Constructing Fairytales: Transcultural Migrations and Chinese Identities

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A Note on the Text

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of this thesis and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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Abstract

Constructing Fairytales: Transcultural Migrations and Chinese Identities

By

Melissa Karmen Lee

This thesis investigates contemporary visual and literary Chinese narratives by focusing on the creative representations of migrants, immigrants, travellers, and their transcultural experiences. More specifically, I use my curatorial initiative *Fairytale Project* (2011), as an inspiration point to examine representations of diverse migrational axes in China. Given the hybridisation of arts and literary material in my own curatorial practice, this project is multi-disciplinary and encompasses visual, written, and transmedial forms.

My distinctive contribution to the aforementioned fields of study is the assemblage of minoritarian experiences, focusing on both the creative practitioner (artist and author) and their imagined subjects in the act of transgressive storytelling and performance. This thesis uniquely considers the minoritarian storytelling model in examining various media that frames imagined Chinese transnational subjects. It foregrounds the peripheral subject's ability to metaphorically subvert dominant structures, history, and space through storytelling. I examine the archetypes 'expatriate,' 'immigrant,' 'migrant,' and 'spy,' with each type compelled to perform assimilation in response to themes of hospitality and arrested belonging in literary and visual narratives. In my consideration of these archetypes, I explore different ways in which imagined Chinese subjects are represented as immigrants in North America (Chapter Two), and as rural migrants in metropolitan contexts (Chapters Three and

Four). These analyses are bookended by Chinese expatriate artist Ai Weiwei (Chapter One) and my curatorial initiative *Fairytale Project* (Chapter Five), informing my interpretations of transnational performativity in the thesis. Using minoritarian storytelling as an overarching paradigm, I consider the relationship between participants, artists, authors, archives, and fairytales, in combined acts of performance and protest, exploring contemporary Chinese cultural identities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Constructing Fairytales: Transcultural Migrations and Chinese Identities

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.

-Benedict Anderson[1]

In 2007, Ai Weiwei created *Fairytale*, an artwork that brought 1001 Chinese citizens from the People's Republic of China to Kassel, Germany, for *Documenta XII*, Europe's most significant quinquennial contemporary art exhibition. For nearly all *Fairytale* participants, it was their first time leaving China and flying on an airplane. Participants travelled to and stayed in Kassel for two weeks, invited by Ai to sightsee as tourists before returning to China. In 2011, I subsequently collaborated with Ai in revisiting this canonical artwork by co-founding *Fairytale Project* (2011), an archive that brought my methodological, artistic, and creative envisioning to the fore. *Fairytale Project* compiled the transnational Chinese–Kassel interludes of the participants, showcasing their visual and literary material with a focus on travel, transcultural storytelling, and lawful border crossings.

This thesis distinctively envisages Chinese cultural identities, derived from migrational subjects and their originative practices in minoritarian storytelling. Specific migrational axes are relevant to the frameworks of my analysis, focusing on im[migration] subjects, minoritarian narratives and the influence of transcultural text and image. More specifically, I examine late twentieth and early twenty-first century visual artists and authors who have migrated or travelled and, as such, formulated

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 145.

transnational communities, disturbing and expanding the limits of knowledge on the subject of evolving Chinese identities. I explore creative artwork and literature by Ai Weiwei (Xinjiang, Beijing, New York, Portugal), Cai Guo-Qiang (Quanzhou, Japan, New York), Ha Jin (Harbin, Boston), Yiyun Li (Beijing, Princeton), Ou Ning (Zhanjiang, New York, Bishan) and Geling Yan (Shanghai, California), amongst other artists and writers involved in transnational shifts in their own biographies yet define themselves as Chinese. These creative practitioners and their transcultural Chinese experiences are represented in a selection of visual and written transmedia published in the English language. I examine how these Chinese artists and writers destabilize dominant social and representational discourses, their own creative practices becoming sites of cultural resistance to imposing national identities.

The relationship between text and image is explored in this thesis by analyzing cross-currents of 'interartistic' comparison, demonstrating the importance of extended formal analogies across the arts and fostering a re-evaluation of Chinese cultural experiences in multiple genres.[2] This direct comparison of text and image in my thesis centres on creative practitioners, and is stimulated through what Homi Bhabha refers to as an interactive 'third space,' or what I recognize as 'in between genres.'[3] Both text and image are examined in [im]migration stories through transcultural moments, ruminating on how visual imagination is sutured to language.[4] Artists and

[2] For a more comprehensive analysis of 'interartistic' analogies, please refer to W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 84.

[3] For more on how Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories of 'third space' relate to Chinese cultural identity, please refer to Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu's conversation 'Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s- Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu,' *On the Mid-Ground*, (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002), 64. For more on 'interartistic comparisons,' please see W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 84.

[4] For more on the concept of suture in relation to image/text in self-representation and the spectatorial subject which Mitchell finds critical to late twentieth century languages of representation, please see W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 92.

writers involve us in concurrent journeys, advancing horizontally from China across to North America and Europe and returning home again.

W.J.T. Mitchell ponders the relationship between text and image and finds, 'the answer cannot be thought without extended reflection on texts, on the ways in which texts act like pictures or "incorporate" pictorial practices and vice versa.'[5] I consider art and literature in parallel through alternate chapters in this thesis, examining creative practitioners who explore deterritorialized subjects in their artistic practices. My own research background as a literature scholar and a visual arts curator, consciously focuses attention on text and image as a multi-disciplinary exchange of composition and influence. I underline this proliferation of meaning by focusing on Ai, an artist who capitalizes on working in multiple artistic mediums and counters state-sanctioned narratives in his art practices through the engagement of minoritarian narratives.

Within the context of pivotal late twentieth-century Chinese events such as Deng Xiao Ping's economic Open Door Policy (1979) and the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), this thesis demonstrates that the aftermath of such occurrences marked a geopolitical change for Chinese cultural identities. These wide spreading changes in policy and protests affected not only those who resided in the metropolitan areas of Mainland China, but also in the countryside and diasporic migrations abroad, fostering a transnational turn in the reconceptualization of home and citizenship in Chinese text and image.

In considering these contemporary Chinese subjects, minoritarian narratives are featured that articulate themes of hospitality, illegitimacy, and cultural adaptation,

[5] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 4.

thereby shifting preconceived notions of Chinese visual and literary art practices.[6] My argument is driven by my co-founded initiative, *Fairytale Project* (2011), which generates excerpted interviews, performative photography and transmedial storytelling (across multiple platforms), serving as the inspiration and engine for this thesis. It does so by imaginatively performing as an archival project that proliferates minoritarian experiences, constructing new methodologies of evolving identities and investigating the portrayal of diverse Chinese migrational axes.

In his seminal 1983 text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson envisages a speculative political group, dependent upon the imagination of a community of people drawn together through a projection of national belonging.[7] As Anderson elaborates, collective imagination has the opportunity to transform the colonial into the national state, made possible by the 'established skein of journeys' through which each place, city, village is experienced by its residents.[8] I take inspiration from Anderson in the framing of this thesis, envisaging a narrative in which China's historical self-obliteration leads to artists and their imagined subjects proactively embarking on an imaginative journey. This exploration is begun by a shared Chinese community in search of new transformative expressions of identity, articulating China's historical self-obliteration before transnational narratives can singularly emerge.

Louisa Lim asserts that Chinese people are forbidden from dwelling on the past, giving pertinent examples of twentieth century historical events such as the Chinese Famine (1959-1962), Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and Tiananmen

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[6] For more on minoritarian narratives, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (University of Minnesota Press, 1975) as well as page 18 of this thesis.
[7] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
[8] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 114-115.

Square protests (1989) buried in the nation's history.[9] This thesis takes the position that the Chinese government's official policy of historical event erasure spurred creative practitioners to flexibly center their own and their imagined subjects' transnational experiences through travel, migration, and immigration. I critically examine how migrating subjects and their transmedial works enable a re-evaluation of the relationship between past and present, China and abroad, focusing on experiences by creative practitioners.

While it is necessary to ground arguments about transnational identity-making in collective imagination, it is equally important to encompass the everyday processes in which citizens live with each other in present day interactions. Sara Ahmed reinvigorates this notion in a discussion on stranger proximity and building community identity, elaborating on nation-making as both 'simultaneously imaginary and real,' involving not only mythmaking's visual presentation, but everyday negotiations of what it means to be that nation(ality).[10] Ahmed examines both literal and metaphorical patterns of estrangement and exile in group communities, destabilizing psychological and geographical boundaries. She determines that migration patterns are formed from communities banding together through transnational movements of people in 'multiple acts of remembering in the absence of a shared knowledge or familiar terrain' rather than a singular migrant's perspective.[11] Building on Ahmed's research, I critically examine how imagined Chinese [im]migration narratives problematize not only discordant social relations and the displacement of people but the very nature of contemporary Chinese identity. I

[9] Please see Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2014) as well as Jonathan Mirky, 'An Inconvenient Past,' *New York Times*, May 23rd, 2014, https:/Jonathan /www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/books/review/the-peoples-republic-of-amnesia-and-age-of-ambition.html

[10] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 98.

[11] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters,* 79.

envisage the precedent of Chinese identities transforming communities, constructed from intra and international migrations and travel. These crosscurrents are mirrored in interviews and storytelling through my co-founded curatorial initiative *Fairytale Project*, discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis.

Historical Context: The Emergence of a Chinese Transnational Imaginary in Literature and the Visual Arts

In the 1980s, Chinese literature moved away from 1970s 'scar literature' or the 'Literature of the Wounded' genre (depicting the realistic sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution), and towards an imaginative historical mythologization, reflecting the turbulent events of China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[12] In particular, Chinese postmodern stories such as 'The Hut on the Mountain' (1985), Mo Yan's 'The Yellow-Haired Baby' (1989) and Yu Hua's '1986' (1996) demonstrated a burgeoning avant-garde movement, using magical realism as a mode of fictional representation to covertly criticize the Chinese Communist Party government.[13] Deriving from Wendy Faris' interpretation, magical realism encompasses 'antibureaucratic' texts, using the alibi of fiction as magic 'against an established social order' and 'combin[ing] realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed.'[14]

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[12] For further reading on the 'scar literature' movement, please see Lu Xinhua, *The Wounded: New Stories of the Cultural Revolution,* trans. Geremie Barmie and Bennett Lee (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1979). Lu Xinhua's 1978 story 'Scar' attacking official hypocrisy and corruption is of relevance.

