposing the structures of power embedded in everyday life.

The Author

Meng Yi is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Art and Art Theory at the University of Cologne. Her research examines representation of the body in contemporary Chinese art, with particular attention to gender, visuality, and transnational modernity. She explores how artists use bodily imagery to negotiate political, social, and historical tensions in a rapidly changing society. Her articles have appeared in *Woman's Art Journal, ASAP/Journal, and Visual Studies*.

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Introduction

What is the body in Chinese art? In Chinese visual culture, the human figure has never been simply an anatomical object or a neutral site of mimetic representation. In traditional painting, the body did not appear as visible flesh or as a form exposed for anatomical accuracy. As art historian John Hay observes, "Chinese art was produced and seen within a very different set of frames... It was dispersed through metaphors locating it in the natural world by transformational resonance and brushwork that embodied the cosmic-human reality of qi, or energy" (Hay, 1994, p. 44). The body was not a stable form to be modeled or copied. Instead, it was spatially disassembled and placed within a cosmological reference system.

As the twentieth century began, new Western-style art academies shook up traditional ways of seeing and creating art. Pioneering artists like Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian introduced European techniques to their practices, teaching valuable skills such as anatomical drawing, linear perspective, and using light and shadow, known as chiaroscuro. A significant part of this change was the emphasis on the nude figure. David Clarke notes, "The challenge posed by the nude lay less in what was being depicted than in how it was being depicted. It involved a whole new approach to image-making—working from life" (Clarke, 2011, p. 116). This new focus did not merely expand the artist's formal vocabulary. It called into question the entire visual foundation of Chinese art. European academic realism promoted an observational logic in which the body could no longer remain implied. Artists now measured, observed, and rendered the body directly. It marked a decisive move from metaphorical and cosmological modes of depiction toward visual empiricism.

After founding the People's Republic of China in 1949, the body took on new political urgency. Its visibility became strictly scripted, especially in *yangbanxi* (model operas) and propaganda materials. The same clenched fists, raised arms, and forward gazes appeared repeatedly across media platforms. These gestures were so often replicated that they became visual laws, not creative decisions. What kind of body was being constructed for public view? These visual formulas did not disappear after the Cultural Revolution. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the body had become a source of anxiety and controversy. In 1979, Yuan Yunsheng painted *Water-Splashing Festival: Ode to Life*, a mural that depicted a Dai minority ritual and included nude female figures. The work caused an immediate uproar because it introduced nudity into a state-sanctioned public space. Around the same time,

Wang Keping carved rough wooden figures with distorted forms and sealed mouths. Though these works may seem familiar or moderate today, they drew fierce criticism and official resistance when first exhibited. This contrast prompts reflection: Why did these images disturb viewers then, and what has since changed our ways of seeing?

From the 1990s onward, the artist's body became a site for radical experimentation. Zhang Huan used his body in performances such as *12 Square Meters* (1994) and *65 Kilograms* (1994), subjecting himself to filth, exhaustion, and physical strain. He Yunchang continued this trajectory in works such as *One Rib* (2008), in which he surgically removed a rib from his own body, and *One Meter Democracy* (2010), where he invited an audience to vote on whether he should cut a one-meter incision into his torso. Zhu Yu provoked even sharper controversy with *Skin Graft* (2000), in which he sewed his removed skin onto pork flesh, and *Eating People* (2000), which reportedly involved the cooking and ingestion of a human fetus. What compels these artists to use violated bodies as their primary material during this moment in Chinese history? With the rise of the internet, images that once shocked viewers in physical space have become increasingly acquainted in virtual environments. For people working in China's tightly regulated media landscape, navigating these constraints has become an ongoing negotiation. How do contemporary Chinese artists respond to a system where visibility is enabled and restricted?

This introduction establishes the conceptual foundation and methodological orientation of the dissertation. It begins by tracing the shifting paradigms of bodily representation in Chinese visual culture, from classical cosmology to socialist iconography. It then outlines the key research questions and central aims, positioning the body as a visual and political site shaped by power and identity. The chapter describes the dissertation's structure, which moves from a historical genealogy to a thematic exploration of two recurring bodily figures. It also presents the theoretical and methodological frameworks, drawing from Foucault's genealogy, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Rancière's politics of aesthetics. These frameworks help illuminate how bodily imagery is produced in different historical contexts. The literature review examines Western and Chinese scholarship, identifying conceptual gaps and disciplinary imbalances. Finally, the introduction defines critical terms such as "contemporary Chinese art" and "the West," treating them not as neutral categories but as historically produced and epistemologically fraught constructs.

Research Aims

This dissertation re-examines the body as a central site in contemporary Chinese art, drawing from art history and visual culture. Rather than treating the body as a passive object, I analyze how it mediates power, enables agency, and shapes contested identities. Through close readings of artworks across periods, I show how the body can operate both as an instrument of state control and as a site for personal expression and cultural dissent. Moving beyond stereotypes of Chinese art as rigid or state-bound, I examine how artists use bodily imagery to negotiate the complex ties between self and society. Through these practices, the body becomes a site of tension where tradition confronts ideology, and artistic intervention drives cultural change. I aim to clarify how these works open new perspectives on subjectivity, agency, and collective experience.

The goals of this research are threefold. First, I use the body as a lens to examine how politics, culture, and identity intersect in Chinese art. Second, I trace how historical ruptures and political shifts shape the visual logic of the body. Third, I analyze how individual artworks challenge inherited narratives and open new spaces for selfhood and collective belonging. In doing so, I question Eurocentric art historical paradigms, patriarchal constructions of femininity, and essentialist critiques of Chinese politics. I seek to develop a more situated perspective that accounts for local specificities and shifting visual regimes. This study argues that the image of the body is not only a mirror of society but a method of critique. Through this lens, I show how art contributes to rethinking questions of vision, power, and belonging in contemporary China.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into two main parts and consists of six substantive chapters. It moves between chronological and thematic approaches, balancing a macro-historical narrative with micro-level visual analysis. Part I maps the genealogies of bodily imagery in Chinese art after 1949. It examines four key periods: the Maoist era, the 1980s, the 1990s, and the digital transformations since 2000. Each chapter situates the body within rapidly shifting political and artistic contexts. It explores how the body operates as a surface for ideology, reflects social order, and responds to changing visual languages.

Part II adopts a thematic and iconographic perspective, focusing on two recurring bodily figures: Mao Zedong and the woman's body. These symbolic forms are examined through their visual persistence and transformation across different historical configurations. Mao's body shifts from a sacred icon to an object of parody and artistic dismantling, and the woman's body moves from revolutionary erasure to commercial overexposure. Tracing these transformations, the dissertation shows how bodily imagery becomes a dynamic site for negotiating visual politics in historical and contemporary contexts.

Part I: Historical Genealogies of the Body

Chapter 1. Constructing the "Socialist New Man" in Maoist Visual Culture (1949–1976)
This chapter examines how the "Socialist New Man" was shaped as a political subject and a bodily ideal. Drawing on Confucian legacies, it analyzes how Communist ideology redefined the moral and visual norms of the body. It focuses on Mao Zedong's period, using materials such as the Yan'an Talks, *yangbanxi*, and propaganda posters. The chapter explores how figures such as the worker, soldier, peasant, and Iron Girl became embodied icons of state ideology. These images functioned as propaganda, transforming the individual body into a symbol of collective identity and moral order. The analysis uncovers the visual strategies that governed body politics under socialism.

Chapter 2. Reimagining the Body: Sensory and Artistic Shifts in 1980s China
This chapter explores how artists reimagined the body during the early years of reform. In the 1980s, Between 1977 and 1989, Chinese art shifted from collectivist norms to sensory and individual exploration. Artists employed painting, installation, performance, and collective action to launch a sensory revolution. Drawing on JacRancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible," I examine how artists restructured visibility and revealed previously suppressed bodily experience. From Scar Art to the Stars Exhibition and the 85 New Wave, the chapter shows how the body became a tool of resistance and a site for public intervention. Artistic innovation during this period was political and formal, challenging state-imposed aesthetic order and amplifying marginal voices.

Chapter 3. Identity Crisis and the Violent Body in 1990s Chinese Performance Art
This chapter investigates why violence and self-inflicted pain became central to performance art in the 1990s. Amid rapid market reform and ideological collapse, artists like Zhang Huan,

Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao used their bodies to expose the psychological and social trauma of their generation. The body became a definitive frontier for autonomy and critique in a context where speech and image faced censorship. These performances also inherited past wounds, including revolutionary violence, family suffering, and cultural rupture, turning the body into a living archive. Engaging theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Elaine Scarry, I argue that bodily violence negotiates the tensions between control and resistance, memory and forgetting individual pain, and collective history. In doing so, the body emerges as a site of struggle and a vessel of historical inheritance.

Chapter 4. Virtual Bodies: Digital Transformations and New Embodiments since 2000
This chapter examines how the rise of the internet has transformed bodily representation in contemporary Chinese art. I focus on three influential artists: Cao Fei, Miao Ying, and Lu Yang. Their works develop new forms of embodiment, memory, and agency within and against China's digital infrastructures. Cao Fei's *RMB City* explores how virtual avatars enact and recompose collective memory within the hyperreal logic of online space. Miao Ying's projects, such as *LAN Love Poem* and *Hardcore Digital Detox*, use humor, censorship aesthetics, and glitch effects to show how the body survives and resists algorithmic control. Lu Yang's posthuman experiments stretch the limits of gender, identity, and mortality. Through digital doubles and virtual simulations, her work questions the very boundaries of the human. Drawing on theories from Baudrillard, Haraway, and Ferrando, I argue that the digital body in China is neither disembodied nor liberated. It is continually produced and contested within a shifting technical and cultural forces nexus.

Part II: Contemporary Perspectives on Bodily Imager

Chapter 5. Iconographies of Power: Mao Zedong's Body and the Politics of Representation
This chapter examines the changing visual politics of Mao Zedong's image in contemporary Chinese art. Once a sacred icon of revolutionary devotion, Mao's body has become a contested site of reinterpretation and aesthetic critique. During the Mao era, his image unified national ideology and collective belief. After his death, however, that unity fractured under political transition and cultural reevaluation. Contemporary artists such as Wang Keping, Zhang Hongtu, Liu Wei, and Li Shan revisit Mao's figure and question its symbolic authority. Their works move between nostalgia and disruption, reflecting collective memory

and critical detachment tensions. Drawing on theories of sovereign power and the symbolic body, I explore how Mao's image continues to influence national identity and political memory discourses.

Chapter 6. Nowhere to Hide: Exploring Bodyscapes of Chinese Women in the Place of Modernity

This chapter analyzes how the female body has functioned as a contested site for modernity and power in Chinese art from 1949 to the present. In the Maoist period, women were portrayed as disciplined, desexualized symbols of socialist virtue. With reform and opening, artists such as Yuan Yunsheng and Wang Qingsong introduced the female nude and the commercialized "material girl" into the public eye. Despite increased visibility, the female body often remained a surface for national and market projections rather than a medium of selfhood. I argue that Chinese women's bodies have functioned both as targets of regulation and as agents of resistance. They participate in shifting visual regimes, negotiating pressures of objectification, and strategies of self-representation. Through their art, female artists confront these tensions directly. Their work opens new ways to understand gender, identity, and autonomy within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a genealogical methodology and takes the body in art as its central analytical lens. It examines how visual culture in China continuously produces and reconfigures disciplinary frameworks around "normalcy," "gender," and "national subjecthood." Art historical methods guide the selection and contextual interpretation of artworks. These methods situate visual forms within broader artistic traditions, exhibition practices, and institutional frameworks. They also help trace visual motifs across historical shifts and political transitions. This interdisciplinary approach connects formal aesthetics with systems of power, ideology, and affect. Through close readings and theoretical engagement, I apply Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, Rancière's politics of aesthetics, and other theories. This intersectional framework clarifies how the body operates across contemporary Chinese art's artistic, cultural, and ideological formations.

Embodied Perception and the Body as Structure of Experience

Any methodological discussion in Chinese contemporary art history must first confront a distinct challenge. Unlike their Western counterparts, since 1949, most Chinese artists have lacked formal theoretical training. Their work did not emerge from academic paradigms but from historical contingency and the lived intensity of social upheaval. In this context, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment offers a generative lens. His philosophy illuminates the subjective, sensorial, and experiential dimensions that shaped these artists' engagement with their world. "The body," he writes, "is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 169). It does not merely perceive; it is the condition of perception. His concept of flesh (la chair) resists materialist and semiotic reduction. Flesh is neither purely physical nor abstractly mental. It is the reversible fabric of perception, where seeing and being seen occur together. "The visible can thus fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the outside, and because I am immersed in it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 139). In this view, perception arises through bodily entanglement with the world.

Consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, cannot be separated from physical presence. "Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man'… man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. xi). This resonates deeply with artists in China in the 1980s and 1990s, who used their bodies not to theorize but to act, endure, and respond. In moments of rupture, the body became the most immediate medium for registering trauma and bearing witness when language failed.

Embodiment in aesthetics shows that art does not exist as a detached visual display but as a sensuous and affective form. Arthur Berndtson (1960) writes, "Embodiment is present in the contemplation of works of art… where acts of creation and reception have been completed" (p. 50). Aesthetic experience arises through embodied encounters rather than abstract analysis. In *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (2001), Paul Crowther argues that the symbolic power of art always arises from sensuous form. He defines art as "the making of a symbolically significant form out of, or into, sensuous manifolds" (p. 4). Perception, as asserted, is firmly rooted in the experience of the body. He emphasizes, "We inhere in the sensible" (p. 2), highlighting that all artistic experiences are actively shaped through the material interactions between the viewer and the world.

Contemporary embodiment theory extends this view further. It situates art within historical, cultural, and somatic contexts. King and Page (2017), writing on cyberpunk aesthetics, argue that "human cognition and consciousness are inseparable from our embodied experience" (p. 110). They caution against theories that reduce art to cognition or code, insisting instead on its basis in lived, bodily presence. This shift from visual primacy also informs Amelia Jones's *Performing the Subject* (1998). She critiques art history's privileging of vision and insists that meaning arises through physical enactment. "The body is not a passive recipient of visual pleasure," she writes, "but a site of active production of meaning and identity through performative enactment" (p. 11). This approach can help me to clarify why Chinese artists in the 1980s and 1990s turned to performance.

Though Chinese artists rarely articulated a theory of embodiment, their actions align with what Paul Bowman (2019) describes as "the translation of cultural 'messages' into physical practices… living life according to new values and different orientations" (pp. 80–81). For Bowman, embodiment is not a metaphor. It is a negotiation between the body and the world. Performances by Chinese artists thus become more than symbolic acts. They express memory, ideology, and pain through lived physical engagement. Bowman adds that embodiment involves "the performative and interpretive elaboration of something other that is received, perceived, felt, constructed, believed, assumed or otherwise lived" (p. 76). In this sense, the body becomes a medium of critique, a method of survival, and a practice of knowing.

Thus, embodiment forms a central methodological framework for this study. It shows how Chinese artists developed their aesthetic and political vocabularies not through theory alone but through flesh, sensation, and lived experience. From revolutionary propaganda posters to bodily interventions in post-socialist space and trauma-inflected performances to digital avatars, these practices assert the body as a site of perception, memory, and resistance. Embodiment has appeared in Chinese art from its very formation.

The Body as a Genealogical Method

The genealogical methodology developed by Michel Foucault and rooted in Friedrich Nietzsche's thought offers a robust framework for analyzing the historical construction of the body as a site of power. Rather than seeking origins or essences, genealogy reveals the contingent, discontinuous, and often violent processes through which social practices and norms emerge. Within this framework, the body is not a neutral biological constant, but a historically inscribed entity shaped by disciplinary systems.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1994), Nietzsche describes the body as a bridle that is a mechanism to restrain desire, spontaneity, and embodied knowledge. In his view, moral values do not arise from rational consensus but from historical struggles in which dominant groups impose their values on others. The body becomes the primary site of this imposition. Pain, punishment, and memory are etched into flesh to produce obedient subjects: "Only that which never ceases to cause pain stays in the memory" (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 61). To become a "responsible" subject, one must be made a regulated bodily subject. This insight laid the groundwork for Foucault's investigations into the disciplinary structures of modern institutions.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1978), Foucault extends the genealogical method to examine how modern institutions operate on the body. For him, the body is the central target of disciplinary power, which does not function solely through law or violence but permeates everyday spaces such as schools, factories, military barracks, and hospitals. It shapes individuals into productive and calculable subjects, as mentioned, "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault, 1995, p. 26). Disciplinary power operates through surveillance, architecture, and normalization. The panopticon serves as the emblem of this regime: "Visibility is a trap" (p. 200).

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) introduces the concept of biopower, which expands disciplinary mechanisms from individual bodies to populations. Through discourses such as medicine, hygiene, and sexology, the modern state governs the intimate dimensions of life like birth, death, reproduction, and sexuality. Biopower complements disciplinary power while discipline molds individuals, and biopolitics manages the health and life of the population. A genealogy of the body thus traces how bodies are constructed, regulated, and

experienced within historical and cultural contexts. This framework allows us to analyze how bodies participate in forming identity, social hierarchy, and political resistance.

Feminist and psychoanalytic theories extend this framework by emphasizing the body as a site of disruption and visual politics. In *Powers of Horror* (1984), Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of abjection to describe how bodily matter such as blood, vomit, and excrement threatens symbolic coherence. These substances provoke revulsion not due to hygiene but because they blur boundaries and destabilize identity: "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (p. 4). Though cast to the margins, such material retains disruptive force. The corpse, as the ultimate abject, "blurred between inanimate and the organic...represents fundamental pollution" (p. 109).

This visibility of the body and how it exposes what culture represents closely aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (2006), Butler argues that "gender is not a preexisting entity but is produced through repeated bodily acts within a regulatory framework" (p. 25). The body does not express identity; it is enacted through habitual practices that naturalize norms. She explains, "Power is not an external imposition but works through the reiteration of norms" (p. 2). Kristeva and Butler demonstrate that the body is not a neutral surface but a site where symbolic orders are enacted, enforced, and resisted.

Nicholas Mirzoeff extends this critical genealogy into the realm of visual culture. In *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995), he argues that the body in art always functions as a sign, overlaid with metaphor and cultural meaning: "In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign…This complex of signs is what I shall call the bodyscape" (p. 2). For Mirzoeff, the bodyscape is a contested field where history, power, and identity are negotiated. It captures the tension between the imperfect material body and its idealized image, between lived experience and ideological projection (p. 18).

In Maoist visual culture, propaganda images cast the body as a utopian ideal that is disciplined, heroic, and abstracted from actual corporeality. These images embodied what Foucault called the "productive body," manufactured through normalization and surveillance to serve national goals (Foucault, 1978). This aesthetic rendered difference invisible and replaced bodily complexity with ideological clarity. In recent decades, Chinese contemporary

artists have reclaimed the body as a contested space, challenging the visual legacies of socialist realism and the aesthetic pressures of global capitalism. The body ceases to function merely as an object of representation; it becomes a means of critique. Artists such as Zhang Huan and He Chengyao use their bodies as sites of endurance. Through pain and vulnerability, they confront viewers with the body's undeniable presence. When examined genealogically, such practices reveal layers of repression, gendered expectation, and social trauma.

Today, as artists experiment with digital media and immersive technologies, the body is subjected to new regimes of control and opens to new representational modes. Genealogy allows us to chart how these new forms reinscribe and disrupt older frameworks. The body becomes a site for negotiating memory, identity, and opposition. A genealogical method reveals how power operates through the body and how the body actively resists, absorbs, and transforms that power. This framework is essential for understanding how contemporary Chinese artists critique institutions, articulate subjectivity, and invent new visual vocabularies.

Bodily Visibility and the Distribution of the Sensible

In contemporary China, artistic practice rarely operates as an isolated or purely aesthetic endeavor. It remains profoundly shaped by networks of political control, institutional censorship, and pervasive demands for self-discipline. Within this environment, the question of how the body becomes "sensible," that is, how it acquires visibility, offers a key lens for understanding contemporary Chinese art. Artists do not merely depict the body. Instead, they navigate a field where the visible and the sayable are inseparable from power systems.
To analyze this field, I draw on Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible." In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006), Rancière defines this as "a system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (p. 12). Each era organizes its sensory regime. These regimes do not function as neutral structures. Instead, they shape which voices people hear, which bodies society recognizes. They serve as invisible scaffolding that supports the social order by shaping what can be perceived, understood, or felt.

Rancière distinguishes between the “police order” and genuine “politics.” The police order encompasses the laws, norms, institutions, and everyday routines that maintain hierarchies and fix boundaries. It assigns roles and allocates spaces. It says, in effect, what belongs and what must be ignored. As Rancière explains, “The police is, essentially, that which says that here, on this street, there’s nothing to see, and so nothing to do but move along” (p. 29). Through these mechanisms, the police order silences differences and consolidates the logic of exclusion. In Rancière’s terms, "politics" disrupts these established sensory distributions. Politics is not chaos. This intervention unsettles existing partitions of what can be seen or said. In this sense, disorder introduces new subjects and makes previously inaudible claims visible. As Rancière writes, “Disorder is not a conflict over the same thing; it is a conflict about the definition of what is perceptible, what is nameable, and what belongs to the common space” (p. 30). Genuine politics and aesthetics create new possibilities for equality by altering what people can perceive and who can appear.

To clarify the relation between art and politics, Rancière identifies three regimes of art: the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic. In the ethical regime, art serves as a vehicle for moral education. Images receive judgment based on their alignment with communal norms and social virtue. In the representative regime that dominated Western art from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, value depends on the precise imitation of reality, adherence to formal decorum, and reverence for established hierarchies. Art detaches from both moral utility and rigid mimesis in the aesthetic regime. It welcomes difference, multiplicity, and ambiguity. It becomes political not through direct critique but by making the invisible visible, the inaudible heard, and the excluded perceptible (see pp. 18–19).
This triadic framework proves especially useful in analyzing contemporary Chinese art. I use Rancière’s theory to track how the meanings and functions of art shift as it traverses moral regulation and autonomous aesthetic production. Art under the ethical regime becomes bound to the needs of the collective or the state. Art under the representative regime sustains symbolic hierarchies and visual decorum. However, in the aesthetic regime, art achieves a new freedom. It makes perceptible what dominant discourses suppress. It opens space for resistance, plural experience, and unassimilated voices.

This framework allows me to analyze how Chinese artists respond to evolving modalities of control. Their practices challenge assumptions about visibility, legitimacy, and cultural meaning. The concept of the aesthetic regime, in particular, helps identify moments when art

functions as a political force by shifting the boundaries of what can be sensed, shared, or imagined. In China, where art remains closely managed by the state, institutions, and social conventions, Rancière's theory clarifies how artworks intervene in and potentially reconfigure the perceptual and political field.

Methodological Practice and Research Trajectory

This study does not treat genealogy, embodiment, and the politics of perception as transforming into an open path shaped by direct encounters with specific artworks. The dissertation breaks into two parts. The first part follows a historical trajectory across four stages: the Maoist "new man," the affective awakening of the 1980s, the extreme body in 1990s performance art, and the emergence of digital and virtual bodies after 2000. The second part takes two key figures: the body of Mao Zedong and the female body. These two themes are focal points for examining how power, gender, and technology intersect to produce agency and resistance. Each chapter integrates a distinct theoretical lens with close visual analysis, forming a dynamic and evolving research field grounded in real problems and specific material.

Genealogy underlies both the historical narrative and the detailed analysis of visual ruptures. The first chapter explores the collectivist body of the Maoist era (1949–1979) through propaganda posters, public sculpture, photographic documentation, and textual slogans. Rather than tracing a linear origin, the chapter compares gestures, clothing, and spatial arrangements in canonical images such as *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* and *The Iron Girls*. These comparisons show how political visuality disciplined the body through repetition, symbolic exaggeration, and selective visibility. The body of the "new man" was never a static ideal but a dynamic and contested construct formed and fractured by mobilization, ritual, and collective identification.

Chapter two focuses on the early reform era (1979–1989) and the sensory liberation of the body in the "85 New Wave" movement. The chapter analyzes how gestures, gazes, clothing, and space articulate a new affective vocabulary through case studies of Chen Danqing's *Tears Streaming Down to the Field of Harvest* and Gao Xiaohua's *Why* Interviews, media commentary, and exhibition records contextualize these visual details within a broader psychosocial shift. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, the analysis shows

how the body's affective presence interrupts old regimes of visibility and allows new subjectivities to emerge. Here, genealogy operates as historical archaeology and a method for tracing internal tensions within the material.

Chapter three addresses performance art between 1990 and 2008, where artists turned to their bodies as sites of endurance and exposure. Grounded in embodiment theory, this chapter restores the sensory dimension of works by Zhang Huan, Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao. Instead of analyzing performance documentation solely as an image, it emphasizes smell, pain, shame, and vulnerability as integral to the event's meaning. For example, the reading of *12m²* draws on Zhang Huan's memory of "pain seeping under the skin," positioning the work as an embodied archive of urban neglect and political abandonment.

Chapter four examines the shift to digital and virtual bodies after 2008. Focusing on Cao Fei's *RMB City*, Miao Ying's censorship aesthetics, and Lu Yang's avatars analyze how the body in games**.** The genealogical analysis is expanded here through a focus on technological mediation. The digital body no longer appears as a direct representation but as a constructed interface for memory, belief, and affect. "Embodiment" now includes the synthetic logic of avatars and the viewer's sensory interaction with virtual environments.

The second part of the dissertation moves from historical periodization to thematic case studies. Chapter five investigates the iconography of Mao Zedong's body as a contested national symbol. Combining genealogy with perceptual politics, the chapter studies how artists like Wang Keping and Liu Wei use parody, fragmentation, and visual irony to refigure Mao's presence. The analysis draws on Ernst Kantorowicz's theory of the "king's two bodies" to show how Mao's image sustains contradictory meanings between authority and decomposition.

Chapter Six turns to the female body as a critical field where modernity, gender, and visual power intersect. The chapter contrasts the "modern bodyscapes" created by male artists such as Wang Qingsong with the counter-practices of female artists like Cao Yu. The analysis weaves together feminist theory, embodiment, and gender critique to show how the female body becomes the most sensitive site of symbolic struggle under contemporary Chinese social conditions.

Across all case studies, selection follows a triple logic of "historical node, theoretical tension, and visual paradigm." Each work is not merely illustrative but chosen for its paradigmatic role in reshaping bodily configurations and their political implications. Rather than assembling material by theme alone, the study builds constellations of comparison, guided by repeated close readings that reveal shared tensions and divergent outcomes.

Methodologically, this dissertation develops as a living process, always recalibrated through its entanglement with visual material, historical shifts, and theoretical encounters. Each link between theory, object, and problem comes alive through iterative interpretation. The changing social and technological environment constantly reshapes the visibility and meaning of bodily imagery. Rather than a fixed model, the method becomes a form of embodied critique and situated analysis. Through this trajectory, the project aims to open new theoretical pathways for understanding the body in Chinese contemporary art and offer grounded methodological innovation models in visual culture studies.

Literature Review：theorizing the body in art

The concept and artistic representation of the body in Western culture have undergone profound transformations, each reflecting shifting cultural values and theoretical paradigms. In ancient Greece, artists celebrated the human form as the epitome of beauty, strength, and moral virtue. The concept of *kalokagathia is* the unity of physical perfection and ethical nobility and was vividly realized in works like Myron's *Discobolus* and the *Venus de Milo*. These sculptures established a formal canon of proportion that would leave a lasting imprint on Western aesthetic traditions (Jenkins, 2015). With the rise of Christianity, attitudes toward the body grew more ambivalent. Theological doctrines increasingly underscored the body's imperfection and its potential to distract from spiritual purity. As a result, artistic focus shifted from celebrating corporeal beauty to conveying metaphysical and symbolic meaning. Caroline Bynum (1995), in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*, traces this shift through theological and devotional practices. Jack Hartnell (2018) extends this analysis, revealing how art, medicine, theology, and politics often clashed in their interpretations of the body during the Middle Ages. The complexity of these medieval traditions has sharpened my own sensitivity to the ways that the body can be invested with multiple, often contradictory, forms of meaning beyond the immediately visible.

The Renaissance revived classical ideals and brought renewed attention to both the anatomical and symbolic power of the body. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo combined empirical anatomical study with a humanist vision, emphasizing realism, proportion, and expressive form. Works such as Michelangelo's *David* and Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* exemplify this synthesis of observation and ideology. Michael Baxandall, in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), contends that the Renaissance body represented both physical perfection and a metaphysical order, linking the human form to divine and intellectual harmony. This return to the centrality of the body, both physically and metaphysically, has inspired me to identify those moments in art history when bodily forms reflect both natural order and evolving cultural aspirations. During the Enlightenment, René Descartes's mind-body dualism profoundly reshaped Western conceptions of embodiment, subordinating the body to rational consciousness.Thomas Csordas, in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (1994), critiques this dualism and emphasizes how artists reclaimed emotional expression and sensory immediacy, opening new possibilities for situating the body in cultural discourse.

By the nineteenth century, influenced by Romanticism and Nietzschean philosophy, artists began treating the body explicitly as a locus of affective intensity and existential questioning. Auguste Rodin's sculptures, such as *The Thinker* and *The Kiss* foregrounded kinetic form and psychic depth. Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1892) and *On the Genealogy of Morality* (ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, 2007) called for a revaluation of bodily instinct, resistance to normative constraint, and embodiment as a source of critical force. Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) profoundly influenced artists like Chris Burden and Valie Export, who foregrounded vulnerability, control, and surveillance. Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Export's *Tapp und Tastkino* (1968) made the exposed body an active site of public contestation, converting private sensation into collective experience. These frameworks have directly shaped my dissertation's methodology: I analyze how Chinese artists use the body to reveal the logics of biopolitics, challenge gender norms, and produce new forms of subjectivity.

Feminist and queer movements further reoriented the field of bodily representation. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) recast the body as

performative and unstable, shaped by repeated acts that reproduce or resist social norms. Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) and Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1973–1980) used performance to disrupt patriarchal assumptions. Feminist art historians such as Whitney Chadwick (*Women, Art, and Society*, 2020) and Rozsika Parker with Griselda Pollock (*Old Mistresses*, 2013) exposed structural gender bias in art history and challenged dominant notions of artistic value and visibility. Lynda Nead (*The Female Nude*, 1992) and Emily Newman (*Female Body Image in Contemporary Art*, 2018) further examine how the female body simultaneously reflects, resists, and rewrites visual codes. These interventions have informed my critical approach to gender in Chinese art, helping me recognize how women and queer artists disrupt visual traditions and resist dominant narratives.

Recent decades have seen expanded interest in embodied cognition and somaesthetics. Richard Shusterman's *Practicing Philosophy* (1992) and *Body Consciousness* (2008), together with Shaun Gallagher's *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (2005), emphasize the foundational role of bodily experience in cognition and artistic practice. These arguments reinforce the view that embodiment structures perception and creativity. Ann Millett-Gallant (*The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*, 2010) explores how representations of non-normative bodies challenge cultural conventions and provoke social critique. Peter Brooks (*Body Work*, 1993) and Daniel Punday (*Narrative Bodies*, 2003) show that narrative forms rely on the body as both metaphor and the site of meaning-making and affective engagement. This theoretical debate highlights the value of embodied analysis in my own work.

Since the mid-twentieth century, artists have increasingly mobilized the body both materially and metaphorically to challenge aesthetic conventions. Recalling Enlightenment legacies, René Descartes's mind-body dualism profoundly shaped Western concepts of embodiment. Thomas Csordas, in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (1994), critiques this legacy by emphasizing how artistic practices reclaim emotional intensity and subjective corporeality, thereby expanding the conceptual space for understanding bodily experience within culture.

Armando Favazza's *Bodies Under Siege* (1996) offers a foundational clinical and cultural account of self-injury, arguing that acts such as cutting or burning are not expressions of suicidal intent. Instead, they regulate affect, articulate psychic pain, and reassert the self's

disrupted boundaries through the skin. These insights resonate powerfully with the transgressive performances of Carolee Schneemann (*Meat Joy*, 1964), Hermann Nitsch (*Orgien Mysterien Theater*, 1962), and Vito Acconci (*Seedbed*, 1971), all of whom placed the viewer in confrontation with the body's exposure, affective charge, and critical agency. As a result, the body has become a central site for examining autonomy, firmly securing its place within contemporary art's theoretical and aesthetic frameworks. By reflecting on these Western genealogies, I am able to situate the development of Chinese practices within a broader critical context, while foregrounding the need for close, context-specific analysis of local logics and artistic practices.

The Body in Chinese Culture and Art

The concept of the body in Chinese visual culture has shifted significantly across historical periods. In traditional China, artists rarely treated the body as a purely aesthetic object. Instead, the body existed within a dense web of rituals, moral codes, and cosmological order. The edited volume *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Zito & Barlow, 1994) foregrounds this multidimensional view by integrating contemporary critical cultural studies with historical analysis. Contributors such as Shigehisa Kuriyama, who examines "winds" in Chinese medical thought, and John Hay, who interrogates the "invisibility" of the body in Chinese art, both show how Chinese concepts of the body are shaped by cosmology and aesthetics, not anatomical display. In his essay "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" (1994), Hay complicates Western assumptions by showing that, although figural representation persisted throughout Chinese art history, Chinese painters never developed the nude as a cluster of "culturally defined anatomical shapes and surfaces so prominent in Western art" (Hay, 1994, p. 43). This perspective has prompted me to avoid projecting Western-centric categories onto Chinese materials and instead to foreground the culturally specific logics that organize visuality in China.

Similarly, *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, edited by Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang (2005), assembles twelve essays that explore bodily and facial representation from the Han and Tang dynasties to the Ming and Qing eras (third century BCE to the nineteenth century CE). These contributions address funerary pottery figures, Buddhist sculpture practices, ink painting, female portraiture, and the concept of the "shadow-soul." Together, they highlight the multiple historical layers through which the body acquired meaning in

ancient China, showing that bodily representation operated as a site for the articulation of lineage, gender, spiritual efficacy, and cosmic order.

As China entered the twentieth century, the body became a critical site for the negotiation of modernity and cultural transformation, especially as national identity became deeply entangled with bodily metaphors and practices. Li Rong (2014) argues in *A Reader on the Study of the Body in Modern China* that bodily reform served as a stand-in for self-cultivation and national rejuvenation. Similarly, Frank Dikötter (1995) in *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* and Huang Jinlin (2006) in *History, Body, Nation* demonstrate how bodily imagery articulated modern Chinese identity and resistance to colonial epistemologies. Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich's edited volume *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures* (2006) further enriches this discussion. Divided into two parts, the collection first addresses late-19th to early-20th-century concerns (foot-binding, gender, masculinity, transgender bodies), then moves to contemporary contexts in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and transnational flows, covering issues such as organ transplantation, female politicians, urban transformations, and the Bruce Lee phenomenon. The authors emphasize that the body is a crucial intersection of national, gendered, and global identities, thus providing valuable interdisciplinary perspectives that position the body as central to Chinese modernity.

Within art history, bodily discipline has become a critical lens for understanding modern Chinese subjectivity. David Clarke (2011), in *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World*, identifies the introduction of the nude into Chinese art as a moment of cultural rupture, arguing that the early-20th-century interest in the female nude symbolized a radical modernity specific to China rather than simply a fascination with novelty: "It is in some sense a 'radical' or 'modern' subject in the Chinese context, for reasons other than its mere intrinsic novelty" (Clarke, 2011, p. 124).

After 1949, the body was central to socialist governance and visual propaganda. Susan Brownell's *Training the Body for China* (1995) and Andrew D. Morris's *Marrow of the Nation* (2004) highlight that bodily management under socialism intertwined with health, productivity, ideological fidelity, and collective identity. Complementing these insights, Pang Laikwan's *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution* (2017) systematically outlines how visual culture standardized and disciplined the body,

turning it into a visible symbol of collective ideology. Building on Pang's work, my dissertation, particularly in Chapter Five, explores how contemporary artists reactivate, subvert, or reflect upon this Maoist visual heritage of the body.

In contemporary art, the body has increasingly emerged as a site of personal expression, social critique, and identity construction. Although scholarly interest in bodily practices within contemporary Chinese art has steadily grown, focused and theoretically sustained studies remain relatively limited. Lu Hong and Sun Zhenhua's *Alienated Flesh: Chinese Performance Art in the 1990s* (2005) offers one of the earliest systematic documentations of Chinese performance art, tracing its development from 1979 to 2005. Emphasizing meticulous archival research over theoretical interpretation, the authors compile extensive primary materials to record how artists such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Zhu Yu employed pain, violence, and bodily extremity to critique consumer society, human alienation, and mechanisms of state control.

A more comprehensive theoretical and practice-oriented intervention can be found in *The Body at Stake: Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre*, edited by Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan (2013). Bringing together nineteen firsthand contributions from artists, scholars, and curators, the volume situates bodily experimentation within broader cultural and historical transformations. It reflects on how the body was instrumentalized under Maoist ideology, while also examining how post-Mao artistic practices transformed the body into a medium for articulating personal experience, traumatic memory, and poetic resistance through sculpture, performance, and visual media.

While this body of scholarship has convincingly demonstrated how the body was standardized, disciplined, and mobilized as a collective ideological symbol within socialist visual culture, comparatively less attention has been paid to how this visual legacy is reframed and rendered legible within global exhibitionary contexts. Addressing this gap, Jane Chin Davidson's *Staging Art and Chineseness: The Politics of Trans/Nationalism and Global Expositions* (2020) shifts the analytical focus from bodily practice itself to the institutional and geopolitical conditions through which contemporary Chinese art is displayed, interpreted, and circulated internationally. Davidson argues that bodily practices are not merely expressive or transgressive acts, but are *staged* within transnational regimes of visibility shaped by museums, biennials, and global curatorial discourses. Through case studies of artists including Zhang Huan, Patty Chang, Wu Mali, and Cao Fei, she demonstrates how

embodiment becomes intelligible through frameworks of nationhood, ethnicity, and cultural difference, rather than through bodily experience alone. Her analysis provides a crucial bridge between socialist visual legacies and contemporary bodily practices by foregrounding the politics of display that condition how bodies are framed, historicized, and understood in international art contexts.

A complementary genealogical perspective is offered by Zhang Nian in her chapter "The Genealogy of the Politics of the Body in Contemporary Chinese Culture." Tracing bodily representation from the May Fourth Movement through the Maoist period (1949–1976), the early reform era (1978–1990s), and into the early 2000s, Zhang argues that bodily expression in Chinese art and theatre gradually moved beyond instrumental rationality and state discipline, paralleling the emergence of individual consciousness (Zhang, 2013, pp. 17–28). However, constrained by its broad historical scope, her analysis primarily addresses macro-level narratives, leaving limited room for detailed visual analysis or theoretical engagement with specific artistic practices. Building on Zhang's genealogical framework, this dissertation extends the discussion through close case studies, visual analyses, and theoretical expansions that foreground sensory politics, gendered memory, and the body as a dynamic visual field.

Shuqin Cui's *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (2016) significantly informs my dissertation by offering comprehensive theoretical and methodological frameworks regarding the body. Cui provides detailed interdisciplinary analyses of both prominent and lesser-known female artists, demonstrating how the female body becomes central to expressions of subjectivity, traumatic memory, social critique, and spatial practice. Similarly, *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art* edited by Hongwei Bao, Diyi Mergenthaler, and Jamie J. Zhao (2023), stands as one of the first systematic international compilations on Chinese queer art, examining the formation of LGBTQ+ identities through artistic practice, curation, and activism from the late 1970s onward. Covering underground origins, feminist art, lesbian and cross-dressing communities, queer curating in the 2010s, and recent artistic practices under tightened state control, this volume argues for a "de-Westernized" queer theory that challenges patriarchal, heteronormative, and nationalist cultural regulations within Chinese and transregional contexts.

Silvia Fok's *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (2013) explores diverse engagements with bodily themes of mortality, revealing nuanced interrelations between bodies, materiality, and death. Yet Fok notes limitations in articulating artists'

specific bodily perceptions, arguing, "how specifically they perceived their bodies was not made clear" (Fok, 2013, p. 7). While her work provides significant insights into the material and sensory dimensions of bodily practices, it falls short in addressing broader social-historical contexts, power structures, memory formation, and identity transformations. My dissertation, therefore, extends Fok's work by systematically examining the dynamic relations between body, power, and visuality through rigorous theoretical frameworks and detailed visual analyses. I demonstrate how contemporary Chinese artists utilize bodily practice to transform social trauma, reconstruct collective memory, and articulate new modes of subjectivity and perception.