[13] Can Xue, 'The Hut on the Mountain,' in *China's Avant-Garde Fiction*, ed. by Jing Wang (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), Mo Yan, 'The Yellow Haired Baby,' in *Explosions and Other Stories*, trans. Janice Wickeri (Hong Kong: Renditions Press, 1993) and Yu Hua's '1986' in *The Past and the Punishments*, trans. Andrew F. Jones (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1996). For more specific research on the Chinese avant-garde and Postmodernism era, please see Sara Rutkowski's 'Between Histories: Chinese Avant-Garde Writing of the Late 1980s and 1990s,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no 4. (Winter 2016): 610-626.

[14] Wendy Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,' in *Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995), 163.

Authors such as Yu Hua and Mo Yan wrote stories about rural villagers and the countryside, incorporating fantastical elements embedded into their reality. This absorption in magical realism correlated to a shift in Chinese translation publishing companies focusing on international fiction, including fantastic genre literary authors. I underline the significance that two major publishing companies, Shanghai Translation Publishing House (1978), and Lijiang Publishing House (1980), stimulated a plethora of Chinese translations of international literature in the Chinese market, influencing creative practitioners and spurring an avant-garde movement. Pivotal magical realist text translations include Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (trans.1980), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 years of Solitude* (trans. 1984) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (trans. 1987).[15]

In visual culture, similarly, modes of creative representation firstly experimented with imaginative versions of history encouraged by the ruling Chinese Communist Party government. Referred to as Socialist Realism, Cultural Revolution artists (1966-1976) were in fact commissioned by state-funded opportunities to aggrandize historical cultural myths in China, displaying a highly political fantasist art perspective that aligned with the same goals as the government ruling party.[16] In counter-distinction to the dissident creative's project of magical realism, in China,

[15] For a comprehensive history of the Shanghai Translation Publishing House, please see their website http://www.stph.com.cn/about. On the subtleties and transnational influence of translating Franz Kafka's literature in multiple languages, please see Patrick O Neil's *Transforming Kafka* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). For more on Chinese translations of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, please see Meng Ji, 'Exploring Chinese Experimental Literary Translation: Translation of Latin American Magic Realism into Modern Chinese,' *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 8, (2015): 355–363.

[16] According to Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding, Socialist Realism in China originated at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in May 1942, personally hosted by Chairman Mao ZeDong. More than a hundred writers and artists were invited to this conference, including Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei's father. The conference emphasized Mao's commitment and the importance that he attached to literature and art in serving the Communist party. For more on the theoretical implications of China's Socialist Realism, please see: Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding's 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part 1,' *E-flux Journal*, Issue 55 (May 2014), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/55/60315/from-the-issue-of-art-to-the-issue-of-position-the-echoes-of-socialist-realism-part-i/. For more of Ai Qing's involvement in the Yan'an conference on Literature and Art, see Ai Weiwei's *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2021), 286-288.

orthodox fantasy became actualized through hyperbolic mythmaking, substantiated also through creative processes and means.

During Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), artists were commissioned to paint propaganda landscapes depicting China as a wealthy and prosperous country under the Chinese Communist Party regime, with Mao Zedong as an iconic figure. The stylish propaganda posters represented idealised fantastic representations of China, depicting peasants as muscled giants against the sky, with happy labourers and youth admiring them from below. As Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding elaborate, although visual artists were commissioned in the service of Communist Party propaganda, it was a complex relationship in which artists hoped to serve the government, maintain financial stability, and synchronously engage in artistic experimentation.[17]

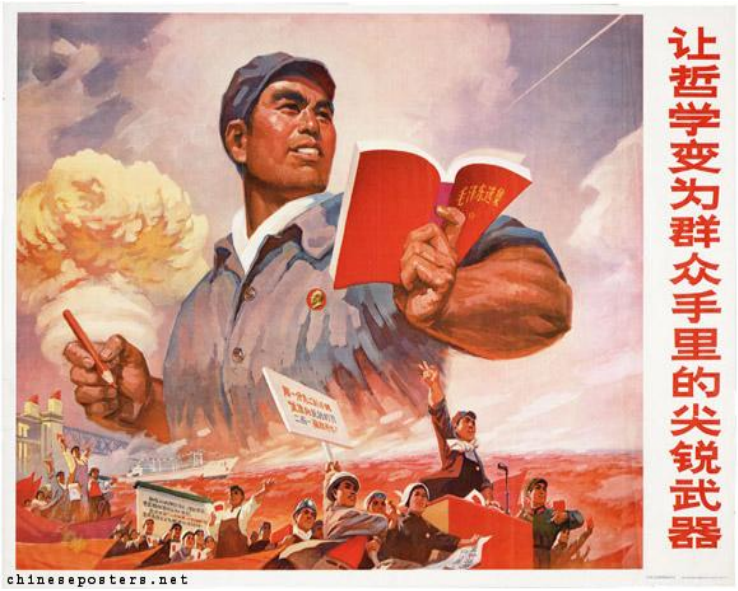

Figure i.i. *Turn Philosophy into a Sharp Weapon in the Hands of the Masses*, 1971. 76.5x105.5 cm, The Landsberger Collection. Courtesy of chineseposters.net.

[17] Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding's 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part 1,' *E-flux Journal*, Issue 55, May 2014, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/55/60315/from-the-issue-of-art-to-the-issue-of-position-the-echoes-of-socialist-realism-part-i/

Figure i.i exemplifies China's absorption in historical mythologization aligned with definitive 'revolutionary' or 'grand' narratives perpetuated during the Cultural Revolution. The image features a swarthy peasant holding Mao Zedong's *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* against the sky. The male peasant is portrayed as an iconic figure to the multitude of young Communist revolutionaries and labourers below. The mushroom cloud over his right shoulder, along with the famous Yangzi Bridge at Nanjing (1968), symbolize the sinister threat of technology's triumphal progress over a largely agrarian society, looming over pre-Cultural Revolution China. *Turn Philosophy into a Sharp Weapon in the Hands of the Masses* exemplifies what Gao Hua refers to as the state's aspiration for hyperbolic mythmaking by 'selectively cut[ing] and past[ing] historical material in order to affirm a certain authoritative description.'[18] The image articulates China's Cultural Revolution era aggrandized myths, laying the groundwork for a new generation of cultural practitioners emboldened, from dissident rather than orthodox positions, to destabilise historical 'facts' in favour of deterritorialized narratives. Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang and Ou Ning would deconstruct state myths that were, ironically, pivotal in reorienting Chinese cultural identity towards alternative transcultural narratives and mythologies.

The June 4th, 1989, Tiananmen Square protests led to immigration and exile for many Chinese artists and writers in the late twentieth century. Chinese citizens devised temporary crossings to North America and Europe and, through their artistic work and process, constructed transnational narratives. Pivotal overseas cultural hubs congregated in the New York Chinese artistic communities of the 1980s at the same

[18] Gao Hua, *Xushi Shijiao de Duoyangxing yu Dangdaishi Yanjiu: yi 50 Niandai Lishi Yanjiu Wei Lie (Diversity of Narrative Perspective and Contemporary Research: the Case of Historical Research on the 1950s*), Geming Niandai (*The Years of Revolution*), (Guangdong: People's Publishing House), 289, quoted in Lu and Liu, 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position,' *E-flux Journal*.

time as China's avant-garde literature movement. Immigrant artists and writers explored issues external to China, redefining the parameters of a national and conceptual envisioning of art from both inside and outside their ancestral homeland. Central figures included visual artist Xu Bing (immigrated to the United States in 1990), visual artist Xiao Lu (immigrated to Australia for nine years before returning to China), visual artist and author Ai Weiwei (living in New York and moved back to China in 1990), and visual artist Cai Guo-Qiang (lived in Japan and New York, represented China for the 2010 and 2022 Beijing Olympics). These deterritorialized artist subjects travelled internationally back and forth, producing cross currents and knowledge exchanges, which influenced artistic Chinese communities both locally and abroad. Chinese artists' practices transnationally evolved, questioning state-sanctioned narratives and reinvented Chinese histories from abroad and within China.

Similarly, in literature, post the Tiananmen Square protests, there was a mirroring of contemporary Chinese writers who left China and moved to the United States, absorbed in exploring evolving transcultural identities. American Chinese writer Ha Jin (immigrated to Massachusetts in 1985), Geling Yan (moved to the United States at the end of 1989) and Yiyun Li (moved to Iowa to study in 1996) are writers I examine who focus on transnational subjects in their fiction. Literary writers such as Geling Yan and Gish Jen would contribute to this debate, moving beyond Maxine Hong Kingston's high profile legacy of embedding Chinese ancient folktales in North American homelands. They transformed predominantly nationalist histories into hybridized multi-transcultural relationships, challenging the contours of Chinese American imagined identities.

A pertinent example of transcultural crosscurrent stories is Li's *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2006), featuring Chinese characters who travel back and forth

between China and the United States, in Chapter Three.[19] The short stories include a school teacher caught in an American immigration love triangle ('Love in the Marketplace'), a retired Beijing widower visiting his estranged daughter in the United States ('A Thousand Years of Good Prayers'), and a Mainland Chinese pregnant woman travelling to Nebraska to meet her baby father's queer lover ('The Princess of Nebraska').[20] Ha Jin's *A Good Fall* (2009) short story collection similarly centres around a transnational Chinese community living in the suburb of Queens, New York, with strong cultural and representative ties to China.[21] Represented by authors such as Jin and Li in their writing, the deterritorialized subjects indicate a contemporary Chinese diasporic literature movement away from a focus on cultural mystification, homesickness, national identities, and towards transnational performative identities that leave and return home, which I explore in detail in Chapters Two and Three. These writers have compelled critics to reconceptualise 1980s Western-centric literature as no longer teleologically positioned at the terminus of migration narratives, and instead, to expand the genre to include critical redefinitions of transnationalism and mobility in late twentieth and early twenty-first century conceptions of Chinese identity.