In sum, most research on the body in Chinese visual culture consists of edited collections and broad surveys, which tend to prioritize compilation over sustained theoretical engagement. This body of literature reveals a pressing need for a framework that centers the body within visual production, treating it not as a fixed icon but as a relational, contested, and politically charged site. My dissertation responds to this gap by tracing the genealogy of bodily imagery in contemporary Chinese art from the Maoist period to the digital age. By drawing on Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Rancière, and Kristeva, I connect institutional critique with embodied aesthetics, showing how the body acts not as a passive mirror of political conditions but as an active, generative force that continually reshapes the field of contemporary Chinese art and visual culture.

The Terms

Contemporary Chinese Art

I use the term *contemporary Chinese art* rather than *Chinese contemporary art* to emphasize the evolving nature of artistic practices in China. By placing "contemporary" before "Chinese," I resist the tendency to judge Chinese art through Western-centric criteria of contemporaneity. This formulation allows for a broader analytical scope that includes not only post-1990s experimental practices but also the work from the 1980s. The later period for scholars often misclassifies this period as simply "modern" and frequently remain excluded from the dominant global narratives surrounding contemporary art and culture. This study does not treat "the contemporary" as a neutral temporal marker or stylistic category. Instead, scholars approach it as a condition that changes over time and involves contestation, shaped by China's specific political, social, and infrastructural transformations. This usage resists the

tendency to treat “Chinese” as a qualifying adjective within a global art paradigm. Instead, it highlights how place-specific tensions and historical arrangements unique to China’s cultural and political landscape produce contemporaneity.

The term “contemporary” carries its complex genealogy in Chinese intellectual discourse. Hong Zicheng, for instance, examines the emergence of contemporary literature and notes that many scholars interpret it as the inevitable outcome of regime change. However, this view risks erasing the tensions, discontinuities, and negotiations that shape its formation (Hong, 2009, pp. 23–24). The same logic applies to the visual arts. The rise of contemporary Chinese art signifies more than a stylistic transformation. It signals a fundamental reconfiguration of everyday aesthetic experience in the post-Cultural Revolution era.

Within dominant Euro-American frameworks, “contemporary art” often designates a break from modernist autonomy characterized by conceptualism. These features have become normative benchmarks for evaluating global art practices. However, applying such criteria uncritically to the Chinese context risks reproducing a hierarchical temporality in which non-Western art appears derivative, always arriving “late” to the stage of contemporaneity.

Gao Minglu contends that scholars should not interpret the category of the contemporary in China solely as an aesthetic or stylistic designation. Instead, it functions as a cultural and historical signifier shaped by the enduring imprint of political conditions (Gao, 2011, p. 17). In this sense, “contemporary” marks a chronological moment and a historically embedded response to the spatial and perceptual transformations accompanying rapid modernization, market reform, and shifting control systems. The practices observed in contemporary Chinese art do not merely reflect global trends; they emerge from the tension between transnational aesthetic flows and the enduring influence of socialist visual culture. This ongoing dynamic actively shapes the processes of art creation, reception, and institutionalization in China today.

The West

This dissertation adopts the term *the West* primarily for academic convenience. The *West* refers to the artistic concepts, theoretical traditions, and institutional frameworks that have dominated art historical narratives. Chinese artists who engaged with European realism in the early twentieth century and those influenced by modernist and contemporary art currents in

the post-socialist era actively entered dialogues with the paradigms labeled as Western. This interaction reflects a complex interplay of cultural exchange, highlighting how these artists navigate and reinterpret established artistic frameworks. The term thus functions as a practical shorthand for the diverse intellectual and cultural resources that have shaped the development of Chinese artistic practices. It is crucial to emphasize that the West does not present itself as a monolithic entity or a fixed geographical or cultural category. Instead, it represents a fluid and multifaceted construct that resists essentialization.

This understanding invites a more critical and nuanced examination of the complex interactions between Western influences and Chinese artistic traditions. As Edward Said famously argues in *Orientalism*, "the Orient was almost a European invention" and "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1979, p. 1). The West, by implication, is similarly constructed—not a coherent civilizational essence, but a discursive formation shaped by historical comparison, epistemic differentiation, and asymmetrical power relations. Said's "imaginative geography" concept highlights how spatial distinctions produce and sustain temporal and civilizational hierarchies. Within this framework, *the West* embodies modernity, reason, and progress, while its Others are cast as traditional, irrational, or perpetually belated.

Building on this critical foundation, I use the terms *the West* and *Western art* reflectively and analytically. The historical significance of Western frameworks in shaping Chinese contemporary art is undeniable, particularly in the circulation of concepts. However, it is essential to interrogate the epistemological authority embedded in these categories. Treating *Western art* as a neutral or universal aesthetic model risks obscuring its roots in colonial expansion, institutional formation, and intellectual hegemony. What often appears as modernity or innovation may reflect specific historical configurations of power and discourse.

This dissertation examines how historical processes produce, strategically mobilize, and continuously problematize the categories of the West and China within the global field of contemporary art rather than simply reinforcing a binary opposition between the two. My analysis foregrounds dynamic interaction, hybridization, and negotiation processes among diverse cultural formations. These formations are not self-contained systems but fluid and interdependent networks that reshape one another through contact, translation, and

contestation. Through this critical lens, *the West* emerges not as an ontological truth but as a historically contingent positionality that continues to shape the circulation of visual languages, aesthetic values, and institutional norms in the contemporary art world.

Modernity

Modernity in the Chinese context refers to a historically situated dispositive formed through overlapping nation-building processes, cultural rupture, and epistemological reorganization since the late nineteenth century. It emerges from China's encounter with the collapse of inherited worldviews and the pressures of modernization. Modernity operates as a dynamic response to shifting cultural demands in this context. Xu Zhangrun argues that Chinese modernity develops through cultural negotiation, where intellectuals rework indigenous traditions while addressing the symbolic authority of Western knowledge. He introduces the term "comparative ethnonational perspective" to describe a method of critical activation rather than imitation(Xu, 1998, p. 132).

Gao Minglu adds further clarity by identifying Chinese modernity's spatial and temporal dimensions. He states that in China, the " modern " idea has long referred to the construction of a new national space rather than the inauguration of a new epoch. "Chinese modernity," he writes, "is a consciousness of transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national, cultural, and political territorial boundary" (Gao, 2011, p. 2). His view emphasizes that modernity functions as a localized structure of perception. It organizes vision and meaning in response to temporal disruptions and competing claims over cultural and political space.

To understand how this perceptual structure operates in visual practice, this study draws on Thierry de Duve's concept of art as "an event of coherence or compensatory activity" (de Duve, 1998, p. xix). De Duve proposes this idea to address the modern condition in which aesthetic meaning is no longer grounded in shared metaphysical systems. In a fragmented symbolic landscape, art assembles historical forces, ideological pressures, and sensory fragments into provisional forms of coherence. This compensatory function allows art to reveal the internal contradictions of modernity. Under modern conditions, representation becomes unstable, authority dispersed, and the body unsettled. Art transforms contradiction into visibility, allowing audiences to sense and reflect on the fractures within the present.

In China, this role has become especially urgent. Contemporary Chinese art arises from the layered history of revolution. Artists work within the legacy of socialist aesthetics and global capitalism's imperatives. It clarifies the conflicts among competing timelines and embodied desires. In this view, art becomes a site of assembly. It produces a temporary grammar for making sense of fragmented materials and unstable histories. In this study, modernity refers to the shifting ideological formations that define how each historical period in China imagines and organizes “progress.” These formations emerge from changing political structures and cultural norms. From revolutionary collectivism to reform-era market expansion, from cybernetic governance to post-digital experience, each stage of modernity generates new configurations of desire. Contemporary Chinese art does not simply reflect these formations. It mobilizes the body as a medium that makes the contradictions of progress visible, effective, and open to interpretation.

Part I: Historical Genealogies of the Body

Chapter 1 Constructing the "Socialist New Man" in Maoist Visual Culture (1949–1976)

In traditional Chinese thought, Confucian philosophy positions the body as the beginning of moral self-cultivation and the anchor of ethical and political order. As Confucius stated in the *Analects*, "When a prince's conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed[1]"(Confucius, trans. Legge, 1861). This statement emphasizes the importance of personal virtue in governance and raises self-cultivation to a political responsibility. Personal ethics, in this system, legitimize authority. The *Great Learning* elaborates a sequential logic in which self-cultivation leads to family harmony, which enables state governance and ultimately results in world peace[2] (Confucius, trans. Legge, 1861). Confucian scholar Huang Chun-chieh interprets this sequence as a progressive structure that moves from the individual to the nation. He writes, "the transformation of the world starts with the transformation of the self. It follows, therefore, that East Asian Confucian philosophy is centered on the theory of self-cultivation" (Huang, 2017, p. 1). In this tradition, cultivation shapes private virtue and sociopolitical stability.

Confucianism regards bodily discipline as the primary pathway to social order. Individual conduct is closely tied to the moral coherence of family, society, and empire. As Huang explains, "The cognitive functions of the mind-heart are always conceived as rooted in the body. The body is not only biological; it is steeped in the values and traditions of society and culture. These factors are cultivated and folded into the appearance, dispositions, habits, and behavior of the body" (Huang, 2017, p. 10). The body is the basis of personal virtue and political responsibility, and its refinement reflects a unity of perception and action shaped by ethical obligation. Confucian ethics rests on this embodied logic: through the regulation of the self, one contributes to the moral structure of the world.

Within this tradition, bodily sacrifice emerges as the ultimate expression of moral will. Mencius brings bodily ethics to its extreme in his well-known teaching: "Life is what I desire; righteousness is also what I desire. If I cannot have both, I will give up life for

[1] In the original Chinese: "其身正，不令而行；其身不正，虽令不从"]

[2] This excerpt is a condensed version of a more extended passage, which initially reads: "The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts..." Chinese text: "修身齐家平天下"].

righteousness[3]" (Mencius, trans. Legge, 1895, 6A:10). Moral integrity, for Mencius, requires the readiness to relinquish life in the name of justice. The body thus becomes the site where virtue is realized.

This chapter examines how Maoist visual culture absorbed and repurposed Confucian principles into revolutionary imagery. In a time of intense ideological demand, bodily sacrifice became a symbol of moral courage and a simplified and obvious ethical model. Posters, paintings, and performances called on individuals to merge personal transformation with national struggle. The body was no longer a private site of self-cultivation but an instrument of collective uplift. I argue that in Maoist China, visual culture played a central role in constructing the figure of the "Socialist New Man." This figure merged Confucian ethics of self-cultivation with communist ideals of discipline and class allegiance, producing a regulated, transparent, and politicized body. The state established visual templates for revolutionary subjectivity through three emblematic figures: the soldier, the worker, and the peasant. Each figure followed a stable visual grammar that linked bodily form to ideological meaning. The body was transformed into a legible sign of national strength through compositional scale, symbolic color, spatial arrangement, and iconographic cues. Within this visual regime, to see the body was to interpret the state.

1.1 The Body as a Symbol of National Strength and Renewal

A connection between the national spirit and the body took a profound shape in China amidst outside dangers and national emergencies. From the 19th century through the early 20th century, China faced profound internal conflict and immense external pressures. The Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) forced China into signing unequal treaties, planting deep-seated humiliations. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) added insult with territorial defeats and an ultimate blow against national sovereignty. In this context, the earliest reformers, like Kang Youwei and Cai E, opportunistically employed the "sick country" trope to rouse public awareness of China's perilous condition. In their quest to inspire a national awakening, reformers highlighted serious social issues like opium addiction and foot-binding. They sought to unite the public around the urgent need for change (Yang, 2010, pp. 37-40). Like Liang Qichao, key figures were instrumental in this movement, pushing for political and structural reforms to revitalize the nation's health and cultural identity. They took a stand

[3] In the original Chinese: 生，我所欲也；义，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍生而取义者也。

against outdated customs and championed modern hygiene practices, marking a significant shift toward a renewed sense of vitality for individuals and the nation.

However, during this tumultuous period, as China faced ongoing foreign aggression, the concept of the "sick nation" was cruelly twisted by Western imperial powers into a derogatory term, calling China the "sick man of East Asia"(Yang, 2010, p. 57). This label not only belittled a nation in crisis but also served to justify continued imperialist interests in the region. What started as a call for reform and self-improvement turned into a symbol of colonial contempt, used to belittle the Chinese physique and, in turn, diminish the nation's dignity. This external scorn deepened feelings of national humiliation and changed how people viewed the human body. Thus, the body became a symbol of the power struggles happening on the world stage. Conversations about physical health and strength became intertwined with the broader narrative of national revival. Pursuing physical vigor represents China's journey toward renewal and resistance against foreign influence.

The symbolic character of the "new man" resulted from an evolutionary shift of political subjectivity from the previous "new citizen" ideal enshrined during the late Qing and Republican eras. The shift represents a profound restructuring of the question, "What is man?" This transformation shifts from prioritizing moral self-cultivation and civic virtue to prioritizing ideological faith and collective discipline. Ultimately, the "new citizen" represented a rational and moral individual aligned with the principles of republican values and national progress (Wang, 2008, pp. 198–200). What started as critiques of the existing system gradually transformed into a powerful movement that rallied the Chinese people to reclaim their strength. From simply being an individual property, the body transformed into an iconic representation of renewal and resilience, influencing political discourse and art.

One seminal moment when the body took center stage was at the Political Consultative Conference in September 1949, when Mao Zedong infamously declared, "The Chinese people have stood up." This statement was instrumental in modern Chinese history, emphasizing the body's deep symbolic role in the nation's revival. It commemorated the birth of the People's Republic and encapsulated an aspiration toward standing above humiliations from the past. This sentence instantly signified national sovereignty but symbolically transformed the image of the body from that of submission to that of political authority and pride.

As the mid-century socialist period unfolded, political conversations heralded a new ideal: the "new man" emerged to replace the earlier concept of the "new citizen." This change reflected a broader political aim. The Party sought individuals who could wholeheartedly commit to the revolutionary cause, embodying the correct beliefs and behaviors. The Communist Party initiated an extensive campaign to alter social institutions and individual character. Mao Zedong believed that personal transformation played a key role in national progress. In a 1937 speech, he described the ideal revolutionary as someone with political foresight, a strong spirit of struggle, and an open and loyal heart. This person would give up personal interests and work entirely for the liberation of society (Mao, 1937, October 23). Mao's ideal became the foundation for what the Party called the socialist "new man." This figure needed strength, self-awareness, moral clarity, and the willingness to sacrifice comfort for the collective good.

The Party abolished practices such as foot-binding, which it identified as relics of feudal oppression, and at the same time, selectively adopted Confucian values that emphasized self-discipline, moral growth, and collective responsibility (Cheng, 2009, p. 112). Leaders urged people to work toward self-cultivation for the nation instead of for family or personal honor. In this manner, the meaning of moral value was transformed from individual virtue to shared purpose. Institutions evaluated citizens by their compatibility with shared objectives and contribution toward common political enterprises. Self-cultivation was transformed into an ideological responsibility related to national progress instead of an individualistic pursuit (Cheng, 2009, p. 57). By infusing revolutionary thought with aspects of conventional culture, the Party lent legitimacy to vision and maintained the momentum for reform intact, most notably during the quick transformation.

Socialist China's "new man" vision revolutionized the meaning and representation of the body entirely. Instead of seeing the body as the seat for individual virtue or family honor, Party cadres invited it as a symbol of collective force and national rejuvenation. Art was at the core of this ideological project. In his Yan'an Talks of 1942, Mao Zedong declared that "all our literature and art are for the masses of the people" and should be "for political ends" (Mao, 1942, May 23). He invited artists to have a clear "direction," "position," and "attitude" and use their art towards creating revolutionary consciousness and awakening citizens' fighting spirit (Mao, 1942, May 2). In such initiatives, the Party attempted to inscribe art in daily life and convert it into an instrument for recasting national identity. Historians have

noted this as an aimed policy: Bonnie S. McDougall (1980) points out Mao's literary policy as "comprehensive," mobilizing visual and literary culture toward promoting a new vision of society (p. 7).

By no stretch, the Cultural Revolution marked the ultimate level of the state's aspiration toward creating the socialist "new man." In this period, ideological correctness and moral reform reached an intensity never before experienced during prior phases of the revolution. French sinologist Léon Trivière (1975) once remarked that the Cultural Revolution was "one of the most impressive attempts to transform man in world history" (p. 15), capturing the lofty spirit of this political and cultural experimentation. One influential device within this transformation project was yangbanxi, or model operas, which served as a chief platform for shaping revolutionary values via theater.

Initially, Jiang Qing rose to political prominence and played a decisive role in shaping yangbanxi. She saw theater not as entertainment but as a crucial instrument for ideological training. Jiang Qing closely supervised every aspect of these model operas, insisting that every gesture, costume, and line serve a political purpose. One classic example is *The Legend of the Red Lantern*. This opera, which takes place during the struggle against the Japanese invasion, revolves around Li Yuhe, an underground worker of the Communists whose demeanor and bravery during torture offer an ideal of revolutionary virtue. According to journalist Chen Tushou (2014), Jiang Qing insisted that the actor playing Li Yuhe should emerge looking handsome, assured, and relaxed under pressure. Unsatisfied with previous performances, she insisted that changes be made, including an additional scene that showed the character remaining firm in faith with the Party despite an injury to underscore Li Yuhe's strength and political resolve. Jiang's instructions indicate how yangbanxi served more than simply art; they became visual blueprints for ideological instruction.

Through such performances, yangbanxi gave abstract ideals tangible form and emotional impact. Heroic characters demonstrated strength, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, teaching audiences what to believe and how to embody the "new man." Under Jiang Qing's direction, yangbanxi modernized Peking opera with contemporary staging and choreography, spotlighting the disciplined and expressive revolutionary body. Stylized movement, upright posture, and bold expressions created a behavioral model for the socialist subject, blending political faith into everyday life. Yangbanxi did not simply mirror Maoist values, shaping

collective imagination and revolutionary identity. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* and similar operas, such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* and *Shajiabang*, redefined the family by elevating political solidarity above blood ties. These works depicted protagonists from diverse backgrounds forming revolutionary families founded on a shared purpose. The operas encouraged viewers to subordinate personal feelings to collective goals, modeling the suppression of individual desires that did not serve the group.

This aesthetic practice reflected deeper ideological aspirations. Everett Yuehong Zhang (2005) argues that authentic revolutionary fervor requires the surrender of individual ownership over the body and the elevation of collective interests. Echoing Mao's claim, "My life belongs to the Party," self-sacrifice became the highest revolutionary ideal (Zhang, 2005, p. 6). Legitimate emotion was redirected toward collective entities such as Mao, the Party, and the State. Devotion and loyalty became the ultimate values, linking socialist goals with the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and communal duty. State-led campaigns for value and behavior transformation were comprehensive. By promoting model operas, visual propaganda, and systematic ideological training, officials sought to reshape thought, feeling, and behavior. These efforts aimed to forge a new type of individual who embodied socialist ideals at every body and mind level. By fusing revolutionary ideology with elements of tradition, the regime cultivated a heightened sense of collective identity and political participation. This sweeping project demonstrates how ideological conviction and artistic innovation drove China's revolutionary transformation.

1.2 The exemplary soldier's body

Mao Zedong established the ideological direction for art in the 1942 Yan'an Talks by asking, "For whom are literature and art created?" He responded with clarity: art must serve "the widest ranks of the people, forming over 90 percent of our entire population: the workers, peasants, soldiers, and urban petty bourgeois" (Mao, 1942, May 23). By prioritizing these groups, Mao positioned workers, peasants, and soldiers at the very center of revolutionary society. In this framework, art addressed the working masses, fueled the socialist revolution, and shaped its future. This new political vision prompted a surge of posters and prints depicting scenes of daily labor and collective life.

These visual images, however, did not simply imitate reality. Artists applied strategies of exaggeration and theatricality, transforming heroic figures into icons that exceeded ordinary experience. Pang Laikwan underlines the constructed nature of these bodies, noting, “These yangban figures were extremely unreal and therefore demanded a lot of aesthetic manipulation to elicit people’s identification” (Pang, 2017, p. 102). The standard formula, defined by the “Three Prominences” (*san tuchu*), required artists to place revolutionary bodies at the dramatic center, intensifying moral clarity and visual appeal. This principle created the instantly recognizable “red, bright, and shining” (*hong guang liang*) aesthetic that dominated the era. Pang explains, “Real-life models and constructed heroes supposedly belonged to two categories: while heroes did impossible things, model figures could be found in everyday life. However, Maoist romanticism merged fact with fiction, making the Cultural Revolution highly surreal” (Pang, 2017, p. 102). By merging myth and model, fact and fantasy, Cultural Revolution art achieved a visual world that was both didactic and dreamlike.

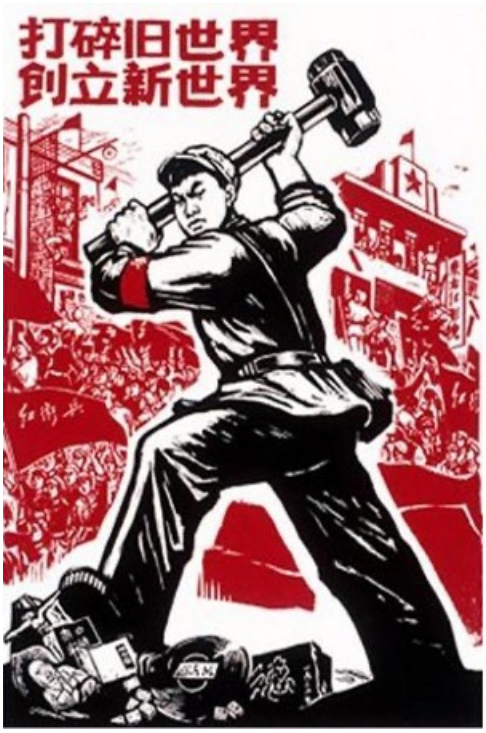

Figure 1.1 *Scatter the Old World, Build a New World*, 1967, woodblock print. Central Art Academy Blockprint Combat Group. Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. IISH Collection, Call No. BG D29/184.

The woodcut *Scatter the Old World, Build a New World* (Fig. 1.1) vividly embodies this heroic archetype. The composition places a male figure at the center, wielding a giant hammer poised above a corner packed with capitalist symbols. The hammer, signifying revolutionary authority, directs the viewer's gaze toward a power contest. The artist exaggerates the soldier's physique, employing oversized forms, bold colors, and heightened contrast to dramatize the struggle. In the left corner, tied-up capitalists, scattered books, tires, and Christian symbols such as the cross and Jesus appear trampled underfoot, visually signifying the defeat of the "old world." Dramatic gestures and theatrical lighting immerse the viewer in a scene charged with collective energy, mirroring the affective power of yangbanxi model operas.

These figures do not stand as isolated individuals. Their emotions and gestures channel a broader persona, an archetype the state prescribes. Although clad in military uniforms, these figures often represent the Red Guards, not just front-line soldiers. The Red Guards, composed mainly of students, played a decisive role in reshaping China's political landscape. Their actions expressed both idealism and intense loyalty to Mao Zedong. Lowell Dittmer explains, "Students as a whole manifested an idealistic conception of politics, indignation about its underlying coercive aspect, and a demand for the emancipation of all disprivileged groups. Most Red Guard organizations consisted of students... and their motives may be characterized with some confidence based on a content analysis of the themes of criticism in their publications. Red Guard posters and tabloid newspapers evinced an intense preoccupation with issues of political persecution and repression" (Dittmer, 1977, p. 71). In practice, their attacks targeted intellectuals and traditional authorities, seeking to dismantle entrenched hierarchies and "break down old social and cultural structures" in the hope of achieving genuine transformation. By mobilizing personal emotion for collective action, the Red Guards turned revolutionary passion into a visible force for social change.

These visual stories distilled political ideology, transforming the human body into a sign of collective belief and social identity. During this period, society became rigidly divided by class. As Wanqi Yang observes, "The CCP categorized individuals based on their familial background, ranging from the 'good' and 'red' that peasants, workers, revolutionary cadres, soldiers, to the 'bad' elements of capitalists, landlords, petty bourgeois, and 'rightists'" (Yang, 2017, p. 4, citing Gordon). Artists rendered these divisions instantly legible through strict conventions: positive figures always appeared *gaodaquan* (tall, upright, and central)

painted in the *hongguangliang* palette of "red, bright, and radiant." In contrast, landlords and capitalists shrank into the margins, appearing small, weak, and shadowed. As Sun Zhenhua emphasizes, "The body, in its specific scale, size, volume, and composition, must conform to certain established rules" (Sun Zhenhua, 2005). Slogans and quotations, frequently drawn from "People's Daily" and "Red Flag," reinforced these visual distinctions, ensuring that positive and negative characters remained easily distinguishable within a single frame.

This blend of art and ideology directly connected physical strength and national vitality. Visual art became central to expressing and spreading the socialist spirit. As Chenzui (2019) articulates, "Content is dictated by national policy and central movements; the form is about crafting engaging narratives and setting up dramatic scenes." The straightforward nature of this visual approach helped it reach a broad audience. Artists use symbols everyone can recognize and choose a visual style that resonates with viewers across all literacy levels. They include slogans and quotations from sources such as *the People's Daily* and *Red Flag*. These textual elements reinforce political messages and help viewers distinguish positive from negative figures, even when both appear in the same scene. This consistent visual system shapes how the public interprets images and guides collective behavior. It also sets clear standards for self-censorship. Stefan Landsberger explains, "An image is structured as a narrative, something which is not merely to be seen or to be understood, but which can also be 'read,' as a story containing numerous meanings" (Landsberger, 1998, p. 24). By building visual narratives in this way, artists help the state promote cultural participation and encourage people to incorporate art into their daily lives.

Visual archetypes from the Cultural Revolution shaped personal memory and collective aspiration. Images of wounds, sacrifice, and militant readiness implied that participation in the proletarian revolution could grant ordinary people new strength, transforming them into champions of justice. At the same time, the visual narrative enforced a strict ethic of bodily discipline. Xie Youshun notes, "In those revolutionary years, almost without exception, the punishment for backward thinking took the form of labor reform (making the body suffer), imprisonment (restricting bodily freedom), and execution (causing the body to disappear altogether)" (Xie, 2003, p. 8). These images called everyone to uphold revolutionary principles while serving as stark warnings to those who resisted collective transformation.

1.3 The exemplary workers' body

At the height of the socialist movement, people placed the worker at the heart of political and cultural life. This figure meant more than just economic productivity. It held the hopes and dreams for a future based on equality, unity, and progress for all. People stopped seeing labor as a burden. Instead, they connected it with pride, dignity, and revolutionary energy. Mao Zedong spoke about this change during the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. He told writers and artists to rethink how society looked at manual labor. From his experience, Mao admitted that he once saw physical work as low and unwanted. However, later, he believed true moral strength did not come from elegance or comfort. It came from serving others and staying loyal to the collective. In his view, the rough hands of workers and peasants showed a deep and honest loyalty to society (Mao, 1942, p. 61).

Figure 1.2 *Advance Courageously along the Glorious Road of Chairman Mao's "May 7 Directive"*, 1971, poster. Museum of the Chinese Revolutionary Army. Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. Landsberger Collection, Call No. BG E13/625.

Because of this new understanding, people began to see unity in a new light. Mao's goal was not only to change the economy. He wanted to build a society where workers, farmers, soldiers, and intellectuals could move forward together. The propaganda poster titled *Advance Bravely Along the Bright Road Shown by Chairman Mao's May 7 Instruction* offers a clear example of this vision (Fig. 1.2). In the image, a soldier lifts a shovel. Next to him, a

farmer carries a bucket. A nurse holds a medical bag, and a worker operates a drill. All of them march together, moving in the same direction. Because they share a clear purpose and energy, they look united. Once viewed as plain objects for work, the tools in their hands now show pride and strength. Each person grips their tool with confidence. In this way, every tool becomes almost a sign of resistance.

The image does more than ask people to work. It offers a view of a society where cooperation replaces competition. It shows people from different backgrounds walking side by side, pointing to the power of a shared belief in the revolution. The soldier at the front does not stand apart from the group. Instead, he joins them, acting as both a comrade and a worker. In this way, the scene shows how Mao saw the military. For him, the army was not only there to defend. It was also a partner in building the nation. The slogan above the group reads, “Advance along the bright road of Chairman Mao’s May 7 Instruction.” These words refer to Mao’s 1966 statement, where he encouraged the military to participate in farming, political education, and cultural work. He wanted soldiers to learn from peasants and workers, just as he wanted peasants and workers to learn from soldiers. He hoped this exchange would produce well-rounded individuals who could serve the revolution in every way.

The visual culture of socialist China did more than reflect political ideals; it offered a compelling vision of the ideal citizen. The Party used images, performances, and everyday rituals to promote a new model of human character shaped by physical labor, political clarity, and collective responsibility. This ideal did not remain in official speeches. It entered the visual environment and took shape in countless public forms. The revolution acquired a human face and a living body that invited the masses to join in its forward movement.

Within this social world, the worker took on a special importance. People no longer saw workers as outsiders or as uneducated laborers. Instead, artists and propagandists showed them as skilled builders of a new China. They called workers the “elder brothers of the people,” which showed respect for their strength and trust in guiding the socialist transformation (Yang, 2012, p. 309). Visual art reinforced this change by presenting workers as confident and competent individuals who took control of their environments. Paintings that once depicted laborers in positions of passivity or ignorance now presented them as knowledgeable and commanding, playing central roles in the nation's reconstruction.

This new value placed on labor changed how people related to each other daily. In his study of socialist literature, Xian Wang (2022) notes that collective labor shaped people's emotions in the Mao era. He explains that working together created new forms of romantic and social bonds. These shared experiences gave personal feelings a political dimension, connecting emotions such as love and solidarity to larger revolutionary narratives. In this way, labor stopped being only about meeting economic needs. It also helped people shape their identity, form communities, and change how they felt about each other inside a collective way of life.

As these ideas about work shifted, artists changed their methods as well. Poets like Ai Qing and art historians like Wang Xun asked Chinese painters to leave behind the old style of scholar-artists who kept their distance from real life. Instead, they wanted a new way to show the energy of daily life under socialism, especially in the countryside and in factories (Chen, 2008, pp. 68–69). Their calls led to the New Chinese Painting Movement, which blended old techniques with socialist realism. Artists in this movement looked for fresh ways to paint workers and scenes of labor while still keeping the expressive power of traditional ink painting.

Figure 1.3 *A New Woman Coal Miner*, 1972, ink on paper. Yang Zhiguang. Reproduced in Zhou, Y. (2020). *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present* (Figure 2.20). Springer.

One clear example of this artistic change can be seen in Yang Zhiguang's New Female Miner (Fig. 1.3). In the painting, a young woman stands in the center. She wears a black jumpsuit over a bright pink shirt. Her body stands tall, and her face looks calm and assertive. The image rejects sentimentality. It highlights clarity, strength, and purpose. This figure radiates energy, unlike the quiet reflection in classical literary portraits. She stands at the center of industrial life, not as an outsider, but as an active force for progress. Her presence bridges the rural and urban divide, offering a unified vision of modernity. Femininity, labor, and class consciousness are within a single ideological frame. This new visual language changed how society viewed female labor and its role in national development. It encouraged a broader reconsideration of gender roles in the socialist state. The working woman became both a political symbol and a real presence in industry and agriculture. In paintings, posters, and public events, women appeared as protagonists of the revolutionary future.

The term "iron girls" appeared as a symbol of this ideal. It described young women who took demanding jobs in mining, tractor repair, and factory work. These women became national role models. They represented gender parity and revolutionary spirit. Jin Yihong (2006) explains that the state supported this image with collective rituals such as military-style management, oath-taking ceremonies, and team-based work structures. Women often worked in all-female teams, where their achievements received more recognition than in mixed-gender groups. These teams gave women social recognition and a strong sense of group identity (Jin, 2006, p. 185). The female worker's body turned into a political symbol through this process. She no longer represented domestic femininity. She embodied discipline, endurance, and productive power.

In daily life, women responded to this cultural script. They changed their gestures, habits, and physical comportment to match the new revolutionary ideal. Wang Ban (2008) notes in his study of revolutionary aesthetics that Communist cultural reforms used artistic media to shape political consciousness. Art became a place where ideology met the body. Through images, performances, and public ceremonies, the Party promoted a new image of the female in socialist China. Women did not appear as wives or mothers, but as strong, capable workers. Their bodies communicated confidence and purpose, turning previous gendered gestures into signs of collective virtue. Over time, these representations changed how people saw female ability. They made it possible and desirable for women to do labor once reserved for men.

The vision of socialist utopia aimed for equality purpose. It tried to remove barriers between classes, regions, and genders. In practice, though, it placed great demands on individuals, especially women. The "socialist new man" meant more than a political subject. They embodied a cultural project that asked people to remake themselves. This project inspired hope and social energy, but also revealed tensions between revolutionary ideals and daily life. The working woman stood at the center of this contradiction. She symbolized a new freedom but bore the weight of collective expectations.

1.4 The Exemplary Peasant's Body

In Maoist China, peasants stood at the center of the socialist "new man." Their bodies worked in constant physical labor, becoming both engines of national productivity and emblems of socialist virtue. Peasants supported food security and economic foundations by plowing land, harvesting grain, and toiling in fields. Their daily work symbolized diligence, endurance, and self-sufficiency.

Mao Zedong often praised the political commitment of peasants. He emphasized their moral superiority over urban residents, especially intellectuals (Cheng, 2008, p. 79). As the early years of the People's Republic China, land reform stood as a central Communist policy. The campaign aimed to end feudal exploitation and ensure fairer land distribution in rural areas. Historian Man Yong (2016) uses the term "*fan shen zhang*"(the turning-over battle) to describe the profound impact of land reform on the body. He observes that this movement did not just redistribute land and resources, but also brought visible changes to people's physical and emotional experiences. For both poor tenant farmers and former landlords, the body became the site where power shifted and rural order was overturned (Man, 2016, p. 5). Through labor and revolutionary struggle, peasants embodied the ethical and physical strength prized by the state. Artists and propagandists celebrated peasants in paintings, posters, and publications. They urged people to follow the peasants' lead and adopt the model of the ideal socialist citizen.

One of the most iconic visual tributes to this ideal appears in the painting *Good Men of the Great Wall* (Fig. 1.4), produced during the Cultural Revolution. The artwork portrays golden wheat fields stretching across the hills, with peasants working cheerfully under bright skies. The canvas overflows with color and motion, capturing a vision of abundance and national

vigor. The wheat rises like the Great Wall, merging historical pride with a vision of agricultural achievement. Red flags rise above the scene, pointing to the “Learn from Dazhai” campaign. This movement started in the early 1960s and gained momentum by 1964. It promoted the village of Dazhai in the Taihang Mountains as a national model. Despite poor soil and little rain, the villagers physically changed their landscape. Their achievements became a blueprint for the country. The campaign made collective farming into a political and moral duty. In a time of material scarcity, these images gave reassurance. They showed that national stability depended on rural workers' visible labor and cooperation.

Figure 1.4 *Good Men of the Great Wall*, 1974, poster. Wen Jun and Yulin Diqu Revolutionary Committee, Cultural and Education Bureau. Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe. UC San Diego Special Collections & Archives. https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb1844196

Officials often called this era “poor and blank.” But many images from the time told a different story. These artworks celebrated health, energy, and abundance. For example, in *Good Men of the Great Wall(1974)*, the wheat grows as thick as mountains, and the farmers stand tall and sure(Fig.1.4). Their robust bodies show not deprivation, but vitality. Still, this scene hides the actual suffering of the Great Famine, which devastated rural China between 1958 and 1962 (Zhou, 2016). The painting ignores this history. Instead, it idealizes peasant life, using the strong, healthy body as a sign of hope and prosperity. Through such images,

the state reshaped memory and turned attention to a utopian future rather than the painful recent past.

In *Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era* (2020), Jie Li examines how this visual strategy worked on memory. She writes that Mao-era images and relics were curated to project an aspirational reality: “not so much reality as it was but reality as it should have been” (Li, 2020, p. 109). Photography and propaganda art let the state create an imaginative world, shaping how viewers saw the present by linking it to a future ideal. This form of "socialist realism" was not committed to truth in a documentary sense but offered a vision of ideological correctness. Li suggests that this drive to project national dignity, especially in contrast to the moralizing gaze of Western humanitarian narratives, shaped a visual culture in which suffering had no place: “It was not compassion but dignity that Chinese intellectuals sought for their people” (p. 107). In this framework, visual art acted less as a representation and more as an instruction. It taught citizens to see their world through the lens of socialist potential.

Following this logic, the peasant’s body became a central projection site. Artworks gave the body strength, endurance, and purpose. These images set the body as the model revolutionary subject. They not only reflected ideal citizens. They helped create them. The body joined revolutionary heritage to a utopian future. It tied individual labor to national destiny. In this view, a muscular physique showed moral strength and political virtue. Health itself stood as proof of ideological commitment.

However, this politicization of the body brought contradictions. Cultural critic Zhan Hong notes that the body came under pressure to rise above its material limits in seeking revolutionary purity. In her essay “Fragments of the Body in Chinese Contemporary Art” (2013), Zhan argues that the revolution demanded bodily perfection that could only be achieved by denying physical needs and human frailty. She writes, “The harmonization of body and spirit is predicated upon either the sacrifice of the body or the neglect of the spirit” (p. 20). This logic puts the body in a double bind. It had to show ideological strength and personal denial at the same time. Physical exhaustion, illness, or desire could be seen as political weakness. The revolutionary body, in this way, became alienated from itself. It was celebrated in images, but repressed in daily life.

Zhang Hong examines this contradiction further. She critiques the promise of bodily liberation in a system that limits personal agency. In her analysis of revolutionary visual culture, Zhang notes that Maoist rhetoric praised bodily freedom and empowerment, yet the reality of political life made autonomy impossible. She writes, “The emphasis on the liberated body was frequently undercut by the strict ideological frameworks that governed individual behavior” (Zhang, 2010, p. 29). This tension shows the deeper stakes of body politics in Maoist China. The body was the promise of revolution and the site of its failure. Looking at these layered representations, we see how the revolutionary body was built not to reflect reality, but to replace it. This body became collectivized, stylized, and arranged to serve ideology. Its muscle turned into a metaphor. Its posture sent a message. The peasant body served as an allegorical conduit: connecting past hunger with future abundance, historical trauma with collective pride. Through repetition and idealization, it transformed the failures of history into the promises of revolution.

Conclusion

The socialist project to shape a “new man” in Maoist China went far beyond slogans or surface-level visual culture. It rewrote the meaning of the body in daily life. Ordinary workers, soldiers, and peasants became living templates of revolutionary virtue. An ancient Confucian vision of self-cultivation evolved into a collective project. Personal growth meant loyalty to the nation and a willingness to embody the era's ideals.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how revolutionary demands politicized the body. Art and visual media propelled this transformation on every level. Within the visual archive of Maoist China, the body became the primary stage where ideology and daily life converged. Through images, performances, and rituals, people learned to inhabit new roles and internalize new behaviors about how to stand, work, and feel. The worker emerged as a symbol of dignity and determination. As Xie Youshun notes, “A politicized society requires every individual to possess a body that corresponds to its demands” (Xie, 2003, p. 8). The worker’s strength and skill mirrored the nation’s hopes for modernity. Artists and propagandists gave the worker’s body new meaning, presenting it as more than a tool for labor but also as a symbol of pride, technical mastery, and self-sacrifice. Gender roles shifted as women entered positions previously reserved for men, and their discipline and energy became integral to the narrative of collective progress.

The soldier, alongside the worker, appeared as a guardian and moral beacon. On posters and stage, the soldier's upright posture and fearless gaze expressed more than military might; they embodied steadfast commitment, emotional restraint, and absolute fidelity to the Party and the people. Model operas and mass spectacles turned military discipline into everyday aspiration. To be a good soldier meant to give oneself wholly to the cause, making sacrifice the highest patriotism.

The peasant, tied to the rhythms of land and labor, formed the base of the nation's moral renewal. The strong, resilient body of the farmer did not merely reflect the dream of abundance; it gave the countryside's daily struggle new political meaning. In paintings and propaganda, peasants were shown not as victims of the past, but as authors of a new era, their perseverance and endurance recast as the raw material of socialist virtue. The state offered hope, solidarity, and a vision of turning scarcity into plenty through these bodies.

These three figures are connected through more than just repeated heroic images. They shared a larger project to reorder a generation's senses, feelings, and memories. As Pang Laikwan notes, the Cultural Revolution was about broadcasting political messages, "aestheticizing the sensorial," and producing new habits of perception and emotion (Pang, 2017, p. 9). Art became part of daily life. It taught people what to see and how to desire, move, and dream. The body was not just an individual's possession. It became raw material and vessel for revolutionary hope, shaped and sometimes limited by ideology.

However, these images and performances always carried tension. The same bodies that showed collective strength and hope often faced exhaustion. The drive to be exemplary often meant hiding weakness, silencing suffering, and ignoring the gaps between ideal and reality. Body politics was never just about what was shown, but also about what was left out. Even as China moves past the Maoist era, traces of this project remain. Collectivism, discipline, and aspiration echoes still shape public culture and how bodies are valued and imagined. In examining the construction of the "socialist new man," we see how art can inspire, discipline, and define subjectivity.

Chapter 2 Reimagining the Body: Sensory and Artistic Shifts in 1980s China

The 1980s were a turning point for Chinese art and society. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Maoist visual culture portrayed the body as a disciplined, heroic figure, always serving the needs of the state and the ideals of socialism. During that time, artworks rarely allowed for personal emotion or expressions of vulnerability and bodily differences. People viewed the body as a part of the collective, and official narratives tightly controlled its meaning. However, against this backdrop, the 1980s gradually loosened those collective scripts and gave rise to a new artistic sensibility. This chapter investigates how Chinese artists reimagined the body, not as an emblem of state power or collective destiny but as a site of individual experience, sensory perception, and self-reflection. With the loosening of ideological control, artists turned their attention to pain, memory, intimacy, and the everyday rhythms of embodied life. In doing so, they challenged the established boundaries of artistic representation and helped reshape the structure of perception in post-Mao China.

To analyze these developments, I use Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible." This idea emphasizes how aesthetics and politics organize what can be seen, said, and thought in society (Rancière, 2006). Rancière argues that each order of perception sets limits on inclusion and exclusion, deciding which bodies and voices may enter public view. The artistic changes of the 1980s, shown by Scar Art's wounded bodies, the calm of the Current of Life School, and the growth of existentialist selfhood, signaled a redistribution of the sensible. These practices opened space for new subjectivities, brought silenced experiences into public awareness, and disrupted the visual order left by the Maoist era.

This chapter traces how artists in the 1980s depicted the body in changing ways. Through close readings of key movements and artworks, I explore how artists expressed pain, memory, and daily experience, how they responded to new philosophical influences, and how collective actions like the Stars Exhibition and the '85 New Wave redefined the link between art and social life. By highlighting sensory and artistic shifts, this chapter shows how the transformation of the body became a way to imagine new agency and redraw the boundaries of Chinese cultural and political life.

2.1 Scar Art and the Re-Emergence of Emotion

In the final decades of the twentieth century, socialist realism in China continued to glorify leaders and idealize the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers. This tradition set clear limits on what artists could show and how they could depict bodies and emotions. Within this context, Chen Danqing's *Tibetan Series* marked a turning point in Chinese contemporary art. The seven paintings introduced a new aesthetic into the national scene and sparked discussion far beyond the gallery. Drawing from French landscape painting, Chen shifted toward realism and offered a more sensitive view of ordinary people.

A key work in the series is *Tears Streaming Down to the Field of Harvest* (1977; hereafter *Tears*). This painting shows a group of Tibetans in a wheat field, just after they hear of Mao Zedong's death (Fig. 2.1). Chen's arrangement of the figures deepens the emotional weight of the scene. He draws viewers into an atmosphere filled with grief and disbelief. Careful use of light and shadow, along with attention to dress and facial expressions, brings out the raw sorrow of the moment. Some figures lower their heads, cover their faces, or slump forward, simple gestures that reveal the depth of pain. The golden wheat fields stretch under a wide blue sky, creating a bright backdrop that, paradoxically, makes the sadness even more striking. The landscape seems to witness the pain in silence.

The image of covering one's face while weeping has since become an emblematic gesture of national mourning. Within the constraints of the time, however, such emotional expressiveness was highly regulated. Artists were prohibited from depicting grief among workers, peasants, or soldiers unless it served a politically sanctioned narrative. Reflecting on this paradox, Chen later said, "Painting workers, peasants, and soldiers crying was not allowed at that time, but crying for Chairman Mao was accepted. However, the art community appreciated its tragic nature" (Chen, 1983). His remark reveals the ideological boundaries that shaped artistic expression. Yet, within these limits, genuine human emotion still found ways to appear and gain recognition.

Over time, the art world continued to change. At the 1979 National Art Exhibition, held for the thirtieth anniversary of the People's Republic China, several works centered on grief left a deep mark on viewers. Gao Xiaohua's *Why* (1978) stands as one of the earliest and most notable examples. Gao arranged the painting from a bird's-eye view, creating distance and starkness in the scene (Fig. 2.2). The composition draws the eye along a diagonal toward a

young man at the center, his head wrapped in bandages, hinting at recent trauma.To his right, a woman lies on the ground, her face pale and partly hidden beneath a red cloth, while another young man sits on the left in quiet contemplation. Scattered shells and guns offer evidence of recent violence and injury.

In *Why*, Gao steers clear of glorifying heroism or portraying the wounded as symbols of collective strength. Instead, he brings to light the harsh realities of conflict by focusing on images of bandaged wounds, collapsed limbs, and faces etched with exhaustion and anguish. The painting's muted tones and heavy brushwork heighten the tension, taking us back to a time of historical turmoil. Scholars have highlighted that "Why" allows for a sober reflection on past suffering without glorification or condemnation. It presents this historical tragedy in a way that stirs genuine feelings in viewers (Yuning, Duanzelin et al., 2008). Gao's depiction of physical pain highlights how fragile and vulnerable lives can be. He uses bandages, slumped postures, and expressions of pain to draw our attention, prompting us to face the regret, anxiety, and disillusionment that his figures express. This striking portrayal of mental and physical suffering evokes empathy and encourages us to reflect deeply, challenging us to see beyond our usual perspectives.

The appearance of such artworks marked a clear stylistic shift. They challenged the rules of visibility and legitimacy in China's public sphere. Jacques Rancière's idea of the "distribution of the sensible" explains how social orders set limits on what people can see, say, and feel (Rancière, 2006, pp. 12–14). These artists showed uncertainty and sorrow in direct opposition to the collective's unified narrative. By presenting individual trauma in public images, they made marginalized experiences visible. They allowed viewers to feel the pain and confusion of those once silenced by society. Rancière states, "The distribution of the sensible establishes at the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts" (Rancière, 2006, p. 12). Scar Art used this process to redraw the lines of who was included and who was left out. It questioned the official rules about what could be seen and felt.

Official responses to these new artistic expressions revealed ongoing anxieties about the power of visual culture. Scar Art paintings' visible sadness often serves as a veiled critique of the present order. For example, Gao Xiaohua faced ongoing discouragement from his university while creating *Why*, as they interpreted his subject matter as a potential source of political unrest (Lv, 2007, p. 650). Art historian Julia F. Andrews note, "The emotional authenticity depicted was read as a daring political statement, a silent yet powerful indictment

of the revolution's failures" (Andrews & Shen, 2012, p. 250). The possibility that sadness might signal dissatisfaction with reality made these works both dangerous and transformative.

Figure 2.1 *Harvest Fields Flooded by Tears*, 1976, oil on canvas, 120 × 200 cm. Chen Danqing. © Chen Danqing. Courtesy of Tang Contemporary Art.

Figure 2.2 *Why?*, 1978, oil on canvas, 107.5 × 136.5 cm. Gao Xiaohua. © Gao Xiaohua. Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

Both paintings focus on sorrow, but the kind and direction of that sorrow differ greatly. In *Tears*, mourning unfolds as a shared ritual after Mao Zedong's death. This reflects a tradition where personal feelings dissolve into the collective. The figures show a guided form of grief,

shaped by political and cultural rules that turn the loss of a leader into a public crisis. Here, sorrow becomes less about private pain and more about the public display of loyalty and historical memory.

By contrast, Gao Xiaohua's *Why* marks a shift in how Chinese art shows suffering. The sorrow in *Why* is not shared, but deeply personal. It appears as confusion and inner struggle. The wounded, fragile body becomes a stage for psychological conflict. Gao brings individual subjectivity to the front, in a culture that long kept such introspection out of sight. His focus on vulnerability breaks from the old model of collective heroism. Instead, he offers an image of private pain and reflection, rarely seen in earlier works.

This shift from collective to individual sorrow signals more than a change in subject matter. It marks a deep transformation in how culture expressed itself after the Cultural Revolution. Yang Jui-sung (2016) notes that scar literature allowed people to "foster a sense of psychological resilience" (p. 2) by expressing emotions long held back. He writes, "By engaging this metaphor, Chinese people publicly and collectively revisited the trauma of the Cultural Revolution" (p. 3). This openness in fiction created space for private pain to become public, mirroring Scar Art's focus on psychological truth and the sharing of inner suffering. Through both art and literature, these works made room for grief. Scar Art became a key tool for collective reflection in the 1980s, changing the cultural life of China. It helped society face deep historical traumas, both personal and shared.

2.2 Everyday Poetics: Redefining the Ordinary Body

The Current of Life School marked a significant turning point in Chinese art from 1980 to 1984. This school emerged alongside the Scar Art movement, which focused on introspection after the Cultural Revolution. Earlier art forms had centered on revolutionary socialism and glorified idealized images of workers, peasants, and soldiers. In contrast, the new movement emphasized the dignity and complexity of the human body, breaking away from its former role as a symbol of state ideology. He Duoling's painting *Spring Breezes Have Arrived* (1981) vividly illustrates this stylistic shift. The work depicts a young girl seated quietly with a buffalo and a dog, creating a tranquil and intimate atmosphere (Fig. 2.3). Soft colors and gentle transitions convey a peaceful mood, sharply contrasting with the bold style of earlier political art. The painting signals a movement toward serenity and introspection.

Figure 2.3 *Spring Wind Has Waken Up*, 1981, oil on canvas, 96 × 130 cm. He Duoling. © He Duoling. Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

The girl, buffalo, and dog arrangement forms a triangular composition, highlighting harmony and calm. Their simple relationships and the quiet rhythms of daily life generate a sense of peace. He Duoling carefully renders the girl's posture: her relaxed shoulders, slightly tilted head, and soft gaze express ease and grace. This method directs the viewer's attention away from grand narratives of collective heroism, inviting appreciation for the beauty of stillness and reflection. The animals are not mere decorations; they reinforce the close ties between humans and nature. The painting offers a glimpse into daily life free from political overtones and historical burden. The resulting mood is intimate and poetic.

This new approach to representation did not appear in isolation. An exhibition of nineteenth-century French rural landscape painting profoundly impacted He Duoling and his peers. It encouraged a generation of Chinese artists to explore new ways of depicting nature and the human figure. He also acknowledged his affinity with Andrew Wyeth, the American realist whose focus on rural life and ordinary people resonated with those seeking authenticity beyond ideology (He, 1982). In his work, the human body appears relaxed and unguarded. He intentionally moves away from depicting disciplined or heroic bodies, instead presenting the beauty of ordinary existence. Rather than repeating historical narratives, He Duoling's art gently invites the viewer to find dignity in everyday moments. This act of "depoliticizing" the image creates a poetic alternative to the dominant visual codes of the previous era.

The movement from collective heroism to everyday poetics finds theoretical grounding in Jacques Rancière's work. Rancière describes Dutch genre painting as art that values freedom and equality, rejecting hierarchy and the need for a grand narrative. He writes, "This lack of concern for the outside, this inner freedom of their being outside, is what the ideal concept refers to... This peace and joy of theirs is closer to the gods of Olympia" (Rancière, 2006, p. 46). He Duoling's painting embodies this spirit of inner freedom. The girl's silent meditation on the grassland becomes a form of resistance to Maoist ideals of will, action, and sacrifice. Rather than using images to declare progress or modernity, He Duoling opens a contemplative space rooted in the bodily experience of nature.

Works like these invite viewers to see the human body not as a tool of political messaging but as a subject endowed with dignity and simplicity. Art critic Yanzhou notes, "this painting was a product of the process of seeking or recovering truth in society and virtue in people's minds" (Yanzhou, 2020, p. 111). He Duoling's work aligns with a wider cultural turn in the early 1980s. During this period, artists and intellectuals sought new ways to represent truth and virtue beyond ideology. By centering a young girl's bodily grace in a rural setting, He Duoling creates a "counter-narrative," celebrating personal poetry and everyday life over politicized images.

The rise of the Current of Life School thus marks more than a stylistic shift. It signals a profound transformation in the values and ambitions of Chinese art. Art historian Lv Peng traces the movement's name to Western "lifestream" novels, emphasizing direct observation and the unembellished reality of daily existence rather than structured plot (Lv, 2008, p. 33). This dedication to the everyday is evident in the textured surfaces of their paintings. The focus on personal experience and individual perspective becomes a distinctive feature. The Current of Life School urges us to find meaning in ordinary moments and appreciate human life's complexity.

Luo Zhongli's *Father* (1980) stands as a landmark for the Current of Life School, embodying its ideals through subject and scale. Luo presents an ordinary rural laborer on a monumental canvas, a size previously reserved for national icons (Fig. 2.4). The artist carefully details the weathered face: sun-darkened skin, cracked lips, and deep wrinkles reveal a life of hard labor. This faithful depiction of physical reality marks a clear departure from socialist realist works that favored perfect, heroic bodies. Instead of expressing only collective virtue, the farmer emerges as unique. His fatigue and strength evoke a shared sense of humanity. The painting's

documentary style and respectful gaze underline the dignity of everyday people, bringing attention to those often neglected by official narratives. Focusing on the body's material reality is not simply a technical change; it marks a fundamental rethinking of collective narrative. Luo's "ordinary" farmer, presented on a grand stage, challenges established hierarchies and shifts attention to the beauty and meaning found in daily life.

Figure 2.4 *Father*, 1980, oil on canvas, 215 × 150 cm. Luo Zhongli. © Luo Zhongli. Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

However, this turn to individual experience brought new artistic and philosophical questions. Yanzhou observes that artists of this period "were looking for the transcendence of individuals in the process of experiencing this existence," suggesting that painting became a means to explore both the visible world and the depths of subjective experience (Yanzhou, 2020, p. 138). The ordinary body thus becomes a site for exploring the meeting of metaphysical and physical, rational and instinctive dimensions. For the Current of Life School, painting was never simply a record of the external world. Instead, it created a space for subjective experience and embodied existence to become central. This process shifted Chinese painting away from collective idealization and abstraction, leading to a more

grounded, humane, and open-ended engagement with daily life. Through this transformation, the body emerges as a locus for dignity, memory, and meaning, a new foundation for post-revolutionary Chinese visual culture.

2.3 Existential Turns: The Self and Subjectivity in Art

In Zhong Ming's *He is Himself, Sartre* (1980) introduces individual subjectivity by weaving existential philosophy into its visual language. Sartre's portrait appears in the lower right, set against a vivid red background that evokes revolution. His black suit and serious expression draw the viewer's eye, making his posture a conceptual and visual focus. Rather than displaying collective strength, Sartre's body radiates introspective calm. Irregular white lines frame the scene loosely, hinting at movement beyond inherited boundaries. A transparent glass cup sits in the upper left, suggesting the simplicity of daily existence or the clarity existential reflection seeks, though the artist leaves its meaning open.

Figure 2.5 *He Is Himself – Sartre*, 1980, oil on canvas, 110 × 179 cm. Zhong Ming. © Zhong Ming. Collection of Hong Kong Arts Centre.

Zhong Ming's choice to depict Sartre stands in sharp contrast to the images of Mao Zedong that filled public life for decades. Mao's portrait was everywhere, and Maoist ideology shaped education, encouraging collective identity while discouraging personal inquiry. By foregrounding Sartre, Zhong Ming marks a shift from seeing the body as a collective tool for

the nation toward a philosophy that values individual freedom, responsibility, and the body as a field for existential discovery.

In the 1980s, China saw profound ideological change as people began to engage with Western thought after years of isolation. New philosophical ideas, especially Sartre's existentialism, influenced scholars and artists. In an article for *Fine Arts Magazine*, Zhong Ming cited Sartre to discuss artistic self-expression and writing: "The essence, meaning, and value of existence must be affirmed and determined by one's own actions. This reality holds true even in the discipline of painting, where each artist elucidates his own creative impulses and actions" (Zhong Ming, 1981, p. 9).

Zhong Ming's painting focuses on existential themes of freedom and responsibility. Sartre asserted that humans are defined not by predetermined essence but by their choices, making them accountable for their own existence (Sartre, 1946). This stance clashed with a Chinese education system that upholds collectivism and prioritizes self-sacrifice for national progress. Zhong's work thus echoes Western philosophy while reflecting China's changing society. Most importantly, he reminds viewers that the body is not only a tool for labor or propaganda, but also a locus for individual will and self-assertion.

He is Himself; Sartre captures the era's profound ideological shift. It reflects a move from strict collectivism toward existential thought and personal choice. Zhong Ming highlights the importance of individual freedom and responsibility, questioning the limitations of collectivist culture. He insists that artists should not merely depict the body, but also practice autonomy through their work and life.

During the Mao era, visual representations conformed to the socialist "new man" ideal, embodying collective purpose and devotion to national projects (see Chapter 1). By selecting Sartre rather than Mao, Zhong Ming subverts this tradition. He presents a body associated with skepticism, introspection, and agency. The painting's red and white brushstrokes surrounding Sartre's figure suggest a break from rigid conventions and confirm the self as autonomous.

Artists from this period explored historical and political critique through diverse themes and styles. They began highlighting ordinary people's emotional and physical lives, moving

beyond staged appearances to express genuine feelings. Their work was not only about personal expression. It also raised questions about subjectivity. These paintings focused on "humanity" and the "individual," placing personal freedom above class categories or sweeping historical narratives. In this way, the body emerged as a symbol of genuine emancipation, inviting viewers to confront daily life's realities and gain new insight into individuality and aesthetic experience.

2.4 Action and Protest: The Body in Collective Performance

In 1979, a pivotal art movement unfolded quietly outside the official exhibition halls in Beijing. A group of independent artists, mostly self-taught and lacking formal training, organized an exhibition on the fences surrounding the National Art Exhibition in a small park. This unauthorized show featured over 150 works, including paintings, ink pieces, nude prints, and abstracts (Huang Rui, 1986). The exhibition drew unprecedented attention and even outshone the official display, much like the Salon des Refusés had once energized French Impressionism. The Stars Art Exhibition challenged institutional boundaries and announced the arrival of a new era in Chinese contemporary art. With styles ranging from abstraction to surrealism, the exhibition included works by artists such as Huang Rui, Li Shuang, and Wang Keping. Their slogan, "Picasso is our rallying cry, Cézanne is our example" (Huang Rui, 1986; Mei Qin, 2010), showed their commitment to Western modernist ideals and determination to explore new artistic possibilities.

Art primarily served as a vehicle for political propaganda and collective ideology during the Cultural Revolution. In contrast, the Stars Art Exhibition introduced unconventional artworks into public space without official permission, marking a significant break with prevailing norms. Wu Hung observed that some pieces from the exhibition directly confronted Maoist ideology, displaying a boldness that shocked audiences (Wu, 2010, p. 9). For example, Wang Keping's wooden sculpture *Silence* (1978) presents an abstract face, twisted and distorted. Rugged lines and carving marks stress the rawness of the wood (Fig. 2.6). One eye stands out in sharp relief, while the other is closed, denying the figure its vision. The mouth, enlarged yet obstructed by a curved piece of wood, suggests suppressed speech and emotional repression. This imagery evokes the silent struggles many faced during the Cultural Revolution. Another work by Wang, *Long Live* (1978), shows an exaggerated arm holding up the Little Red Book. The arm stretches unnaturally, expressing both force and tension.

Beneath it sits a distorted head, screaming with pain and protest. Together, arm and head form an abstract opposition that radiates anxiety (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.6 *Silence*, 1978, wood carving (birch), 43 × 27 × 27 cm. Wang Keping. © Wang Keping.

Figure 2.7 *Long Live*, 1978, wood carving and vinyl, 38.7 × 22.2 × 7.8 cm. Wang Keping. © Fukuoka Asian Art Museum.

In Mao's era, artists often idealized the body to fit the socialist image. Wang's sculptures instead transform the body, breaking social conventions. His distortions use the body as a critique site, challenging old ideas of rationality and identity. Through these exaggerated forms, Wang creates a sense of "otherness." He unsettles the familiar and compels viewers to question their assumptions about normalcy. He highlights how political history and collective ideology have shaped how people view individual and social bodies.

Wang Keping's sculptures go beyond visual critique; they enact defiance against the period's ideological strictures. The exaggeration and fragmentation in his works reveal the trauma and disorder of the time. By radically altering the human form, Wang questions inherited ideals and uses grotesque images to challenge familiar concepts of anatomy and selfhood. These hybrid bodies blur the boundary between the familiar and the strange, often provoking discomfort or fear. Unlike the idealized figures of state sculpture, Wang's bodies struggle for autonomy and rebellion. Presented at the Stars Art Exhibition, these works drew a strong public response and became symbols of resistance to the official art system. They revealed art's potential to subvert both aesthetics and ideology.

The Stars Art Exhibition gained massive public interest for its daring content, but it was closed only two days after opening. Officials confiscated the artworks. The authorities saw the exhibition's unauthorized nature and deviation from socialist realism as challenging their power. Wu Hung (2010) notes that the bold imagery of specific works openly provoked Maoist values, unsettling viewers with their defiant content (p. 9). Unlike Cultural Revolution art, which spread state propaganda and enforced collective ideals, the Stars Art Exhibition fostered new forms and ideas, destabilizing official culture.

When authorities shut down the exhibition, organizer Huang Rui voiced strong dissatisfaction and mobilized artists and intellectuals to resist. Members of the Stars Art Society organized a march to protest the closure and demand an official apology. They insisted that authoritarian methods should not stifle artistic expression. They asked for a public apology from the institution that had barred their show (Wang Keping, 2009). The group marched through central Beijing, launching the first large-scale artist protest since the founding of the country is founding . Although officials offered to reschedule the show, the artists refused to comply. They used their bodies, banners, and inventive strategies during the march to confront official restrictions.

Police soon intervened, dispersing the protest, and leaving about thirty determined participants. Among them was Ma Desheng, who, despite living with polio, led from the front, and added dramatic force. The demonstration ultimately produced positive results. On November 23, authorities permitted the Stars Art Exhibition to reopen. Attendance surpassed the official National Art Exhibition (Huang Rui, 1986). The events in question signify a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art, illustrating that artists could navigate their creative practices independently of state institutions. It represented the first substantial collective endeavor for artistic freedom within the context of modern Chinese art history.

Cultural sociologist Huang Jinlin, in his book *History, Body, State: Body Formation in Modern China 1895–1937* (2006), examines how students in the 1910s transformed their bodies from passive objects into visible agents of protest through collective action. Their presence disrupted state surveillance and forced hidden demands into public view (Huang, 2006, pp. 195–197). While Huang's research covers the early twentieth century, his insights help explain the 1979 Star protests. Like the student demonstrators he describes, the Stars artists used their bodies to claim public space and seek greater artistic freedom. These embodied protests served as resistance and questioned how public spaces are defined politically and culturally. By gathering in Beijing's streets, artists challenged state control over space and visibility, turning monitored areas into new platforms for artistic and political action. Huang Rui recalled that some artists discarded personal items like watches, symbolizing their dedication (Huang Rui, 1986). The Stars' protests showed how collective bodily actions can challenge authority, create new public spaces, and reshape the relationship between art, power, and society.

Rancière offers a helpful concept here: "noise." He describes noise as the voice of those marginalized by social structures, which interrupts public order. He writes, "There is an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics… a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière, 2006, p. 14). In this view, noise is not just sound; it represents a rupture in the dominant order and a challenge to who is recognized or heard. Politics and aesthetics, for Rancière, share the exact distribution of the sensible. This order is activated when those dismissed as "noise" seek recognition in public.

The Stars' protests vividly illustrate this theory. By organizing collective performances in Beijing's streets, the artists transformed monitored spaces into contested zones for art and politics. They made their demands for artistic freedom impossible to ignore through marching, holding banners, and occupying public space. The individuals in question exemplified the "noise" that Rancière articulates, effectively disrupting the state's control over dissent and reconfiguring the parameters of visibility and expression within the urban landscape.

2.5 The 85 New Wave and Artistic Experimentation

After the Stars Art Exhibition, a surge of transformative energy spread through China's art world. Many young artists, motivated by resilience and creativity, formed collectives across major cities. They worked without galleries, museums, or institutional support. Groups such as the Northern Art Group, the Southwest Art Research Group, the Chi Society, Xiamen Dada, and the Big Tail Elephant Work Group emerged. These collectives, united by shared visions, explored new forms and concepts. They produced manifestos and essays, drawing from Freud, Nietzsche, analytical philosophy, and Western values. They initiated dialogues with other artists, critics, and the wider public (Gao Minglu, 1991; Yanzhou, 2020).

From the Northern Art Group, Ren Jian emphasized the value of social alliances between artists, poets, and musicians. These artists built support networks, gaining strength and shared purpose (Ren Jian, personal communication, March 10, 2023). They boldly experimented with radical themes. Galikowski (1998) noted, "In an atmosphere of mutual help and encouragement, artists were able to experiment with more radical styles and themes, finding comfort, no doubt, in the safety of numbers, mainly when exhibiting their work to the public" (p. 164).

In a society where collectivism long overshadowed the individual, their search for personal utopia was a declaration of autonomy. They sought self-expression and reclaimed agency over their bodies and lives. Sharing discoveries and even misunderstandings, they broke free from old constraints and created new communities focused on creativity and individuality. Their exhibitions and actions directly confronted political and aesthetic norms, reshaping public discourse with every work and intervention.

They aimed to provoke responses. In a newly opened country, they used art to expand collective horizons. Their works sought to influence society, signaling a desire for freedom. They often prioritized speed and response over technical refinement (Gao Minglu, 1989). These collectives did not aim to create a unified style. They understood that authorities might shut down their exhibitions at any time. Although they drew inspiration from Western figures like Picasso or Klee, they transformed those ideas within the Chinese context. Their goal was not to expand art in the abstract but, as Yi Ying (1989) wrote, "Imitation is a necessary process in developing human civilization, and closed cultures always remain passive within bilateral exchanges. Imitation is a means of awakening from this and a starting point for self-criticism" (p. 129). This view urged artists to expose social and political problems and work toward a better future.

Xiamen Dada stood out for its radical interventions and destructive acts, which redefined bodily representation. The group moved beyond static painting, embracing the body as an agent of direct action. In the early 1980s, Xiamen Dada drew inspiration from European Dada, known for its absurdity and anti-establishment drive. The group challenged the norms of a Chinese art scene still dominated by socialist realism and political propaganda. Their most famous event was the burning of their artworks in November 1986. At the Xiamen Dada Modern Art Exhibition, 14 artists presented 87 works. Curator Huang Yongping led a ritual of "modification, destruction, and burning," setting the paintings alight (Huang Yongping, 1986). The act marked total rejection of old values and commitment to radical change. Artworks are scattered on the square, surrounded by slogans in lime: "Art is to the artist what opium is to man," "Life is not peaceful without the destruction of art," "Dada is dead," and "Fire beware." For over two hours, flames transformed the space into a new arena. The artists' presence and action shifted the body from painted object to performative force.

By destroying their works, Xiamen Dada aimed to reconstruct the body's meaning in art. The burning rejected fixed forms and norms that governed bodily representation. This self-destruction sought to escape traditional aesthetics and social expectations, opening new ways to experience the body as dynamic and free. Xiamen Dada's spirit rested on radical experimentation and resistance to dominant culture. They embraced absurdity, confronting society's roots. Huang Yongping connected Dada's destructive force with Zen Buddhism's "letting go," stripping tradition and fostering "anti-art." He wrote, "The fire of Dada pushed the movement to its climax, and what was important was that the Dadaists had the meaning

of ‘letting go’ in the blazing flames. Dada is dead. Art is dead. Phoenix nirvana and rebirth” (China Fine Arts News, 1986). Their actions challenged artistic norms and used bodily performance to critique existing structures. By mixing humor, nonsense, and provocation, they aimed to transform art and society.

Through unruly behavior, artists challenged the traditional sense of bodily representation, breaking old structures and introducing new ways of sensing and signifying. Their bodies no longer served as cogs in the socialist machine. Instead, they opened themselves to the unknown. Even if the artists did not recognize it then, their acts constituted early performance art, pushing the limits of creativity. Zhou Yan observed, “They sought solutions at the discursive level. Avant-garde artists believed that art would be in a crucial place and become a critical fighting force in this revolution. Accordingly, they considered themselves the major group in regenerating culture, and their art would be an incarnation of ideas and conceptions of this cause” (Zhou Yan, 2020, p. 139). This transformation illustrates the evolution of the body from a passive subject to an active agent of resistance. During the Cultural Revolution, strict control over individual bodies was a hallmark of the era. However, within emerging support networks, the body emerged as a catalyst for social change.

Gao Minglu (1999) argued that “behaviorism” defined the period, shifting focus from the final product to the process. Artists value the environment and atmosphere more than discrete works. The body moved from being a painted subject to a social agent. Once bound by collective discipline, the art world became a site of contestation against tradition, power, and morality. Artists used their bodies to assert new, resistant subjectivities.

These artists created space for novel expression and meaning by breaking rules through disruption. Their transformation of the body, from disorder to renewed possibility, demonstrated art’s power to reshape norms and perceptions. Their collective energy shook the art system and fueled a broader intellectual and cultural awakening in 1980s China. Once a passive image, the body became a living agent in making social and political meaning, a decisive step from representation to action.

2.6 Avant-Garde and Anxiety: Artistic Freedom and Political Boundaries

Despite recurring political interventions, artists in the 1980s pressed forward with their creative pursuits, testing boundaries and resisting constraints. To prevent the momentum of

Chinese art from stalling, the avant-garde art conference in Zhuhai, Guangdong, in 1986 reviewed the “85 New Wave” and inspired a large-scale Beijing exhibition of original work. While political movements repeatedly delayed and contested art form and content, artists and critics persevered, culminating in the China/Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Art Museum in 1989 (Zhou Yan, 1989; Li Xianting, 1989). This event symbolized a new era of liberated thought.

On February 5, 1989, the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition opened, its poster emblazoned with a “No U-Turn” sign. Authorities had prohibited performance art and sensitive themes like “pornography” and “political issues” (Li Xianting, 1989), yet the exhibition went ahead. Over two weeks, 186 artists showed 297 works, marking a watershed since the “85 New Wave.” Despite the official prohibition on performance art, numerous artists strategically subverted this restriction through innovative expressions. Li Shan, for instance, engaged in a poignant act by cooling his feet in water, while Wu Qingshan conceptually transformed the sale of shrimp into a form of artistic commentary. Additionally, Zhang Nian's performance involved sitting atop a nest of eggs, a powerful statement underscored by his sign that declared: “During egg incubation, no theories are allowed to avoid disturbing the next generation.” These acts reflect a nuanced critique of constraints on artistic expression and underscore the resilience of creativity within restrictive environments.

The most dramatic act came from Xiao Lu, who fired two gunshots at her installation “Dialogue” on the opening day. The piece featured two aluminum phone booths, with photographs of a man and a woman, joined by a mirror. A red telephone on a white table, the receiver hanging, alluded to dialogue and separation. Xiao Lu’s two shots, a spontaneous outpouring of emotion, ruptured the line between artistic action and public event, triggering the museum's temporary closure. Xiao Lu’s act embodied protest, expressing both individual and generational tension. Shooting her work, she made her body the direct medium of resistance. Her visceral gesture challenged the limits imposed on artistic expression, exposing the repressive conditions artists faced. This act became a turning point, closing the chapter of the 1980s avant-garde and presaging rising political sensitivity.

The event provoked widespread debate about art’s political function. Although Xiao Lu later emphasized her emotional drive rather than political intent, foreign media focused on the incident. *Time* magazine captured the moment with “Condoms, Eggs, and Gunshots.” Xiao

Lu's performance and its aftermath became a lens for global audiences to assess communism's cultural legitimacy. Critics recognized the danger and rawness of the act. Li Xianting noted that Tang Song and Xiao Lu confronted risk directly, making other works seem "pedantic or sentimental." Their audacity, "not seen since Duchamp," exposed the complexities of Chinese law, as artists could discharge firearms in public without harsh penalty.

This episode highlighted the ongoing tension between artistic freedom and state authority. Xiao Lu's gunshots symbolized the unspeakable pressures facing artists, marking the end of the New Wave (Li Xianting, 1989). Only months later, the political turmoil of 1989 would render collective artistic action almost impossible. Alain Badiou's idea of the "event" clarifies Xiao Lu's impact. He defines an event as a rupture that changes people's thoughts and actions. "Every truly creative work generates a new encoding of the possibilities of the world, a new guideline for the coordination of collective practices" (Badiou, 2013, p. 96). Xiao Lu's act was such an event that it altered Chinese art's trajectory and shifted the focus from collective activism to individual expression.

In the 1990s, China's booming art market offered new opportunities for recognition and success, accelerating the turn from collective action to individual careers. Artists began to use new media, integrate global influences, and explore diverse themes from private experience to universal concerns. Despite greater political pressure, the rebellious and innovative spirit of the 1980s remained, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of Chinese artists.

Conclusion

This study traces a profound transformation in how the human body was perceived and represented in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese art. The decade after 1979 ushered in new freedoms, fueled by liberal cultural policies and foreign philosophical currents. Artists such as He Duoling and Luo Zhongli abandoned the glorification typical of socialist realism, choosing more nuanced approaches that highlighted autonomy and personal experience. It marked a break from state narratives and a move toward individual subjectivity.
During the '85 New Wave, groups like Xiamen Dada pushed the limits of artistic resistance. Their extreme acts, including the burning of artworks, went beyond challenging aesthetic norms to question art's place within society. Disorder in art became a political act, directly

confronting established values and power structures. By disrupting collective representations, these artists made space for new perceptions of self and society.

This artistic transformation had profound political consequences. Bernard J. Dobski, in *Shakespeare and the Body Politic* (2013), identifies a core paradox of liberal democracy: advancing personal autonomy can weaken the bonds of national identity. He notes, "an assault on national political bodies has been launched for the sake of liberating the will of individual human beings to choose to act... independently of any consideration of the political context which secures rights and invests them with political meaning" (Dobski, 2013, p. 3). By privileging artistic freedom over national sovereignty, Chinese artists mirrored this tension between individual and collective demands. Their pursuit of personal rights risked eroding the cohesion of collective identity, a process Dobski calls "disincorporation." These shifts reflected the awakening of self-consciousness and new challenges to tradition.

Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" also helps explain these developments. The power structures the understanding of reality by organizing visibility and discourse. The Stars Art Exhibition and the '85 New Wave artists disrupted this order by prioritizing personal expression over collective ideology, transforming audiences from passive observers into active participants. This shift from "seeing" to "acting" represented a significant assertion of agency.

Despite the reforms 1979, Maoist legacies persist in contemporary art and ideology. The state continues intervening, as seen in ideological campaigns in 1986, 2013, and other moments (Song, 2022). Through funding and control of official institutions, the government ensures that art aligns with socialist core values. However, as artists achieve international success and explore personal themes, the official narrative fragments, making space for new voices. Today, official art operates within government frameworks, enjoying state support and broad exposure, while radical groups innovate on the fringes, challenging artistic and social conventions. This dual structure allows for both gradual change and radical experiment. Such works have received growing acclaim abroad, further diversifying China's art world.

In sum, the reconstruction of the body in contemporary Chinese art marks a crucial juncture for both artistic and political life. By embracing disorder and breaking established rules, artists redefined individual and collective identity, fostering new understandings of self and

value. This period of innovation reshaped artistic practice and contributed to cultural and intellectual awakening. As Chinese society evolves, further research should continue to follow the reconstruction of the body, especially as artists navigate state control, global trends, and personal expression. It will reveal the ongoing power of art to provoke reflection, challenge norms, and imagine new possibilities for both individuals and collectives.

Chapter 3 Identity Crisis and the Violent Body in 1990s Chinese Performance Art

In the early 1990s, China experienced dramatic social change. The shift from a planned economy to a market economy disrupted collective identity and challenged accepted social structures. In this period, performance art emerged as a vital method for artists to confront these conflicts. Many early Chinese performance works used extreme bodily gestures to express personal and collective anxieties. Artists engaged in symbolic acts such as wrapping or confining the body and radical practices involving self-harm, pain, and exposure to danger. For example 1989, Xiao Lu performed *Dialogue* by firing a gun at her painting, later remembered as "the first shot" of China's avant-garde art scene. In the same year, Sheng Qi protested political repression by cutting off his little finger and burying it in a flowerpot. Zhu Yu's later work, which involved eating a cooked fetus, provoked moral panic and widespread indignation. These provocative performances triggered strong public responses and generated heated debate within the art community.

As curator Wu Hongliang noted in 1999, "the body gradually became the text of the times." In a climate of uncertainty and instability, artists used their bodies to reveal what words could not fully articulate. Li Xianting, in his curatorial statement for the exhibition *Obsession with Harm* (2000), addressed the prevalence of violent and self-harming art. He argued that artists were not irrational. Instead, society had become accustomed to consuming violence through a media landscape saturated with wars, murders, accidents, and disasters. Li asserted, "People consciously or unconsciously consume violence through the media. Thus, it is not the artists who have gone mad, but rather the world itself" (Li, 2000). This repeated turn to pain sharpened audiences' awareness of both physical and psychological suffering. Performance art became a powerful way to explore shifting boundaries between self and society, body and identity. However, the question remains: why did these artists choose to harm themselves? What cultural and political circumstances made self-harm a comprehensible, even necessary, form of expression?

To address these questions, I will focus on three artists born in the 1960s: Zhang Huan, Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao. Zhang Huan's endurance-based performances explore the tension between individual and collective identity, drawing on Eastern spiritual traditions and Western performative strategies. Yang Zhichao subjected his body to branding, incision, and

implantation to question ownership, surveillance, and the state's control of the body. He Chengyao worked with her own and her mother's corporeality, foregrounding trauma, shame, and intergenerational inheritance through public exposure and embodied vulnerability.

I introduced two conceptual frameworks that guide the analysis in this chapter: *experimental death* and *embodied stickiness*. Drawing from theorists such as Georges Bataille, Elaine Scarry, Julia Kristeva, Armando Favazza, and Michel Foucault, these concepts clarify how the wounded body stands at the intersection of affect, memory, and power. Experimental death refers to performance actions that simulate breakdown, exposure, or dissolution. These acts do not enact literal death. Instead, they create shared affective experiences that confront viewers with the limits of empathy, control, and bodily integrity. Embodied stickiness describes how trauma, suppressed emotion, and historical pressure do not disappear. These residues become inscribed into the body, which describes how trauma, suppressed emotion, and historical pressure do not disappear. The residues of historical experiences are intricately inscribed within the body, manifesting in a manner that transcends generations and institutional frameworks. This concept will be further elaborated in subsequent sections, exploring how memory and suffering endure within the corporeal form, frequently eluding articulation through language.

3.1 Experimental Death**: Testing Bodily Limits and the Politics of Exposure**

Since the onset of the Reform and Opening-up, China's transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented system has brought profound changes to its economic structure. The government implemented several regulatory measures to integrate people into a single management framework as part of its modernization agenda. The goal of population control measures, the household registration system (hukou), and legal reforms was to maximize and simplify social organization. The national ID system in the 1990s signaled a clear shift toward more standardized and logical forms of government. This change transformed personal identity into administrative classifications, which redefined the relationship between people and state institutions. What people once regarded as independent has progressively shifted into government management.