In New York, artists such as Ai Weiwei, Zhang Shongtu, Li Shuang and Xu Bing would become acquainted through tenuous connections of family or friends derived from the necessity of shared accommodation.[22] New York Chinese collectives

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[19] Yiyun Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 92-111.

[20] The term 'Mainland Chinese' is often used to denote the difference between Chinese people from China, and other Chinese people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and foreign born and living Chinese people.

[21] Ha Jin, *A Good Fall* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

[22] Ai gives the amusing anecdote about how his first landlord was coincidentally the landmark Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh. These coincidental meetings between pivotal Chinese artists in New York is another example of the integral machinations of Chinese expatriate artist

were founded by visual artists such as Hong Kong artist Bing Lee, constructing landmark Asian American collectives such as *Godzilla* and *Epoxy Art*. Chinese expatriates formed lasting friendships, influencing creative practices in both North America and Asia. These collaborations became the building blocks for cultural groups organising ground-breaking exhibitions in the 1990s, cultivating nascent Chinese artistic communities. Through these New York encounters, Ai and Xu would subsequently edit and publish *Black Cover Book* publication introducing domestic Chinese artists to continental conceptual art movements. The seminal exploratory art history book showed sketches and photographs of Marcel Duchamp's ground-breaking *Fountain* sculpture (1917) but with the captions and explanations written in Chinese and mediated by Ai.[23]

Hou Hanru contends that Chinese contemporary art has always been related to the history of migration, with artists studying or working abroad acting as a critical influence in Chinese art history. Artists would return to China after travelling internationally, subsequently bringing their experience of Western art to China, and would be 'the first source of Chinese modern experiences.'[24] The significance of domestic based conceptual artists in China inspired by transnational Chinese artists who interpreted European Continental art cannot be understated.[25] Without the specific transnational knowledge and experiences of overseas Chinese artists returning to China, the evolution of Chinese creative identity would have evolved differently in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Hou further elaborates

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communities abroad. Ai Weiwei, *One Thousand Years of Joys and Sorrows*, trans. Allan. H. Barr, New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2021.

[23] Ai Weiwei, *The Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing, 1994).

[24] Hou Hanru, 'From China to the International on the Mid-Ground,' in *Hou Hanru: On the Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong: Distributed Art Publishers, 2003), 82.

[25] Examples of such artists include Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing and other transnational artists that I referenced in my introduction. For more information, please see Gail Pellett, 'Is There Art after Liberation? Mao's Scorched Flowers Go West,' *The Village Voice,* 1986. http://gailpellettproductions.com/is-there-art-after-liberation-maos-scorched-flowers-go-west/.

that 'by inventing and creating the new space of contestation and new "ethnoscape" in the Western societies they [Chinese artists] give birth to a veritable global art.'[26] Continental-influenced conceptualism became critical in guiding the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art and its move towards Cynical Realism and the avant-garde movements of the early 1990s.

Figure i.ii: Zhou Long, Xiong Xiaage, Tan Dun and Yi Fugio. Black and White Photograph in *Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1989-1993*. Courtesy of Ai Weiwei.

Figure i.ii is a photograph, taken by Ai during his New York era, capturing expatriate Chinese artists from a variety of disciplines travelling together on the New York subway. The photograph shows composers Zhou Long and Tan Dun sitting with Yi Fugio, a visual artist demonstrating a mixing of different cultural practitioners meeting together in New York. Other artists, writers and musicians who spent time in New York during this time, often staying at Ai's apartment, included Chen Kaige, the filmmaker, Hu Yongyan, the conductor, and Wang Keping, the artist.[27] The crosscurrents of Chinese writers, artists, and composers meeting in New York

[26] Hou Hanru, 'From China to the International on the Mid-Ground,' 82.
[27] Gail Pellett, review of *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983 – 1993*, by Ai Weiwei, Asia Society, New York, *TransAsia Photography*, vol. 2, issue 1. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.111

produced transnational connections as they moved back and forth from China to the United States. They would return to China and publish English-to-Chinese translated publications that interpreted Western art forms, thereby influencing the trajectory of the local Chinese art scene in China.

Chinese visual artists post 1980s residing in China, such as Song Dong, Zhao Chuan, Xiong Wenyuan, and Xiao Lu, conceived of innovative, experimental art exemplified in the *Fuck Off* exhibition (2000). Curated by Feng Boyi and Ai, the exhibition challenged traditional representations of Chinese culture and artmaking, representing a contemporary turn in Chinese art, which the curators conceived as an 'othering' or alternative perspective to the state-sponsored Shanghai Biennale exhibition (2000). In a published statement, the curators explained that the *Fuck Off* exhibition 'challenged and criticized the power discourse and popular conventions. In an uncooperative and uncompromising way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation.'[28] Significantly, exhibiting artists in the *Fuck Off* exhibition were a mixture of contemporary Chinese artists who had travelled, lived abroad, and returned as well as those who remained in China.[29] This exhibition signified preeminent themes of new emerging transcultural communities that amalgamated a mixture of Chinese citizens with international as well as local knowledge and experience.

The curators' desire to explore an 'alternative identity' that represented a contemporary turn demonstrated how late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese artists and writers veered away from central artistic discourse and pivoted to minoritarian themes of transgressive storytelling and performance. Feng Boyi bluntly

[28] Wu Hung, 'Shanghai Biennale: The Making of a Historical Event,' *Art Asia Pacific,* Vol. 31 (2000): 44-49.

[29] Other artists in the show who spent time living internationally included Huang Yan who lived in Canada for an artist residency, Meng Huang who lived in Berlin, and Zhang Dali who lived in Italy from 1989-1993. All three artists returned to China in the mid-late 1990s.

elaborates that 'we wanted to show the "fuck off" style, not working for the government or in the style of Western countries, but a third way.'[30] This 'third way' demonstrates the proliferation of minoritarian narratives that mapped China's unofficial historiography, with artists and writers playing an integral part in a reimagination of histories.

Similarly, to Feng Boyi's 'third way,' Hou Hanru has discussed contemporary Chinese artists in the context of Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space,' transforming what Edward Said considered the opposition between the East and the West into a post-orientalism interactive 'in-betweenness.'[31] Image and text were instrumentalized to present alternative versions of history, revealing an instability in, or the cracks and fissures of, state-sanctioned narratives. Radically experimental art created a friction of historiographic alterity in Chinese culture and social histories for audiences and communities to reinterpret and explore beyond state-sanctioned narratives. Gao Minglu elaborates on the specificities of this in-between-ness, explaining that 'what is crucial for overseas Chinese artists is not the preservation of Chinese characteristics but rather to act effectively in the third space. This causes a kind of metamorphosis: a shift from dichotomous ideas about East and West to the practice of cultural strategies.' [32] Artists transform Chinese cultural experiences to intervene in the new social reality, instead of holding on to preconceived concepts of Chinese culture. Hou concludes in response to Gao's statement that 'the invention of the third space itself is a cultural strategy.' [33]

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[30] Barbara Pollack, *The Wild, Wild East: an American Art Critic's Adventures in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2010), loc. 747 of 2426, Kindle.

[31] Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, 'Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s- Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu,' in *On the Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002), 64.

[32] Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, 'Strategies of Survival,' 64.

[33] Hou Hanru, 'Strategies of Survival,' 65.

It is important to note that my explorations in this thesis are not exhaustive in covering all contemporary transnational Chinese identities. In text and image examples represented here, I return to my co-founded *Fairytale Project* (explored in depth in Chapter Five), inspiring my choices of their further examination in this thesis. *Fairytale Project* highlights particular tropes and representational tendencies, firstly by using the conceptual model of minoritarian narratives to determine migrant subject tropes as they appear in text and image form, and secondly, focusing on deterritorialized subjects that evolve towards transnational identities. *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* highlight particular representational tendencies of migration, demonstrating how decentering the origins of home, performing Chinese-ness and a transcultural globalized identity network allow us to rethink what makes one legitimately 'Chinese' in the first place.

Through a close study of Chinese transmedial works, I am particularly interested in how these artists, writers, and their imagined subjects are theorised as 'deterritorialized,' repurposing Deleuze and Guattari's term, defined as a weakening of ties between cultural subject and place of origin. Deterritorialized subjects actively decenter the original environment, raising complex negotiations of identity and translation unresolved within each individual migrant, immigrant, traveller.[34] In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there was a new-found interest in applying Deleuzian concepts to China, exemplified by the *Kaifeng International Deleuze Conference* (2012) held at Henan University in China. This conference brought together international and national scholars addressing Deleuzian political thought from a Chinese context. These figures combat established systems or

[34] For more on Deleuzian influence in China, please see Paul Patton and Craig A Lundy, 'Deleuze in China,' *Theory and Event*, 16:3, 301.

territories, often representing fluid counterflow movements told through alternative storytelling.[35]

Creative representations of [im]migration and travel bind together my chosen transmedial material, focusing on an unresolved tension between cultural adaptation and performing assimilation in my thesis. A [im]migrant who moves to a foreign environment is compelled to construct a new identity, which, through the process of becoming someone else, is inherently performative. Richard Schechner's definition of performance as 'restored behavior' or as Joseph Roach extrapolates, 'twice-behaved behavior' offers a useful analysis in referring to performance under colonialism. [36] Migrant performance offers a substitute for something that pre-exists it or 'stands in for something it is not but must embody and replace,' which I explore in detail in Chapter Two through Ha Jin's novels. Most prominently, Rey Chow specifies the context of performing immigrant identities as a capitalist fetishization towards work with Asians being North Americans' 'model minority,' or excellent assimilative subjects, acting as a method of normalizing social conflict and antagonism.[37] This exacerbates a situation where Chinese migrants meet expectations by performing legitimacy, exemplified in both Ha Jin novels *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*, discussed in Chapter Three. By foregrounding models of performative assimilation, I show how characters also demonstrate evidence of having a 'double consciousness,' simultaneously enacting a cultural memory of one's origins and the performative behavior of a new [im]migrant identity. A double consciousness places psychological

[35] For more on Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Deterritorialization related to minoritarian narratives, please see Paul Patton's 'Deleuze's Practical Philosophy,' in *Gilles Deleuze: The Intensive Reduction*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 292.