3.1.1 Yang Zhichao's Biopolitical Wounds

Yang Zhichao, born in the 1960s, began directly responding to these expanding structures of control by the early 2000s. In 2000, he presented a piece titled *Iron* (fig. 3.1) in the courtyard of Ai Weiwei's studio in Beijing. Yang heated a 500-watt branding iron engraved with his government-issued identification number until it glowed red. Without anesthesia, he pressed it into the bare skin of his back. The Iron sizzled against his flesh, and the smell of burning skin filled the air. Bureaucratic information became a permanent mark. In response to Ai Weiwei's interview, Yang later called the scar "the calligraphy of power written in scar tissue" (Yang, 2013). What once existed on paper alone now embedded itself in his body.

In 2001, Yang performed *Hidden*, in which Ai Weiwei selected and implanted an unidentified object into Yang's leg. Neither Yang nor the audience knew what the object was. A practitioner conducted the operation under clinical conditions for forty-five minutes. Afterward, he stitched the wound shut without explaining. X-rays later revealed a foreign object lodged beneath Yang's skin. No one removed it. It stayed in his body, undefined and irreversible. The performance did not rely on spectacle or visible violence. It exposed a quieter intrusion that entered the body without consent and never left. Power here did not strike; it settled in, enacted through vagueness and decisions made by others. Yang's embedded wound forces a more urgent question: how much control do we have over our bodies, especially within systems that make decisions in our absence?

Georges Bataille's notion of transgression further intensifies this conceptual tension. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), Bataille suggests that eroticism and death are not opposites, but continuations of life into limit experiences. "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death," he writes (p. 11). Bataille views death not as a termination, but as a moment when individuals transcend discontinuity and encounter continuity. He describes this experience of the "continuity of being" as an internal rupture intensely felt rather than rational or representational (p.82), a state he calls a "sovereign moment" (p.171). In this moment, often marked by silence and dissolution, the subject confronts the instability of its boundaries. Through transgression, the body exceeds its given limits and enters a space where language fails and affect takes over.

Building on these ideas, I propose the concept of *experimental death* to interpret the performances discussed in this section. This term refers to artistic actions that simulate breakdown, decay, or dissolution, not to allegorize death, but to create an immersive threshold for the performer and the viewer. The aim is not to destroy the body, but to displace its stability. In performances like *Hidden* or *Iron*, pain is neither hidden nor dramatized. The artist structures and brings the experience into presence, creating a field for shared affective engagement. The spectator does not remain a distant observer; discomfort, uncertainty, and sensory proximity draw them into the work. Thus, *experimental death* becomes a performative strategy that uses pain to open a space of collective vulnerability, where power, control, and identity can be momentarily suspended and re-examined.

3.1.2 Cutting and reborn

This dynamic becomes even more visible in *Planting Grass* (2000). Yang cut open the skin on his back and inserted blades of grass into the wound (fig.3.2). The gesture was modest, quiet, and deliberate. Unlike *Iron*'s searing intensity or *Hidden*'s clinical uncertainty, this performance yielded a softer picture, fresh life growing from broken flesh. The grass meant endurance rather than healing. Rooted in damaged skin, it stayed delicate but alive. Here, the body begins to be on the surface and soil, where suffering persists but does not end. As with his earlier works, *Planting Grass* staged pain not as a symbol but as a shared condition. It balanced life and decay, presence and disappearance, visibility, and silence. In this way, it fits within the logic of *experimental death*: not a representation of mortality, but a suspended state that invites shared perception. The open wound activates collective attention and affect. Critic Xi Pu (2013) noted that such performances confront viewers with realities often obscured by everyday life routines. What appears brutal is not gratuitous; it brings to the surface the structural violence that remains embedded in institutional systems. Yang has described his method as “body intrusion,” a phrase that accurately names the action without dramatizing it. His wounds are not declarations; they are quiet entries of objects, memory, systemic pressure into the body’s interior. What is cut is skin and a boundary between the visible and the concealed.

This idea of new life growing from pain echoes Eva Hayward’s theory of “prefixial flesh.” Hayward sees cutting not as a loss but as a shift in bodily potential. The wound becomes a site for new growth, where trauma gives rise to transformation. Hayward writes, “cutting is a

generative enactment of growing back or healing" (Hayward, 2008, p. 71). The act does not erase; it alters. In Yang's work, the wound preserves life and keeps hope present. Grass, small and persistent, takes root in broken skin. What is cut is more than the body's surface; it is the border between harm and renewal. The flesh absorbs injury yet remains open to change. As Hayward observes, the subject "move[s] toward myself through myself" (p. 72). Here, the body carries both memory and possibility, showing how pain may become the ground for becoming.

Figure 3.1 *Iron*, 2000, performance photograph. Yang Zhichao. © Yang Zhichao. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

Figure 3.2 *Planting Grass*, 2000, performance photograph. Yang Zhichao. © Yang Zhichao. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

In this sense, Yang's performances do not merely stage pain; they organize it as a perceptual and affective threshold. Acts of self-injury function as material-discursive practices that alter the dynamics between artist and audience. Rather than asking for interpretation alone, they demand presence and emotional engagement. The concept of *experimental death* moves beyond symbolic gestures of rupture and enters a space where memory becomes sensory, and history is etched into the body. The wound remains open to sustain a living site of tension and invite others to inhabit its uncertainty rather than resolve it.

3.1.3 Zhang Huan's Abject Body Politics

Rapid urbanization and industrialization in post-reform China reshaped the nation's social landscape. Economic opportunities multiplied, but so did social stratification. Class divisions deepened, traditional communities dissolved, and environmental degradation accelerated. In this shifting context, Zhang Huan (b. 1965) began his artistic practice in Beijing's East Village. This semi-legal enclave offered low rent and basic living conditions. Its makeshift studios and poor sanitation created a marginal but vibrant space for creative work. Wu Hung (2002) characterizes the East Village as "a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial waste," a "space of self-exile" (p. 5). For Zhang and his contemporaries, this environment became both a shelter and a crucible.

Figure 3.3 *12 Square Meters*, 1994, performance, C-print, 164.5 × 115.5 cm. Zhang Huan. © Zhang Huan.

Zhang's performance *12 Square Meters* (1994) exemplifies his deep engagement with embodied marginality. Staged in a disused public toilet near his East Village residence, the work involved Zhang sitting naked for over an hour, his body coated with honey and fish oil(Fig. 3.3). The summer heat and pungent stench of human waste intensified the discomfort, drawing swarms of flies that covered and bit his skin. Following the act, Zhang washed himself in a muddy, stagnant puddle, filled with dead insects, which was recorded entirely on video. The resulting footage is a documentation of physical endurance and existential vulnerability.

Zhang later recalled that the idea came from a mundane but distressing experience. After heavy rain, sewage had overflowed from local cesspools into public toilets. Seeking an alternative, he encountered a swarm of flies that overwhelmed him. Reflecting on this event, Zhang stated, “This is my life. No one can replace it. You have to live your own life” (Zhang, 2010, p. 75). In this context, filth, poverty, and neglect were not just environmental backdrops; they became integral to the performance’s meaning.

Fully grasping the significance of this work requires placing it within the broader context of cultural transformation. During the Maoist era, the body was idealized as strong, pure, and ideologically “red, bright, and shining.” In the post-1980s reform period, this ideal shifted toward consumerism and modernization. Economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s shifted this ideal toward visions of modernization and consumer prosperity, marginalizing those who did not fit neatly within this narrative, such as migrant workers, rural poor, and independent artists. After 1989, the Chinese state promoted "New Realism," aligned with national image-making, while censoring experimental practices like performance and installation art (see chapter 3). Filth and disorder became categorized as "not sufficiently modern" and thus expendable, further alienating individuals on the social periphery. In this context, Zhang’s decision to stage *12 Square Meters* in a public toilet, a space rejected by urban planning, public hygiene discourse, and modern aesthetics, serves as both a personal confrontation and a symbolic intervention. More than a physical space, the toilet represents everything expelled or hidden in the pursuit of cleanliness and progress.

Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection offers a lens to understand Zhang Huan’s work. Kristeva defines abjection as more than filth. It marks the collapse of meaning and order, triggered by what unsettles “identity, system, order” (p. 4). When boundaries between self and waste, subject and other, dissolve, abjection emerges. In Zhang’s performance, his still, fly-covered body erases the line between defilement and self, visibility and invisibility. The work confronts systems that hide discomfort and push aside those labeled as waste.

Georges Bataille further clarifies this through class and labor. In *Abjection and Miserable Forms* (1993), Bataille observes that impoverished workers are stripped not only of comfort but of their very capacity for recognition: “The majority of workers cannot react strongly against the filth and decay… they have taken away… the possibility of being human” (p. 11). *12 Square Meters* makes this condition visible. It presents the viewer with a body marked by social exhaustion, silent labor, and public neglect, all of which dominant ideals of cleanliness and productivity often work to erase. Importantly, Zhang’s work refuses closure. Washing in dirty water does not bring purification. It extends discomfort. Zhang writes, “letting my spirit depart from my body, only to be pulled back repeatedly” (Zhang, 2010, p. 75). His performance holds on to lived tension and does not transcend it.

3.1.4 From Exposure to Purification

In *65 Kilograms* (1994), Zhang expands this engagement with corporeal limits. Staged in a confined studio, he suspended his naked body from an iron beam using ten chains(fig.3.4). Eighteen white quilts cover the floor, creating a stark backdrop for the experiment. At the center, an electric stove connects to a heated metal plate. A nurse skillfully withdraws 250 milliliters of blood from Zhang, allowing it to cascade onto the hot plate. The blood sizzles upon contact, releasing a distinct metallic scent that permeates the air. Zhang's body remains suspended, effectively demonstrating the fragility of human existence to the audience.

Kristeva's theory sees blood as especially unstable. Blood is not dirty by itself. It becomes abject because it unsettles the border between life and death. She writes, "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). In *65 Kilograms*, blood seeps from the suspended body and vaporizes into the air. It becomes neither entirely present nor absent, dissolving the body's integrity. Zhang does not seek purification. Instead, he stages defilement, rendering visible the unstable thresholds of the corporeal. Kristeva explains that societies manage impurity by creating boundaries. Rituals divide groups and block "filthy, defiling element[s]" from entering (Kristeva, 1982, p. 65). In 65 Kilograms, Zhang reverses this logic. He lets blood flow out, touching heated metal. No purification occurs. The action breaks ritual separation, forcing viewers to meet the body at its limit.

Rina Arya (2014) highlights how blood, when it leaves the body, unsettles meaning. Its potency lies "in the very act of leaving the body's interior," caught between life and decay (p. 6). In Zhang's performance, blood does not stain fabric but dissipates as scent, transforming the space into a site of collective memory. Pain, as Arya writes, "symbolizes the rupture of social homogeneity and rethinking identity and social mores" (p. 7). Here, Zhang literalizes this break. The body carries fatigue and burden not as a metaphor, but as lived material.

Hal Foster's analysis shifts the focus to the audience. Abject art, he argues, "does not represent the wound but opens it, asks the viewer to inhabit it, even identify with it" (Foster, 1996, p. 149). In Zhang's performance, trauma becomes neither story nor symbol. Instead, it emerges in real time as a sensory event that punctures distance. Foster describes this as "the

traumatic real, a puncturing of the subject and the screen alike" (p. 146). The viewer cannot remain detached; the rupture draws them in, making pain present and unmediated.
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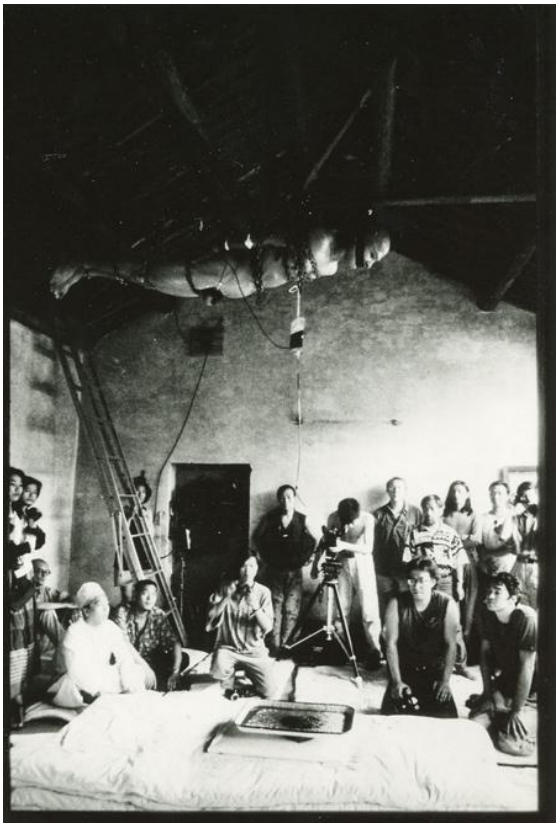

Figure 3.4 *65 kg*, 1994, performance photograph, 164.5 × 115.5 cm. Zhang Huan. © Zhang Huan. Photo by Xing Danwen. Courtesy of Zhou Yan Contemporary Chinese Art Archive.

In this sense, *65 Kilograms* constructs a ritual space in which trauma is not overcome but sustained. The suspended body contains unspoken histories of labor and loss. The work refuses symbolic resolution. It does not elevate pain into redemption; it holds the viewer within it. In the context of post-reform China, which is characterized by displacement and

exhaustion, Zhang's bleeding body represents the fact that official discourse cannot assimilate.

Zhang's work reaches beyond the surface of pain. It explores how pain becomes public when exposed. Visible wounds and suspended bodies turn pain from a private feeling into a shared condition. These scenes invite viewers to participate, not stand apart. The cuts and stillness ask each person to find meaning for themselves. They demand engagement, provoking thought and emotion directly. Helge Meyer (2012) notes, "pain can be most compellingly communicated through the live images of body-centered performance art" (p. 40). In Zhang's work, the bleeding body acts not just as a sign, but as a site where relationships form. The wound addresses the viewer in real time.

This address works as a structure, not a metaphor. Wu Hung (1999) argues that art that tests the body's limits responds to the need for awakening in a society shaped by repression. In the context of Zhang's earlier actions, 65 Kilograms marks a shift. The ritual of bleeding does not resolve pain into story or transcendence. Gao Minglu (2013) writes that Zhang's performance "reduces the human condition to its fundamental physical and mental attributes," shaking stable images of modernity and bodily wholeness. These actions operate within a threshold between meaning and materiality and structure. The viewer engages not in the interpretation of a metaphor but in the witnessing of a transformation. What initially presents itself as a solitary act of self-harm evolves into a collective confrontation with systems that surpass the individual body yet inscribe their effects upon it.

Zhang's work aligns with what I call experimental death. This state is not the literal end of life but a performance in which the body breaks down, lingers, and slowly dissolves. Experimental death differs from symbolic death. It opens a space of duration and affect, where the body neither heals nor vanishes, but stays open and exposed. In 65 *Kilograms*, martyrdom does not settle in blood alone. It appears in burning, fading, and spreading through the air. This process is not a heroic death. Instead, it marks a way of being that asks viewers to stay with the slow, unresolved decay. Experimental death does not mark an end. It creates a stretched-out vulnerability, where pain means endurance, and being seen becomes resistance.

3.2 *Embodied stickiness*: When Trauma is written on the Body

Artists faced complex pressures as Chinese contemporary art entered the international stage in the 1990s. On one side, expanding state control and marketization reshaped the limits of artistic expression. On the other hand, increased involvement by Western curators, critics, and collectors introduced a system focused on "cultural identity" and "national markers." Chinese artists navigated these tensions between political ideology and global market demands. Rather than vanishing, "tradition" resurfaced as a heavily contested concept, functioning as both a cultural label in the international art system and an internal source of identity anxiety. Events such as the inclusion of Chinese art in the 1993 Venice Biennale, Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, and the landmark exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" (1998) at MoMA PS1 and SFMOMA transformed "Chineseness" into something observed, consumed, and contested.

Figure 3.5 *Family Tree*, 2000, performance photograph. Zhang Huan. © Zhang Huan.

Zhang Huan's Family Tree (2000) shows how tradition can inscribe and erase at once (Fig. 3.5). In Elmhurst, New York, Zhang sat motionless for a one-day performance. Three calligraphers covered his face with black ink, writing classical Chinese texts, Confucian sayings, and moral proverbs. The ink grew denser with each layer until nightfall erased his

features. By the end, his face was gone, buried under heavy marks of meaning. Calligraphy in Chinese culture carries more than beauty. It encodes memory and moral authority. Wu Hung (2002) calls it a visual form of “cultural orthodoxy and selfhood.” In Zhang's performance, tradition feels weighty and constricting. People praise cultural continuity, but it becomes a cover that hides. The phrases lose clarity, shifting from expression to erasure. Instead of anchoring identity, repeated writing fragments it, making it unstable. The performance makes visible how cultural inheritance can discipline and depersonalize.

Among the textual inscriptions on Zhang's face, the phrase *Yugong Yishan*, meaning "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains," stands out because of its strong historical and ideological resonance. Initially a Daoist-Confucian fable emphasizing perseverance and moral willpower, the phrase was appropriated by Mao Zedong in a seminal 1945 speech to the Seventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. There, Mao appropriated the parable and turned it into a call for collective revolutionary action. He portrayed the people as the "foolish old man" and positioned imperialist, feudal, and bureaucratic forces as the mountains they must remove. From that moment, *Yugong Yishan* ceased to be merely a moral tale; it became a political slogan, a marker of self-sacrifice in the name of historical progress and ideological loyalty.

However, Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* offers a reversal of collectivist logic. By turning his body into a surface for inscription, Zhang shows how ideology marks not just the mind, but the skin. The ink does not clarify. It covers the body, layering until the self disappears. His performance reveals how cultural meaning, when uncritically layered onto the body, can overwhelm rather than nurture the self. As his features vanish under the weight of ink, the work asks: What remains of identity when tradition leaves no space to question or adapt? If never reinterpreted, cultural inheritance risks turning a person into a shadow without a voice. Through this act of self-erasure, Zhang asks what it costs to belong only symbolically. When tradition hardens into script, the body becomes a flat surface, existing to repeat meaning, not to speak from itself.

In *Bodies That Matter* (2011), Judith Butler reconceptualizes the body not as a natural given, but as a product of reiterative power. “Performativity,” she writes, “is not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (p. xxi). The body emerges not from nature but from repeated actions, such as duty, pain, and identity, which are enacted

repeatedly. These repetitions do not just reflect power; they build it into the body. In Butler's view, materiality is not neutral. It forms through norms learned, endured, and enacted. Power shapes the self from within, not just from above.

In Confucian tradition, the body is genealogical and symbolic rather than purely individual. As the *Xiao Jing* (*Classic of Filial Piety*) states, "The body, hair, and skin are received from the parents; one must not dare to injure them—this is the beginning of filial piety." In this ontology, the body is not merely biological but genealogical and symbolic. Injuring the body is not just an individual offense, but an offense against a moral lineage, disrupting the ties of child to parent, and by extension, subject, and state. This tradition presents bodily sacrifice as the highest form of filial piety. The well-known act of cutting one's flesh to save a dying parent (*ge gu liao qin*) appears in texts such as *Ershisi Xiao* (The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars) and sets the model for selfless virtue. Chun-chieh Huang (2007) explains this logic as a core Confucian ideal: "to sacrifice the individual body in service of the familial or national whole" (p. 92). Here, the body becomes a sign of virtue, a site where cultural norms are repeated and made material. Through such repetition, the body loses its neutrality. It becomes inscribed and occupied by histories it never chose, but cannot reject.

In The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004), Sara Ahmed reconceives emotion as a social process shaped by histories of contact between bodies and objects. For Ahmed, emotions gain meaning through these encounters, and their effects remain on the body as a form of "stickiness." She writes, "stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 90). The body's surface records these marks. Ahmed further connects disgust to embodiment: "When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body becomes sticky" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 92). Bodies marked by pain or shame do not passively hold emotion. They become sticky sites where affect gathers and lingers, sometimes turning certain bodies into blockages in social and emotional life.

Building on this, I use the idea of embodied stickiness to describe how affective residues, such as Trauma, repression, and unspoken, are not just held in memory or language. They settle and repeat in the body. Unlike genetic inheritance or discursive transmission, embodied stickiness moves through gesture, habit, and self-regulation. These marks appear in everyday movements and silent routines, often below conscious awareness. The body actively stores

pain tolerance, enacts ritual obedience, and embodies the quiet acceptance of shame and obligation. It serves as both a surface for memory and a site of acquiescence. In this context, individuals replay history through ongoing bodily practices.

Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* makes this dynamic visible. In performance, Confucian sayings and nationalist slogans are written, layer by layer, onto his face. Each new line of ink is both citation and burden. The build-up shows cultural continuity and also psychological saturation. What Zhang inherits is not just meaning, but the duty to bear and show it on his body. His silence and stillness signal how inheritance often works: not as active choice or remembrance, but as embodied compliance. The work makes moral scripts and cultural legacy visible on the skin, drawing the body into tradition by repeated, unspoken acts.

Figure 3.6 *Still from Tao Te Ching*, 2007. Yang Zhichao. © Yang Zhichao. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

Yang Zhichao's *Dao De Jing* (fig. 3.6), performed at the 2007 Venice Biennale, demonstrates embodied stickiness in another way. Yang stands motionless for eighteen minutes while damp pages of the Daoist text are laid over his face, blocking his mouth, nose, and eyes. The paper clings to his skin, restricting breath and sight. The audience watches his restraint, seeing a form of constraint that is neither openly rejected nor explained. This act recalls "paper punishment" (*zhi xing*), a method once used to suffocate or subdue. The reference points to a larger framework of cultural and institutional control.

This restrained act acquires added meaning when considering the term *daode* (morality) in modern China. In present discourse, *the diode* often regulates behavior, promoting conformity and self-restraint more than critical thinking. What might once have offered philosophical guidance now serves as a tool for control. In Yang's performance, *Dao De Jing* is not advice but a physical limitation. The gesture shows how morality can bind with tenacity, even when not violent. Moral obligation, carried in repeated acts, shapes bodies quietly but powerfully.

In contemporary Chinese society, many significant historical experiences are rarely addressed directly in public, such as the Cultural Revolution or the aftermath of 1989. Many issues remain unresolved, and public discussion or emotional release is limited. Silence does not lead to their disappearance; such unresolved experiences find expression through other channels. This process is characteristic of *embodied stickiness*. Unarticulated questions and unresolved tensions can be registered by the body, often without conscious awareness. The absence of open resistance or analysis lets words, images, and feelings pile up as traces. These traces point to what cannot be spoken directly.

When official narratives erase specific memories and public spaces lack room for mourning, people must process loss privately. Artistic practice, especially performance using the body, becomes a site for expressing these silences. Such works do not explain or interpret Trauma directly. Nor do they reduce it to one event. Instead, they present Trauma as a continuing state. Artists who use pain and bodily exposure do not pursue martyrdom. They aim to make invisible histories visible. These performances do more than represent Trauma. They serve as acts of memory. The body, in such works, endures what words cannot voice. It bears both open and hidden marks of experience. In this way, experience is carried forward not only through story or knowledge, but through the ongoing pain and restriction that the body holds.

3.3 He Chengyao and the Reconstruction of Inherited Wounds

He Chengyao, born in 1964 in Sichuan, began working with performance art in the early 2000s. Her work responds to personal and intergenerational trauma, especially the effects of her mother's mental illness and social exclusion. Unlike artists focused on collective political trauma and grand history, He centers on the maternal body. This focus brings individual

experience to the fore and marks a key intervention in Chinese feminist art and embodied memory. Her first public performance, *Opening the Great Wall* (2001), occurred on the Great Wall during H. A. Schult's "Trash People" installation. He removed her shirt and walked topless among a crowd of aluminum figures. By placing her unidealized female body in this iconic, patriarchal setting, she opened a complex conversation about gender, shame, and public space. Though later interpreted as a feminist act, the initial response was negative, even compared to Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People (1830). Here, He's act did not celebrate heroism but highlighted vulnerability and exposure. Many critics read her toplessness not as freedom but as a violation, inviting censure. He explained later that she did not mean to shock. She aimed to confront the shame tied to her mother's mental illness and to break the silence around it. "I was not afraid of being called crazy. My mother's experience gave me a different understanding of 'madness.' Through my actions, I wanted to tell people that the body and pain are not a crime" (Welland, 2018, p. 228). By making private pain visible, her performance addressed personal and collective denial. Her body became the site where hidden suffering met the public eye.

He's nudity in this context was neither stylized nor eroticized, but direct and unembellished. Unlike the often-spectacular body art practices of male avant-garde artists, her action rejected sensationalism as well as the expectations of the male gaze. She compared her gesture to a famous scene in *The Red Detachment of Women*, where the female protagonist tears open her shirt to reveal her wounds, a moment that expresses rage, resistance, and unspoken pain (Tatlow, 2014; Welland, 2018, p. 225). He's nudity differed from cinematic conventions. Her body looked plain and real, shaped by years of stigma and experience.

This directness broke with established images of ideal femininity. Instead, it asserted the agency of a body marked by vulnerability and shame. Her nudity thus became political. Philip Carr-Gomm (2010) writes that nudity in protest can show a paradoxical strength from vulnerability (p. 164). For He, exposing her body in public was a deliberate act. She rejected concealment and silence, choosing to shed the weight of shame. She did not seek to please viewers. Instead, she wanted to unsettle and make people think, challenging the norms that hid such pain. By placing her body in public view, He reclaimed what had been hidden. She turned inherited shame into something seen, recognized, and made her own.

The site itself made the gesture even more meaningful. Gao Minglu (2006) has written that the Great Wall represents China's imperial legacy and a deeply rooted conservative nationalism (p. 188). By intervening with her body at this historic site, the artist set the personal and the intimate against a structure representing collective pride and male endurance. Her behavior was a kind of transgression, as a woman's body entered and disrupted a space usually labeled as "grand" and "masculine." Her nudity was hesitant, but it was also purposeful. This contrasted with the longstanding expectation that Chinese women should be modest and reserved. The action was not a loud act of rebellion, but a subtle and persistent breaking down of the boundaries between personal and political.

Figure 3.7 *99 Needles*, 2002, chromogenic photograph, 45 × 30 1/4 in. He Chengyao. © He Chengyao. Brooklyn Museum. Photo courtesy of the artist.

This logic of using the body to process and expose trauma became more pronounced in *99 Needles* (2002), a performance that directly reenacted her childhood experience. During the Cultural Revolution, He's mother was forcibly stripped and subjected to a pseudo-medical acupuncture procedure by Red Guards. In *99 Needles*(fig.3.7), He subjected herself to the

insertion of ninety-nine acupuncture needles across her face and torso, a process lasting several hours, pushing her to physical and emotional limits. He's act differed from her mother's forced exposure. She chose her ordeal, turning inherited suffering into a ritual of confrontation and symbolic redress. Here, embodied stickiness stands out. Trauma is not passed only through story or memory. It settles, enacts, and returns in the body itself. He's willingness to relive her mother's pain with her skin and nerves shows how shame and silence attach to the body, accumulating across generations.

In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry clarifies this context. Scarry writes that pain "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language" (p. 4). In works by Zhang and Yang, silence does not follow when language collapses. Instead, new bodily gestures appear to communicate through sensation and endurance. Scarry insists, "The body is the confirmation" (p. 200). Pain, in He's work, is not a metaphor. It is direct evidence of trauma that words cannot hold persist within the flesh.

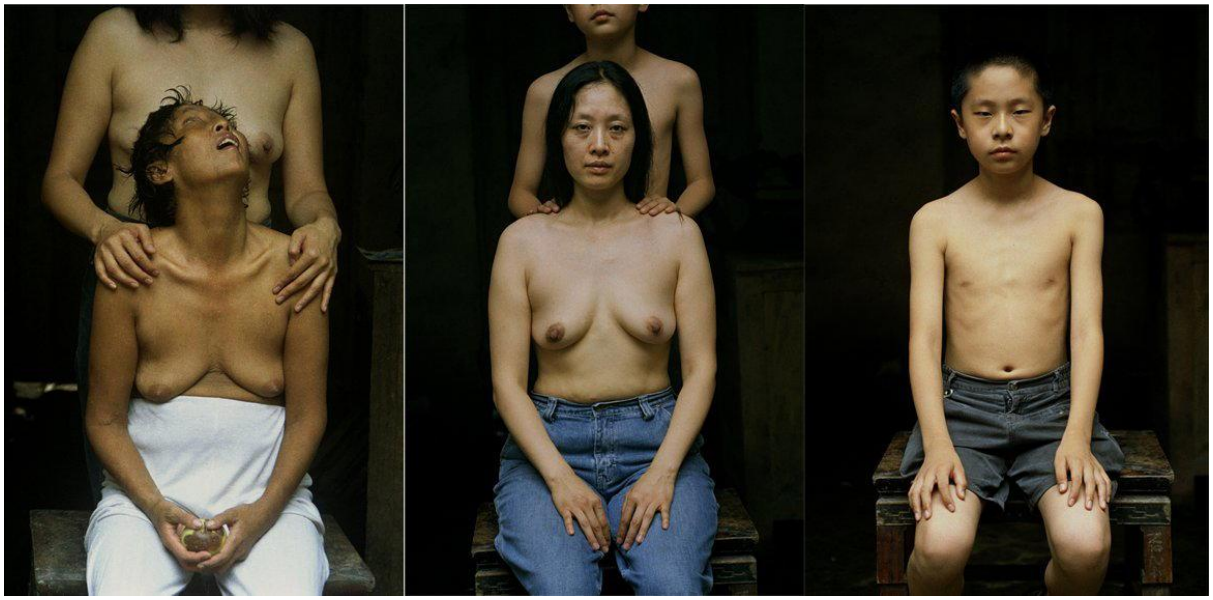

Figure 3.8 *Testimony*, 2001–2002, chromogenic photographs, approx. 47 × 29 in. He Chengyao. © He Chengyao. Brooklyn Museum. Photo courtesy of the artist.

He deepened her exploration of bodily memory in *Mama and Me* (2002). In this performance, she stood bare-chested with her mother before a public audience. The act was deliberate, a gesture of mirroring and reconciliation. By undressing together, He confronted the stigma tied to maternal nudity and mental illness. Through intentional exposure, she reclaimed a

space marked by shame and turned it into a moment of shared presence. Here, *embodied stickiness* takes on another dimension: it is enacted through the intimate proximity and mirroring between mother and daughter, transforming affective residues of shame and pain into sources of care, reconciliation, and collective agency. The performance serves as an example of how bodies can foster new kinds of mutual recognition and solidarity. This performance was a subdued confrontation with generational pain, as opposed to an erotic or provocative spectacle. Once split apart by stigma, the image of two female bodies standing next to each other became a symbol of solidarity. His gesture was not just a personal outcry but a generational public conversation that enabled suffering and humiliation to be addressed collectively and ultimately transformed into possibility.

In *Testimony* (2001–2002), He Chengyao's exploration of familial memory and embodied trauma reaches its most explicit and expansive form(fig.3.8). Building directly on the intimate dialogue of *Mama and Me*, she introduces her young son into the frame, constructing a triptych that draws three generations into a single visual and affective space. The work transforms the bodies of its subjects into a living archive: the grandmother's head tilts upward with closed eyes, oscillating between exhaustion and release; Her son sits at the edge, facing forward with a calm, unreadable expression; he sits in the center, meeting the viewer's gaze with quiet resolve. A physical and symbolic chain of connection forms when hands gently rest on the shoulders of the previous generation. Viewers confront the reality of inherited suffering and recognize the potential for transformation. The simplicity of nudity, devoid of eroticism and spectacle, reinforces this message. Rather than seeking catharsis or closure, the work opens a space where pain, care, and reconciliation histories may be recognized and coexist.

This logic of bodily transmission and intergenerational encounter is made especially clear in the triptych's visual structure. *Embodied stickiness* becomes visible within this tableau: the body emerges as a living archive, enacting intergenerational history's burdens and generative potential. The visible proximity and touch among three generations reveal how memory, pain, and care persist through words, in flesh and gesture, transcending the limits of language and official narrative. By staging these corporeal links, He Chengyao challenges the longstanding marginalization and abjection of the maternal body in both public and private contexts. Her performances suggest that the maternal body can serve as a site of knowledge, Testimony, and renewal. Here, the skin is not a locus of desire, but a marker of endurance

and survival. In He's work, memory emerges through discourse, physical gestures, touch, silence, and the intimate proximities of shared experiences, transmitting pain and memory. In Welland observes, "By staging the subjection of the female body, she unhinges it from the moral, emotional, symbolic work it has performed for the family and the nation. She thereby attempts to move beyond their modes of regulation" (Welland, 2018, p. 227). This inheritance is not just symbolic. It settles in muscle memory, daily routine, and the movements of intimacy.

He develops this embodied transmission by showing the maternal body in public. This act questions and unsettles the hierarchies of shame and invisibility placed on women. Through repeated gestures that include needle piercing, intergenerational nudity, and mutual exposure, He Chengyao turns private pain into public critique. Her work asks viewers to see trauma as dynamic, evolving across generations, shaped by memory and context. These performances do not dwell on despair. Instead, they pay careful attention to history and offer empathy to those still unable to speak their pain.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, China experienced a swift transition from a planned economy to a market-based society marked by extraordinary economic growth and significant social change. Market forces, urbanization, and institutional reforms transformed the individual's body into a battleground for subjectification, visibility, and legitimacy issues. In this context, performance artists such as Zhang Huan, Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao employed self-inflicted pain not as spectacle, but as a strategy of exposure, rendering trauma visible, politicizing the wound, and reclaiming agency through bodily vulnerability.

Across their practices, the body does not stand as a neutral canvas. It emerges as a space where memory, trauma, and resistance form. Zhan Huan's performances explore pain as a durational state rather than an explosive event. Whether covered in flies in *12 Square Meters*, suspended and bleeding in *65 Kilograms*, or silently overwritten by text layers in *Family Tree*, Zhang positions his body within accumulative structures of exhaustion, social pressure, and cultural discipline. His strategy is not to shock but to sustain, to allow pain to settle, to fatigue the body and viewer alike, and in doing so, reveal the slow violence embedded in everyday structures of modernization and symbolic inheritance.

By contrast, Yang Zhichao's interventions take the inscription logic more literally. In works such as *Planting Grass*, *Iron*, and *Dao De Jing*, the body becomes the direct surface of bureaucratic, moral, and ideological control. Yang visualizes how state systems and cultural dogmas penetrate the body through branding, implantation, and suffocation under the paper. His actions suggest that biopolitical power does not always arrive as spectacle; it often enters silently, through documentation, ritual, and repetition. Yang's work thus foregrounds how trauma becomes internalized emotionally and somatically. The body here is wounded, conditioned, regulated, and archived by the systems it lives within.

He Chengyao shifts attention to pain's transmission across generations. Her reenactments of maternal trauma, particularly in *99 Needles*, *Mama and Me*, and *Testimony*, transform the body into a medium of familial memory. Rather than staging rupture, He emphasizes continuity, the slow seepage of shame, violence, and silence from generation to generation. She constructs a visual lineage of exposure and care by performing alongside her mother and child. Her use of nudity and physical vulnerability does not seek provocation but insists on recognition. Through these gestures, she relives inherited pain and transforms it, offering what this dissertation terms *bodily compensation,* a symbolic redress enacted through the body itself.

Together, these works challenge the liberal model of the autonomous subject by foregrounding pain as a form of embodied knowledge. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called "the object/ive of enlightenment self-control." It follows that one cannot possess oneself, precipitating the necessity of a society that can do it for you. In turn, this instantiates the construct of a self in ownership of itself as the only acceptable kind of person (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 29). This critical insight destabilizes the dominant liberal conception of the autonomous subject.

Across all three artists' practices, pain is embodied knowledge that resists the liberal ideal of the self-controlled subject. They use the vulnerability of their bodies to question the standards set by modern society. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write, "the object/ive of enlightenment self-control" is not a given, but a social demand; it produces "the construct of a self in ownership of itself as the only acceptable kind of person" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 29). Their performances show that when the body is exposed and wounded, it does not signal

failure. Instead, pain and rupture create opportunities for agency and new forms of expression. For these artists, subjectivity emerges not from mastery but from their willingness to endure, confront, and transform collective trauma in the flesh.

This artistic response to structural pain does not exist only within the Chinese context. In the late twentieth century, the Modern Primitive movement in the West also reimagined bodily pain as a purposeful act. Fakir Musafar, whose work is documented in Favazza's research, saw body modification as a way to reclaim personal agency and meaning. He asks, "Why have people of all ages and most cultures sought expression of life through the body, its sensations, and modification? … The more I look, the more convinced I am that the phenomenon wells up from some deep inner source—perhaps a behavioral archetype that may be encoded in our genes" (Favazza, 1996, p. 333). Musafar emphasizes pain's transcendental potential, while Favazza recognizes the paradox that self-injury can occupy a space between pathology and empowerment. This duality helps explain why artists like Yang Zhichao employ pain not just to harm the body, but to unsettle boundaries and claim new authorship over lived experience.

Favazza notes that "the individual human body mirrors the collective social body" (Favazza, 1996, p. 322). When language or conventional protest fail, bodily injury can become a visible response to social and psychological conflict. In this context, such actions are neither madness nor provocation for their own sake. Instead, they force viewers to reflect on how power and vulnerability shape the flesh. In the practices of Zhang Huan, Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao, pain makes private struggle visible and reveals the depth of conflict and inherited pressure each body must carry.

Within China's post-socialist transformation, many traumatic histories remain unspoken. Modernization brings both visibility and new erasures. Against this backdrop, the wounded body offers a space where resistance can be seen and felt. These artists do not retreat into abstraction. Instead, they use pain as a somatic inscription, making presence concrete amid social fragmentation. Pain is not a final destination for Zhang Huan, Yang Zhichao, and He Chengyao. It is a channel through which unresolved violence and memory travel from generation to generation. Their art enacts what can be called bodily compensation: using their flesh to confront and respond to the silences inherited from family, gender, and history.

Elaine Scarry writes, “pain can serve as incontrovertible proof of an intangible reality” (Scarry, 1985, p. 13). These performances confirm her view. For these artists, pain is both evidence and resistance. It makes it impossible for sanitized narratives of progress to hide the actual costs imposed by rapid social change. Their art does not heal historical wounds. Instead, it brings them into view, inscribing trauma in scars, silence, and the shared discomfort of witnessing. In a time when collective systems collapse and language fails, the exposed body becomes a last space for memory and truth. History continues to speak through the marked, pierced, or bared skin, showing that the body is the most direct and enduring archive of collective trauma and transformation.

This transformation in China closely connects with state infrastructure and platform governance. Since the early 2000s, the Chinese government has established the "Great Firewall," a comprehensive system restricting access to global platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. In parallel, the state has been cultivating a regulated domestic ecosystem centered on platforms like QQ, WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. These platforms function as social tools and as extensions of state policy. Their design incorporates user surveillance, data extraction, and algorithmic control at every level. Real-name authentication and facial recognition payment systems operate beyond mere convenience. They fundamentally shape online visibility and influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and value everyday reality.

This new digital environment echoes Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulation" from *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). Baudrillard argues that contemporary representations do not reflect a preexisting reality. Instead, they generate their versions of the real. He writes, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). As a result, individuals no longer define what is real, desirable, or valuable through direct experience. Instead, algorithmic metrics and networked circulation become the dominant forces shaping perception and self-understanding.

Building on Baudrillard's critique, Mark Nunes (1995) views the Internet as both a technological and a cultural system. He notes, "In the virtuality of the Internet, our words are our bodies, an aporetic copula that forces a reexamination of 'the body' as both physiological (noumenal) entity and phenomenological experience" (p. 326). Within digital environments, bodily presence is no longer established through proximity. Expression and participation occur through typing, clicking, and interacting with interfaces. These actions extend presence across networks, leaving traces that constitute a digital body. This shift challenges traditional views of the body as merely biological and compels us to consider the body as dispersed, affective, and mediated.

Mark B. N. Hansen (2004) develops this analysis by centering the body in the production of digital images. Hansen argues that digital images are not static representations but processes that make information perceivable. He states, "The body [is] the agent that filters information

to create images" (p. 1). This idea shifts focus from vision alone to sensorimotor and affective experience as the foundation of digital perception. Hansen insists, "There is no information (or image) in the absence of the form-giving potential of human embodiment" (p. 12). The digital world and the body remain inseparable. The body acts as a dynamic interface that determines how virtual content enters lived experience.

The digital era has also transformed the logic of vision itself. Friedrich Nietzsche's insight that "There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'" (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 119) is now deeply relevant. The viewer's position and context continually shape what is seen and known. In today's digital systems, algorithms, interfaces, and attention economies determine visibility. Users are both observers and subjects of algorithmic prediction. Data models continuously show or conceal information according to their calculations. Here, the gaze is no longer produced solely by a human subject. Recommendation systems, metrics, and algorithmic protocols co-construct what can be seen. Vision becomes a distributed process, blending human and non-human agents. This process destabilizes the idea of a centered, stable subject. Instead, subjectivity fractures, as visibility emerges through constantly shifting watching and being watched circuits. The body, now visible as mutable data, continually reshapes itself through digital acts of perception.

Karen Barad's theory of agential realism frames the digital body as a material-discursive formation. The digital body's shape results from the interaction of interface design, server latency, algorithmic filters, and cultural codes. Barad (2007) asserts, "There is no absolute boundary between the 'social' and the 'scientific' or the 'discursive' and the 'material'" (p. 25). Digital images do not exist as fixed objects for passive consumption. They are co-constituted through intra-active engagements among bodies, platforms, and infrastructures. In this framework, algorithms act as micro-agents, governing visibility and organizing meaning. Barad further writes, "Matter is not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 151). This approach rejects traditional representational models, insisting that embodiment in digital space is always provisional and always in process.

Despite strict regulatory censorship, the Chinese Internet continues to expand, constructing its digital environment governed by local algorithms and platform logic. This environment is not a neutral space for communication. Instead, it uses meticulously engineered algorithms

and content metrics to determine what can be seen. Users perform curated identities, seeking algorithmic validation and peer approval. Byung-Chul Han observes, “The society of control achieves perfection when subjects bare themselves not through outer constraint but through self-generated need” (Han, 2015, p. 46). On Chinese platforms, self-exposure is built into digital architecture. The quest for visibility deepens user entrapment within cycles of algorithmic oversight and data extraction, producing a feedback loop of exposure and control.

Building on these theoretical frameworks, this chapter examines the work of three contemporary Chinese artists who engage critically with the politics of digital embodiment. Their projects do not merely represent digital bodies. Instead, they interrogate the mechanisms that construct, display, and govern digital subjectivity. These artists, Cao Fei, Miao Ying, and Lu Yang, turn their practices into mediation sites. They investigate the infrastructures and power relations shaping how subjectivity appears and circulates in China’s platformed media environment. These artists do not visualize the digital body in isolation. Instead, their work maps the circuits of visibility and code that define digital embodiment in contemporary China. Tracing the infrastructures that govern perception and exposure creates counter-mappings of what it means to be seen, sensed, and known within a platform society. Their interventions exaggerate and destabilize representational norms, shifting analysis from depiction to mediation. This chapter reads their work as active sites for rethinking digital embodiment. In their art, digital subjectivity appears as a dynamic interface continually constructed under the unique techno-political conditions of the Chinese Internet.

4.1 Cao Fei and *RMB City*: Virtual Embodiment, Simulacra Landscapes, and Theatres of Memory

In 2007, as China entered a period of accelerated urban transformation, artist Cao Fei launched her ambitious digital project *RMB City* (2008–2011). This work appeared on the virtual platform Second Life just before the Beijing Olympics, reflecting China’s shifting realities and expanding collective imagination (Fig.4.1). Second Life offers a user-generated 3D world where participants construct spaces, create avatars, and engage in virtual economies. Cao Fei built a symbolic city within this environment that merges fantasy, memory, and political allegory. She envisioned *RMB City* as a decentralized digital society shaped by its users. This speculative vision reinterprets familiar Chinese motifs, historical

fragments, and political symbols, drawing them into a space where meanings remain open and constantly in flux.

The cityscape of *RMB City* immediately commands attention. It unfolds as a spectacular collage of symbols and visual references. When the player enters, iconic elements appear in surreal configurations. Water partly submerges Tiananmen Gate. A waterfall pours from a monument. Industrial chimneys fill the sky with smoke. In the distance, the Oriental Pearl Tower collapses. Floating pandas and suspended bicycle wheels add to the city's atmosphere of disruption. These images, borrowed from politics, tourism, and childhood, lose their fixed meanings in the virtual space. Instead, they have been pulled apart and reassembled into a disjointed city. Players moving through *RMB City* encounter memories of the 1990s, a decade marked by rapid change. The city emerges from pieces of architecture, slogans, and images, now separated from their original contexts. Within the platform, these fragments become pure visual spectacle.

Figure 4.1. *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* (still), 2007, animation. This 3D model visualizes the city prior to its launch on Second Life. Retrieved from Net Art Anthology.

4.1.1 Victual body and space

At the heart of *RMB City* stands Cao Fei's avatar, China Tracy. She wanders through the virtual landscape, exploring its narrative and spatial possibilities. Cao Fei personally selected China Tracy's hairstyle, clothing, and even the color of her eyes, carefully crafting an identity that moves beyond the limits of her physical self. This design choice aligns with Donna Haraway's cyborg theory from *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). Haraway describes the cyborg as "a creature in a post-gender world… It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (p. 151). In this sense, China Tracy becomes a post-gender, post-biological entity. She does not depend on material existence to assert her presence. Instead, she comes alive through visual coding, behavior patterns, and interactive dynamics inside the digital platform. China Tracy is not simply a symbolic projection or a direct representation of Cao Fei. She operates as an active agent, genuinely participating in and reshaping the operational logic of the virtual world.

Sherry Turkle's analysis of virtual identity in *Life on the Screen* (1995) clarifies why avatars in *RMB City* are not mere replicas of physical identity. For Turkle, an avatar is "an object-to-think-with," a tool for constructing and experimenting with multiple versions of the self in digital space (p. 262). Rather than simply representing a stable identity, the avatar enables users to mix, match, and negotiate different social roles. As Turkle points out, "Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (p. 180). In this sense, China Tracy is not a fixed digital portrait of Cao Fei. She is an active site where identity remains open, fluctuating, and embedded in the shifting architecture of *RMB City*.

This flexibility of the avatar transforms how individuals relate to each other online. In Second Life, China Tracy developed an emotional connection with a user named "He Yue." Their relationship was based not on physical appearance or biography but shared actions and conversations within the virtual world. When Cao Fei learned that "He Yue" was a 67-year-old Marxist, the discovery did not affect the intimacy or meaning of their exchange. In virtual environments, avatars allow people to explore different roles, form relationships untethered to age, gender, or body, and experiment with ways of being that physical space would not readily permit.

However, avatars are never fully autonomous or detached from control. They function within technical and social systems that mediate their actions and meanings. Karen Barad reminds us, “Humans are neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 136). Avatars, as digital bodies, are shaped by the codes, infrastructures, and protocols of the platforms they inhabit. Their agency emerges not in isolation, but through constant negotiation with control and power systems.

RMB City is a testing ground for the relationship between virtual body and digital space. Its spectacular design contains a more profound institutional critique. For example, the “mayor’s office” introduces a simulated governance structure. The mayor, chosen by public election for three months, has the authority to set city policy, sell virtual real estate, and even alter weather scripts. Notably, Miao Ying did not serve as mayor herself. Instead, she appointed Uli Sigg’s avatar as the city’s first mayor. Uli Sigg is a prominent art collector and a central figure in promoting the contemporary Chinese art market. This decision appears playful at first glance, but also prompts reflection on power and agency.

Tom Boellstorff (2011) argues, “Virtual embodiment is always embodiment in a virtual place” (p. 224). Embodiment, he suggests, is never abstract but always situated, shaped by the architecture, codes, and rhythms of digital environments. Boellstorff emphasizes, “the avatar is the locus of perception and sociality” (p. 226). Avatars do not simply substitute for physical bodies. Instead, they perform acts of sensing, relating, and world-making. Through these embodied gestures, digital subjectivity takes shape within virtual space. However, this structure raises a critical question: Can we truly break away from established power systems, or do we reproduce old hierarchies in new visual forms?

4.1.2 Rewriting Memory through Virtuality

RMB city forms a visual theater composed of historical and cultural symbols, such as Mao Zedong statues, revolutionary opera, socialist slogans, and commercial advertisements. Cao arranges these elements in ways that are both intentional and off-balance. A Mao statue leans precariously over the sea, revolutionary dances are recast in the kitsch style of *RMB City* Opera, and political slogans blend almost seamlessly with commercial branding. These scenes create a cultural environment that is at once recognizable and strangely disorienting.

These juxtapositions do more than highlight the fragmentation of collective historical narratives. They create a deliberately unstable visual experience, a hyperreality assembled from aesthetic disassembly and symbolic remix. These images do not remain on the surface. This process recalls Maurice Halbwachs's claim that memory is "not a personal faculty, but a social practice, shaped by frameworks of communication and shared narrative structures" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). Cao Fei's work elucidates the dynamic nature of collective memory, positioning history as malleable and subject to reinterpretation. In her project that memory is conceptualized as an active social process rather than a mere static repository of historical facts. This approach underscores the fluidity of memory and its role in shaping collective identity and experience.

In this context, memory transcends the notion of a stable archive of past events, instead manifesting as a dynamic construct that evolves through processes of interaction within digital spaces. This redefined understanding of memory challenges traditional perspectives, highlighting its contingent nature and the ways in which it is shaped by user engagement in virtual environments. Silvana Mandolessi (2024) explains that digital memory does not erase collective memory. Instead, it "materializes and puts into practice the characteristics with which we have defined collective memory since the inception of the field" (Mandolessi, 2024, p. 5). In *RMB City*, memory operates on many levels. The landscape shifts constantly. Symbols appear and dissolve, disrupting the frameworks that once organized meaning. Each viewer encounter becomes a point where memory takes form, filtered by perception and shaped by embodied interaction. Mandolessi notes, "the digital realm allows us to rethink the social nature of memory through a different concept of the social" (Mandolessi, 2024, p. 10). Memory here detaches from fixed social identity and emerges from fleeting connections between users and algorithms.

This digital memory and embodiment model finds theoretical support in Karen Barad's (2007) concept of agential realism. Barad writes, "Matter is not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency" (p. 151). The player's virtual body is not a substitute for the physical self. Digital technical operations and sensory engagement shape how they interact with others. China Tracy's presence arises not from physicality or abstract code alone but from ongoing negotiation across senses, visual interfaces, and technological systems. This interplay between digital infrastructure and embodied action shapes how all participants behave and form identity in *RMB City*.

Building on this framework, *RMB City* constructs a digitized vision of "future China" and advances a critical mechanism through visual parody. Virtual fireworks light up the sky. Buildings transform in endless cycles. The entire city performs a spectacle reflecting how a city imagines and represents itself. Starting in 2007, during Hu Jintao's tenure, the Chinese government emphasized "soft power" as a fundamental element of its cultural diplomacy. In this framework, the emergence of *RMB City* on an international stage raises an important question: When the digital realm serves as a canvas for envisioning "future China," whose perspective holds more weight—the government's, the artist's, or that of a global audience influenced by the dynamics of the platform?

4.2 Miao Ying and the Chinternet: Ghostly Data and Language Censorship

Miao Ying presents the digital body as a ghostly presence that persists through dislocation and censorship. Her *Blind Spot* (2007) begins with a standard Chinese dictionary. Miao cross-references each entry with Google.cn search results and marks every censored term with white tape. She obscures over two thousand entries across 1,869 pages, building a visual archive of absent words linked to politics, religion, historical trauma, and ambiguous meanings.

This method goes beyond mere documentation. Foucault's *Power/Knowledge* challenges the idea that knowledge reflects reality. He asserts that "Power produces knowledge [...] power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault, 1980, p. 27). Knowledge always connects to power, and the truths we recognize often serve specific regimes. Dictionaries seem neutral, but always embed ideological structures. Miao's careful, word-by-word redaction of the Xinhua Dictionary exposes more than the erasure of sensitive terms online. By filtering language, she makes visible the subtle ways the state marks boundaries around 'legitimate knowledge'. The body enters this process not as a passive vessel of experience but as a symbolic site， reclassified within systems of knowledge.

However, why do these erasures not simply destroy meaning or memory? Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* explains that power's exclusions never disappear. She writes, "Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life" (Gordon, 2008, p. 7). What has been erased returns as a felt absence, a ghostly presence that shapes memory and lived experience. In Miao

Ying's dictionary, every blank space becomes an encounter with what society tries to suppress. Page-turning becomes a confrontation with absence; censorship, no longer invisible, is embodied as a silence that the viewer must face.

This sense of the ghostly body is inseparable from the technological context of language. Francesca Ferrando's posthumanist theory reframes subjectivity as a meshwork—relational, immanent, and always embedded in networks of organic and inorganic forces. She writes, posthuman subjectivity 'thinks with and through multiple connections to others, both human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic" (Ferrando, 2019, p. xii). In this account, language functions not as pure expression but as an interface. It mediates between bodies, codes, and institutions, shaping how presence, absence, visibility, and erasure become possible.

Google's withdrawal from China in 2010 marks a key turning point. The "Great Firewall" is both a technical and discursive system. In this reterritorialized digital space, language becomes a border and a filter, deciding what may enter the public sphere and what remains unspoken. Language has become the front line of algorithmic governance within China's digital infrastructure. Miao Ying's *Blind Spot* visualizes this process. Censorship removes words and rewrites the very conditions of what can be said, seen, and known. The body in this system is not just watched; it is catalogued, reclassified, and sometimes rendered invisible, not through images, but through the silent work of language and software.

4.2.1 Platform Humor and *Shanzhai* Aesthetics

The Chinese internet has always been described as a passive subject that accepts machinery and censorship without agency. Miao Ying refuses this narrative. She develops an inhuman humor as a survival tactic and a critique. In her *LAN Love Poem* series (2014–2015), she stages a digital theater where emotion appears under censorship. She selects fragments from QQ status messages posted by Chinese netizens and translates them into Chinglish, deliberately retaining awkward grammar and strange phrasing. These translations use low-resolution GIF animations and hyper-romantic, pseudo-poetic Chinese expressions. In *Holding a Kitchen Knife Cut Internet Cable, a Road with Lightning Sparks* (Fig. 4.2), a lightning bolt splits a browser window, visualizing the unstable, unpredictable access to Google in China. In *Baidu Cannot Find Your 30-Degree Smile*, searching for emotion becomes a melancholy portrait under censorship. The Baidu search engine, rendered as "Bai-

du" or "a hundred poisons," tries to retrieve a smile once seen on an ex-girlfriend's Instagram. The search fails, amplifying absence and loss. This unresolved grammar produces a poetic effect, allowing ambiguity and emotional residue to remain at the surface.

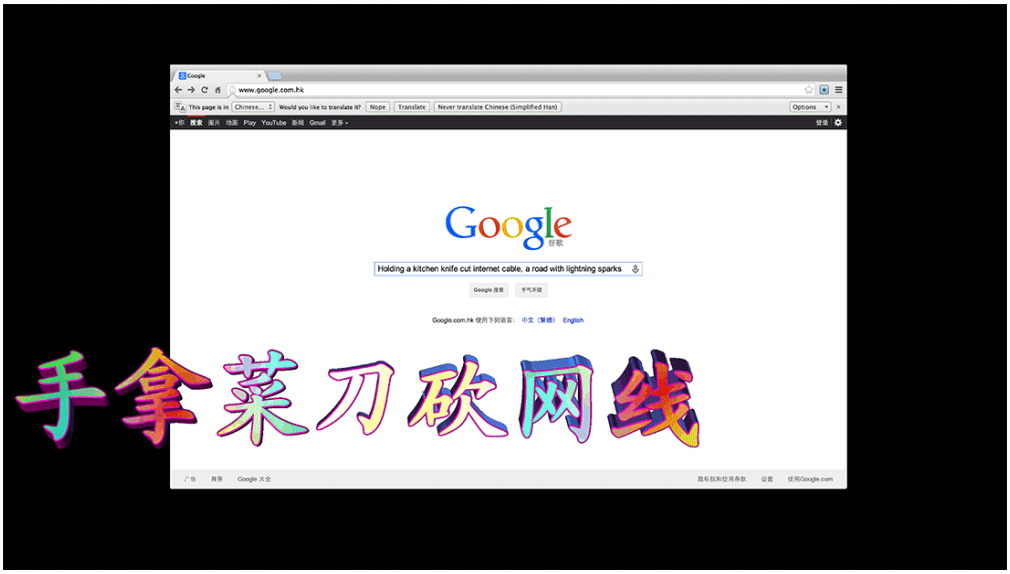

Figure 4.2 LAN Love Poem—Holding a Kitchen Knife Cut Internet Cable, a Road with Lightning Sparks.gif, 2014, animated GIF. Miao Ying. © Miao Ying. Retrieved from https://www.miaoyingstudio.com/

The humor in *the LAN Love Poem* is not decorative. It forms the core of the work's aesthetic structure. Tension arises between poetic emotion and the rigid architectures of digital platforms. Awkward translations and visual glitches take center stage. Olga Goriunova's theory of platform-based auto creativity offers a framework for understanding this practice. Goriunova explains that humor emerges from platforms' algorithmic operations and organizational logics. She writes, "Interface and structure… humor, mass-scale autocreativity… all come together in variable combinations as the regularities of organizational aesthetics" (Goriunova, 2012, p. 71). Miao adopts this platform-generated humor and turns it into an aesthetic tactic. She does not attack censorship head-on. She works within its boundaries, turning language disjunctions and emotional leftovers into subtle disruptions. Her humor operates not as loud parody but as quiet, persistent reconfiguration of digital environments.

This strategy becomes especially clear in her use of 3D Taobao-style fonts and pixelated, retro digital backgrounds. The visuals look clumsy and unfinished on purpose. Goriunova, in her study of Micromusic.net, observes that low-tech aesthetics support "skillful, knowledgeable, and romantic imperfection, of complex simplicity, the aesthetics of low-tech" (Goriunova, 2012, p. 102). Miao builds her style directly from the visual language of digital platforms. She overloads the viewer, working against clarity and emotional transparency. In her series *Chinternet Plus*, she states, "The viewer's eye must not be allowed to rest. Pack as much content as you can into the aesthetic" (Miao Ying, 2016). This lo-fi style suggests digital breakdown, as if emotion and beauty have moved to the internet's margins. Here, emotional expression splinters and becomes unreliable.

Byung-Chul Han's analysis of *shanzhai* aesthetics resonates with Miao's refusal of visual smoothness. *Shanzhai*, once a term for counterfeits, now stands for a creative force rooted in imitation, mutation, and open-ended process. Han writes that "*shanzhai* products do not simply imitate; instead, they mutate into originals themselves" (Han, 2017, p. 81). Shanzhai does not value essence or stability. It prizes process, transformation, and difference. In this light, Miao's visual choices do not seek nostalgia or parody. They perform an aesthetic deconstruction of digital norms, rejecting both minimalism and the polished aesthetics of social media. Her "embarrassing" designs foreground emotional failure and block easy consumption. *Shanzhai* is a humorous, generative force that reclaims space from algorithmic authority. Miao's lo-fi approach becomes both a critique and a mode of belonging, shaped by the everyday constraints of the Chinese internet.

Miao describes her bond with the Chinese internet as "a Stockholm Syndrome kind of love" that is loving it because there is no alternative (Miao Ying, 2016). In this contradictory structure, emptiness becomes spectral, displaced, yet affectively charged. Instead of fighting censorship directly, Miao shows how real intimacy and subjectivity survive within rupture and regulation. This affective structure echoes Andy Weir's account of nuclear waste landscapes, places that attract longing and intimacy yet remain emotionally indifferent (Weir, 2017). Like these landscapes, the digital platform never truly recognizes or acknowledges the user. In *LAN Love Poem*, structural indifference becomes the only echo of emotion left in a digital wasteland.

In the posthuman context, the disembodied textual body matches Francesca Ferrando's (2019) concept of "postmaterial embodiment." Presence does not depend on flesh. It comes through affective overflow, and linguistics remains in a world of data and code. Ferrando writes, "Embodiments do not have to be strictly physical: they can be digital, virtual, or even oneiric" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 155). Miao's poems do not imitate fixed emotion. They trace intensities that seep through the cracks of digital infrastructure. These fragments record emotional surplus and persistent feeling, escaping the algorithms' grasp. Through this process, Miao enacts "a postmaterial form of agency" where language becomes new forms of embodiment. The shift from bodily image to affective leakage is critical in posthuman aesthetics.

4.2.2 Algorithmic Wellness and the Displacement of the Digital Body

Miao Ying's *Hardcore Digital Detox* (2018) expands her critical engagement with algorithmic environments. This multimedia project combines web interfaces, interactive text, and video, presenting itself as a digital wellness program that relieves users of online overload. Users are encouraged to connect to a mainland China VPN, a gesture described as "digital reclusion" (Fig. 4.3). On the surface, this appears to be a guided retreat from online noise: by blocking access to global platforms, one might hope to regain focus and calm.

However, the project's structure quickly destabilizes these expectations. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism explains how tech platforms convert behavioral data into "prediction products" for profit and behavioral control (p. 95). Zuboff writes, "Surveillance capitalists discovered that they could engineer behavior remotely by leveraging digital architectures of behavior modification" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 377). Within this logic, users become passive subjects managed by invisible algorithmic mechanisms.

Miao subverts the usual function of a VPN. Rather than using the tool to escape censorship, users are invited to enter it willingly. "You do not need to retreat to the mountains, just connect to a Chinese VPN," the work suggests, parodying mindfulness language and digital wellness culture. Through this reversal, *Hardcore Digital Detox* exposes how China's overt state firewalls and Western algorithmic platforms operate as parallel control systems. One exerts power through visible, enforced barriers; the other relies on subtle, voluntary behavioral governance.

This critique deepens in the “Backfire Your Cookie” section. On the surface, the title references playful internet slang. It marks a sharp critique of data infrastructures underlying everyday digital life. Cookies do not merely store history. They collect and analyze behavior, generating what Zuboff terms “behavioral surplus,” the excess data harvested from every digital action (p. 93). These surplus traces feed predictive systems, optimizing user engagement through granular profiling.

Figure 4.3 Hardcore Digital Detox (still), 2018, animation. A VPN interface appears as a symbolic portal for digital escape. Miao Ying. © Miao Ying. Screenshot by the author from the artist’s published video.

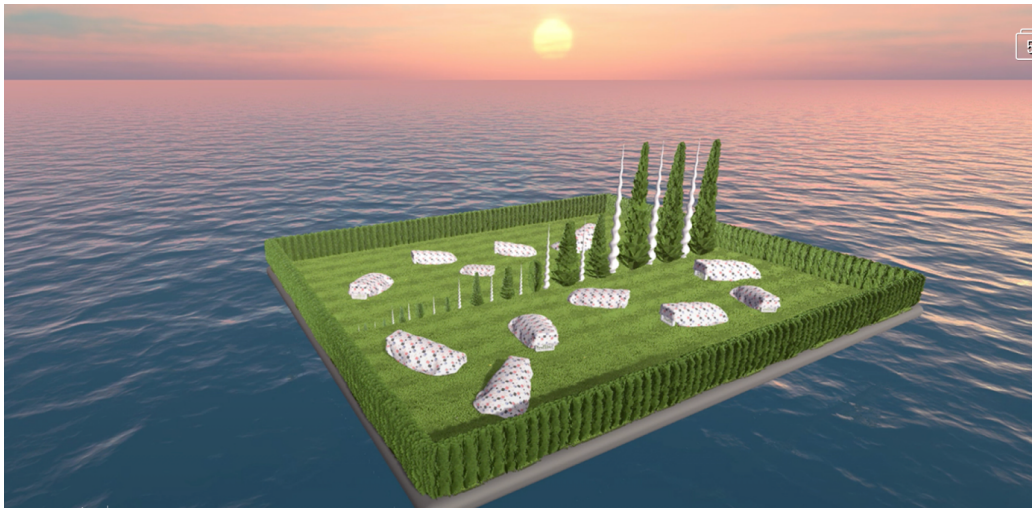

Figure 4.4 Hardcore Digital Detox (still), 2018, animation. A surreal healing island emerges in the digital realm. Miao Ying. © Miao Ying. Screenshot by the author from the artist's published video.

When users enter Miao's simulated meditation platform, they encounter not calming voiceovers but a barrage of hashtags like #spiritualretreatinchinternet and #stonesfromotherhills. The idiom "the stone of another mountain can attack jade," which traditionally means learning from others, gains a satirical edge here. It comments on a typical Western perspective: while criticizing China's lack of institutional freedom, it ignores the pervasiveness of digital surveillance elsewhere. Miao reframes the idiom, making it a critique of how platforms commodify and decontextualize cultural references. In this way, her project foregrounds the structural parallels between different regimes of digital control, where governance and freedom function as mirrored systems rather than true opposites.

Through these playful and critical distortions, Miao builds a parody of a digital wellness sanctuary, a simulated oasis generated by a game engine (Fig.4.4). The environment looks orderly and soothing, with lawns modeled in geometric patterns and server racks wrapped in Facebook and YouTube logos. Surreal imagery, like unicorn horns entwined with trees, heightens the sense of artificial tranquility. User interactions, such as clicking "return to simulation" or "reject filter," reveal the platform's deeper structure as a system for data capture and behavioral modification.

In this context, *Hardcore Digital Detox* enacts symbolic bodily displacement. Users enter new regimes of control without crossing any physical borders; their digital actions become

data traces within algorithmic systems. Ferrando (2019) writes, “In the posthuman context, the body is a processual entity—perceived, coded, and enacted through behavioral interfaces” (p. 112). Here, the body no longer expresses subjective will. It appears as an algorithmic echo, shaped by passive interaction with technical infrastructures.

This transformation redefines both body and spatial experience. In Miao’s project, users do not need to move their bodies, yet their orientation and agency shift dramatically. As dependence on digital platforms grows, original perceptual and navigational skills atrophy. The “Lose Your Mental Map” module critiques this trend. Miao shows how increased reliance on external navigation tools like Google Maps leads to the erosion of independent spatial reasoning. The text highlights a larger condition: individuals begin to outsource their cognitive and perceptual functions to external systems, becoming more dependent on algorithmic mediation.

In works like *Blind Spot* and *Hardcore Digital Detox*, Miao does not present the body as a visible or singular form. She reveals it as a site of negotiation between institutional power and digital systems. In the digital age, the body is no longer defined by flesh or appearance. It becomes a set of behavioral traces, patterns of connection, and modes of interaction that platforms constantly record, analyze, and predict. This digital body grows even more complex within the framework of Chinese internet governance. Policies such as firewalls, real-name authentication, and data localization bind the online body to state authority, making true anonymity impossible. Western platforms monitor for commercial gain, but the Chinese system links digital activity directly to legal identity and political oversight. Miao’s ironic use of the VPN does not create liberation. Instead, it signals deeper regulation. The user, seeking healing, enters a space of intensified control. The body does not exist outside technology; technology continually reshapes the body through market and political power. What emerges is not a site of freedom or stable identity, but a mobile subject, perpetually tracked and managed by systems of classification and algorithmic response.

4.3 Lu Yang and *Material World Knight Adventure*：Buddhism and Embodied Gameplay

Lu Yang's *Material World Knight Adventure* (2021–) fuses Buddhist thought with digital technology, creating new models for representing the body and consciousness. Instead of offering a static narrative, the game immerses players in life, death, and reincarnation cycles. Visual motifs such as organs, bones, and medical texts appear throughout the environment, shifting the body from a stable entity to a mutable interface. Lu Yang composes a digital world where code, sensation, and belief systems interact to shape embodied experience. The body ceases to serve as a fixed structure. It functions as a site where sensory data and algorithmic commands continually reshape its form and meaning.

The game opens with the player entering a dark, dystopian factory dominated by red and black hues. The ambient sound of machinery fills the space. Pipes carry unknown fluids overhead, while fragments of human organs float beneath harsh fluorescent lights. The screen displays questions such as "Do you feel fear when looking at skeletons?" and "Are these bones male or female?" Texts projected on the walls, including phrases like "rib cortex vascular implant" and "neural tissue repair compound," echo medical language and suggest that someone can dismantle, reassemble, and repair the body like a machine.

4.3.1 The Body as Mutable Interface

A familiar animated figure from Lu Yang's earlier work, *Uterus Man* (2013–2014), reappears in the game. This superhero's exaggerated powers derive not from masculine traits but from the uterus itself. It destabilizes conventional associations of gender and strength (Fig. 4.5). Central to the scene is the Pelvis Chariot, a vehicle modeled after the human pelvis. Originally introduced as a weapon in *Uterus Man*, it returns as a symbol of birth and death in one form. This figure anchors the body in a cyclical system of meaning, machinery, and combat. Surrounding the chariot is an armory of bone fragments such as vertebrae, scapulae, and skulls. The player can dismantle and reassemble these into wearable battle gear. In this process, organs separate from their original anatomical context, dissolving their traditional functional roles. This transformation reshapes how we conceive the use of body parts. Turning the uterus into a weapon or a playful element challenges normative narratives about

reproduction. By inviting players to manipulate and reassemble these bodily fragments in a digital space, Lu Yang destabilizes fixed identities and fluid possibilities for embodiment and agency.

Lu Yang's perspective on embodiment becomes most explicit at the central control console in the game's main chamber. Here, dissected organs are meticulously arranged under cold fluorescent light. Beneath them, the phrase "Thirty-Six Impurities" appears in bright red letters and directly references the Buddhist meditative practice of contemplation of bodily uncleanliness. In this tradition, practitioners meditate on thirty-six bodily parts, such as hair, nails, skin, blood, brain, urine, and others, to relinquish attachment to physical beauty and to reduce desires rooted in ego and sensuality (Dalai Lama, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 2008, p. 133).

Figure 4.5 Material World Knight Adventure (still), 2021–ongoing, animation. Stage 1 encounter with the Pelvis Chariot. LuYang. © LuYang. Screenshot by the author from the artist's published video.

Figure 4.6 Material World Knight Adventure (still), 2021–ongoing, animation. Stage 2 scene with Uterus Man surrounded by dismembered bodies. LuYang. © LuYang. Screenshot by the author from the artist's published video.

Figure 4.7 Material World Knight Adventure (still), 2021–ongoing, animation. Stage 4 infernal realm with symbolic wheels of reincarnation. LuYang. © LuYang. Screenshot by the author from the artist's published video.

Lu Yang translates this contemplative practice into a digital interface. In her system, impurity is no longer a fixed moral category but becomes a flexible element. The interface allows players to interact with these bodily parts as modular, mutable nodes, constantly manipulated and reconfigured. Through this mechanism, the Buddhist value of renunciation does not oppose digital manipulability. Instead, it is absorbed into the game's operational logic,

producing a distinctive posthuman Buddhist worldview. Here, detachment from the body arises through spiritual practice and technological operations that transform impurity into a dynamic, consumable element within the material universe of the game.

The body no longer appears as an enclosed biological form but as a consumable organ. This conception resonates with and extends beyond Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway describes the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). N. Katherine Hayles further describes the posthuman subject as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles, 1999, p. 3).

Lu Yang adapts these frameworks through a distinctly Eastern philosophical lens. Her approach reflects digital media's modular logic and modern Buddhist thought's ontological skepticism, especially in the Abhidharma tradition. In this tradition, reality is not made up of permanent substances. However, fleeting elemental units such as color, sound, taste, and touch (Fig. 4.6). These dharmas are temporary aggregates shaped by intricate causal relations rather than enduring essence. John Kieschnick explains, "The ignorant see the dust as real ground, while the wise see it as illusion" (Kieschnick, 2003, p. 7). David McMahan adds that the Buddhist principle of dependent origination appears in contemporary theory as a "systemic principle of universal interconnection," with all entities functioning as provisional nodes within shifting networks (McMahan, 2008, p. 174).

Lu Yang presents the body as a programmable interface that activates according to the cyclical logic of algorithms. Bodies, organs, and nerves do not follow a fixed anatomical structure. They change shape and function, appearing more as energy flows than stable parts. This system embodies a posthumanist view of the self. The self is not fixed or original but forms through the ongoing interplay of technology and cognition.

4.3.2 Gaming Samsara and the Eastern Philosophy of Life and Death

Lu Yang reimagines the Bhavacakra (the Buddhist wheel of rebirth) as a gamified digital cosmology. The player does not simply move through imaginary levels. Each stage confronts the player with questions about how the body is managed and understood in both spiritual traditions and digital systems. Instead of using traditional names for Buddhist realms, the game labels numbered stages. The environment foregrounds the contradictions inherent in human desire at the level representing the human world. Onscreen messages such as "Humans desire happiness, not suffering" appear alongside floating body parts, grotesque creatures, infant corpses crawling on severed limbs, and flashes of commercial neon. These visual elements create a jarring, unstable space that ties happiness and suffering to longing, consumption, and loss cycles.

This tension peaks in the hell realm (Fig. 4.7). Flames, rattles, and shattered machines overwhelm the player's senses. Amid the chaos, the protagonist asks, "Why does hell still torment the body? If hell punishes the soul, why does pain still pass through the flesh?" These questions unsettle any simple boundary between bodily suffering and spiritual consequence, suggesting that even imagined transcendence cannot escape the body's vulnerability to power and pain. By contrast, heaven appears with exaggerated sweetness. Cartoon animals float through pastel dreamscapes and plastic palm trees. The protagonist wonders, "Does heaven change according to individual desires?" and "Is a virgin-filled heaven tailored for straight men?" Here, transcendence loses its aura of spiritual elevation and becomes another circuit of managed desire and consumer gratification, mirroring cycles of longing and disappointment that permeate both digital and material worlds.

Death and rebirth function within this system as system routines, mechanical resets embedded in the game's code. Each level changes the player's body, space, movement, and pain sensation, trapping them in an endless loop. Samsara thus loses its conventional moral and spiritual meaning, functioning instead as a program defined by continuous restart. The player executes commands that are quick, automatic, and emotionally neutral. Death becomes a momentary burst of sensory overload, followed immediately by the screen flashing and the cycle beginning again. What remains is not a moral lesson but a direct, unmediated sensation, stripped of fixed meaning.

The game does not ask players to reflect on impermanence. Instead, it compels them to experience it physically and affectively. The body becomes the conduit for this experience, bypassing rational contemplation. Affect takes precedence, shaping meaning through sensation rather than intellectual analysis. Brian Massumi explains, “Affect is autonomous. It escapes confinement in subjectivity” (Massumi, 2002, p. 35). Affect operates beneath or beyond conscious thought, impacting the nervous system before language or cognition can respond. Lu Yang constructs a system that overrides intention and conscious reasoning. She does not offer philosophical explanations. Instead, the game immerses players in a field of sensory input, generating meaning through embodied and affective response.

Alexander Galloway’s theory clarifies the distinction between game and narrative. He writes, “Video games are actions,” emphasizing that meaning arises through symbolic representation and procedural enactment (Galloway, 2006, p. 2). Unlike literature or film, games function through dynamic exchanges between player and machine. Galloway calls this “operative representation,” where embodied interaction becomes the locus of cultural meaning (p. 106). Lu Yang’s work fully adopts this operative logic. She does not narrate or explain metaphysical concepts. Instead, she renders them executable. Reincarnation becomes a loop of input and feedback. Impermanence becomes an experience, generated through failure, repetition, and affective intensity. The digital environment she builds weaves bodily sensation with metaphysical principle, using gameplay but not narrative as the medium. The player does not follow a linear arc or construct a stable identity; instead, they engage recursively with spiritual principles. Through this cyclical, affective process, the game produces a model of subjectivity that remains grounded in impermanence. By integrating Buddhist cosmology, posthuman embodiment, and coded ritual, Lu Yang transforms her game into a simulator of spiritual experience. Her system offers not passive contemplation but an enactment of spiritual concepts through repetitive action and heightened sensation.

Lu Yang does not reinforce an Orientalist view of Eastern philosophy as spectacle. Instead, she invites players from diverse backgrounds to engage directly with ritual logic embedded in the game system. Galloway observes, “The game-as-text is now wholly subsumed within the category of the gamer, for he or she creates the gamic text by doing” (Galloway, 2006, p. 6). In Lu Yang’s game, players engage with the constructed worldview as active participants who enact this worldview through procedural means. They perform their beliefs via ritualized

gameplay mechanics, thereby transforming the gaming experience into a dynamic interplay of agency and expression.

The final stage of the Material World Knight Adventure presents the player with a mirrored version of themselves. This figure mimics every movement and turns combat into a confrontation with one's presence. This encounter does not produce victory. Instead, it triggers a loop: defeat leads to rebirth, and the cycle starts again. This dynamic recalls early Buddhist ideas, in which the self is not an eternally unified entity but a contingent assemblage of impermanent elements. Siderits explains, "According to early Buddhism, there is no self, and persons are not ultimately real. This may be put somewhat cryptically as: we are empty persons, persons who are empty of selves" (2007, p. 31). This emptiness does not suggest nihilism but offers a structural insight: each person is a temporary configuration of physical and mental processes, such as form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. "The exhaustiveness claim is this: every constituent of persons is included in one or more of the five skandhas" (Siderits, 2007, p. 37). The game's confrontation with the self is not a narrative device but a philosophical simulation, revealing identity as a glitch, a loop, and an illusion.

The game further dismantles the illusion of autonomous agency. Rather than inviting contemplation, it overwhelms the player with pulsating visuals, destabilizing sound, and algorithmic feedback loops. Death registers not as a symbol but as a direct, embodied event. Siderits notes, "An entity cannot operate on itself" (2007, p. 46). In this model, the notion of a self that controls or transforms itself is a fiction. The player does not act with unified intention. Sensations trigger responses, so players operate as nodes in a stimulus, feedback, and compulsion system.

For Lu Yang, digital technology does not merely revive ancient cosmology. It ferments Buddhist ideas into a new sensory logic, shaped by media and code. What matters is not what players see, but what they do: experiencing digital samsara, decomposing the body, and dismantling gender and self. This focus on execution aligns with Massumi's theory of affect as bodily intensity that precedes cognition. In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi writes, "Affect is autonomous. It escapes confinement in subjectivity" (Massumi, 2002, p. 35). Gameplay in Lu Yang's design does not express intention. It emerges from overwhelming triggers, audiovisual excess, and sensory saturation.

Lu Yang's visual aesthetics reinforce this affective logic. She employs lo-fi textures and extreme collage not to create harmony but to amplify intensity and fragmentation. The viewer enters a visual space where cartoonish brightness collides with graphic violence. Eastern philosophy loses its mystical aura, dissolving into unstable digital fragments. Motifs from anime, neon, quantum particles, and neural diagrams converge in a chaotic, generative system. The resulting imagery avoids stable ethnography, drawing players into a digital mythological space where body, technology, and consciousness continually recompose one another.

Conclusion

In contemporary China, where platform capitalism merges with state-driven technological governance, the body no longer toggles between "online" and "offline" states. Instead, it fragments into perceptual circuits that remain constantly accessible, predictable, and open to manipulation. Cao Fei's *RMB City* illuminates this logic through the avatar. Her virtual persona, China Tracy, navigates an overloaded city of simulacra. The avatar serves as a vessel for personal desire and a mirror for the entwined governance structures formed by state power, capital, and collective memory. Within this system, surveillance and self-presentation merge on a single interface.

Miao Ying introduces the notion of the "void" in the gaps left by censorship. She employs visual strategies, such as white tape, glitchy GIFs, and "VPN meditation," to reveal how information is blocked. These absences are not merely technical; they acquire emotional and psychological weight. The body becomes visible at its most unstable points, oscillating between regimes of control and moments of affect. Through this "disconnected body," Miao Ying demonstrates how digital systems shape what can be seen, remembered, and felt. LuYang radicalizes the body further, transforming it into a myth-interface. In her work, Buddhist reincarnation takes on an algorithmic form. The player enacts the Buddhist principle of emptiness through keyboard and joystick. Massumi's concept of "autonomic responsiveness" collapses into circuits of particles, bullet screens, and server latency (Massumi, 2002). Digital rebirth becomes less a return to religious tradition than a reconfiguration, adapting spiritual logic to networked life's posthuman, performative apparatus.