[36] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 34 and Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: CircumAtlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[37] For more on Chow's theoretical research on redefining the notion of ethnicity with the American Protestant work ethic and capitalism, please see Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

obligations on characters or participants in a literary text or performative artwork. In Chapters Two and Three, I focus on this doubling in literary texts in which protagonists perform assimilation to integrate into society, consequently resulting in uneasiness and complex bodily negotiations with the world around them. I build on this research of performance, body, and environment by examining the migrant archetype in Chapter Four, focusing on the collaborative visual art practices of rural Chinese citizens and artists, but considering the influence of the Chinese countryside rather than the ascendancy of the metropolis. As an overarching theme throughout the thesis, I explore the peripheral subject's ability to subvert dominant structures, history, and spaces through alternative storytelling, asserting transnational dimensions to evolving cultural identities, including subjects who migrate both domestically and internationally across China and beyond.

Although counter-narratives have a grounded and rich history of resisting dominant power structures, minoritarian narratives are a moderately recent field of inquiry in literary and visual art studies. Deleuze and Guattari's foundational essay offers a thorough analysis of the specificity of marginality not only in an author's creative practice but in their sociopolitical position. Introduced in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, the minor concept has flourished in representations of visual and textual language, inspiring ephemeral definitions of writing within and against dominant narratives.[38] In the minor concept, the practitioner writes within the confines of a dominant voice, constructing assemblages out of the reigning deployments of power, and politicizing the points of conflict within the major through a minor voice. These parameters are defined by that which a 'minority constructs

[38] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

within the context of a major language.'[39] The emergence of multiple subgenres has contributed to the genre and to the critical field's malleability. These minor narratives include themes of racial agency, politicized art, new transmedia, exiled Asian diaspora, and migrant literature.[40] Minoritarian narratives have proven central to theorizing the relationship between language and power, and the possibility of subversive forms of enunciation contesting dominion. The advancement of affect, decolonisation and late capitalism have problematised these influences making such narratives richer and more complex.

However, inaugural studies of this genre can be critically contested for a generic, all-encompassing characterization of literary and artistic form. Although Deleuze and Guattari's essay remains largely influential in contributing to the visibility of dispossessed narratives, critics have warned of an exoticism or a pluralism that neglects unacknowledged systemic discrimination or economic exploitation of vulnerable and marginalized classes.[41] Such views have been contested and expanded to include diverse criticism in many ways. In *Minor Transnationalisms*, Shu-Meh Shi and Francois Lionet bring together a collection of scholarly essays that researches the binary oppositions between majority cultures, minority subjects and the complexities of colonial power relations.[42] The 'minor' concept has also been innovatively used by Hentyle Yapp to problematize narratives at the intersection of Mainland China and Chinese diaspora studies referring to the

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[39] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 19.

[40] For more on minoritarian narratives in postcolonial and diaspora fiction, please see Christa Albrecht-Crane's 'Becoming Minoritarian: Post-Identity in Toni Morrison's "Jazz,"' *The Journal of the Mid-Western Modern Language Association*, vol 36, no 1 (Spring 2003): 56-73 and Christopher L. McGahan, *Racing Cyberculture: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet* (New York: Routledge Press, 2008).

[41] For more on the exoticism of dispossessed narratives not fully acknowledge systemic discrimination, please see Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, 'Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse,' *Cultural Critique*, no 6. (Spring 1987): 10.

[42] Shu-Meh Shi and Francois Lionet, *Minor Transnationalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

'motherland' as an 'open and unstable' sense of the country that informs both fields.[43] Yap's study of visual art practices in China and North America uses 'major' to refer to China as an authoritarian monolithic system and the relational 'minor' as dissonance to problematize and subvert the major system through forms of queerness.[44] I build on and diverge from Yap's study as his research focuses on queer theory and global art market limitations when privileging Western understandings of visual art and I focus on transmedial Chinese text and image that undermine dominant histories, evolving into new transnational cultural identities. Situating my own intellectual endeavor more specifically within the expanse of minoritarian narratives, the transmedial works that I have chosen gesture towards wider scholarly discussions involving mimicry, performing assimilation and hospitality, discussed at length in Chapters Two and Three.

Envisioning a rhizomatic approach derived from Deleuze and Guattari's branch-like multiplicities, I trace the minoritarian trajectories of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century Chinese artists and writers across locations that intersect with varied communities and geography. I demonstrate rural and urban mobilizations as art networks, positing evolving identities of Chineseness and attaining the potential to consider international worlding through other forms of visualization. I contend that contemporary Chinese art practices did not develop as a linear trajectory, but flourished as a series of concurrences, exchanges, and migrations. These journeys included migrants and immigrants circuitously returning home, adopting, and synthesizing international practices, and constructing their own

[43] Hentyle Yapp, *Minor China: Method, Materialisms and the New Aesthetic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
[44] Hentyle Yapp, 'Minor China: Affect, Performance, & Contemporary China in the Global,' (PhD. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2014), https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Yapp_berkeley_0028E_14288.pdf

contemporary Chinese identity and vernacular, which I explore particularly in Chapters One and Four. The transnational flow of goods, culture and people result in a transformation of local communities and reimagined neighborhoods, examined in this thesis in relation to themes of cultural adaptation and belonging in Chapter One between New York and Beijing, and Chapter Four in cross-migrations between the Chinese countryside and the metropolitan city. The experimental performances and installations of contemporary China and the literature by Chinese diasporic authors generated a multiplicity of networks that subtly critiqued and influenced economic acceleration, inciting new historical directions and cultural paths.[45]

I consider how all the textual and artistic intersections that I examine instigate friction, or what anthropologist Anna Tsing refers to as the 'collision' of disparate elements, which, because of such encounters, initiate historic currents and changes in flows of movement.[46] Friction abets conflicting forms of social interaction between expatriates, immigrants, migrants, intersecting and transforming Chinese identities. By focusing on contemporary Chinese transnational writers and artists, I bring together historically separated Chinese diaspora, cultural literature, and visual studies. I demonstrate that the blurring of genres represented in transmedial forms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is invaluable to understanding the evolving nature of transnational Chinese identities.

Across five chapters, this thesis focuses on transnational Chinese practitioners, with an emphasis on how these creative interventions, including my own curatorial art practice, comprise of transnational narratives. I use my curatorial initiative *Fairytale Project* as a generative creative framework that enables the critical examination of

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[45] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Robert Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
[46] Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 214.

cultural shifts in [im]migration narratives, concerning performing legitimacy and the politics of citizenship. I examine citizenship performativity as a thematic reoccurrence in contemporary Chinese cultural identity through different archetypes (expatriate, immigrant, migrant, traveller), explored by pursuing the following trajectory.

Chapter One lays the conceptual groundwork for minoritarian storytelling by focusing on the artist Ai Weiwei as an archetypal example of an *expatriate*. This chapter proposes that Ai's biography as a transcultural outsider is relevant to his practice of diverging from state-sanctioned histories, which I examine and use as a basis for further discussion of other artist practitioners in subsequent chapters. The chapter demonstrates that much of Ai's artwork aspires to subvert dominant forms of historical memory using minoritarian narratives, reframing a relationship between singular and collective storytelling. I explore Ai's early photography during his New York era leading to *June 1994* (1994), a pivotal artwork he created upon his return to Beijing after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, challenging and subverting state-sanctioned historical narratives. This chapter signals the ways the thesis moves from expatriate artist to immigrant, migrant to traveller identities, using minoritarian narratives to contest traditional modes of linear storytelling.

Chapter Two assesses how creative representations of Chinese immigrants perform assimilation, while negotiating the politics of belonging in foreign environments. I examine Ha Jin's representation of the *immigrant* in his two novels *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Map of Betrayal* (2014).[47] The protagonists in these texts expose the psychological disjuncture between performing assimilation and an emotional turmoil in non-belonging. Characters manifest this discomfort by identifying a physical uneasiness and demonstrating illogical affective behavior. I

[47] Ha Jin, *A Free Life* (London: Pantheon Books, 2007) and *A Map of Betrayal* (New York: Vintage Fiction, 2015).

argue that performative assimilation plays a crucial role in adapting an 'illegitimate' identity to conform with supposed norms of socio-migration practices. The cultural assimilation process is co-opted by the economic choices of the main characters as they immigrate to and reside in the United States due to remunerative decisions made on behalf of their families. Lauren Berlant's theoretical research on the cruel optimism of affect and disillusioned desire is pertinent in understanding the motivations of these protagonists, and how unachievable fantasy pervades and influences constructions of national identity.[48] New Chinese immigrants are caught in an impossible double bind, effecting tension in the struggle between assimilative and transcultural identities. Inherent in the questions of illegitimate and performative subjects is the conceptualization of citizenship rights, guest belonging, and behavior, all of which I carefully consider in this chapter.

Following from Chapter Two's exploration of immigrant texts involving assimilated performances, Chapter Three moves from immigration to migration, investigating the Chinese *migrant* trope, moving domestically from the countryside to the city. China's 1978 economic Open Door policy plays a pivotal role in migrant movement and the forms of evolving identity that are generated by these journeys. I closely examine how mass rural to urban movements transformed Chinese communities, creatively represented through the eyes of migrant outsider Dan Dong in *The Banquet Bug* and Sansan in 'Love in the Marketplace.' These migrant characters act as imagined subjects, negotiating a mix of performative assimilation and hospitality in hostile societal systems. Tensions between rural migrants moving to, and navigating metropolitan hierarchical structures are explored here, with entrenched government systems represented by *hukou* and *guanxi* playing an integral

[48] Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

part in the ecosystem of migration, movement and evolving contemporary Chinese identities.

After considering the [im]migrant archetype in the context of performing assimilation in Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Four investigates visual art performing identities that foreground the migration and ingenuity of the countryside, veering away from the capitalist labour flows of the city. It builds on Chapter Three's exploration of performing cultural assimilation by analysing creative art practices drawn from three artistic projects led by various metropolitan Chinese artists' collaborating with rural villagers in *Dancing with Mingong* (2001), *Bishan Commune* (2011), and *Peasant Da Vincis* (2010). Chapter Four focuses on rural utopias, demonstrated through migrational themes exemplified in experimental communes and frictional collisions between rural and urban citizens. It examines capitalization and labour flows of deterritorialization and metropolitan moves to the countryside, illuminating significant cross-cultural exchange in *Dancing with Mingong*, *Bishan Commune* and *Peasant Da Vincis* playing a pivotal role in transforming Chinese identities.

Finally, Chapter Five explores my curatorial initiative *Fairytale Project* as a return to and critical reassessment of *Fairytale*, considering the wider engagement in my thesis on performing cultural adaptation and redefining a contemporary Chinese conception of nationalism and home. It examines the *traveller*'s archetype in *Fairytale* and my subsequent co-founded *Fairytale Project*, using it as a punctuative ending point for a wider interdisciplinary discussion on transcultural discourses. I analyze the significance of both artwork and archive in affiliation to pertinent themes of migration, immigration, and transcultural crossings. *Fairytale Project* acts as an academic research and storytelling initiative, framing the thesis in its entirety, serving

as the strategic conclusion to the social and cultural context surrounding art and literary production.

Situated at multi-disciplinary intersections that include literature, visual art and cultural studies, my thesis examines the transnational storytelling that fosters performativity, friction, and interconnectedness of evolving Chinese identities that are no longer geographically limited. My distinctive contribution to the aforementioned fields of study is a new direction to the study of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese transmedial forms of text and image, providing a transnational focus on [im]migration narratives and exploring themes of assimilation, performativity, and citizenship.

Chapter One

The Expatriate: China as Readymade

> I take the constitution and the political situation in China as readymade. I transform it in my own way to show people the possibilities of this reality and a way to change. That, I think, is directly related to my art; it's the same thing for me.
>
> -Ai Weiwei[49]

So Sorry, the title of Ai's pivotal Haus der Kunst exhibition, alludes to the insincere apologies dispensed by government institutions for their wrongdoings towards citizens.[50] Ai's opening quotation for this chapter aligns his art with the conceptual 'readymade,' in which he repurposes cultural materiality and transforms monuments and antiques, including the government machinations of China itself, to influence the trajectory of contemporary Chinese discourses.[51] Through his art practice, he holds the government accountable and ensnares the state for unlawfully breaking the Chinese constitution and the rule of law of China. Ai's practices feature deterritorialized subjects (including himself) articulating through minoritarian storytelling, actively raising complex unresolved negotiations between individual and collective identities. Ai's minoritarian narratives counter dominant displays of state power, uprooting systemic hierarchies through a transformation of cultural materiality. These colloquial, informal stories become embedded in the larger

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[49] Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 27.

[50] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 951.

[51] 'Readymade,' a term first coined by French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp refers to art 'made' from already existing objects. According to Duchamp's avant-garde magazine *Blind Man* (May 1917), the main principles to the readymade include 1.) The creative act in choosing the object, 2.) cancelling the useful function of the object and as such concentrating on its aesthetic properties making it art, and 3.) the presentation of said object revising its original meaning. All three principles apply to Ai's readymades. Duchamp was an integral artistic influence on Ai, one of Ai's early works *Profile of Marcel Duchamp* (1995) is a key work. For more information, please see 'Readymade,' Tate Museum, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/readymade.

community fabric, veering away from traditional historical systems, and critiquing an individual's negotiation with the ramifications of state sanctioned power. Intervening in such wide ranging subjects as: Chinese migration, travel, architecture, historical narratives, and governing systems, Ai's art practices span widely in the public and political arena. In this chapter, I examine him seamlessly operating in genres of photography, sculpture, and social practice conducive to the reinvention of transnational Chinese identities. Through these artistic mediums, Chinese historical narratives are reframed into new migrational spheres of minoritarian storytelling.

In this chapter, I examine three different phases of Ai's artistic practice: photography, readymade sculpture, and social activism through the deciphering of an anti-monumentalist methodology. In the first section, I examine Ai's photography during his New York years, which led to a series of anti-monumentalist artworks in the *Study of Perspective* series (1995-2003), and *June 1994*, a photograph tableau staged upon his Beijing return. In the second section, I emphasize Ai's artistic readymades (1995-1999), in which he redefines cultural objects that diverge from state-sanctioned narratives and reformulates Chinese cultural histories. I surmise that culturally significant touchstones such as Qing dynasty chairs, Han dynasty vases, Flying Pigeon bicycles, and the bureaucratic systems of China itself are repurposed into transforming Chinese transcultural identity narratives. The third section focuses on Ai's political activism (2008-2011), defined by his unequivocal challenge to the Chinese Communist Party, which culminated in an eighty-one day detention in 2011. Extending extant analysis of Ai's work by referencing such important critical voices as Wu Hung, Uli Sigg, Carol Yinghua Lu and Lee Ambrozy, and drawing on Ai's 2021 memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, I contend that Ai's unique

transnational perspective contributes to his antipathy for the nationalistic use of cultural objects and monuments to perpetuate dominant narratives.

Chapter One focuses on Ai as a transnational artist as a precursor for Ha Jin's assimilative immigrant performances in Chapter Two. The two chapters explore the potential of minoritarian narratives through imagined subject tropes, across text and image, to contest traditional modes of parochialism and monolithic national identities. Both artist and author consider themes of cultural adaptation and the psychological disjunction between body and state representation in their creative practices, illuminated through image (Ai) and text (Ha Jin).

Chapter One contributes to my overall argument that Chinese contemporary cultural identity was not fostered exclusively within China; on the contrary, its wider resonance emerged primarily from the influence of cultural practitioners who travelled during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (of which Ai is a primary example), situating themselves as [im]migrants and transnational subjects via outside performative identities. In the last century of Chinese Modern art, Hou Hanru argues that contemporary art has always related to the history of Chinese migration, with the Diaspora as a 'major locomotive' in 'China's social revolution and modernisation period.[52] Hou elaborates that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Chinese artists had been studying or working abroad before 'bringing their experience of Western modernism back to China as the first source of Chinese modern experiences.'[53] He concludes that 'by inventing and creating the new space of contestation and new "ethnoscape" in the Western societies they give birth to a

[52] Hou Hanru, 'From China to the International on the Mid-Ground,' in *On the Mid-Ground*, (Hong Kong: Time Zone, 2002), 82.
[53] Hou Hanru, 'From China to the International on the Mid-Ground,'82.

veritable global art.'[54] Deriving from Ai's expatriate perspective, his international experience was an integral part of his artistic process in confronting notions of the nation state upon his return to Beijing, influencing the cultural art scene.

In the 1990s, Chinese art evolved from what curator and art historian Gao Ling has defined as 'attitudes' concerning social and cultural objects, and maturing to reflect on 'conditions of existence.'[55] Gao hypothesized that contemporary Chinese art has centered on the rapid environmental and socio economic effects of globalization from the agricultural to the metropolitan, with artists using their own bodies juxtaposed against the rapidly changing spatial environment as modes of resistance in constructing alternative narratives.[56] Wu Hung has written that the contemporary Chinese artist's rejection of grandiosity generated an 'anti monumentality,' the process towards entirely conceptual artworks with the traditional art form itself participating in a 'deconstructive exercise.'[57] Anti-monumentality was a theme that Chinese avant-garde artists often returned to, which Wu defined as 'principally overthrowing the authority and presence,' or the jurisdiction represented by 'the monumentality of traditional monuments.'[58]

No artist would embody anti-monumentality like Ai Weiwei. In this first section, I focus on how Ai's personal history of extradition, [im]migration, and return home gave him a unique expatriate perspective of China's cultural ideologies. The very nature of the outsider arriving in a country suggests an extrinsic critique of the

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[54] Hou Hanru, 'From China to the International on the Mid-Ground,' 82.
[55] Gao Ling, 'A Survey of Contemporary Chinese Performance Art,' in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: MOMA Primary Documents, 1999), 179.
[56] Gao Minglu, '"Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth:" Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art,' in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008), 150.
[57] Wu Hung, 'Monumentality and Anti-monumentality in Gu Wenda's *Forest of Stone Steles--A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry,*' trans. David Mao, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 4:4, (2005): 51-52.
[58] Wu, 'Monumentality,' 51-52.

cultural values and ideologies in that country. Ai's Xinjiang childhood, New York years, and subsequent China return was instrumental in forming that perspective. Ai's biography played an important role in his artistic process. Following his father's 1920s Parisian journey, he pursues a similar expatriate archetype in 1980s New York. He moved to New York during his formative art education years, before returning to China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Deterritorialized subjects such as Ai and his father observed with an alterity or 'third' perspective, focusing on minoritarian narratives that diverge from state-sanctioned histories. Both father and son's international living experiences influenced their extrinsic perspectives experiences and attitudes towards China, shaping the trajectory of China's social art scene. Ai's extrinsic views on China questioned predetermined forms of Chinese cultural identity, having spent a significant amount of time negotiating and adapting as an outsider. In the first section of this chapter, I examine *New York Photographs 1983-1993*, *Study of Perspective* series, and *June 1994*, featuring Ai's artistic practices that use documentation narratives as a form of emergent political action.