Though their methods differ, these three artists share a circular, entangled topology. The visibility and control of the avatar create space for the displacement of the ghost. Ghostly glitches and absences fuel mythic imagination. On one side, firewalls, health codes, and facial recognition systems anchor the body in real-name databases. Conversely, artists and users subvert these structures, deploying humor, appropriation, and overload to generate resistance as "system errors."

This logic of alienation and disruption echoes larger currents in contemporary image politics, especially regarding cultural coding. As global images circulate and the politics of Eastern representation intensify, artists refuse to accept essentialist identities passively. They use digital media's programmability to recombine local fragments into critical visual grammars. This approach does not seek authenticity but produces new body politics through misalignment, collage, and code.

Within China's tightly regulated digital environment, the "body-as-interface" paradigm appears with striking clarity and complexity. The body is bound to national and capitalist infrastructures—firewalls, health codes, and real-name systems. However, in the gaps in these interfaces, artists and users invent tactics to produce systematic glitches. These strategies preserve the body's potential for rupture and escape even when abstracted and analyzed. The body thus becomes both a substrate of algorithmic order and a crucible for mythic regeneration and political resistance.

The shift "from flesh to interface" is not linear but recursive. It operates as a feedback loop: flesh becomes data, and datafication reawakens sensory perception through aesthetic and political intervention. Avatars, ghosts, myths, and interfaces continually translate into one another, forging new ethics and zones of action between computation and memory. As the body serves as an interface, new forms of social meaning, symbolic value, and political force reshape it. In this new condition, the body remains both exposed and active. People summon, control, and use it to question or disrupt the systems that contain it. The interface does not erase bodily experience; it translates sensation into new forms mediated by screens, code, and interaction. To navigate this shift, we need new perceptual strategies and ways to trace life's residue within digital noise, fragmented comments, and network latency. Contemporary

Chinese digital art reveals this ongoing experiment in seeing, feeling, and responding to the body under digital conditions.

Part II: Contemporary Perspectives on Bodily Imagery

Chapter 5 Iconographies of Power: Mao Zedong's Body and the Politics of Representation

Mao Zedong occupies a central position in modern Chinese history. His political philosophy and leadership have drawn consistent scholarly attention and are deeply embedded in China's collective memory. The immense symbolic power of Mao derives in large part from the pervasive visibility of his image in public spaces. This visual phenomenon began in the 1940s and peaked during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. During this period, Mao was depicted as teacher, leader, commander, and helmsman in various media forms. These included posters, book covers, newspaper mastheads, household portraits, and rural installations. Such images reinforced official ideology and played a critical role in shaping public consciousness (cf. Francesca, 1999; Lee, 2016; Landsberger, 2020).

After Mao's death, his image remained charged with political and emotional meaning. Contemporary artists such as Wang Keping and Zhang Hongtu have reengaged with this legacy. Their artworks oscillate between homage and critique, positioning Mao's figure as a site of visual contestation. Rather than treating him as a fixed icon, these artists reconstruct Mao as a mutable cultural object. Through strategies of satire and distortion, they reveal the ideological instability beneath his iconic surface. Mao's image thus transforms from a singular revolutionary ideal into a layered symbol shaped by memory, trauma, and continual revision. These reinterpretations illustrate how his visual legacy influences personal and national identity. At the same time, they demonstrate the enduring capacity of art to negotiate China's historical narratives and political realities.

As a vessel of political meaning, the monarch's body holds profound significance in both Eastern and Western traditions. The emperor's physical condition in ancient China symbolized national harmony and legitimacy. As the "Son of Heaven," people viewed his health and moral standing as factors that determine the fate of the entire

state. This connection appears in Confucian classics such as the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*). In the chapter "Da Xue" (*The Great Learning*), the text states, "Illuminate the illustrious virtue, be close to the people, and stop at the utmost good" (Legge, 1885, p. 357). This sentence asserts that a ruler's moral cultivation secures social order. The emperor's body became a living metaphor for governance through such principles, shaping political rituals and symbolic hierarchies (Huang, C., 2007). The ruler's body functioned as an individual existence and as a measure of collective harmony.

Western political theology provides a structural parallel. Ernst H. Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1997) describes the medieval monarch as possessing two bodies: natural and political. The king's natural body is mortal and subject to decay, while the political body is institutional, continuing beyond the life of any individual ruler (p. 7). This duality enables the monarch to embody personal authority and the continuity of state power. Kantorowicz's model, although rooted in medieval Europe, continues to shape the representation of sovereign figures in modernity (Stuparu, 2015; Reed, 2019). The politicized body thus maintains its function as a symbolic form of authority across historical ruptures and cultural boundaries.

In modern China, Mao Zedong became the locus of a new sovereign duality. His physical health and carefully managed public image were inseparable from state identity and ideological coherence. In "Mao's Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman," Haiyan Lee demonstrates that Mao's image extended far beyond personal likeness and functioned as a strategic symbol of legitimacy (Lee, 2016, p. 250). His visual representations worked to sustain national cohesion and project ideological strength. Lee notes that Mao was "the sovereign subject of the new political order." She further investigates the performance of Mao impersonators, showing how his image now generates multiple, layered meanings ranging from reverence to parody.

Mao’s body operated simultaneously as a personal presence and as a national symbol. Artworks referencing Mao do not simply repeat his image; they repurpose his symbolic authority. Through these artistic acts, we witness a transition from political absolutism to cultural pluralism. Artists challenge the univocal meanings once imposed upon Mao’s figure. In this process, individuals contest Mao’s body as a site where historical consciousness evolves and ideological boundaries shift.

This chapter analyzes the function of Mao’s image within contemporary Chinese art. I focus on artists' visual strategies to reconstruct the relationship between the body and political power. By examining artistic representations of Mao, I trace how his image changes across different temporal and ideological contexts. I show how artists confront and deconstruct the cult of Mao through symbolic interventions. Art, in this context, serves both as witness and as critic. Through visual acts, it reveals how political figures transform into cultural icons and how those icons, in turn, shape public discourse. Ultimately, I argue that Mao’s image remains vital for exploring the tension between state ideology and individual agency.

5.1 Mao Zedong’s Natural Bodies

The iconic painting of Mao Zedong sparked the widespread dissemination of his image. Artists and manufacturers created approximately 900 million reproductions throughout China and over 100 million photographs, badges, and stamps (Yan Zhou, 2020; Smith, 2015; Johnson, 2018). Most of these materials featured Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, which has become the defining visual symbol of revolutionary China. The painting presents a youthful Mao to Anyuan, a key site where he organized the miners’ movement. This moment marks a crucial victory for the workers and highlights the rising influence of the Chinese Communist Party among the proletariat.

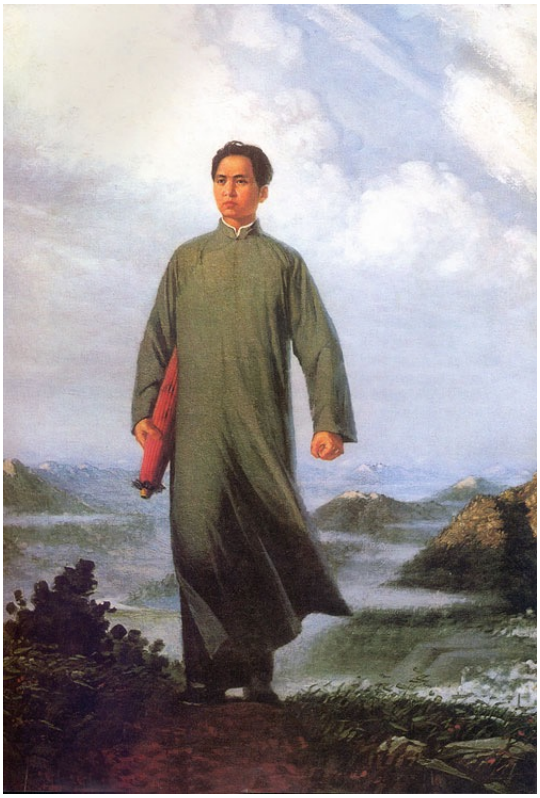

Figure 5.1 Chairman Mao Going to Anyuan, 1967, oil on canvas, 51 × 75 cm. Liu Chunhua. © Liu Chunhua. Collection of the National Art Museum of China

In the painting (Fig. 5.1), Mao stands alone, calm yet resolute, draped in a flowing robe. Behind him, layers of mist, mountains, and clouds create an atmosphere of tension and anticipation. Mao's left fist clenches tightly, while a paper umbrella rests under his right arm. His gaze fixes on the distant horizon, expressing determination and inner resolve. The composition blends romantic vision with historical realism. Nature does not simply serve as a background but aligns with Mao's revolutionary momentum. Billowing robes and turbulent skies prefigure the storm of revolution to come.

Each symbolic detail in the painting helps to mythologize Mao's youth and construct his image as a national savior. As Liu Chunhua observes, Mao "holds his head high in the act of surveying the scene before him," conveying a spirit "dauntless before danger and violence." His clenched fist "depicts his revolutionary will, scorning all sacrifice." At the same time, the old umbrella under his arm demonstrates "his hard-

working style of traveling, in all weather over great distances, for the revolutionary cause" (Liu Chunhua, 1968, as cited in Lvpeng, 2010, p. 60).

Liu's account aligns closely with the painting's visual language. Mao's youthful body becomes a vessel for political ideals, transcending individual identity. The figure signals perseverance, sacrifice, and harmony with natural forces, tying his journey to China's historical destiny. Mao appears as both a leader in motion and a gathering point for national will, clarity, and moral authority.

The symbolic grammar of the painting merges human agency and cosmic order. Mao appears as a visionary whose goals reflect natural law and national necessity. His forward gaze asserts purpose. His stable stance signals authority. The umbrella represents endurance, while the robe evokes the traditional image of the scholar-official, now infused with revolutionary power. These elements invite viewers' reverence and trust. Mao's body is no longer ordinary; it becomes the locus of collective transformation. Through *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, Liu Chunhua immortalizes a moment of youth and renders visible a mythic foundation for modern political authority. The young Mao becomes the embodiment of "new beginnings," a symbol of generative energy, revolutionary legitimacy, and unwavering national will.

Depicting Mao as eternally young reinforces his political body. This choice elevates the symbolic dimension of leadership and keeps it untouched by time. The youthful image gained prominence in official narratives, suggesting that youthfulness served a strategic function. This body does not age or display weakness. The image resists the natural limits of life. The youthful Mao stands for vitality and the revolution's enduring power. The painting does not simply portray Mao; it constructs him as timeless. He emerges as an indestructible political ideal, entirely separated from the vulnerabilities of an ordinary body.

5.1.1 The Limits of Power in Bodily Exposure

Portrayals of Mao Zedong performing physical feats directly assert his stamina and affirm ideological strength. Tang Xiaohe's *Marching in the Wind and Waves* (1971) exemplifies this visual logic, drawing inspiration from a well-documented historical event that Mao's swim in the Yangtze River (Fig. 5.2). Mao consistently promoted physical fitness through sports, seeing it as crucial for personal character, national vitality, and the foundation of China's prosperity (Uberoi, 1995). The meticulously staged swim, witnessed by both domestic and international audiences, showed Mao at seventy-three years old diving into the Yangtze during heavy rain and swimming for fifteen minutes (Tang, 2009). Geremie Barmé (1996) identifies Mao's swim as a "powerful demonstration of revolutionary physical strength" (p. 24). Barmé further situates the act as a courageous confrontation with the forces of nature, embedding it within Chinese revolutionary mythology (p. 25).

Figure 5.2 Marching in the Wind and Waves, 1971, painting. Tang Xiaoming. Retrieved from http://www.mzdbl.com.cn

Tang chooses not to depict Mao swimming. Instead, he presents the moment after the swim, when Mao stands on the deck and waves to the crowd. This decision reflects a preference for clarity and composure, avoiding any ambiguity a water scene might introduce. In the painting, Mao wears a bathrobe. He has dark hair, radiant skin, and a calm but resolute expression. His posture combines ease with authority. The composition fuses individual vitality with collective aspiration, projecting charisma and ideological force.

In this image, Mao's body does not reflect aging. Instead, it operates as an instrument of political power, confirming leadership through visible resilience. This portrayal sustains the myth of unbroken revolution and enduring authority. Nicholas Mirzoeff's *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995) provides a compelling theoretical framework. Mirzoeff analyzes how absolutist regimes, such as Louis XIV's, transformed the ruler's natural body into a political icon through art. Portraits and sculptures elevated the monarch above personal frailty, constructing an image of power that resists decay. Mirzoeff argues that "only the visual sign enabled the transition between imperfect natural body and perfect Body politic" (p. 59). Artistic representation turns a vulnerable body into a lasting symbol of sovereignty.

Marching in the Wind and Waves adopts this logic. The painting erases any sign of aging and replaces it with clarity and vigor. Tang does not record Mao's natural decline; instead, he visualizes revolutionary permanence. Like the portraits of Louis XIV, Mao's image comes to signify more than the individual. The painting projects ideological durability, collective belief, and the fantasy of invincibility. The body becomes familiar and untouchable through visual transformation, mortal in origin but eternal in form.

Both composition and title reinforce the work's symbolic purpose. "Marching in the Wind and Waves" evokes more than simple movement. The phrase signals political determination. Tang frames Mao's swim as an act of national endurance, linking

bodily strength to Party legitimacy. Mao's physical vigor represents ideological stability, channeling the people's collective will into a single, idealized body.

The choice of costume further enhances the painting's significance. Mao wears a loose bathrobe, a detail charged with symbolism. Tang recalls that the original design included Mao's bare feet, suggesting openness or vulnerability. However, officials rejected this detail, fearing that bare feet might imply informality or undermine Mao's sanctified image. Tang resolved this by adding a boy with a swim ring to obscure Mao's feet (Tang, 2009). This subtle adjustment highlights the challenge of balancing authenticity with symbolic control. Every bodily detail carried ideological weight. Exposing Mao's bare feet risked disrupting the idealized image of strength.

Artists needed to humanize Mao enough to maintain recognition, but always preserved his mythic authority. Every visual element had to serve the code of power, ensuring that Mao's body appeared perfected. In this context, the natural body became a contested field, where artists, officials, and audiences negotiated the boundaries between realism and political idealization.

5.1.2 "The Reddest, Reddest Sun"

During the Cultural Revolution, the symbolic transformation of Mao Zedong's image reached new depths as the cult of Mao intensified across Chinese society. One slogan, "Mao as the Red Sun," became central to this process. This metaphor fused political faith and emotional attachment, presenting Mao as a radiant figure who transcended the boundaries of political leadership. The popular song "The East is Red" crystallized this sentiment. Its opening lines proclaim, "The east is red, the sun is rising! From China comes Mao Zedong. He strives for the people's happiness. Hurrah, he is the people's great savior!" These words elevate Mao from a political leader to the dawn of a new era, a source of warmth and guidance for a population seeking deliverance.

A particularly vivid visual articulation of this metaphor appears in the poster *Chairman Mao is the Reddest, Reddest Sun in Our Heart*, created by Ni Zhen and others (Fig. 5.3). The composition adopts a direct and consequential approach. Mao's half-length portrait radiates from the center, resembling a luminous celestial body. His face glows within an orange-red aura that evokes sunrise. Below Mao, figures of various ethnicities lift The Little Red Book. Their gazes rise upward in celebration and devotion. The convergence of light and allegiance constructs Mao as a political guide and as the source of ideological illumination.

Figure 5.3 Chairman Mao is the Reddest, Reddest Sun in Our Heart, 1966, poster. Nizhen, Geweimo, & Qinlong. Retrieved from http://www.mzdbl.com.cn.

Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1997) provides a valuable framework for interpreting this visual strategy. In reading the Aachen Gospels, Kantorowicz describes how medieval rulers possessed both a mortal natural body and an immortal political body. The visual merging of these two aspects affirmed the ruler's divine right and transcendent authority (p. 65). Mao's image underwent a similar process. His portraits no longer depicted an individual man. They became sanctified representations of the state itself. This visual transition emerged from an emotional collaboration between artists and the masses.

During the "Smash the Four Olds" campaign, Mao became the spiritual center of a new symbolic order. His image circulated widely, and ideological fervor. As production increased, visual standardization followed. Prototypes disappeared. The new ideal Mao's features became uniform and standardized. This visual stability mirrored his role as the ideological axis around which the political cosmos revolved. This artwork vividly portrays Mao Zedong as the "head" guiding a unified political body. The synchronized crowd below him enacts collective discipline and submission. Each figure performs identical gestures, creating an image of national coordination under a single ideological command. In Leviathan (1651), Thomas Hobbes proposes a model in which the state resembles a human body. Order arises when the multitude consents to be represented by a sovereign power. Hobbes writes, "A multitude of men are made one person when they are represented by one man... with the consent of each individual of that multitude" (p. 13).

This metaphor clarifies the enforcement of political unity during the Cultural Revolution. Mao unified the people not only by force but also by fusing symbolic and emotional integration. This unity took physical form in the "Go to the Mountains and Countryside" campaign, as millions of urban youths relocated to rural areas to labor with peasants. The campaign aimed to reconfigure the social body. Like a brain coordinating limbs, Mao's central authority directed the scattered movements of the nation. Visual images of Mao provided direction and fostered obedience. The labor of the people mirrored the coordinated gestures of a body acting under a single mind, sustaining political stability through synchronized action.

This visual logic reinforced the symbolic construction of the political body. Mao functioned as the nation's head and heart, the source of collective vitality and coherence. The sun metaphor extended the sovereign body's symbolism beyond earthly rule, recasting the leader as the cosmic and social harmony organizing principle. As planets orbit the sun, the people gathered around Mao, their actions

guided by his radiant presence. In this system, the leader became irreplaceable. His body radiated warmth, power, certainty, and moral clarity.

Mao himself reinforced this vertical hierarchy. In *The Little Red Book*, he insisted that "mastering ideological leadership is the first step in mastering all leadership" (Vol. 2, 1942, p. 435). He further declared, "Ideological education is the key link to be grasped in uniting the whole Party for great political struggles. Without this, the Party cannot fulfill any of its political tasks" (Vol. 3, 1945, p. 265). Within this structure, Mao occupies the mind of the political body, directing movement, thought, and emotion. The people, as the body's limbs, depend on their judgment to act, survive, and align with the nation's aims. This model presents interdependence as both natural and harmonious.

This visual propaganda went beyond portraiture, functioning as a vehicle of emotion and political devotion throughout the Cultural Revolution. Mao's image gradually became a condensed symbol of the Chinese Communist Party through repeated strategies: standardized portraits, radiant sun-like forms, and integration into everyday objects. These visual choices blurred the line between the man and the institution. As Hu (2015) observes, Mao's face eventually replaced the Party's institutional identity, transforming him into the visual embodiment of the CCP. The mythic image created emotional coherence for mass mobilization.

Visual culture gradually detached Mao's image from historical specificity and reconfigured it as a mythic presence. These posters did not record narrative action or biography. Instead, they distilled Mao into an emblem of collective longing. The recurring metaphor of the red sun most directly expressed this transformation. Mao no longer appeared as a leader bound by time or circumstance. Instead, he became a source of illumination and unity, vital to the nation's coherence and energy. His image lost its mortal boundaries and aligned with cosmic order and collective will. The sun metaphor operated as both an aesthetic device and an ideological tool, erasing

any trace of vulnerability and projecting an image of moral purity. In this way, visual culture constructed a visual theology of leadership in which the political body was imagined as sacred, sovereign, and enduring.

This symbolic transformation did not originate solely from institutional mandates. It emerged through the affective collaboration between state media and popular sentiment. During the emotionally charged period of the "Smash the Four Olds" campaign, Mao came to occupy the center of a new visual and spiritual order. As his image circulated across the country, visual standardization gradually took hold. Earlier variations disappeared. The idealized form of Mao became stable, exact, and repetitive. This uniformity deepened the emotional bond between the people and the image. Visual representation became a substitute for political proximity for those without access to Mao in person. Portraits allowed individuals to feel a sense of participation in the revolution. The image materializes utopian longing, presenting it in a tangible form. Scholars revere Mao as the visual embodiment of a collective future.

Integrating Mao's image into the national imaginary reinforced political identity and emotional unity. As Stefan Landsberger notes, "The likeness of Mao Zedong… has evolved from an image that was used and able to mobilize millions to an icon that signifies and personifies the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime" (2020, p. 150). The image of Mao as the red sun crystallized a longing for moral certainty, order, and unity. This transformation enabled his portrait to move beyond the intentions of any single artist and become part of the country's visual consciousness. Paintings, sculptures, coins, and commemorative objects made Mao's presence monumental and solemn. His portrait entered daily life, especially in rural homes, where people began the day by saluting Mao's image. They read his writings before meals and reported their work at night, grounding their lives in visual ritual (Haglund, 1975, pp. 45–54). These actions did not merely express fear or obligation. They reflected a shared

emotional investment that transformed Mao's image into a source of ethical orientation.

His presence extended into symbolic forms as well. Quotations, poems, and metaphors such as the red sun or the Little Red Book carried equal political and spiritual weight. Landsberger explains, "Not only the man himself was made into a divine being; his portrait had to be treated with special care… nothing could be placed above it, and its frame should not have a single blemish" (1998, p. 31). The image itself became sacred. Any gesture of disrespect appeared as an attack on the collective order. Mao's image was directly intertwined with his persona, serving as a medium that organized political emotion, redefined authority, and rendered national loyalty visibly apparent.

5.1.3 After the Death of Mao: The Immortality of Mao's Political Body

After Mao Zedong's death, intense ideological turbulence ended. His successor, Hua Guofeng, faced the immense challenge of asserting authority without the presence of a unifying figurehead. One phrase emerged as a powerful symbol of political transition. Hua met with Mao for a formal briefing in April 1976, when his health had drastically declined, and his speech was limited. "With you in charge, I am at ease," Mao wrote to Hua, according to contemporaneous accounts. The political purpose of this handwritten message quickly became clear, despite historical disagreements regarding its authenticity and original intent. Despite historical disputes about this handwritten message's authenticity and original intent, its political purpose soon became apparent. *The People Daily* covered the phrase frequently and extensively, turning it from a private reassurance to a public slogan and presenting it as Mao's final act of confidence.

The phrase's symbolic weight went beyond textual circulation as it became more popular in official discourse. Image-making emerged as a crucial mechanism for stabilizing political meaning by providing visual confirmation of the succession. The

main characters in state-sponsored art festivals started to change in line with this: new pictures emphasized up-and-coming leaders like Hua. At the same time, depictions of Mao progressively faded compared to before. The visual field thus became a site where the political logic of continuity was carefully staged and aestheticized.

A notable example is Li Yansheng's painting *With You in Charge, I Am at Ease* (Fig. 5.4), which renders the symbolic transfer of authority through understated visual codes. The composition depicts a scene of calm authority and orderly transition rather than emphasizing Mao's physical decline. The scene is set in Mao's private study, which displays a well-organized yet straightforward home interior. Warm lighting, plush upholstery, and bookshelves complete the scene. Mao sits up straight and makes a calm explanation posture with his left hand. Across from him, Hua leans forward intently while holding a document; his face is alert but submissive. Instead of causing disruption, the subdued color scheme fosters a sense of institutional reassurance and political intimacy.

Figure 5.4 With You in Charge, I Am at Ease, 1976, color poster, 53 × 77 cm. Li Yansheng. © Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. Landsberger Collection (Call No. BG E13/436).

Other artists made the same theme, composition, and color, such as Zhang Huaqing, who rendered it in oil, Xu Kuang in print, Peng Bin in oil, and Chen Beixin in a traditional New Year's painting style. Together, these representations constructed a visual consensus that affirmed the continuity of Mao's revolutionary legacy while ushering in a new political order centered on Hua. As Lv Peng observes, "For an extended period, October in 1976 was referred to as the 'Red October,' a time when the Chinese still believed that red symbolized truth... Painters remained accustomed to the timely artistic response to changes in political reality" (Lv, 2007, p. 641).

Zhang Sheng and Zhang Ruwei's painting *Laying the Foundation* (Fig. 5.5) profoundly mediates the political transition that followed Mao Zedong's death. The composition appears simple. At the center, Hua Guofeng is depicted shoveling earth, an act rooted in the Chinese tradition of foundation-laying. This gesture points to an ending and a new beginning, capturing the tension between honoring past leadership and initiating the future. Although Hua is the active figure in the scene, Mao's image takes an equal share of the visual space. Mao's stature nearly matched Hua's height yet extended beyond in width. The symbolism is direct: Mao's physical absence does not diminish the authority or ideological structure he established.

This visual narrative echoes the theory of Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote, "The King is a name of continuance, which shall always endure as the Head and Governor of the People... and in this name, the King never dies" (Kantorowicz, 1997, p. 23). Accordingly, the painting confirms that Mao's influence is still present and inextricably linked to the country's identity and the ideological underpinnings he established. A new stage in the Party's visual and political narrative was signaled by the inclusion of Hua Guofeng's image in official art following his rise to power. Numerous representations of Hua Guofeng placed his iconography at the forefront of the 1977 National Art Exhibition. These pieces were more than just homages to the new leader. They served as visual links between Mao's legacy and Hua's burgeoning era, serving as tools of political continuity.

Figure 5.5 Laying the Foundation Stone for Mao's Mausoleum, 1977, color poster, 76 × 53 cm. Zhang Sheng & Zhang Ruwei. © Tianjin Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. Landsberger Collection (Call No. BG E15/287).

Deng Xiaoping's ascent to leadership echoed these patterns. Hua's eventual fall from power exposed the instability of political imagery. The state art system soon began to feature Deng's likeness in a similar process of visual consolidation. This episode highlights a crucial distinction: while the political body claims immortality, its human representation remains subject to change. Although Deng distanced himself from overt personality cults, the official system continued establishing and propagating his power. The evolving portrayal of leadership in official art reflects more than just aesthetic preference; it signifies deeper political and ideological dynamics at play. It demonstrates the importance of a central symbol and the evolution of authority. Chinese leadership culture underwent a dramatic shift after Mao's death. Deng and other new leaders altered how society views leadership by enacting new laws and

strategies. This process raises an important question: How can the state preserve its legitimacy without a charismatic leader like Mao?

A notable change emerges in the artistic transition from Hua Guofeng to Deng Xiaoping. Deng's portrayal emphasizes individual character and practical leadership more than inherited authority and group narratives. Cheng Lizhi's painting best illustrates this shift. Comrade Deng Xiaoping (Fig. 5.6). Against a backdrop of contemporary structures and blossoming flowers, Deng's light yellow trench coat stands out as he appears in traditional military garb. This composition marks the start of a new era characterized by hope and progress. The work stands out from the prevalent red tones of Mao's era thanks to its vibrant palette and modern setting. These creative decisions reflect Deng's pragmatic style and reform-focused policies, which led China toward modernization and international participation.

Figure 5.6 Comrade Deng Xiaoping, 1983, color poster, 77.5 × 52.5 cm. Cheng Lizhi. © Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe. IISH Collection (Call No. BG E12/731).

Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" offers a lens for understanding this transition. National identity no longer depends on the image of one leader but on shared narratives, rituals, and symbols that bind people together. Nicholas Mirzoeff, in *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (2020), examines this shift from monarchical to national authority. He notes a reversal in the use of violence and the mobilization of citizens as an active political body (p. 56). Authority persists, not through the cult of a single figure, but through the nation's ability to imagine itself as a unified collective. This evolution in visual culture reflects broader transformations in the relationship between the state and its people, highlighting how symbols, images, and shared experiences sustain sovereignty in a new era.

Figure 5.7 Good Night (Third Draft), 1992, oil painting, 350 × 1226 cm. Liu Yuyi. © Liu Yuyi. Mao Zedong Memorial Hall, Beijing.

Following Mao Zedong's death, the Chinese Communist Party established a memorial hall to honor his legacy. On the second floor, Liu Yuyi's monumental painting *Good Night* (Fig. 5.7) stands as a visual testament to the evolving dynamics of power within the Party. Drawing inspiration from Raphael's *The School of Athens*, which assembles

ancient philosophers in a tableau of intellectual exchange, Liu brings together more than fifty key figures from the founding era of the People's Republic China. Each is positioned with narrative care, mapping a network of political and professional relationships across the scene.

At the painting's center, two white and one red table glow beneath ornate palace lamps, anchoring the composition. In the company of key figures like Zhu De, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong practiced calligraphy at the white table. Their closeness indicates a shared goal and vision. A second center of gravity is formed on the left by Deng Xiaoping, who is shown conversing with prominent scientists and intellectuals. This arrangement alludes to continuity and change: the new era of openness to knowledge and innovation, and the old guard at rest.

It is helpful to consider the theoretical trajectory outlined by Eric Santner to grasp the more profound implications of this visual arrangement. Expanding on Ernst Kantorowicz's theory of the king's "two bodies," Santner argues that the end of monarchic rule does not dissolve the political-theological form of sovereign embodiment. Instead, it displaces that structure onto new collective formations. As he writes, "forms that informed medieval and early modern European monarchies do not simply disappear from the space of politics once the body of the king is no longer available as the singular embodiment of the principle and functions of sovereignty; rather, these structures and dynamics migrate into a new location, which thereby assumes a turbulent and disorienting semiotic density previously concentrated in the 'strange material and physical presence' of the king" (Santner, 2011, p. 245).

Good Night effectively visualizes the migration of sovereign power by organizing a constellation of revolutionary figures. Some of these figures supported Mao, while others later published new reforms, creating a harmonious tableau of intergenerational reflection. Authority no longer emanates solely from the sublime presence of a singular leader; instead, it redistributes across a network of historically validated

actors. Their coexistence within the image generates a new visual grammar of legitimacy. The painting thus represents a shift from centralized, charismatic rule to an institutionalized form of collective governance.

This visual logic aligns with what Santner, citing Kantorowicz, describes as the transformation of sacred embodiment from the mystical collective body capable of integrating temporal institutions into a framework of transcendental authority. As Santner summarizes, "the value of immortality or continuity upon which the new polity-centered rulership would thrive, was vested in the *universitas* 'which never dies,' in the perpetuity of an immortal people, polity, or *patria*, from which the individual king might easily be separated, but not the Dynasty, the Crown, and the Royal Dignity" (Santner, 2011, p. 272, citing Kantorowicz). In Liu's painting, the state no longer speaks through the visible body of the supreme leader. Instead, it speaks through the visual cohesion of a revolutionary pantheon whose dignitas transcends the mortality of any single figure.

This reading is further supported by Dachang Cong's analysis in *When Heroes Pass Away* (1997), where he describes the Party's strategic recalibration following Mao's death. The Party restructured its symbolic order rather than allow the vacuum left by Mao's absence to destabilize its legitimacy (p.37). It expanded its leadership imagination and embedded Mao Zedong Thought within the collective foundations of governance and policy. *Good Night* gives visual form to this ideological transition. Its calm, reflective tone departs from heroic or militant depictions of power. Instead, it articulates a vision of continuity through shared remembrance, intellectual exchange, and collective ritual.

Ultimately, *Good Night* does more than commemorate the revolutionary past. It constructs a political theology for post-Mao China. The state persists as an abstract but potent collectivity through ritual image, sustained by shared memory, and animated by ongoing political negotiation. In this schema, the people are no longer

mere subjects under a ruler's gaze. They are imagined as participants in a national corpus whose vitality and legitimacy depend on their continued commitment to a shared revolutionary inheritance. This shift marks a structural transformation in the site of political embodiment: from the flesh of the sovereign to the collective body of the Party and the people.

5.2 Contemporary Reinterpretations of Mao Zedong's Bod

In the late 1970s, as China cautiously began to emerge from the shadows of the Cultural Revolution, an innovative artistic movement began to take shape beyond the limits of state-sanctioned art. This era witnessed artists venturing into new forms of expression that distinctly contrasted with the narratives promoted by the government. Among these groundbreaking works, Wang Keping's *Idol* (fig. 5.8) emerged as a bold critique, questioning the previously unassailable depiction of Chairman Mao. This era, characterized by deep reflection and a critical reevaluation of recent history, witnessed artists venturing into new forms of expression that distinctly contrasted with the narratives promoted by the government.

Idol, a wood sculpture with semi-closed eyes and absent ears, evokes the meditative calm of Buddhist statuary while wearing a red-star military cap that unmistakably signals Maoist iconography. Although Wang later claimed that his intention was satirical rather than directly critical of Mao (Wang, 2009), the work nonetheless operates as a powerful challenge to the regime's visual authority. The cult of personality, which saturated every domain of life during Mao's rule, is here stripped of its grandeur. Through abstraction and subtle distortion, Wang presents a face that resembles Mao without confirming his identity, opening space for irony and ambiguity. The result is a quiet but forceful disavowal of iconographic orthodoxy.

This bold innovation and rebellion emerged as Wang Keping, influenced by the French "Theatre of the Absurd," pushed boundaries (Wang, 2009, p. 1). He employs an exaggerated, dramatized visual language to directly address and mock the

absurdity of power worship and personal superstition. The work is situated between the opposing identities of rationality and irrationality, sublimity and absurdity, resulting from the visual deconstruction of the monolithic sanctity of power by combining Buddhist and Mao imagery. It forces one to reconsider the character and bounds of power relations. There are many layers of satire and irony in the presentation. To create a powerful contrast and tension, the artist skillfully incorporates a Buddha statue's revered form into a portrait embellished with communist symbols.

Figure 5.8 Idol, 1979, wood carving / birch, 57 × 29 × 15 cm. Wang Keping. Wang Keping Studio.

The wood also refers to religious imagery. As the principal architect of the socialist state, Mao did not simply govern through policies and institutions. He developed a philosophical system known as Mao Zedong Thought, gradually expanding its influence into nearly every public and private life sphere. During the Cultural Revolution, particularly through the campaign to eliminate the “Four Olds,” this

ideological framework became increasingly intolerant of difference. Other schools of thought, such as conventional philosophies and religious convictions, were disregarded and frequently actively repressed. There is more to the sculpture than criticism. It makes one think about how easily political power can be used as a religious tool. The artist reveals the disturbing intimacy between spiritual reverence and ideological power by depicting Mao in the pose and form of a Buddha.

However, due to its sensitivity, this piece did not participate in the first "Stars Art Exhibition." It was only displayed during the second Stars Art Exhibition on August 20th of the following year, where the exhibit was prominently placed in the center of the second floor, underscoring its iconic role at the exhibition (Wang Keping, 2007). The exhibition radiated an avant-garde spirit, and its name, "Stars," carried profound implications. As Huang Rui emphasizes in the name, " The reason the stars did not exist was because there was only one sun; that sun was Chairman Mao. The sun was the only thing that shone; Chairman Mao was the only one who gave light"(2006, p.36). In contrast to the former "Sun" (Mao), the Stars showcased the luminous spirit of freedom and independence. This context showcased the independent spirit of freedom against the former "Sun" and made Mao Zedong's statue, included in the exhibition, a critical reflection on past autocracy. At this time, Mao's statue, just one of many themes in painting, did not overshadow the brilliance of the Stars at the exhibition. It sparked a broad discussion on the Mao era, opening a new chapter in contemporary Chinese art regarding visual language and ideological core.

5.2.1 Zhang Hongtu: The Body as Medical Metaphor

Zhang Hongtu (born 1943) is one of the earlier contemporary artists who critically reinterpreted Mao Zedong's portraiture. After moving from China to New York in 1982, he utilized geographical and cultural distance to create various Chairman Mao images. From humorous to exaggerated portrayals, these works often unsettle viewers accustomed to more standardized depictions of Mao yet retain a satirical edge. On one

level, they encourage a reassessment of Mao's image; on another, they reflect broader perspectives on the socio-political landscape of China during and after the Mao era.

In *Bilingual Chart of Acupuncture Points and Meridians* (Fig. 5.9), Zhang Hongtu deepens this deconstructive approach by combining Mao's body with imagery from traditional Chinese medicine. He depicts a nude Mao, highlighting his sagging stomach, drooping chest, and simple underwear, thereby grounding the once "deified" political figure firmly in the realm of ordinary human physiology. In contrast to past depictions, where Mao was imbued with an aura of mystery and authority, for instance, Tang Xiaohe's *Marching in the Wind and Waves* (Tang, 2009, p. 58) features a young boy with a floatation ring concealing Mao's bare foot to preserve his dignity, Zhang Hongtu directly exposes Mao's body. By doing so, he subverts the earlier sanctification of this political giant, turning him into an "anatomized" subject open to scrutiny. The "de-mythologizing" through nudity may cause discomfort or even offense, but through this visual shock, Zhang reveals the immense authority once accorded to Mao's image.

More critically, Zhang incorporates acupuncture points and the meridian system from traditional Chinese medicine, assigning symbolic significance to these markers in Mao's political and personal trajectory. Keywords such as the Communist Party, the Three Mountains, the working class, and family planning are distributed across Mao's bodily "vulnerable points," as though conducting a "political diagnosis" upon his meridians. The sculpture is more than just criticism. It prompts an inquiry into how political authority can be effectively transformed into a tool for religious purposes. By portraying Mao in the form and posture of a Buddha, the artist exposes the unsettling closeness between ideological power and spiritual reverence. By rendering this "visual acupuncture chart," Zhang transforms Mao's body from an "untouchable political symbol" into a political "lesion" or text that people can inspect, evaluate, and diagnose. This "medicalization" further undermines the gravitas people once

considered unassailable in a long-revered political leader whose image people deemed beyond question.

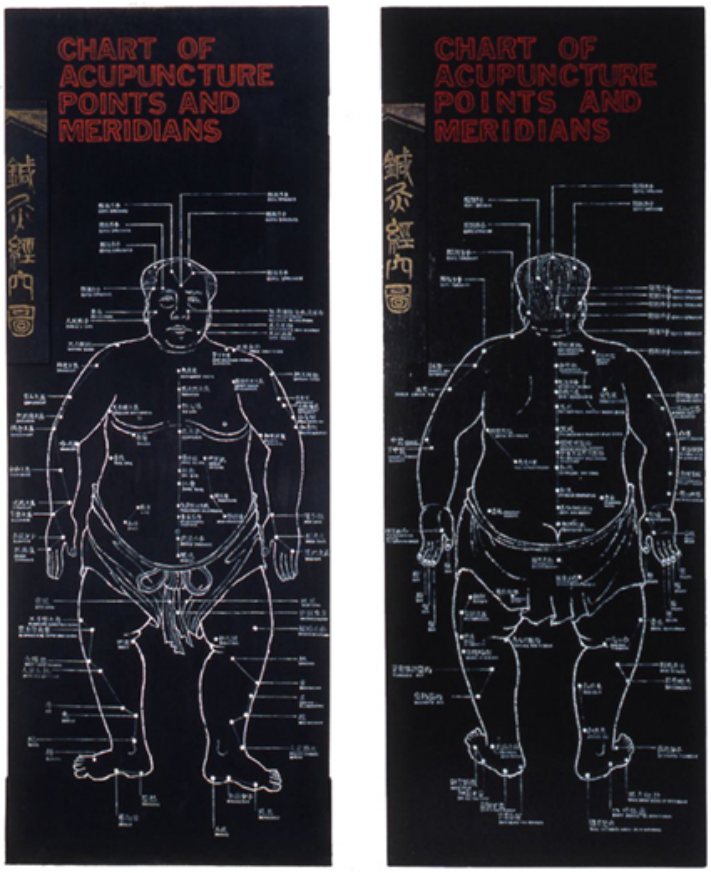

Figure 5.9 Bilingual Chart of Acupuncture Points and Meridians (Front and Back), 1990, ink and acrylic on wood panel, 80 × 30 × 1.5 inches each. Zhang Hongtu. Retrieved from Artnet.

Zhang Hongtu reveals Mao's intimacy and vulnerability, urging viewers to re-examine the leader whom people once treated with near-divine reverence. The artwork removes this political idol from his pedestal and gives the public a point of entry to investigate his complexities. This representation, rich in anatomical metaphors, possesses the ability to scrutinize and critique political power in a society that often reveres authority figures. It diverges from the rigid, unchanging myths surrounding Mao by depicting him as open to debate, inquiry, and even criticism. Instead of limiting Mao to a narrowly deified or heroic iconography, Zhang Hongtu

uses these techniques to invite viewers to reconsider Mao's historical standing and political significance.