Born in 1957, Ai's perspective as an outsider began with his own family lineage and his father Ai Qing's misfortune. Originally from a prominent Beijing family, Ai was exiled to the outer province of Xinjiang when he was four years old. A preeminent pre-Communist Revolution poet, Ai Qing was banished to the Gobi desert in northwest Xinjiang Province during the Cultural Revolution. Xinjiang is a designated autonomous region near Central Asia and home to ethnic groups that were separate from the majority of Han Chinese living in China. Xinjiang is significant as an environment in which Ai, growing up, defined his status as an outsider. For sixteen years, Ai witnessed his father endure daily political humiliation as punishment for his

role as a public intellectual, becoming politically humiliated.[59] The Ai family experienced harsh living conditions in Xinjiang where formal education was non-existent, except for the study of self-criticism and political articles by Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, and Vladimir Lenin. Ai and his family were forced to live in a 'diwozi,' which he describes as a disused dugout consisting of 'a square hole dug into the ground, with a crude roof formed of tamarisk branches and rice stalks, sealed with several layers of grassy mud.'[60] Ai Qing was sentenced to over a decade of hard labour until he was officially rehabilitated by the Chinese Communist party in 1976.[61]

Ai Qing's only comfort during those harsh years of exile was recalling his 1920s Paris years, memories of which he relayed to his son Ai Weiwei. Those years as an expatriate, he told Ai, were among the best years of his life, when he painted as an artist in Montparnasse and eagerly explored the museums and galleries, entranced by the innovations of the Impressionist Painters.[62] Ai recalled that his father's Parisian life influenced his attitudes towards Chinese art and culture, elaborating that 'the intellectual nourishment and idealistic notions he [Ai Qing] acquired in France would help him chart a course through the tumultuous years ahead.'[63] Ai's early experience of exile with his family and the happy memories instilled in him of his father as a painter abroad shaped his rebellion to dominant social discourses and fueled his desire to contextualize his work and life transnationally. I assert that these childhood experiences instilled by his father's memories of being an outsider are pivotal in understanding the nascent creative direction of Ai's art.

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[59] Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, trans. Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), xviii.
[60] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 195.
[61] Chris Dercon and Julienne Lorz, 'Biography,' in *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry*, (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 112.
[62] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 109.
[63] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 144.

A second significant biographical experience was Ai's early participation in the Stars Art Group (Xing 星星画会) before leaving for New York. Co-founded by Chinese artists Ma de Sheng and Huang Rui, the Stars Art Group was an evolution of the contemporary Chinese avant-garde, active from 1979-1983. Mostly self-trained and removed from the traditional Chinese ink painting tradition, the Stars championed individualism and freedom of expression in their artwork, self-financing art exhibitions, and public programs. Ai has written on how the 1979 Stars exhibition was 'the first public attempt at emancipating individual artistic expression since 1949.'[64] Derived from pivotal major historical events in China and using pertinent social issues as their subject matter, the Stars pointedly diverged from state-sanctioned Socialist Realism art that was commissioned and disseminated during the Cultural Revolution as propaganda.[65] In 1979, a culminating moment in Chinese art history occurred when the group defied government regulations and mounted an unofficial exhibition in a park adjacent to the National Art Museum in Beijing. When officials closed the exhibition, a historic protest was staged that became a rallying point for cultural openness in the early years of China's post–Cultural Revolution political climate.[66] The Stars Art Group was an avant-garde symbol representing the tumultuous change affecting China's emerging youth action groups. During the 1980s, the Stars among other youth assembly groups thrived in China, in opposition

[64] Ai, *Ai Weiwei's Blog,*14.

[65] For more information on Socialist Realism art in the context of post 1989 contemporary art and artists, please refer to page 8 of my thesis.

[66] For more information on the Stars Art Group, this pivotal Chinese collective that was instrumental to the beginning of Chinese Contemporary Art, please read Wu Hung's *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 33-39 and Huang Rui, "Preface to the First Stars Art Exhibition, " in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents,* ed. Wu Hung (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6-13, and Li Xianting, 'Confessions of a China Avant-Garde Curator,' in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 116-120.

to state or major traditional conglomerations or institutions of power, ultimately leading to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

The Stars staged a final exhibition before disbanding in 1983 when integral members of the artist group immigrated: Huang Rui and Wang Keping to France; Ai to New York; Ma Desheng to Switzerland; Li Shuang to Paris; and Qu Leilei to London. Ai's involvement as one of the early Stars group members would seed a long-term collaboration with several expatriate Chinese artists, shaping the 1995-2010 Chinese contemporary art scene. Significantly, upon his return to China in 1995 from New York, Ai would include several members of this artist group in *Fuck Off* (2000), his first China based curated exhibition.[67] In collaboration with artist Xu Bing and edited by curator Feng Boyi, he would also create a seminal artist book entitled *The Black Cover Book* (1994), including further sequels such as *The White Cover Book* (1995), and *The Grey Cover Book* (1997). These Chinese translations of existing art-historical critical texts featured reproductions of iconic twentieth-century artworks by Marcel Duchamp, as well as Chinese art submissions, research, and art critical essays.[68] Similarly, much like Ai's own transnational experiences, these artists would culturally critique China from an extrinsic perspective after their own international living experiences and subsequent return to China, influencing the local art scene. These significant biographical experiences would situate Ai among several transnational artists reimaging China's history from within. Ai's experiences were integral to this perspective and paved the way for his art practices working as both a Chinese and transnational citizen.

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[67] Noted as an extension of *The Black Cover Book* concept, the Chinese title of *Fuck Off* translated as 'Uncooperative Attitude,' in Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 738.

[68] For more details on the origins of *The Black Cover Book*, please see Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 720. For images of *Black Cover Book*, please refer to 'MOMA/Print/Out/Ai Weiwei,' accessed November 7th, 2021, https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/printout/category_works/ai_weiwei/.

The Expatriate New York Period: 1983 to 1993

By 1983, Ai had moved to New York to enroll as an arts student at Parson's School of Design. His decision to leave China and relocate to the United States was integral to developing an artistic methodology of documenting activist practices and being introduced to the concept of the readymade. Language was a barrier for Ai, after a year at Parsons, he was unable to complete the art history exam conducted only in English.[69] This was a pivotal career turning point for him as he proceeded in an entirely different direction and began spending his time visually documenting New York City instead of attending art school. His decision to retreat from the formal art education process led towards another path: an intuitive mode of research relying on direct city engagement as an art practice form. As Yoke-Sum Wong, Karen Engle and Craig Campbell have discussed in the context of photograph and text, unstructured photographs 'invite us to generate different constellations of knowing and re-assessing the word–image relation in an age of digital instantaneities—and of meaning perpetually deferred.' [70] Ai's turn to unstructured photographs would prove pivotal to his practice of capturing an instantaneous moment and juxtaposing composition and image to proliferate new meanings beyond the heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of only the visible.

New York Photographs 1983-1993 is a series where Ai documented his daily life with over 10,000 pictures in New York. He photographed everything during his expatriate period from spontaneous happenings and apartment parties to Chinese literati and artists who visited or had relocated to the United States. His friends

[69] Ai Weiwei, 'Interviews,' interview by Stephanie Tung and Alison Klayman in *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press Limited, 2012), 33.
[70] Yoke-Sum Wong, Karen Engle, Craig Campbell, 'Structures of Anticipation: An Introduction,' in *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, 12:1, (2021), 14.

consisted of a variety of literature, music, and art people, including the film director Chen Kaige, the poet Bei Dao, artists Xu Bing and Liu Xiaodong, and composer Tan Dun.[71] Ai's photographs acted as a visual storytelling aid, which was beginning to define his early art, as he progressed into other art mediums such as mixed media, readymades and social practice. The photographs that he captured on an ordinary Casio camera recorded an evolving city consciousness, representative of the metropolis in which he resided.[72]

Figure 1.1: Ai Weiwei, *Mirror*, 1987. Black and White photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Ai also photographed compelling public figures such as politician Bill Clinton, civil rights activist Al Sharpton, photographer Bill Frank, and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. Reflecting Ai's burgeoning interest in activism, he documented a series of high-profile protests and political dissident events, including the 1988 Washington Square protests, the Thompson Square riots and ACT UP Aids demonstrations, capturing these definitive moments of New York

[71] Mark Siemons, 'China as Readymade on the Ai Weiwei System,' in *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 27. Exhibition Catalogue.
[72] Ai had a Casio camera that he bought in Berkeley where he lived for one year before moving to New York. Ai, 'Interviews,' 34.

city in the 1980s to the 1990s. Susan Meiselas classifies Ai's New York era photographs as capturing a 'thought through moment' of culturally poignant science, taking place amidst larger city movements. Meiselas uses *Police Changing Shifts Bowery* (1989) photograph as an example.

Figure 1.2: Ai Weiwei, *Police Changing Shifts Bowery*, 1989. Black and White Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig.1.2 shows *Police Changing Shifts Bowery*, a photograph snapped in mid-action, framing two clusters of policemen congregated in front of a neon-lit jewelry store and comparing paperwork. Meiselas explains that even as a non-trained photographer, the captured grouping of figures demonstrate that Ai is conscious of the significance of composition, form and subject,.[73] For Ai, Tung contends that photography was not treated as an aesthetic medium, but a 'particular way of seeing,' functioning as sketches or notes that he preserved for poignant reflections.[74] His photographic experimentation with varying perspectives and subjects would continue, not evolving into aesthetic composition, but in a compelling difference, as a shorthand

[73] Susan Meiselas, qtd in Gail Pellett, review of Ai *Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* exhibition by Ai Weiwei, Asia Society, New York, *TransAsia Photography* Vol 2, issue 1 (Fall 2011). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.111

[74] Stephanie Tung, 'A Way of Seeing: Notes on Ai Weiwei's New York Photographs,' in *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press Limited, 2012), 23.

method for research documentation, to instantaneously capture a moment or feeling, filing developing archival material in his mind.

When interviewed about his photography, Ai elaborates how his process was the documentation of a temporal moment explaining: 'I started to take a lot of photos, thousands of photos, mostly in black and white. I didn't even develop them. Taking photos is like drawing with a different method, it's an exercise in what you see and how you record it, in trying to not use your hands but rather your vision and your mind.'[75] Ai's photographic process lies not only in aesthetics, but spontaneity, capturing the pulse of a city's narrative. His comment reveals an intention to instrumentalize photographs to capture a city's unfolding cultural narrative through his own sensibility. This artistic process of filtering photography through his own vision and perspective would resonate and echo in *June 1994*, one of Ai's first artworks upon his return to China.