5.2.2 Liuwei's Materializing Mao's Body

Liu Wei (b. 1965) was born into a revolutionary family in Beijing. Growing up amid the ideological intensity of the Mao era, he experienced the pervasive presence of state propaganda and standardized education, which profoundly shaped him. Because of these early encounters, he learned firsthand how Mao Zedong's image permeated both public and private spheres. His artwork frequently combines personal reflections on his family history with Maoist imagery, drawing from the lingering memories of this era.

In his series *Mao Generation* (1992–1999), Liu presents a grotesque reinterpretation of Mao's portrait. The painting features two mature-looking boys seated before a massive, distorted image of Mao's face, creating a composition at once absurd and haunting (Fig. 5.10). Liu's use of pointillist texture, inflated forms, and sickly tones strips away the aura of revolutionary sanctity leaving behind an image of decay and grotesquerie. Mao became not an embodiment of power but a surface of flesh. What once was a symbol of permanence now appearing transient and unstable.

Figure 5.10 Mao Generation, 1992–1999, painting on canvas and hand-carved wooden frame, 123.5 × 103.8 cm. Liu Wei. Sotheby's.

By reducing Mao's body to raw matter, Liu deconstructs the ideological layers once built upon it. The flesh here is not merely biological but symbolic of a collapse. The elevation of Mao to godlike status during the Cultural Revolution depended on the erasure of his human vulnerability. Liu's work resists this. In place of reverence, he offers exposure. This approach resonates with Judith Butler's theory of the body, which views the body not as a fixed entity but as a site of ongoing construction shaped by power relations and systems of discourse. According to Butler, emphasizing the body as "flesh" is to dismantle the network of meanings attached to gender, class, and power (Butler, 1990, 1993). Liu Wei's Mao thus becomes a figure open to reinterpretation. By secularizing the political icon and presenting it as abject and decomposed, the artist challenges the integrity of contemporary values that continue to sanctify historical authority.

The two boys in *the Mao Generation* wear identical uniforms and adopt awkward, revealing poses. Their bodies are partially exposed, their faces seem prematurely aged, and their performative yet uneasy masculinity is evident. This peculiar scene evokes a state of innocence gone wrong. They appear trapped in a surreal scene of confusion and distortion rather than standing in awe of Mao. Behind them, like a dim recollection, Mao's image looms, present but becoming less distinct. This work belongs to Liu's larger *Revolutionary Families* series, where he merges the private and the public, blending memories of his upbringing with the imposed imagery of Maoist iconography. The result is a complex meditation on family, ideology, and the strange intimacy of power.

In President Mao Crossing the Yangtze River (Fig. 5.11), Liu presents a radically different portrait that departs from the familiar heroic imagery of Mao's historical swim. The familiar image of Mao as a vigorous, commanding leader shift to a figure adrift. Instead of exuding strength, Mao appears at the mercy of the river. His body floats, exposed, partially submerged, and no longer in control of the weather. Ambiguity permeates the scene. Soft blues and greens used to depict the water convey a sense of calm and containment. The red flowers that float close to his body introduce a hint of sensuality. Mao shows vulnerability and submission instead of victory. The river's meaning changes from a setting of conquest to a flowing area of change and uncertainty.

This reimagining disrupts the visual order of official history. Rather than reinforcing the cult of personality, Liu unravels it. Mao's body no longer serves as the source of mythic authority but transforms into a surface through which people negotiate desire, fear, and memory. The painting suggests a deeper human dimension, where political symbolism cannot altogether stifle the body's underlying currents. Mao ceased to be a leader and instead became a man caught between the past and the present.

Liu creates a metaphor for blending one's private and public identities in this river scene. Mao's body serves as both a subject and a symbol, embodying a personal memory that defies easy categorization and a political history that permeates daily existence. The river's fluid dynamics make the coexistence of opposing dualities possible. At the ebb and flow of the water, elements like history and embodiment, discipline and desire, and power and vulnerability lose their traditional stability.

Liu Wei's engagement with Mao's image is more than a revision of political iconography. It is a sustained inquiry into how bodies carry meaning, how symbols become flesh, and how visual art can rupture the systems that govern memory and authority. His works neither parody Mao nor redeem him. Instead, they pull his image back to the realm of the human, where decay, sensation, and contradiction reside. In doing so, Liu opens space for a new kind of visual politics that invites historical reflection and emotional reckoning.

This visual tension between the natural and the sensual, the authoritative and the vulnerable, breaks down the constructed image of Mao as an unassailable leader. Liu Wei challenges viewers to examine the nuanced human elements in Mao's persona and doubt the official portrayals' veracity. By removing political façades to expose life's unvarnished and sensual aspects, Liu explores how power manifests within the body.

In *President Mao crossing the Yangtze River*, Mao's body becomes a site for exploring how personal desires intersect with public persona. Liu suggests that many complexities lie beneath the surface of this emblematic figure. The river is a symbolic space where political meanings and personal experience meet. Mao's image is reclaimed from myth and placed within the tangible reality of human life. Liu Wei's work profoundly explores the politics of reproduction and the process of humanizing a mythical figure. He subverts the conventions of political portraiture by depicting

Mao Zedong as a man of flesh and blood, full of desire. It was a man shaped by vulnerability and longing.

Figure 5.11 President Mao Crossing the Yangtze River, 1991, oil on wooden panel in artist's frame, 32 × 39 cm. Liu Wei. © Liu Wei. Courtesy of Anna Ning Fine Art.

5.2.3 Li Shan's Aesthetics of Sensuality

Li Shan's Rouge series invites viewers to reconsider Mao Zedong's persona through a nuanced and layered approach. Li Shan challenges the established visual codes that have long defined Mao's public image by juxtaposing Mao's familiar iconography with motifs that suggest vulnerability and human desire. The artist uses geographical and psychological distance to explore dimensions of Mao often concealed by official narratives.

Embracing a surrealistic style, Li Shan uses standard images of a young and middle-aged Mao Zedong, both adorned in the iconic Chinese Red Army uniform, as foundational elements against a monochromatic backdrop. The striking contrast of

light and shadow on Mao's facial features and the vibrant interplay of colors between his visage and the backdrop result in a visually captivating composition, transforming Mao's image into a decorative element.

Li Shan's use of the lotus flower adds complex symbolic layers to these portraits. In Chinese culture and Buddhism, the lotus signifies beauty, purity, and enlightenment. Its frequent appearance in Buddhist iconography links it to the transcendence of worldly suffering. Li Shan suggests spiritual elevation and the possibility of inner transformation by including the lotus. At the same time, the lotus, rendered in bold colors and sensuous forms, carries erotic undertones. The lush depiction of a peony near the mature Mao echoes Georgia O'Keeffe's work, recalling the visual language of sensuality and fertility. In Li Shan's paintings, the lotus becomes a metaphor for the tension between political power and spiritual awakening. The flower's dual symbolism, which symbolizes spiritual purity and eroticism, destabilizes the myth of Mao as a purely heroic figure. Heather Russell (2013) notes that Li Shan deliberately introduces ambiguity into evaluating Mao's historical legacy, dismantling deification and authoritarianism. By placing sex and sensuality at the center of his inquiry, Li Shan pushes the boundaries of what political portraiture can express.

Contrary to previous stern and traditionally masculine portrayals of Mao, Li Shan introduces feminine attributes into his depiction. The young Mao (Fig. 5.12) is presented with smooth skin and delicately arched eyebrows, captivatingly gazing at the audience with a budding lotus flower gently held between his lips. Unlike the standard portraits, Mao's subtle facial expressions shift from furrowed brows to a more relaxed and open demeanor. The entire figure shows a state of relaxation.The middle-aged Mao (Fig. 5.13) radiates confidence as a rouge lotus flower fully blooms. His enigmatic smile lends the artwork a touch of gracefulness and allure.

Figure 5.12 Rouge – Flower, 1995, oil and screen print on canvas, 105.6 × 141.8 cm. Li Shan. © Li Shan. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong.

Figure 5.13 The Rouge Series, #22, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 140 × 258 cm. Li Shan. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

Li Shan captures Mao's desires by making the leader's body a site of political and erotic projection. Yan Shanchun (2005) observes that Li Shan transforms "rouge" from a noun into a verb, merging connotations of sacredness and vulgarity, nobility and baseness, under the action "to rouge." The artist uses the color rouge, traditionally linked to sensuality and excess, to challenge Mao's sanctified image. This strategy subverts the official narrative by introducing the possibility of corruption, longing, and fallibility. The interplay between enlightenment and desire, articulated through sexual symbolism, opens up an alternative perspective on Mao as both a political and a sensual being.

Throughout the Rouge series, Li Shan maps a territory where spiritual growth and sensual desire converge. The lotus evolves from a closed bud to a full bloom across the sequence, mirroring Mao's journey from youthful idealism to mature authority. This visual progression symbolizes both personal and political transformation. Li Shan's framing of Mao's legacy stresses growth, metamorphosis, and the universal search for identity and belonging. The artist reimagines Mao not only as a figure of political power but as a symbol of the human condition, caught between the demands of public life and private yearning, between ideological mission and personal fulfillment.

Li Shan's approach prompts viewers to question the sacred and profane binaries of hero and villain. The Rouge series becomes a site of reflection, inviting audiences to confront the narratives that shape their understanding of history and power. In Li Shan's hands, Mao's image serves as a mirror, reflecting the viewer's desires and anxieties, and opening space for a more complex engagement with the legacies of revolutionary leaders.

5.2.4 Miao Ying's "Problematic GIFs"

Miao Ying (born 1985) is a contemporary Chinese artist who treats the internet as her primary medium. In her 2016 work *Problematic GIFs* (Fig. 5.14), she creates an

image of Mao Zedong that never fully loads. This visual metaphor captures the pervasiveness of internet censorship. The installation consists of multiple screens displaying celebrities, pop icons, and animals, with one central screen that endlessly attempts to render Mao's image. This perpetual state of incompletion highlights both the theme of censorship and the manipulation of information in digital culture. The never-loading Mao is a metaphor for the fragmented and tightly controlled realities that define today's media environments.

Figure 5.14 Problematic GIFs, 2016. Miao Ying. © Miao Ying. Photography by M+, Hong Kong. M+ New Art Commission.

Growing up in post-Cultural Revolution China, Miao Ying came of age under the influences of Reform and Opening-Up and the one-child policy. This background shapes her approach to Mao Zedong as a historical presence within collective memory, especially for her parents' generation. She graduated from the China Academy of Art's New Media department in 2007, studying with Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, artists known for their critical social commentary. Unlike her mentors, who experienced Maoist policies directly, Miao engages with Mao as a cultural signifier with shifting relevance.

Within Miao Ying's art, Mao's image becomes a complex, multifaceted symbol. She uses it to deliver a nuanced critique of authority and information control. In contemporary China, direct criticism of current leaders remains risky and controversial. In contrast, Mao, an extremely sensitive topic in the 1990s, became less politically volatile but continued to hold symbolic power. This transformation allows artists such as Miao Ying to appropriate Mao's image as a relatively safe yet still charged subject, suitable for critical reflection on China's political dynamics. By situating Mao among celebrities and internet icons, she shows how Mao's myth has evolved: his image still holds historical gravity, yet also serves as a nostalgic reference point in today's visual culture.

In a 2017 interview, Miao Ying describes a shift in her artistic focus from visible censorship to the subtler dynamics of self-censorship. She sees self-censorship as a specifically Chinese phenomenon that generates new forms of creativity. Michel Foucault's theory of power provides a valuable lens for understanding this process. Foucault argues that power does not merely repress; it produces norms and realities by compelling individuals to internalize social standards. He writes, "Power is productive; it produces reality; it produces the domain of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1978, p.105). In *Problematic GIFs*, the eternally loading image of Mao Zedong illustrates this internalization. The artwork suggests that deeply embedded social controls operate subconsciously, making self-censorship even more effective than overt repression. Self-censorship has become widespread, reflecting social norms and cultural expectations that shape individual behavior and collective consciousness.

Kamila Hladíková, in her 2021 study "In the Name of Stability: Literary Censorship and Self-Censorship in Contemporary China," analyzes how self-censorship remains robust even as it evolves. She observes, "Such a system motivates writers to actively comply with the Party's long-term ideological objectives while at the same time enabling them to insert certain acceptably critical points or even covered hints with subversive potential" (Hladíková, 2021, p. 507). As a result, both artists and writers

often self-edit to avoid controversy or risk and consider broader public interests or social harmony.

Miao Ying does not view this creative constraint as a purely negative phenomenon. Instead, she treats self-censorship as a source of artistic innovation. Her work reveals how artists adapt by developing indirect, coded forms of critique. In *Problematic GIFs*, the incomplete image of Mao functions as both a gesture of reverence and a vehicle for critical inquiry. This approach allows Miao Ying to investigate the dynamics of power, censorship, and historical memory in China. Mao Zedong's image, repeatedly invoked and reinterpreted, continues to offer contemporary artists a rich source of inspiration. Through such visual strategies, artists like Miao Ying probe the shifting boundaries between art, politics, and history. Mao's legacy persists as a symbol of political authority and a tool for critical reflection on China's changing social landscape.

Conclusion

In the formative years of the People's Republic of China, the sublime representation of Mao Zedong's physical form stood at the center of national aesthetics. This imagery became inseparable from the constructs of power and the visual articulation of the nation as a unified organism. Art functioned as a crucial mechanism for maintaining state authority. The widespread dissemination of Mao's image gave the masses, who often felt distant from Mao himself, a tangible means to engage with power structures. Through these representations, the visual body of Mao helped perpetuate the system, constructing a utopian vision of society grounded in ideals of peace, liberation, and equality.

A nostalgic Mao fever emerged during the 90s, with people selling and wearing Mao badges and consuming films and TV works about Mao. Many scholars said that people used Mao to express their disappointment and dissatisfaction that the promise

of the four modernizations did not have the desired effect(Suisheng Zhao,1997; Song et al.,1991). This longing underscored a collective disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of the four modernizations. The gap between past hopes and present reality fueled a new longing for Mao's era. At the same time, artists began to question and even mock Mao's legacy. Their satirical, often playful, critical works encouraged people to reconsider collective memory. Chen Danqing painted Mao not as a flawless leader but as an aging man marked by exhaustion. Feng Zhengjie portrayed Mao with rigid, lifeless features. Zhang Hongtu dressed Mao as a child, using humor to open debate about Mao's role in history and culture.

This wave of artistic critique connects to Michel Foucault's theory of power and the body. Foucault explored how the ruler's body stands for the entire society. He argued that an attack on the king's body also attacks the social fabric. By satirizing Mao's physical form, contemporary artists confront deep questions about identity, power, and authority in China. Their art weaves together threads of reverence, disappointment, and critique. These tensions surfaced most clearly during the Cultural Revolution, when the image of Mao dominated public space and private life.

Artists use symbolic violence against Mao's image to challenge the myths and stories that support state power. They show that power operates directly on and through the body. Their works make Mao's image a site for debating collective memory and truth. Reimagining Mao's body allows artists to probe national identity and the meaning of history. Li Xianting (2013) describes this process as a distinct form of Chinese humor. He sees irony as a tool that lets people revisit the Mao era while criticizing the present. Artists use irony and satire in modern consumer culture to explore Mao's continuing influence. Cold War views from the West also shape how Chinese people see Mao today. Through art, Mao remains both sacred and ordinary. He is a complex figure whose relevance endures in China's national consciousness. This dialogue reveals a society re-examining power, leadership, and memory boundaries.

However, one must recognize that these artists do not reject Mao's global influence simply because they portray him satirically. Many artists admire Mao's mastery of political discourse and his ability to shape culture. They do not view him only as a political leader or a product of propaganda. For them, Mao symbolizes China's recent history and complex heritage. Many Chinese artists see Mao as someone who used art with great skill to serve the people. He navigated the changing forces of cultural identity during China's global transformation. Even when artists use satire, Mao remains unique in the Chinese imagination. His image testifies to a complex legacy and shows the power of art to critique, rethink, and reshape historical memory.

Chapter 6 Nowhere to Hide: Exploring Bodyscapes of Chinese Women in the Place of Modernity (1949-Present)

The female body stands at the center of modern China's cultural and political imagination, serving as a key landscape of modernity. After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, this dynamic intensified. The state elevated the status of women and made their bodies highly visible within national policy and visual culture. Building on Karl Marx's claim that "the degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation" (Marx & Engels, 1968, p. 207), Mao Zedong deepened this logic. He promoted slogans such as "The times have changed; men and women are the same" and "Women hold up half the sky." In socialist nation-building, gender equality became a central political goal. This ideological commitment shaped the visual arts. Artists gave the female body new visibility and symbolic meaning, using its image to express social transformation and the promise of equality.

Female figures in classical Chinese painting often inhabit domestic and ornamental settings such as boudoirs, gardens, or pavilions. These spaces were associated with ideals of obedience, visually reinforcing the gendered division between interior and exterior realms. Mary H. Fong notes, "In traditional China, artistic production was gender-specific, exclusively masculine, and the female image that emerged is not what it purports to represent but rather a signification of male power" (Fong, 1996, p. 22). This observation highlights a central logic in premodern Chinese visual culture: artists rarely portrayed women as autonomous subjects. Instead, they constructed symbolic figures shaped by male authority. Painting rendered the woman's body as voiceless and spatially confined, sustaining patriarchal boundaries between private domesticity and public life.

In response to these historical traditions, the twentieth century saw the female body in visual art become both a measure and a vehicle of social transformation. During the Maoist era, revolutionary aesthetics standardized and desexualized the female form to promote ideals of collectivism. After 1978, with the rise of market reforms and the proliferation of nudes and so-called "material girls," cultural producers recast the female body as a site of political, economic, and cultural tension. These shifting representations demonstrate how each historical moment reinscribes the female form according to the dominant logic of ideology. Even today, the image of woman continues to function as a site of negotiation

between competing ideologies and uneven norms of bodily representation. What people consider permissible, celebrate, or censor often depends less on aesthetic form and more on the cultural logic that shapes perceptions of female bodies.

Contemporary Chinese visual culture features women, yet artists often neglect articulating their subjectivities. In numerous artworks, the female body occupies a central position within the composition; however, these representations seldom connect to the lived experiences of actual women. These bodies often function as vessels of ideological meaning, shaped by assumptions about beauty, virtue, strength, or modernity. The portrayal of women significantly influences validating specific forms of femininity that align with broader narratives of national progress and cultural identity. Examining these representations reveals their crucial role in shaping public discourse and understanding of gender roles in contemporary society. The continued emphasis on specific female figures, whether presented as symbols of tradition, revolution, or liberation, reveals how visual culture shapes gender norms while suppressing alternative possibilities. To understand these images, one must delve beyond their surface and analyze the ideological frameworks that dictate certain bodies' visibility, celebration, and exclusion.

In this chapter, I adopt the concept of "bodyscapes" to examine how the female body functions as both a material surface and a symbolic structure within contemporary Chinese art. Nicholas Mirzoeff's formulation posits that the bodyscape transcends the physical body, serving as the site where individuals represent, interpret, and contest the body through various visual and cultural codes. In Mirzoeff's words, "the body in art must be distinguished from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate... This complex of signs is what I shall call the bodyscape" (1995, p. 2). This perspective allows for investigating how power, ideology, and aesthetics are mapped onto the body, turning it into a surface of inscription and control.

Building on this framework, I examine how Chinese art has imagined, shaped, and disciplined female bodies from the early years of to the present. Across shifting historical contexts, the female body has modeled national ideals. In the Maoist era, the "socialist woman" symbolized revolutionary virtue. After 1978, the nude became a site of ambivalent visibility. During the reform era, feminine figures appeared as commodified icons. Contemporary women artists have begun to intervene in this visual field in recent years. They rework the symbolic language of the female body and reclaim its meaning on their terms.

By treating the female body as a bodyscape, I reveal how visual culture participates in constructing modernity and gender, and how it either reinforces or challenges dominant narratives. This approach lets me ask which forms of femininity become visible, what remains excluded, and how aesthetic choices connect to ideological aims. My purpose is not only to identify patterns of representation, but also to understand how these images contribute to gendered governance. I also explore the potential for visual resistance within contemporary art.

6.1 Socialist Modernity and *Natural Beauty* (1949–1978)

As China embarked on its socialist experiment, the woman's figure occupied a newly prominent place in both visual culture and political discourse. Maoist authorities promoted gender equality as a social reform and presented it as a visible marker of rupture with the feudal past. In *The Common Program* of 1949, the Chinese Communist Party pledged to abolish the "feudal system which holds women in bondage" and to ensure "equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational, and social life" (Beijing, 1949). Images were powerful tools for spreading new ideas and helped build a visual and political world focused on the "socialist woman."

In *Ambition in the Sky* (1972), Yuan Hao translates the era's ideological transformation into a highly disciplined and symbolic image (see Fig. 6.1). The painting depicts a female electrical worker suspended high above the ground, performing her task calmly. She wears a dark green uniform and sturdy work gloves, perched on an insulator along a high-voltage transmission line. Her cropped hair lifts gently in the wind. Her posture remains steady and her expression composed as she appears fully absorbed in her work. The background features an expansive blue-and-white sky, which opens onto a sweeping view of China's idyllic landscape and evokes a sense of national harmony and abundance. The saturated greens and blues create an atmosphere of order, serenity, and quiet resolve.

The woman's body is shaped for a collective purpose and projected as a strength, composure, and technical proficiency model. Her labor becomes visible as an emblem of national progress, while her figure serves as a site for inscribing the values of socialist modernity. The serenity on her face exemplifies revolutionary dedication. Her elevated position suggests transcendence over personal concerns and domestic spaces. The visual language of the

painting emphasizes discipline, utility, and public virtue. It crafts a vision of womanhood closely aligned with the moral and productive ideals of the socialist state. Within this framework, the female body emerges as a symbol of national aspiration and a stable visual form through which the socialist order is imagined and affirmed.

Figure 6.1 *Ambition in Sky*, 1972, oil on canvas, 180 × 80 cm. Yuanhao. People's Art Publishing House. Collection of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.

Figure 6.2 *Those Holding Colored Ribbons Dance High in the Sky*, 1976, color poster, 77 × 54 cm. Xinhe Ship Wharf Spare Time Art Group. © Tianjin Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. Landsberger Collection (Call No. BG E13/885).

Figure 6.3 *Raising the Guard, Defending the Motherland*, 1969, oil on canvas. Guan Qiming. Image circulated via secondary market. Retrieved from http://www.mzdbl.cn/huaji/8/index.html

Figure 6.4 Unite for Greater Victory!, 1974, lithograph. Yan Yongsheng. People's Fine Arts Publishing House. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 6.5 We Will Always Study the Three Constantly Read Articles, 1967, color poster, 77 × 53 cm. Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe New Year Picture Creation Group. © Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe. Collection of the Landsberger Collection (Call No. BG E13/973).

Building on this aesthetic of individual elevation, a shift toward choreographed collectivity becomes visible in the later years of the Cultural Revolution. In *Those Holding Colored Ribbons Dance High in the Sky* (Xinhe Ship Wharf Spare Time Art Group, 1976), a carefully orchestrated image of female unity and national optimism emerges (see Fig. 6.2). The painting depicts a group of young women dancing atop a massive industrial ship labeled "500 tons." Their bodies align symmetrically, each holding long, brightly colored ribbons that slice through the air in harmonious arcs. Matching uniforms, serene expressions, and perfectly synchronized movements define the scene. A rainbow arcs across the pastel sky, enclosing the performance in a tableau of collective joy and symbolic fulfillment. The sea remains still, the ship steady, and the dancers seem suspended within a world of promise and stability. The composition radiates vitality and cohesion. The dancers' mirrored poses and coordinated movements generate a compelling sense of group harmony, embodying aesthetic order and an aspirational model of social unity. This presence frames their actions as celebratory and emblematic, drawing the viewer into a vision where revolution is not struggle, but synchronized beauty.

This painting deploys an aesthetic strategy strikingly like that employed in Yuan Hao's previously discussed work. In both images, women appear through a visual regime of standardization and desexualization. The female figures wear nearly identical, loose-fitting uniforms that obscure their physical contours. Their hair remains uniformly short and utilitarian, free of adornment. They do not display signs of cosmetic enhancement, jewelry, or other gendered markers of individuality. Their faces show composure and resolve, evoking disciplined determination rather than personal emotion. The emphasis lies on their vocational identity and seamless integration into the labor force as ideal socialist workers. These women do not represent individuals with inner lives but model subjects within the state's visual economy of production, strength, and collective virtue.

This representation reflects Judith Stacey's argument in *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*(1983) that the revolution did not dismantle patriarchal structures but reshaped them

into a statist form that privileged family stability, female compliance, and productive efficiency. “The revolution gave rise to a reformed patriarchy rather than a feminist order” (Stacey, 1983, p. 248). Under this formulation of “patriarchal socialism,” female emancipation was redefined as visible participation in public labor yet remained structurally confined by gendered hierarchies and moral expectations.

Within this context, the idealized images of collectivized femininity function not as signs of liberation but as tools of ideological coherence. The woman's body becomes visible only when it conforms to state-sanctioned ideals of discipline. Its presence affirms national unity while suppressing individual subjectivity. As Judith Stacey observes, “revolutionary law became moral performance” (1983, p. 176), and the synchronized gestures, celebratory symbols, and radiant order of these paintings exemplify this transformation. The figure of the “Iron Girl,” widely circulated during the Maoist period, condensed this visual logic: she embodied moral fortitude, rationality, and revolutionary virtue, redefined through masculine-coded values such as endurance, technical competence, and collective loyalty. The state rearticulated femininity within a highly codified framework of labor and ideological legibility. In this configuration, the woman's body transforms from a living subject into a surface where national ideals are inscribed.

Although female figures became more visible during the Mao era, they often occupied secondary or symbolic positions within group imagery. In many widely circulated posters, women appear as adjuncts to male protagonists, reinforcing the collective narrative. Guan Qiming’s *Raising the Guard, Defending the Motherland* (1969) provides a revealing example (see Fig. 6.3). In this poster, the artist places women at the margins, positioning their figures just beyond the center of action, beside male characters who stand tall and assured. The men stand in sharp outlines; their postures remain firm, and their gestures convey precision, embodying control and leadership. By contrast, the women fade into the background. One woman is visible only by the edge of a red dress and the hint of a headscarf, her body half-hidden and her presence absorbed into the collective.

This visual arrangement recurs across numerous posters, where women are positioned along the edges, as if assigned to the periphery of both image and history. Men occupy the center, their bodies composed for action, their movements outward facing and decisive. Women remain near, necessary yet restrained, part of the image but never its driving force. A quiet

imbalance defines the scene: power gravitates toward the masculine figure, while the female remains composed, watchful, and visually contained. In such imagery, patriarchy does not vanish; it reappears in newly coded forms, settling seamlessly into the revolutionary aesthetic.

Yan Yongsheng's *Unite for Greater Victory* (1974) exemplifies this visual logic. A male worker stands at the center of the composition, arms raised in triumph. He links hands with a female figure on one side and a soldier on the other, forming a human chain representing revolutionary unity(Fig.6.4). The woman holds *The Red Book*. She wears a determined expression, yet her stance is slightly withdrawn. She does not face the viewer directly, nor does her body command visual attention. Instead, she functions as a supporting figure, reinforcing the central message without redirecting it. The male protagonist remains the axis of composition and meaning, while the woman contributes presence, not power.

A similar dynamic appears in Zhou Yuechao's *Transforming Schools into Tools of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1975). Three figures stand beneath a political slogan calling for educational reform(Fig.6.5). A middle-aged man gestures into the distance, embodying ideological guidance. A young man holds a book to his left, signaling theoretical engagement. A female figure stands to the right, slightly ahead in spatial terms. She wears a Red Guard armband and gazes forward, but her posture is still, her gesture restrained, and her expression subdued. She is present, but narratively silent. The scene depends on her to achieve ideological harmony, yet it grants her little interpretive agency. She fills the visual space, but not the discursive one.

Across such compositions, women are rendered visible but not volitional. Their appearance affirms state ideals of discipline, loyalty, and collectivity, without allowing space for contradiction or agency. Judith Butler's theory of subject formation offers a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon. In *Gender Trouble* (2006), she writes: "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject" (p. 2). Representation is never a neutral gesture; it is a regulatory act that permits legibility only on the condition of conformity.

In the visual culture of Maoist China, the female figure became visible only by passing through the gates of ideological discipline. She appeared to carry collective values such as cropped hair, bare face, and square shoulders. The visual system equated gender equality with sameness, redrawing femininity through a masculine-coded utility aesthetic. Emotional expression shifted to stoic composure; people absorbed individuality into symbolic function. These visual and ideological shifts carried hidden burdens. Yang (2017), in her interviews with women who joined the Down to the Countryside Movement, reveals the cost of these new ideals. Many young women volunteered for physically demanding labor, even when such work exceeded their bodily limits. They did so not from coercion, but because they sincerely believed in the revolution's values. They wanted to prove their political commitment by meeting standards traditionally set for men (Yang, 2017, p. 7). This desire often resulted in physical exhaustion and long-term injury. The revolutionary ideal did not accommodate physiological differences between men and women. Instead, it imposed a uniform model of achievement, privileging strength and endurance without considering gendered implications.

To be seen was not to speak. This system's visibility did not grant voice, but marked speech limits. Central placement within an image did not equate to narrative agency. Instead, it ensured that the female body remained stable within the ideological order. Patriarchal codes were not eliminated but aestheticized. Domestic subservience gave way to political subordination. The female figure, so often present, carried the visual weight of revolution, but was denied its authorship. She signaled strength, resolve, and virtue, but her silence confirmed the narrow terms of her inclusion.

6.2 Naked Women and Freedom of Expression (1978–2000)

In traditional Chinese society, public displays of nudity have long represented a grave moral transgression. Nudity remained confined to the margins of visibility, rarely seen and rarely discussed in public forums. During the Cultural Revolution, these taboos became even more politicized. Any expression of nudity was framed not only as immoral but also as evidence of "bourgeois decadence." However, as discourses of humanism gained ground and China entered the era of Reform and Opening-Up in the 1980s, social attitudes toward the body began to shift. Artists began to look at the body in fresh ways, treating it as a sign of personal freedom and a doorway to new cultural possibilities. For women, nudity stepped out of prohibition and slowly found its place in contemporary art studios and galleries. These bold

images did more than challenge old taboos, they sparked new questions and debates in the art world and across society. As Cultural Politics scholar Richard Curt Kraus (2010) observes that, "Sex became a part of a bread and circus public culture in which nudity was allowed to compensate for a still-limited political speech. Hedonism had priority over political rights." （p. 99）For Kraus, the emergence of nude art in late socialist China was not merely a matter of visual stimulation, but also an example of symbolic tolerance, a strategy used by the state to transition from overt political propaganda to a more semi-open system of cultural governance. In this process, the legitimacy and public display of nudity were subject to the dual constraints of moral ethics and political ideology.

During this period of transformation, Yuan Yunsheng completed his monumental mural, *Water-Splashing Festival—Ode to Life* (1979). Installed in the newly constructed Terminal 1 of Beijing Capital Airport, the work became one of the early Reform era's most symbolically charged artistic projects (Fig.6.6). The mural, part of China's first large-scale public art initiative after 1949, depicts the Dai ethnic minority's water festival, a scene brimming with vitality and the harmony of human beings with nature. The painting combines the bold color of Chinese folk art with the narrative scale of Western oil painting, celebrating freedom, happiness, and the beauty of life while also implying the ideal of national unity in post-revolutionary China. On the left, Dai youths frolic by a spring, their bodies moving as water droplets fly through the air, conveying an exuberant, joyful energy. At the very center of the composition, however, three nude women, bathing openly and rendered with soft, natural lines, capture the viewer's attention. Unlike the gender-blurred and functionally coded women in socialist propaganda, these figures appear neither shy nor provocative but seamlessly integrated with the festive atmosphere and natural environment. As Yuan Yunsheng reflected, "The side wall depicts bathing and love; appreciation for the beauty of the human body, in my view, is precisely a hymn to freedom" (Yuan, cited in Lu, 2021).

Figure 6.6 The Water Splashing Festival — Song of Life (Poshuijie — Shengming de zange), 1980, mural painting. Yuan Yunsheng. Collection of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

Figure 6.7 In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve, 1985, oil on canvas, 196 × 164 cm. Zhang Qun and Meng Luding. © The artists. Collection of Taikang Insurance Group.

Despite the mural's celebration of freedom, the depiction of three nude women in such a prominent public space provoked national controversy. As Kraus (2010) notes, nudity in Chinese visual culture had long been pushed to "the margins of the visible," associated with pornography for the wealthy and described as a "furtive tradition that underscored the scandal with which most people regarded representations of the uncovered body" (p. 74). The sudden appearance of nude figures at the "gateway of the nation", the highly politicized space of the airport, triggered not just anxieties over morality but also intense debates about national image, social ethos, and ideological boundaries.

These anxieties peaked during the "Campaign to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution" in 1983. The intellectual and artistic climate had shifted in 1978 with the slogan "Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth," which encouraged new artistic experiments and personal expression. By late 1983, however, official media launched attacks on "seductive content," "improper art," and "bodily display," naming them as threats to socialist public morals (M. Wang, 2009, p. 113). The campaign targeted not only images of nudity but also urban trends such as revealing clothing, permed hair, and heavy makeup, forms of female self-presentation seen as threats to the state's visual order. Censorship extended beyond the fine arts, reaching literature, mass media, and everyday behavior. "Sensual images, fashionable dress, romantic narratives, and even bodily performance in art exhibitions" were labeled as "corrosive to socialist spiritual civilization" (W. Ruoshui, 1999). This campaign profoundly shaped China's cultural landscape, suppressing avant-garde literature and experimental art, and making the depiction of the body and sexuality highly charged political metaphors. Although the campaign faded by early 1984, its legacy persisted, establishing invisible boundaries for artistic expression, and creating a lasting visual regime throughout the late 1980s.

Within this climate, the position of Yuan Yunsheng's mural at the nation's gateway took on heightened significance. The work was not simply an artistic choice; it became a key site for negotiating "national image," "public morality," and "ideological standards." The presence of nudity in such a politicized space signaled more than aesthetic innovation; it tested the limits of state modernity. Yuan Yunsheng later recalled adding skirt-like lines to his sketches to pass official review, erasing them after installation. When officials asked him to paint shorts on the figures, Yuan refused, and by then, the mural was already mounted and difficult to alter (Lu, 2021). The incident sparked broad debate and exposed sharp divisions over nudity in public art. For years, the mural's partial concealment behind a wooden board turned it into

a barometer for cultural policy, permitting mild controversy but stopping short of challenging the ideological core. The female nude thus became a site of contradiction, poised between the display of state modernity and the maintenance of ideological control.

One exception to the earlier invisibility of the nude in Chinese art came with the publication of *On Nude Art* (1987) by art theorist Chen Zui, who systematically mapped the evolution of nude art across cultures and epochs from prehistory to the present. Artists no longer spoke about the nude only as a technical challenge or a moral risk. For the first time, artists and critics began to see the nude as belonging to a worldwide tradition of art and beauty. This book laid important groundwork, giving Chinese nude art a sense of legitimacy and opening lively debates on the body, aesthetics, gender, and visual culture. Reflecting on his work years later, Chen explained his interest came from genuine academic curiosity. He did not act out of political calculation but out of a passion for research and discovery (Chen, 2012). However, its impact quickly became visible in a changing society.

This growing exposure, however, did not mean that Chinese conceptions of the nude assimilated Western models. To clarify these differences, French sinologist François Jullien, a leading figure in comparative aesthetics, explored the cultural foundations of the nude in his influential work, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics* (Jullien, 2007). Jullien points out that in the West, since antiquity, the nude has served as both a visual form and a philosophical ideal. He writes, "Nude is abstract in both senses of the word: of being abstracted from the posing model, and of being abstract as an essence; the one supports the other, and the two are united in the archetype" (Jullien, 2004, p. 111). In this tradition, the nude body does not simply represent sensuality but becomes a vehicle for accessing the "ideal essence" of beauty and spirit.

According to Jullien, the Western approach depends on "purification and absolutization" (p. 121): the nude is abstracted from ordinary materiality, becoming the "only possible ideal of beauty" precisely because it unites reason and imagination in pursuit of the Ideal (p. 122). It is not a passive invitation to contemplation. "The Nude does not simply offer—the word is too timid—but imposes, stuns us with... the 'everything is here' of its presence" (p. 124). Through this act of abstraction, the nude becomes a philosophical, almost metaphysical, presence.

In contrast, Jullien demonstrates that Chinese painting never relied on this logic of idealized, essential form. Instead, as he shows by drawing on classic manuals like the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, Chinese artists prioritized "indexical signs" to capture movement and inner energy. True resonance emerges "indirectly, in one or two strokes," evoking a sense of "tension and transformation" through the fluid, dynamic lines that reveal life force (Jullien, 2004, pp. 102, 115). What matters is not anatomical accuracy but a living spirit in motion. This immanent approach stands in sharp opposition to the Western abstraction and rationalization of the nude (p. 120).

It was within this context that the nude entered Chinese visual culture under the banners of "science," "modernity," and "basic teaching" in the late 1980s. As art historian Gao Minglu notes, the "autonomy" of Western art has deep social roots; it results from the split among science, morality, and art at the onset of Western modernity (Gao, 2007, p. 45). In China, legitimizing the nude was not only about mastering a new technique but also about adopting a new regime of seeing and knowing. Organizers of early nude exhibitions in China frequently stressed the scientific and educational value of the works, distancing themselves from associations with pornography. As the Vice Minister of Culture Ying Ruocheng stated at the opening of the 1988 exhibition, "Nude paintings may shock those who still harbor feudal thinking, but from the perspectives of art, science, and education, this is a very positive exhibition" (as cited in Kraus, 2010, p. 82). By the late 1980s, China's cultural policy climate grew relatively permissive. In December 1988, something shifted in the world of Chinese art.

The National Art Museum of China unveiled its ambitious “National Oil Painting Nude Exhibition,” pulling together 136 works from top art schools nationwide. The response was immediate and electric, and thousands queued up daily. By the end, more than 200,000 people had come to see for themselves. The show felt less like a routine exhibition and more like a public event, indicating that attitudes were changing. For many, walking among those canvases meant stepping into a new chapter of cultural life. Once considered untouchable, the nude stepped confidently into public view, symbolizing the reform era's intellectual awakening (Chen,2011). Other cities soon followed with similar exhibitions, and the image of the nude became increasingly visible within contemporary Chinese art. Even so, for many viewers, curiosity rather than pure aesthetic appreciation drove their fascination, revealing both a hunger for novelty and a persistent unease.

Meng Luding and Zhang Qun's collaborative oil painting *In the New Era – Revelation of Eve* (1985) offers a meticulously constructed surreal tableau, blending religious allegory with contemporary ideological resonance. The entire scene unfolds against a flat, otherworldly blue background. At the visual center, a young woman dressed in white strides forward, crossing a series of golden geometric frames while carrying a red platter heaped with fruit. Her frontal, composed, and deliberate posture makes her body the structural axis of the composition and the focal point of meaning production.

Below her, a man sits at a yellow table, his face tilted upward. How he looks, half in awe, half in quiet expectation, fills the scene with a sense of ritual. The artist sets up a dramatic tension between the figures. The woman stands in a position of vision and apparent authority, yet the composition weaves her body into layers of spectacle and symbolism. Her presence commands attention, but simultaneously, the scene gently shapes how she can move, act, and be seen. Flanking on either side, two nude statues, one male and one female, stand atop jagged rocks, each raising an apple aloft. This dual reference to "original sin" and "wisdom" re-encodes the image in a cross-cultural vocabulary: on the one hand, it borrows from the Western biblical framework; on the other, it allegorizes China's post-reform reinterpretation of "bodily freedom" and "moral order."

What draws particular attention is the position of the nude female statue, whose direct gaze and open bodily posture establish a focal point of viewing. She looks outward, confronting the viewer, her body fully revealed. At the same time, her male counterpart turns away in classic *contrapposto*, his facial features blurred, and his presence articulated only through musculature and form. Historian Leon Antonio Rocha (2010) observes that since the May Fourth Movement, "sex" (*xing*) has been recorded as an essential part of human nature, serving as a tool for resisting Confucian and feudal repression and as a core language for constructing national modernity. He writes: "Sex became a panacea for China's weakness and degeneracy, and a revolution of the relationships between men and women, the reformulation of love and desire, and the adoption of eugenics and birth control practices were perceived as ways to enable the Chinese nation to 'catch up' with the West and to become ready to participate in a global modernity" (Rocha, 2010, p. 603). Within contemporary Chinese art, the proliferation of the female nude thus represents external expressions of creative freedom and symbols of bodily liberation and the transcendence of authoritarian histories. In contrast to the tightly censored environments of earlier eras, such as the late Qing or the Cultural

Revolution, these images carry a redemptive modernist promise, they both satisfy repressed desires and symbolically "cleanse" past irrationalities from cultural memory.

However, the logic of display remains complex. As visual culture moved toward a post-Mao openness, the depiction of the body, and especially of female nudity, became a site of negotiation between modernizing ambitions and persistent anxieties. The narrative space here is never purely naturalistic but deeply symbolic. The balanced symmetry of the composition—man and woman, East and West, past and future, suggests the influence of Cold War binaries and the ongoing tension between different value systems.

The distribution of these nude bodies in *the Revelation of Eve* also reproduces longstanding gendered codes in the history of Western art. In *Seeing Differently*(2012), Art historian Amelia Jones argues that the Western tradition has often rendered the white female nude "seamless," idealized, and docile—tamed as a beautiful object for male exchange and consumption: "As safely contained within the rhetoric of representation, the erotic content or theme of the commodified painterly or sculpted object, the female nude is presumably made docile, an object of exchange between men (artist and patron or viewer)" (p. 65). In this light, the female figure in *the Revelation of Eve* carries symbolic meaning and a deeply embedded role within the gendered mechanisms of visuality.

Through this lens, *in the New Era – Revelation of Eve*, does more than position the female as "body" and "allegory." It exemplifies how early reform-era Chinese art used Western visual traditions to "learn to look" and reorganize modernity. The female nude stands at a crossroads where enlightenment, transformation, and hope unite. The artist positions her there as a conscious visual choice. At the same time, this visual device carries the legacy of gendered ways of looking. Even when the body seems free, the composition keeps it firmly within the boundaries of the gaze. The "freedom" exists only within visual boundaries.

This dynamic compels us to ask: In reintroducing the female nude after the 1980s, did Chinese art unconsciously borrow from pre-existing Western modes of visuality? Should we understand these compositional strategies as a form of "visual learning"—a process in which, in seeking to rupture the norms of socialist realism, artists inevitably relied on the established nude formulas of classical and modern Western art, thereby inserting a new but equally powerful visual regime? The painting's structure suggests that in breaking from one tradition,

the Chinese art of this period often reinscribes another: the female nude emerges as both a symbol of change and a sign of the enduring complexity of visual power.

6.3 Artificial Landscapes and Female Imagery in Consumer Culture (1990s–2000s)

In the decades after China's opening, the image of the female nude continued to reflect the hopes and contradictions of national modernization. As economic reforms deepened and urban landscapes changed, visual conventions surrounding the female body also shifted. By the turn of the millennium, a new feminine paradigm emerged—the so-called "material girl." This figure departed from the collective ideals of previous decades. She no longer stood for the nation's aspirations. Instead, she became the embodiment of consumption, surface beauty, and personal desire. In this new regime of images, the female body changed in meaning. It no longer represented only national virtue or collective destiny. It became a visual resource that was something to display, manage, and exchange within the circuits of consumer culture.

Wang Qingsong stands out for his large-scale photographic works, which borrow the compositional strategies of traditional Chinese painting while sharply satirizing and dissecting their content. In his 2000 work *New Women (Fig.6.8)*, Wang directly references the "Ladies of the Tang Dynasty" motif. This visual archetype once symbolized the aesthetic and moral ideals of the Confucian elite through images of elegantly dressed, composed noblewomen. Wang's reimagining subverts these codes. He positions six women in nearly transparent veils, their faces expressionless and vacant, their hands grasping cheap stage props. The scene evokes artificiality and displacement, as if the women are caught in an awkward, anachronistic performance. They appear suspended in a state of decorative nudity, recalling the costuming of sex workers. Through deliberate kitsch, excessive femininity, and stage-like repetition, Wang exposes how, in a new consumer context, images of women are produced, displayed, and circulated as commodities.

Figure 6.8 New Women, 2000, photograph, 120 × 220 cm. Wang Qingsong. © Wang Qingsong.

Since the 1990s, the expansion of urban entertainment venues and increased population mobility have further accelerated the commodification and sexualization of women's bodies. The rise of KTVs, nightclubs, and beauty salons created new sites where women, especially migrant women from rural areas, became visible as workers in the service and sex industries. Sexual politics scholar Elaine Jeffreys (2004) argues that the revival of the sex industry in China does not simply signal a moral crisis. Instead, it reflects new forms of structural inequality from modernization (p. 15). Women, particularly migrants with limited access to education, employment, and social protection, often rely on sexual capital as a form of passive social adaptation. Sociologist Xin Ren (1999) substantiates this point through empirical research, noting that with the collapse of welfare structures and increasing scarcity of resources, "women's bodies became their main, sometimes only, means of economic survival" (p. 1426). This situation reveals a fundamental paradox: while the market promises liberation and choice, it often reproduces new forms of gendered vulnerability and dependency.

Against this background, Wang Qingsong's choice of the politically and culturally loaded term "New Women" becomes even more pointed. The term, once used to represent women's liberation and subjecthood, is transformed in Wang's work into an image of garishness, commodification, and performativity. The "new women" are figures shaped by discipline and

constant observation. Their sense of self appears through their roles in a visual economy shaped by desire and market preferences. Wang fills the scene with symbols of femininity, such as flowers, gauze, and carefully arranged poses. This approach draws attention to changing beauty ideals and highlights how images of women circulate and multiply in China's consumer culture. As a result, the display and consumption of the female body become central themes in his work.

Figure 6.9 Can I Cooperate with You?, 2000, photograph, 120.6 × 200.7 cm. Wang Qingsong. © Wang Qingsong.

Can I Cooperate with You? (2000), Wang Qingsong advances his critique of visual culture by constructing a tableau that condenses tensions around cultural power and national identity (Fig. 6.9). He places a white Western man at the center, sitting comfortably in a rickshaw. Surrounding him, heavily made-up women in revealing clothes hold props emblazoned with global brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola. Wang deliberately draws on both the language of Chinese imperial court painting and the imagery of global advertising. In doing so, he reveals how the female body, situated at the intersection of East and West, transforms into what he calls "visual capital." These women do not derive their value from tradition or morality. Instead, their worth comes from their display and exchangeability within the logic of global consumerism.

This spectacle dynamic deepens as we turn to the Chinese men depicted in the same image. They do not occupy positions of agency or power. Some kneel or bow before the rickshaw, while a solitary, middle-aged man holds a national flag at the margin. Despite his presence,

he cannot halt the spectacle at the center. The national flag, once a marker of collective pride, recedes into visual irrelevance. Wang arranges his composition so that Western masculinity dominates while local men are pushed to the periphery both literally and symbolically. This displacement exposes a crisis of agency, not only for individual men but also for national identity. Geng Song and Derek Hird's book *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* examines how Chinese public discourse increasingly frames Chinese men as "emasculated" and inferior to their Western counterparts. They argue that "as China's opening-up continued in the mid and late 1980s, the discourse of yinsheng yangshuai soon focused on disappointment with Chinese men as compared with Western and Japanese men, and anxiety over the virility of China as a nation in the globalizing world" (Song & Hird, 2014, p. 9). As global consumer culture transforms daily life, new patterns of gender emerge. Women fill advertisements and art with striking visibility, their images designed to attract attention and spark desire. Their presence symbolizes what can be sold. However, men carry much less visual influence in this environment. Wang's visual construction precisely captures this anxiety: the weakened male presence mirrors the country's deeper insecurities about its place in the global order. Thus, the painting not only dramatizes gender role shifts but also visualizes how global flows reshape local power structures.

Wang Qingsong places the female body at the center of his compositions, using vivid color and striking placement to capture the viewer's attention. The women in his images occupy the central space, while local men stand at the periphery. This artistic choice highlights the women and foregrounds their role within the visual narrative. As viewers engage with these scenes, the female figure acquires qualities of novelty. The image of the woman becomes tightly linked to ideas of function and value within the artwork. Wang uses this central focus to create a vivid intersection where gender, power, and modernity converge, infusing the scene with tension and energy. The women take on the codes of "novelty," "exoticism," and "sexiness." Their images cater to a global desire for an alluring and accessible modern China. They become what cultural critics have termed the "consumable Other," repeatedly summoned to satisfy the demands of the international art market and media spectacle.

Figure 6.10 Photography Festival, 2005, photograph. Wang Qingsong. © Wang Qingsong.

This visual logic becomes especially clear in Wang's photograph *Fotofest* (2000). In this image(Fig 6.10), five topless women dance in a circle atop a bright red carpet. The arrangement places their bodies at the literal and symbolic center of the scene. However, the viewer's attention soon shifts to the surrounding cameras and audience members, who watch and record the performance. The women's collective dance, which might have suggested ritual or celebration, transforms into a public display, a spectacle staged for consumption. Their bodies acquire value only through the act of being watched. This mechanism echoes the tradition of Western nude art, most famously embodied in Henri Matisse's *Dance* (1910). Matisse turned to the nude to express his beauty and pursuit of creative energy. He used the human form to capture ideals that inspired both the artist and the viewer. Wang, however, upends this legacy. He inserts the female nude into a highly artificial, media-saturated context, stripping away its former purity and transforming it into a spectacle for mass enjoyment. The body no longer generates inspiration or authenticity. Instead, it becomes the output of a visual system shaped by the artist, media, audience, and commercial pressure. Wang does not simply depict the body; he reveals how it is manufactured, managed, and disciplined.

What is at stake here is not only sensory pleasure. Rather, Wang's visual regime embeds the female body within deep-seated systems of gender discipline and cultural control. To understand this logic, it is instructive to turn to French philosopher Georges Bataille, a key

figure in twentieth-century thought on eroticism and taboo. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), Bataille presents prostitution as a clear example of symbolic consecration. He explains, "Prostitution is simply a consecration in the first place. [...] The prostitute was dedicated to a life of transgression. The sacred or forbidden aspect of sexual activity remained apparent in her, for her whole life was dedicated to violating the taboo" (Bataille, 1986, p. 133). For Bataille, this way of life brings the sacred and the forbidden into focus, making transgression central to the prostitute's existence. For Bataille, this status is not about agency or emancipation; it is about endless exposure, about existing as the object of ritualized, collective desire. He further notes that the female body becomes the core of the economy of desire precisely because it both "tempts" and "is watched," acting simultaneously as the catalyst for the male gaze and the visual object that sustains it. "By the concern she has for her beauty set off by her adornment, a woman regards herself as an object always trying to attract men's attention. Similarly if she strips naked she reveals the object of a man's desire." (Bataille, 1986, p. 132). This paradoxical position defines women in visual culture: both makers of beauty and objects of self-objectification, instigators of desire and tools of its fulfillment.

In Wang Qingsong's photography, the adorned body is stabilized within the image and repeatedly offered up for scrutiny. Every detail, such as posture, costume, setting, and gesture, has become meticulously controlled to maximize the pleasure of looking. The female body becomes the mediator of visual reproduction in the contemporary economy. Nevertheless, it remains absent from any assertion of selfhood or autonomy. Wang's compositions draw attention to the intense artificiality of this spectacle. The space is highly theatrical and dense with symbols. Its purpose is not to present real individuals but to generate exchangeable images within a culture of fetishism. In such a structure, shame no longer defines the limits of bodily display. It becomes an element of visual pleasure. Passivity ceases to require resistance. It becomes the default setting of the spectacle. In Wang's world, female existence does not mark a shifting social identity but an arranged, encoded, and consumable role.

This predicament echoes the challenge raised by the Guerrilla Girls in their 1989 parody of Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*. By masking the nude figure with a gorilla's face and asking, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" the collective exposed how institutions marginalize women as artists while celebrating their bodies as subjects. A similar

pattern persists in China. Although some women create art, the majority of nudes depict female bodies, reinforcing male-dominated curatorial frameworks. Experimental exhibitions in Beijing have revealed the scarcity of female artists. While women's bodies receive symbolic attention, their voices and interests remain marginalized.

Wang Qingsong's images reveal that the mechanism of the gaze goes beyond gender discipline. It becomes a primary route through which Chinese society constructs its visual modernity. In Wang's visual language, the female body stands as "symbolic evidence" that China has entered an era of openness, pluralism, and global visibility. In other words, only when the display of the female body becomes possible does "a visible modern China" come into being for the world. This modernity does not emerge from profound structural change but rather from a "gendered renewal" in the visual field. In this system, the female body is over-coded as "sexy, obedient, exchangeable" and pushed to the center of the gaze. She becomes a "fetishized signifier" in global visual culture, compressed into a meeting point of power and desire.

Through this extreme visual collage, Wang exposes how contemporary image culture situates the female body at the boundary between the sacred and the profane. The body becomes both the object of desire and the instrument of sacrifice. Here, to be "seen" is no longer to be "heard." Instead, it is a new, more insidious mode of regulation. Wang's work offers a sharp critique of the "visibility" of women's bodies as evidence of progress. He asks us to consider whether the visual celebration of the female body ever truly respects women's experience. Or does this celebration become a new form of visual power, hiding the mechanisms of discipline beneath the surface of pleasure?

6.4 Contesting the Gaze: Women's Artistic Interventions

The female body is subject to multiple forms of utilization and discipline in modern society. In response, many female artists in China have begun to use their bodies as sites of experience and affect, transforming physicality and action into tools of empowerment and resistance. This shift signals a new negotiation of individual identity and the reconstruction of collective female subjectivity. Since the late twentieth century, Chinese women artists have increasingly engaged in direct bodily performance and behavioral intervention. Through these practices, they challenge the objectification of the female body by art history and the regulatory gaze embedded in visual culture.

Born in 1988, Cao Yu matured during a period of heightened gender consciousness in China. Her work draws upon the physical materials and actions of the body, using them with urgency and clarity to articulate a radical response to the problem of female subjectivity. In her single-channel video *Fountain* (2015), Cao Yu turns her postpartum lactational experience into a visual event within the public sphere. For 11 minutes and 10 seconds, the artist lies on her back against a black background, forcefully squeezing her breasts until milk erupts from her nipples in powerful arcs. As the milk spurts and then dwindles, her breasts move from fullness to emptiness, from swelling to depletion, until finally exhausted. The piece features no music, no speech, and no external narration. The camera's gaze remains fixed on the body, compelling viewers to witness an ordeal that is both a physiological limit and visual fatigue.

Art historian Lynda Nead observes that artistic traditions often reduce the breast to a stylized motif, a mere line within the harmonious contours of the nude. She notes, "The female body has been regarded as unformed, undifferentiated matter, then the procedures and conventions of high art are one way of controlling this unruly body and placing it within the securing boundaries of aesthetic discourse" (Nead, 1992, p. 2). In anatomical illustration, breasts are frequently abstracted, minimized, or even erased, denying their material specificity and potential agency. Instructional art manuals have long cautioned artists against rendering the nipple in detail, warning that it "attracts attention, suggesting the kind of cheap erotic quality that is least desirable" (Nead, 1992, p. 54).

Cao Yu's *Fountain* inverts established conventions. She centers the drying, painful breast, rejecting both erasure and eroticization. The work confronts the raw experience of postpartum breast engorgement, where milk production becomes relentless, and unreleased milk leads to swelling, pain, and sometimes fever or hardened tissue. Cao Yu stages this physiological reality with uncompromising clarity. She neither romanticizes nor conceals the ordeal, instead channeling its discomfort and exhaustion directly into the work's visual form. The arc from fullness to depletion, from physical pain to emotional exhaustion, unfolds before the viewer in real time.

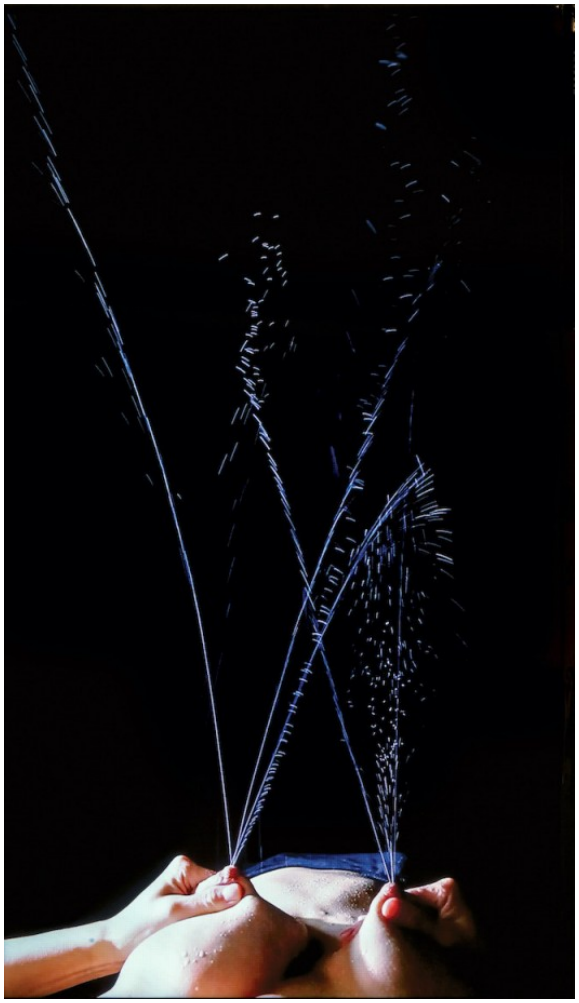

Figure 6.11 Fountain, 2015, single-channel HD video (color, silent), 11′10″, edition of 10 + 2 AP. Cao Yu. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Urs Meile.

Cao Yu transforms physiological pain into an eruption of action, rewriting the female body's power dynamics within her images. The forceful spray of milk she produces is not a simple "maternal tableau." Instead, she harnesses pain, pressure, flow, and exhaustion, the bodily instincts that become the engine of self-sovereignty. Her act is more than a declaration; it opens to public view an experience that has long remained silent in art and society. Through the visual drama of her lactation, Cao Yu does not merely invoke the artistic "fountain" tradition; she displaces the power of object, sculpture, or metaphor and establishes herself as the maker, the sculptor, and the orchestrator of the viewing structure.

This negotiation of agency shifts from physiology to language in *I Have* (2017). In this video, Cao Yu faces the camera directly, her expression and voice commanding the viewer's attention. She recites a list of possessions and attributes—her enviable figure, a devoted

husband, a ten-carat diamond ring, a Beijing license plate. The inventory accumulates beauty, wealth, family, social status, and artistic identity. Her speech echoes advertising and social media discourse and functions as a sly linguistic game. By stretching the ideal of the "perfect woman" to absurdity, Cao Yu exposes the relentless repetition that contemporary culture demands of women.

This enumeration is not self-congratulation but calculated parody. Cao Yu borrows the confessional style of celebrity interviews and influencer videos, immersing herself in an exaggerated persona of feminine achievement. Each claim reveals individual success and exposes the pervasive pressures from society, media, and capital for women to perform "perfection." The discomfort viewers experience as a woman speaks so boldly about her accomplishments serves as a mirror, reflecting the disciplinary mechanisms embedded in gendered language.

At the core of *I Have* lies a reversal: "having" becomes less a statement of will than a revelation of the social metrics by which female value is measured. Art historian Amelia Jones (2012) extends this critique, noting that Western modernism frequently reduces women to aesthetic objects. She writes, "Performative self-image works to disrupt the codes of to-be-looked-at-ness; it refuses passive femininity by becoming both subject and object of vision" (p. 112). In *I Have*, visual pleasure does not arise from spectacle or eroticization. Instead, it emerges from tension and irony, as the woman who is usually objectified as the "looked-at" repositions herself as the orchestrator of the gaze. The viewer encounters a subject brimming with agency and critique rather than a compliant, decorative body.

By repeating these "admired" traits, Cao Yu compels viewers to confront the ideological scaffolding that shapes feminine identity. Film theorist Laura Mulvey (1991) famously contends that mainstream visual culture exists "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance," where "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female," granting men the right to look and women the duty to appear (p. 11). Cao Yu's performance disrupts this hierarchy. She confronts the camera and asserts narrative authority, controlling tempo and content. She no longer waits to be gazed upon; instead, she directs the act of seeing and telling. The viewer cannot simply consume her as an object of desire but must confront the gendered structures that shape the act of looking.

This critical engagement with power and vision finds one of its most concrete expressions in Cao Yu's installation *Piss—Take a Look at Yourself* (2023). Cao Yu maintains her signature approach in this work: she employs direct, unapologetic bodily language. She transforms an act often linked to shame and invisibility, female urination, into the centerpiece of her visual inquiry. She processes her urine and fixes it onto a series of upright, wall-mounted acrylic "urine mirrors." These mirrors emit a soft golden sheen, their edges forming irregular contours that evoke both a splash and a shifting territory. The dynamic shape and high reflectivity invite viewers to engage with their moving images. Everyone standing before the work becomes part of its visual field. When people stand before these mirrors, they see their reflections and recognize that the shining surface comes directly from the artist's most private bodily substance. This experience changes how looking works. Instead of observing from a comfortable distance, viewers find themselves drawn into an exchange, becoming both the ones who look and those who are seen.

This transformation carries special meaning in the Chinese context. In daily urban life, scenes of men urinating against public walls often pass unnoticed, woven into the rhythm of the city as ordinary and unremarkable moments. Against this backdrop, Cao Yu's "urine mirrors", upright, wall-mounted, and glowing with a subtle golden sheen, invite viewers to confront their reflections within a surface composed of a woman's most private bodily material. The work literalizes the colloquial Chinese insult "take a piss and look at yourself," transforming a gesture of humiliation into a complex act of self-encounter. Cao reframes the boundaries of shame by aestheticizing and materializing abjection, inviting viewers to engage with their vulnerability and complicity in looking.

This radical approach builds on Cao Yu's earlier series, *Femme Fatale* (2015), in which she documents men urinating in public spaces in Beijing (see Fig. 6.12). Each photograph is framed in ornate Rococo gold, turning what is usually hidden and shameful into a monument. By capturing men in the act of public urination, a privilege rarely questioned in Chinese society, Cao reverses the gaze, placing the male body under scrutiny and within the frame. Particularly striking is a central figure, a man in red, who meets the camera's gaze with anger and resistance, briefly seizing control and challenging the legitimacy of being watched. In these moments, passive exposure shifts into active confrontation; the "master of the gaze" emerges from entitlement and willingness to challenge the observer.

The series title, *Femme Fatale*, adds an extra layer of irony and critique. The phrase traditionally describes women, often invoking seduction or objectification. Cao flips the script by applying it to men, exposing the arbitrariness and bias of gendered labels. This twist in language, paired with a clever visual setup, unsettles viewers' expectations. The result is witty and disruptive, as boundaries between watcher and watched, shamer and shamed, become blurred and unstable. Through humor and subversion, Cao Yu's work persistently pushes the boundaries between passivity and agency, shame and power. Her art dismantles the long-standing monopoly of male visual authority and challenges the notion that women alone bear the burden of public bodily shame. In doing so, she opens a new space for feminist intervention in Chinese contemporary art.

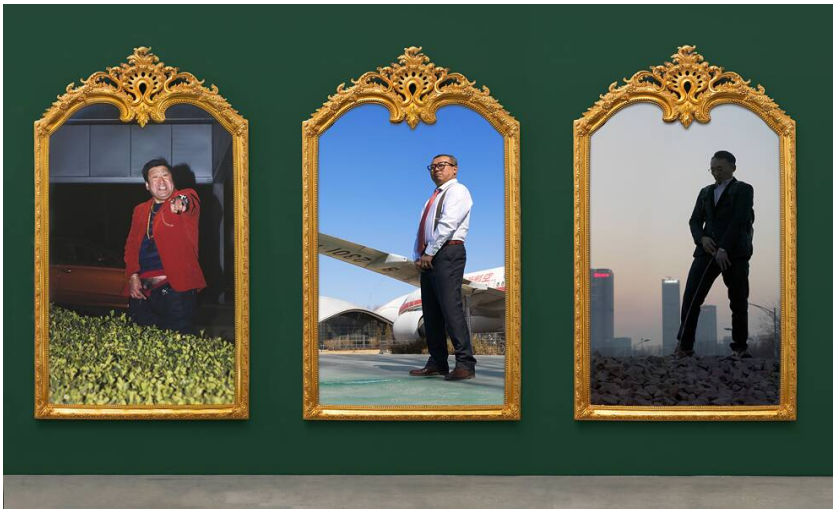

Figure 6.12 Cao Yu, *Femme Fatale* series, 2019, c-print, frame, 250 × 140 cm, edition of 2 + 1 AP. Image courtesy of Galerie Urs Meile.

By visually documenting acts of male urination, Cao Yu places men in the position of being watched and framed, thereby disrupting the implicit social order in China that grants men natural bodily sovereignty in public space. Focusing on the dynamics of the gaze, Cao Yu systematically presents three archetypal "masculine attitudes" through her choices of framing and composition. The most striking example is the central figure in red, who stares directly at the camera and points in anger, producing a reversal between observer and observed. He refuses to be photographed and counters the gaze aggressively, seizing control over the viewing structure. In this instant, he shifts from passivity to agency, becoming the "master of the gaze" and challenging the authority of both artist and audience. This reversal is highly revealing even during an act such as public urination, ostensibly a moment of vulnerability,

men can “look back” and assert control. By contrast, women have historically been positioned as passive, compliant objects within visual culture, seldom afforded the right to resist or return the gaze.

This reversal of power and visibility stands at the core of Cao Yu’s artistic intervention. Mirrors have long served as central symbols in art history, closely linked to femininity, self-reflection, and the ambiguous boundaries between reality and illusion. Art theorist Soko Phay-Vakalis (2001) argues that the twentieth-century mirror functions as “a passage towards other worlds,” acting as a medium that both unites and fractures identity (p. 31). Traditionally, classical imagery depicts women encountering their images in water or glass, experiences marked by flux and self-questioning. At the same time, the masculine gaze typically focuses on and objectifies the female body, presenting it as an object for contemplation. Philosopher Sabine Melchior-Bonnet (2001) deepens this point, suggesting that “to see oneself in the mirror, to identify oneself, requires a mental operation by which the subject is capable of objectifying himself” (pp. 169–170). Thus, every act of recognition in the mirror marks a crossing between self and other, interior and exterior.

By constructing her mirrors from urine, a substance commonly coded as abject and culturally devalued, Cao Yu reclaims both her bodily authorship and the mechanisms of seeing. Her mirrors resist classical art's stable, idealized reflections; instead, they create a charged space in which looking is imbued with intimacy and discomfort. The authority of the mirror arises not from ideals of purity or beauty but from its power to unsettle, disrupt, and confront the viewer’s expectations. In this way, the mirror in Cao Yu’s work does not guarantee mastery or rational self-knowledge but instead opens a threshold where identity is continuously questioned and reconstructed.

By bringing private bodily experience into public view, Cao Yu’s practice exemplifies how contemporary Chinese women artists negotiate, reclaim, and ultimately transform the gendered structures of vision and power. Through actions that shift from physiological extremity to linguistic and material subversion, Cao Yu transforms the female body from a site of passivity into a subject and engine of artistic agency. Rather than yielding to the logic of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” her art orchestrates an ongoing reversal: the body creates meaning, the mirror returns the gaze, and confrontation replaces shame.

Amid the evolving landscape of Chinese visual culture, these works signal a decisive intervention in the politics of the body. They raise pressing questions: Whose vision matters? Who is permitted to be seen, and on what terms? What new forms of subjectivity and agency arise when women reclaim the means of looking, naming, and representing themselves? In addressing these questions, Cao Yu opens up new aesthetic possibilities and points toward new imaginings of gendered selfhood. Her practice demonstrates that the body, in all its vulnerability and power, remains a vital site for challenging cultural regimes and continuously reinventing the possibilities of female subjectivity.

Conclusion

Over the past seventy years, artists, writers, and the media have repeatedly invested the Chinese female body with new meanings, treating it as a space for expressing modernity, shaping national narratives, and projecting images for the world to see. This chapter traced the transformation of the female body across several historical phases, beginning with the Maoist period. Rather than simply bringing women into visibility, Maoist visual culture conscripted their bodies as vehicles for state ideology. Judith Stacey (1983) describes this era as one that fostered a "reformed patriarchy," framing equality as sameness while gender hierarchies continued to structure daily life (p. 249). This approach laid the groundwork for later shifts, influencing how artists and society engage with female subjectivity in visual culture.

With the onset of Reform and Opening, a new paradox emerged. Female nudity entered public art as an index of liberation and modernity, but also became a lightning rod for social and political anxiety. Works like Yuan Yunsheng's *The Water Splashing Festival—Song of Life* signaled new freedoms in visual culture. However, the controversies and censorship that followed revealed how both the state and society continued to regulate the limits of visibility. Even today, as in the near censorship of Cao Yu's *Fountain* (2015), the display of women's bodies remains subject to negotiation, exposing the enduring power of state and institutional gatekeeping. Women still face uncertainty when they attempt self-representation, even as art opens new possibilities and expands its borders.

With the rapid growth of the market economy, the environment grew even more complex. The female body began to signal much more than national progress. It entered the worlds of

commerce and imagery, taking on new roles as a product to display and exchange. The emergence of the "material girl" reflected a new set of values in which women's images circulated between desire, capital, and modern identity. In the works of Wang Qingsong and others, women occupy the visual center, but their presence represents a focus on exchange and consumption. These representations reflect the rapid pace of modernization and reinforce ongoing gender hierarchies. As Bray (1998) points out, the process of commodification causes women to "internalize an objectified representation of the female body," with the development of selfhood becoming dependent on acts of consumption (pp. 52–53). Under these conditions, the body separates from lived experience and becomes a symbol within broader power structures. The subject retreats and the female body becomes reduced to flesh, rarely expressing genuine desire or authentic presence.

At the same time, the structure of visual power in contemporary China is no longer a simple binary of male gaze and female object. Instead, the spectacle of the female body now emerges from a complex network of gazes shaped by Western and Chinese men, local institutions, and global curators. The international art market has added new layers of complexity. Western collectors and curators, such as Uli Sigg and institutions like the Venice Biennale, decide which representations of Chinese women enter the international scene. Their choices influence what global audiences see and set the terms for how Chinese female identity is staged worldwide. However, opportunities for these exhibitions within China remain limited, and female artists continue to face censorship and marginalization (see personal conversations with Monica Merlin). Visual power is never static in this shifting landscape: Western men may wield greater influence than Chinese men. Chinese women may briefly occupy the center, but all operate within global capital and transnational consumption frameworks.

For Chinese female artists, the struggle is especially acute. On one hand, they must resist the pressure to become symbols of "Asian femininity" or cultural curiosities for foreign audiences. This export-oriented gaze shapes art production and how artists present themselves and their bodies. On the other hand, they confront state censorship, exclusion from a male-dominated art world, and constant pressures toward exoticization and eroticization on the global stage. The depiction of the female body often serves as a site of moral or sexual "crisis," which exposes female artists to significant risk when they assert their bodily autonomy. Women in the Chinese art world encounter barriers rooted in

longstanding biases and the dominance of male curators. Some build strong reputations abroad and receive international acclaim, only to face closed doors upon returning to China. These experiences reveal how gender, nationalism, and global recognition are entangled, shaping the journeys of Chinese women artists.

Nevertheless, these obstacles have sparked new creative strategies. Women artists turn their attention to their bodies, pain, and daily realities, making art that rejects the old script of passive femininity. Their work unsettles entrenched power structures, delivering pointed critiques of patriarchy and capitalism. These practices move beyond spectacle to ask who can be seen and who can speak. Over time, the meaning and presence of the Chinese female body have changed. No longer a silent backdrop, it now stands at the intersection of national pride, commercial forces, historical memory, and personal narrative. The search for a true sense of self continues, shaped by every twist in gender roles, changing ideas of nationhood, and the churn of globalization. This journey remains unfinished, carried forward by each new generation.

The persistent interplay of multiple gazes, whether from the state, the market, or global audiences, means that the questions of who is seen, who is heard, and who controls the narrative remain open and unstable. Only through sustained critical examination of these visual and institutional mechanisms can the promise of women's emancipation in art shift from symbolic representation to genuine autonomy and presence. Throughout this period of change, the Chinese female body stands at the heart of modern life's contradictions. It bears layers of historical memory, social expectations, and aspirations for transformation. Each generation takes on these tensions, shaping the future and reflecting the legacy of the past.

Conclusion

As this project is about to be completed, I should return to the question that first guided my inquiry: What do these bodies signify within contemporary Chinese art? My research shows that this question resists any easy answer. The visibility of the body does not result solely from the artist's intention or the viewer's interpretation. Instead, it emerges through networks where power, institutional logic, and cultural codes intersect and continually shift with changing historical circumstances. These networks reach far beyond the familiar narratives of censorship or curatorial choice. Various factors influence cultural identity formation and the visibility of personal or collective experiences.

The 2000 Shanghai Biennale marked a pivotal moment when Chinese contemporary art transitioned from an underground status to an official public exhibition. As artworks travel internationally, they must navigate multiple filters: curators make selections, institutions document them, and perhaps most critically, artists engage in self-censorship. Specific topics, such as the Cultural Revolution, the events of June Fourth, and gender politics, continue to be particularly sensitive. The absence of these discussions extends beyond mere oversight or censorship. I view these omissions not solely as a result of explicit state regulation but as the product of an ongoing negotiation between ideologies. Seemingly opposing or divergent perspectives often pursue the dominant forms of meaning rather than resisting them. Rather than operating outside the system, these oppositions and differences are frequently reabsorbed and utilized, functioning within a framework of implicit collusion. Individuals continuously redefine the boundaries between resistance and complicity through the dynamic interplay between institutional power and the spaces for independent expression.

However, facing state and market expectations, artists practice subtle self-restraint, fully aware that their work represents "Chineseness." The profound changes and divisions within Chinese society make any simple generalization about "what China is" impossible. Today, China consists of many "multiple Chinas" that differ significantly from each other. Wu observed, "While the museum interpreted the biennale as representing a new stage in an officially sponsored evolution from the local to the global, independent curators and critics linked the biennale to previous unofficial exhibitions. From their point of view, the reforms in this biennale are the result, to a large extent, of their persistent efforts in challenging and reinventing the old exhibition system in China" (Wu, 2001, p. 47, cited in Yung-Wen, 2017,

p. 12). Including experimental and overseas Chinese artists and international curators produced both a sense of victory and ambivalence, exposing the persistent tension between global recognition and local legitimacy, between the Party's agenda and artists' negotiations with power.

This constant absence of specific subjects illuminates a far more profound and, one might also say, complex machinery of social and epistemological control. This silence signals external pressures and exposes the internalized self-discipline and risk calculation habits that shape the field. Each time I reflect on these silences, unresolved questions inevitably return. Does this silence merely reflect a regulatory dilemma and the risks inherent to public discourse, or does it point to a more profound, collective uncertainty about confronting the still-raw wounds of the recent past? I sometimes wonder whether these omissions represent conscious choices, with researchers and practitioners prioritizing issues they see as more urgent for society or the nation. Alternatively, these omissions may signal a kind of collective exhaustion, a widespread feeling that some debates will always remain irresolvable or even dangerous.

In academic discussions outside China, the discourses of contemporary Chinese art tend to be different. For example, Chinese art is frequently politicized in the West to fit familiar interpretive frameworks. Sometimes it is read as a lingering echo of the Cultural Revolution, or as a convenient symbol of dissent. Such interpretations remind us how much political stake is at stake in art. Nevertheless, they often elide the complexity of artists' emotional worlds. With its focus on repression and resistance, Western scholarship often reduces the rich media textures of artistic practice to simplistic stories about messages and meanings. This reduction makes it difficult to see how artists generate complex meanings through visual images within particular social and perceptual contexts.

This tendency carries a legacy of Orientalism within cross-cultural research. Danielle Shang has argued that curatorial practices in Western institutions often gravitate toward the exotic and the political."The selection of contemporary Chinese artists and works for exhibitions in the West has long been guided by the curatorial principle of amplifying the exotic and the political" (Shang, 2009, p. 43). Such practices construct a narrow aesthetic of "legible difference," consistently favoring works that fit pre-existing tropes such as Maoist symbols, bodily pain, or eroticized trauma. Meanwhile, artists who pursue more personal or subtle

themes often find their work sidelined. This logic of difference continues to shape how "the East" is positioned as an object of theoretical and political imagination within academic writing.

I work to reveal the forms of knowledge embedded in Chinese experience, from Confucian ethics and socialist conceptions of the body to today's digital visual practices. In doing so, I hope that "the body" becomes an object of interpretation and a generative source of knowledge in its own right. As my research progressed, I realized that any understanding of invisibility remains inevitably partial and provisional. This realization comes not only from the theoretical boundaries of my project but also from my experience as a researcher moving through different cultures and institutions. Living between China and Germany shaped my awareness. I write and witness within complicated, sometimes contradictory landscapes. These ongoing transitions make me more sensitive to local knowledge and lived experience. Indigenous visual traditions often remain misunderstood or ignored within global academic discussions. Both visible and invisible social and historical forces shape the realities I study. Some forces lie far beyond what art or scholarship can reach. I wonder if research or artistic practice can ever heal the wounds and absences left by recent history. There is no specific answer, but this uncertainty motivates me. I stay committed to self-reflection and remain attentive to the politics of visibility. My work continues as I face the ethical demands of scholarship.

In response to these challenges, I continually reflect on my writing position. I ask myself how to maintain intellectual honesty and critical judgment without falling into the trap of defending any single view too easily. c Each choice becomes an intervention in the politics of knowledge. Through repeated cycles of writing and revision, I realize that my embodied presence as a researcher never disappears. I participated in every stage and was always present in the text.

I remain sharply aware of this research's limitations. The bodies I analyze are those already granted visibility. They appear in photographs, exhibition records, and art historical archives. These are "surviving bodies," whose presence depends on institutional filtering. So, I remain deeply grateful to those researchers and curators who collected and preserved artwork of marginal and unofficial artistic practices in earlier decades. Because of their efforts, many works that might have vanished now remain accessible. Fragmentary records remind me that

perceptibility is never neutral. It always comes from permission, struggle, and selective recognition. Seeing and being seen unfold in a contested space.

Within this context, I find particular resonance in the fragile networks of artistic collaboration from earlier periods. As discussed in Chapter Three, many of Yang Zhichao's early performances were created and documented within Ai Weiwei's studio. These were not official residencies or institutional projects, but relationships built on trust, mutual support, and a willingness to take risks. Such images move me most deeply. They survived because of this unique ethic. These moments of visibility resulted not from institutional approval, but from witnessing. Artists actively supported one another's visibility, making it a shared achievement.

I look forward to imagining the genealogical method of the body developed in this dissertation as a potential trajectory for future studies within Chinese art history. Whole regional terrains remain unsurveyed, particularly in the light of gender and queer theory. I suggest that the body serves as a site of representation and a medium that fosters connections and forms new communities.

I look forward to further developing my study of the representation of bodily diversity, fluidity, and emergent boundaries in contemporary Chinese art, but this time explicitly situated within #MeToo consciousness and the broader range of global feminism. How women, non-binary individuals, and LGBTQ+ communities use embodied artistic practices to contest dominant narratives and craft new forms of visibility is, in my view, among the most urgent and rewarding directions for further study.

At the same time, the international movement of Chinese contemporary art brings new theoretical challenges. Re-contextualization and re-politicization change how artists and works are received. As artists and artworks cross borders, they enter transnational exhibitions, international markets, and multiple cultural settings. Some forms of expression are suppressed in one place, and they find new life elsewhere. Visual strategies and political meanings attached to the body also shift. These meanings adapt and sometimes re-encode within new global systems of value and recognition. Such dynamics constantly reshape what is at stake for the body within global visual politics.

In conclusion, I believe this dissertation will pave some new theoretical ground for the politics of the body in Chinese contemporary art. I also hope it is a catalyst for more interdisciplinary and cross-cultural conversation. Only in so doing, through critical and collaborative inquiry, can we hope to begin to grasp the full complexity of how bodies remain acted upon by active actors within the histories and politics of art.

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