Reflecting on his New York period, Ai focuses on visual imagery and people that he met, foreseeing that 'becoming more conscious of my life activities' in New York was 'more important than producing some [art] work.'[76] Ai's reflection about his New York artistic process would resonate decades later in *A Citizen's Investigation* (2008), a project which involved fact checking the Sichuan Earthquake Disaster (May 12th, 2008). He would elaborate on the artistic process as becoming more important than the finished art object, commenting: 'I am interested in ideas, how to conceptualize them, create a language and find possibilities. These matter to me more than the final object. My work is about my life, my consciousness, my

[75] Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei*, ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth (Koln: Taschen Press, 2020), 56.
[76] Ai Weiwei, 'Interviews' in *Ai Weiwei: New York*, 39.

sensitivity, and my skill in dealing with different matters.'[77] Ai's absorption in documentation and cultural history, filtered through his own perspective and artistic practice, would largely formulate with his New York period.

Ai's New York era reveals the emergence of a conceptual artist's sensibility, cultivating a transnational perspective beyond technical art skills. Through his New York explorations, he documents the visual storytelling of public moments, observing through the lens of a resident outsider. Tung suggests that Ai's city explorations reflect his 'change in attitude' (alluding to an artists' acute observation), concerned with recording the 'minutiae of everyday life.'[78] Ai was interested in 'real life' people stories, transforming present historical events and materiality into contemporary art. He experimented with the visual imagery of people's lives, captured through photography. The artistic process of snapping a plethora of photographs demonstrate storytelling moments that became integral in shaping his artistic practice when he returned to China. Ai elaborates on the process of arranging archival photographs, clarifying that by assembling and placing the photos in the 'right position' it was part of the 'nature of this evidence.'[79] The use of 'evidence' emphasises that his photographs were not viewed by the artist as merely aesthetic compositions, but documentation of deterritorialized stories that reflected temporal city moments.[80]

Holland Cotter suggests that Ai's early New York days were 'the seeds for an art of social change [which], if not planted in New York, certainly took roots there.

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[77] Ai Weiwei, 'Ai Weiwei: The artwork that made me the most dangerous person in China,' *The Guardian*, Feb 15th 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/ai-weiwei-remembering-sichuan-earthquake.

[78] Tung, 'A Way of Seeing,' 22.

[79] Ai, 'Interviews,' 36.

[80] This emphasis on arranging archival photographs to represent and document the language of people's lives would also resonate with our 2011 collaboration with Ai in *Fairytale Project* when we compiled archival text and image from *Fairytale* participants together in an online archive.

You see those roots growing in these coming-of-age photographs.'[81] Ai's time in the United States would act as both historical and social commentary on a unique era of American nationhood and identity through an expatriate's perspective. It is significant to his art and political practice that although Ai kept all his photographs in archives, he also handed in several photographs to the American Civil Liberties Union to be used as visual evidence in unjust arrest cases after the 1983 Washington Square riots. This early engagement in supporting political freedom demonstrates that Ai was already involved in art's advocacy into the larger causes of social activism, using his photography as a medium to reflect a version of events that countered official state dominant narratives.

Ai has stated that 'all photographs are proof in and of themselves since they record a piece of reality,' and furthermore in relation to activism, 'photography can be used as proof of history, and it is important for social change.'[82] His decade in New York was significantly a period in which he cultivated an interest in individuals, group rights, and their relation to power. Equally as significant, he was cognizant of how 'power reacted to them' in return.[83] Publicity and nascent press engagement began after he recognised his own New York neighborhood in the background for a photographed political event leading to curiosity about 'how an image could appear as printed matter in newspapers and public media.'[84] This fascination with capturing the city evolved into a similar engagement when he returned to Beijing after New York.

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[81] Holland Cotter, 'A Beijing Bohemian in the East Village,' review of *Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993*. *New York Times*, July 28th, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/29/arts/design/ai-weiwei-new-york-photographs-at-asia-society-review.html

[82] Ai Weiwei, 'We're sitting at the same table,' interview by Llucià Homs in *Ai Weiwei: On The Table*, (Madrid: La Fábrica, 2015).

[83] Ai, 'Interviews,' 39.

[84] Ai, 'Interviews,' 35.

New York Photographs was not developed until his return to China, naturally inciting a certain distance to the images, as viewed through his Chinese environment. As Ai's art career evolved, he increasingly used photography as an instrument for conceptual and cultural practice. During his New York period, he emerged as an artist that sought individual storytelling, capturing minor tales through photographic documentation. This absorption in using individual stories to challenge community and societal truths continues with his return to Beijing in 1995 and his exploration of China, after the Tiananmen Square protests.

Study of Perspective (1995-2003), an eight-year photography project capturing monuments and government legislative buildings of power would continue the theme in Ai's artworks of countering state-sanctioned narratives. In this photography series, landmarks such as Tiananmen Square (China), the White House (United States), the Eiffel Tower (France), the Roman Coliseum (Italy), Hong Kong Harbour, and Trump Tower (United States), are critiqued through a singular gesture of provocative opposition. Instead of the conventional tourist photograph of an individual posing in the background next to the landmark on display, the artist extends his forearm in a defiant, rude gesture directed at the national monument. Tourist photographs of major landmarks are subverted by the artist's impertinent hand gesture, overturning the monument's assumed cultural sanctity, and mediated through performative intervention. Instead of honouring state sanctioned national narratives, the tourist is reinvented as an outlier, detached from the central system, and challenging as a political power symbol. Ai has commented on his *Study of Perspective* series that it is 'just like a tourist's gaze' but the critical difference is that he is a 'bored tourist.'[85] Much like his New York photographs that capture an instantaneous moment revealing

[85] Ai Weiwei, 'The Politics of Shame,' interview by Antony Downey, *The Large Glass*, no. 25/26 (2018): 33.

a disinterest in formal aesthetics, *Study of Perspective*'s technical photography work is blurry, with the purpose being the photograph's intention rather than the image aesthetics. In both *New York Photographs* and *Study of Perspective*, photography is employed towards the assemblage of counter-narratives and reframed individual storytelling.

Figure 1.3: Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective - Tiananmen*, 1995. Black and white photograph, 35 ⅜ x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1.4: Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective - White House*, 1995. Black and white photograph, 35 ⅜ x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1.5: Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective - Hong Kong 1995-2003*. Black and white photograph, 35 ⅜ x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1.6: Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective – Eiffel Tower, 1995-2003*. Black and white gelatin silver photograph, 35 ⅜ x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Figures 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6 capture in detail the *Study of Perspective* series as a critique of the aura of monumentalism in landmarks, or the hierarchal proclamation of iconic buildings as a promontory marker, problematising conventional mass tourism and the upholding of dominant narratives.[86] Through Ai's contemptuous hand gesture, a quintessential tourist photo is transformed into a

[86] Please see Susan Sontag's *Photography* analysis of and why people take pictures of landmarks as well as Martha Rosler's essay on 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)' on the subject of photography and documentation. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador Press, 2001) and Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography),' in *Decoys and Disruptions, Selected Writings 1975-2001* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 151-206. Roland Barthes 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is of relevance here about photography and reflection of art aura, or in Ai's case, monuments.

confrontation with state-regimented forms of national identity. The photographs emphasize a rebellious attitude towards systemic historical tropes, displaying an institutional critique of travel and national symbols.

The series privileges the spectator position as it places the artist with the same perspective as the viewer. In the photographs, the artist is stretching his hand out in the picture, representing both performative subject and viewer. The photographs that are representative of both the spectator and performative subject position is indicative of Ai's own extrinsic and intrinsic position.[87]

Study of Perspective exposes certain forms of tourism as a corollary to nationalism, glorifying monuments as national symbols.[88] Ai's photographs, by contrast, reflect a critique of national power systems, exemplified by juxtaposing the artist as both spectator (extrinsic) and defiant actor (intrinsic) in the foreground. These reinterpretations of cultural history decenter state narratives, illuminating the complex relationships between performative action and experimental photography. The confrontation with dominant narratives would continue in other artworks, *June 1994* being among the most notable during this prolific period. In *Study of Perspective* series, this dissidence is represented by the tension between monumental landmarks and an individual counter gesture. Ai's next pivotal photograph, *June 1994* further examines the strife between bureaucratic pageantry and singular moments of performative defiance.

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[87] For more on this fascinating subject of spectator and performative subject, please see WJT Mitchell's extended analysis of Michel Foucault's interpretation of *Las Meninas* in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 62.

[88] One can further contextualise this photograph series in view of the contemporary obsession for taking 'selfies.' *Study in Perspective* series could be viewed as the 'anti-selfie,' instead of the arm of the photographer used as an instrument to show his/her beaming face, we see only the free arm in a rude gesture. It would be interesting to further explore this relationship between photographer and collecting landmarks as analyzed in Sontag's *On Photography*.

June 1994 evolved from the *Study of Perspective* series, a body of photographic artworks exploring the tension between dominant narratives to singular minoritarian moments of defiance. This partially staged photograph was one of the first artworks Ai created upon his return to China from New York, on the fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests.[89] Related to the un-crowning of state and dominant narratives, anti-monumentalism is emphasized in Ai's photography to theoretically underpin the subtle machinations of power and usurping of nationalist symbols in *June 1994*. Much like the *Study of Perspective* photographic series showcasing nationalist monuments filtered through an artist's performative gesture, *June 1994* showcases individuals in various gestural stances in the foreground with cultural national monuments towering behind them. The artist Lu Qing is captured in a defiant moment, audaciously lifting her skirt, and demurely revealing her underwear in front of the historical monuments of Beijing's Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square.

Translated into English as the 'Gate of Heavenly Peace,' Tiananmen Square, the backdrop for Ai's *June 1994* is one of the most recognizable national landmarks in Mainland China. The famous square has always been associated with a particular urgency for citizens to assemble in front of the seat of power (the Forbidden City is the former residence of the emperor of China) advocating political reform. It is aligned with a precise tension in China's history between youth, idealism, and fervent bloody dialogue, and was the gathering place for young Cultural Revolution cadets in 1965, and the bloodshed of university students during the 1989 Tiananmen Square democratic protests. Tiananmen Square has a long and turbulent history as the symbol of China's capital and the Forbidden City (imposingly pictured behind the square) has

[89] The Tiananmen Square Protests official commemoration date is June 4th, 1989, which is when Chinese government troops opened fire on student protestors.

consistently been a powerful representation of the Emperor of China's fortress and living quarters. The latter is deliberately included in the background of Ai's *June 1994* to allude to these previous historical demonstrations.

Figure 1.7: Chinese protestors march against the Treaty of Versailles, May 4th, 1919.

Figure 1.8: Tse-Tung, Chinese communist party chairman standing in lead car, reviews the youthful Red Guards in Peking, Oct. 19, 1966, Business Insider, June 8th, 2016.

Figure 1.9: Thousands of people in front of Beijing's Tiananmen Square Protests, 1989, Getty Images.

Figures 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9, shown above, capture the youth-oriented gatherings in 1919, 1965, and 1989. Ai's *June 1994* performative action photograph alludes to this chronology of dissent and discord, with multiple figures constructing an alternative space, encouraging marginalised and counter-dominant narratives to flourish.

Figure 1.10: Ai Weiwei, *June 1994*, (1994). Black and white photograph, 47 ⅝ x 61 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1:10 shows Ai's *June 1994*, an action tableau photograph that uses performative bodies to actively strip away notions of hallowed symbolism, represented by the national landmarks behind them. The photograph significantly adopts the same Tiananmen Square location as the previous youth protest photographs, taken directly in front of the Forbidden City. The composition is insightfully managed, with Mao Zedong's portrait uncomfortably framed next to Lu Qing's face, alluding to a juxtaposition of old systemic hierarchies of power superseded by her flippantly youthful performative gesture. Ai comments on the playful humour of the photo elaborating: 'you find a moment of contradiction, and

you cannot cope with the contradiction that it [*June 1994*] generates. There is an argument in the photo itself or in the image itself. So, in China they are full of this kind of moment.'[90]

In *Remaking Beijing, Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, Wu Hung observes that the disenfranchised figures in *June 1994* are imperfectly framed by the spectre of Mao's photograph hovering in the background. He notes the two foreground figures, a woman in flagrant undress and an elderly man in a motorcar, are centralised in the photograph, (both part of the disenfranchised and marginalised Chinese public), separated from the crowd by a fence, with Mao Zedong positioned almost like an 'indiscreet voyeur.'[91]

The featured figures in the foreground are intentionally anti-monumentalist and invert the parochial hierarchies in *June 1994*'s composition. The man leering in the background, the farmer driving on a truck, Lu Qing's impertinent gesture counter as individual elements of chaos and disorder, abolishing the somber history of the public square. The pompous symbols of state-sanctioned power include People's Liberation Army officers marching in the background, fence barriers, and China flags. The congregation of opposing marginalized figures play contra to each other in tension with the imposing parochial landmark, represented by the formal Mao portrait.

Further elaborating on Wu's analysis, I scrutinize the ceremonial gravitas of Mao's portraiture in tension with Lu Qing's performative gesture, her foot raised in mid-action, approximating a dance move. Returning to the capture of an instantaneous moment in *Police Changing Shifts Bowery*, I assert that these varying perspectives

[90] Ai, 'The Politics of Shame,' 29.
[91] Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing, Tiananmen Square, and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2005, 196.

signal a shuffle in action that inverts power dynamics. The anti-monumentalist photograph incites a transformation that foregrounds action as an alternative to stasis and inertia. Energy is mobilized through a willful debasing of power, featuring a partially staged and spontaneous chaotic performance orchestrated by the artist. Lu Qing's foreground figure, flipping up her skirt in flagrant disregard for Mao as a national icon behind her, implies insurgency, much like *Study of Perspective*'s rebellious hand gesture. Echoing the overturning of dominant narratives in *Study of Perspective*, *June 1994* usurps totalitarian ideologies by channeling new energies, inciting a disruption that originates from the chronological history of youthful idealism associated with the history of the monument.

The larger implications of *June 1994* are the playful upending of dominant regimes of power and hierarchical narratives in favour of minoritarian voices. The chaotic individuals, each with their own singular stories, unleash deterritorialized flows of chaotic, contradicting stories. The irreverent, tongue-in-cheek gesture staged in the foreground of solemn state power monuments feels at first glance to be spontaneous but is staged at a particular instance in the action to frame discord and disorder, capturing a gendered and youthful dialogue of bacchanalian revelry. *June 1994* transforms tropes such as patriotic reverence, national symbols and the monumentalism of state power to appear outdated, epitomised in the gesture of Lu Qing lifting her skirt and showing her underwear. The photograph captures Ai's interest in interweaving social as well as extrinsic individual and personal narratives, reconstructing them into new formulations of Chinese identities, transcending official nationalistic discourse. Ai continues to experiment with using photography as a medium to playfully subvert monuments, renegotiating socio-historical moments.

These themes were beginning to define his artistic practice as he evolved into social practice, sculpture, mixed media, and the readymade.

Reinventing Chinese Histories through Readymades

At the beginning of this chapter, I focused on how Ai's biography led to an extrinsic expatriate perspective, in which he documented and engaged with the world around him, using photography as a medium. In this next section, I turn to how Ai reutilizes Chinese cultural objects as part of his readymade methodology, demonstrating coded behaviors of resistance to culturally state-sanctioned histories. The distinct perception of the materiality that Ai 'takes aim' at in his art practice is not the cultural object, but, as Carol Yinghua Lu succinctly refers to in Ai's artworks as, 'the fixed perceptions, ideology, myths, misunderstandings and authority attached to said objects.'[92] Chinese artefacts are utilized to fabricate new histories, specifically seeking out predetermined cultural narratives to reframe Chinese representational identities. Ai features minoritarian participants in his art practice that reinterpret cultural history through an alternative storytelling. The materiality of ancestral Chinese objects—Han dynasty vases, antique wooden stools, Chinese jade and Pu-erh tea leaves— are coded in distinct cultural signifiers, to reassemble formulations of Chinese cultural identities. *Coca Cola Vase* (1994), *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) and *Table with Three Legs* (2008) exemplify Ai's process of deconstructing readymade cultural objects associated with these broad historical themes. These examples indicate the innovative reimagining of historical objects in reframing cultural histories. In this section, focusing on *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995),

[92] Carol Yinghua Lu, 'Ai Weiwei's Relevance, 'in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 30.

Coca Cola Vase (1994) and *Stools* (2007), I argue that Ai's reinterpretation of significant cultural objects reshapes representations of Chinese cultural identity.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995) was one of the first readymade sculptures created by Ai after he returned to China from New York. Documented in a triptych of photographs, Ai theatrically holds a Han Chinese dynasty vase in his hands and is sequentially photographed deliberately dropping the vase on the ground. In the final photograph, the viewer sees the vase has been smashed into smithereens. Much like Ai's *Study of Perspective* series where monuments as symbols of power are deprecated with a single gesture, the smashing of a culturally revered object in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* uses the same destructive logic of fracturing iconoclasms. The fragmentation of a cultural object rebuffs the aura of visual artefacts adhering to assumed state-sanctioned histories. By deliberately dropping the antique Han vase, he continues to undermine dominant histories, rebuking with a performative gesture, expressing an individual's complicated negotiation with state sanctioned narratives. More poignantly, the act of destroying traditional objects leads to a critical evaluation of Ai's evolving contemporary practice of what Dercon and Lorz remark as 'redefining cultural heritage.'[93]

In Fig. 1.11, a close examination of Ai's gesture in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, reveal that he is not actively throwing, but merely releasing it from his hands. The photographic documentation of the artwork demonstrates a noticeable absence of anger or emotion in Ai's destructive action. Roger Buergel analyzes Ai's deliberate neutrality of feeling by acknowledging: 'The act of allowing the urn to fall is not emotional, but an act of deliberated calculated barbarism that plunges the observer, as

[93] Dercon and Lorz, 'Biography,' 7.

powerful witness, into an ethical-aesthetical dilemma.'[94] I elaborate further on Buergel's critique, emphasizing that this emotional neutrality indicates an inevitable shift in cultural signification, of which Ai acts as the agent of cultural change.[95]

Figure 1.11: Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Three black-and-white photographs, each 58 ¼ x 47 ⅝ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn is a performative commentary on the disruption from the continuity of traditional Chinese art-making due to the Cultural Revolution. Buergel emphasizes that the artwork was less about an antique vase breaking into pieces than Ai, as a post-Cultural Revolution Chinese citizen, acknowledging a deeply damaged relationship with Chinese heritage.[96] It is implicit that the Cultural Revolution caused complications amidst Post–Cultural revolution creative practitioners with Pre–Cultural revolution artifacts. The desecration of centuries of Confucian and Dynastic history left cultural practitioners with the task of renegotiating relationships within their own nationalist histories. Ai's staging of these themes is a recognition of these unacknowledged traumas sustained amidst a re-negotiation with materiality and practiced as new forms of creative expression.

[94] Roger M. Buergel, 'The Mediator's Ways: The Freedom and Art of Ai Weiwei,' in *Ai Weiwei*, ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth (Koln: Taschen, 2020), 190.
[95] Also significant is Lu Qing's deliberate gesture and absence of emotion in *June 1994*. I contend that the lack of emotion seen in all these counter-revolutionary gestures is structural.
[96] Buergel, 'The Mediator's Ways: The Freedom and Art,' 190-191.

Ai's performative gestures reiterate his practice of questioning dominant histories and encouraging counter-narratives to flourish. His art experiments associated with smashing cultural iconoclasms include *Breaking of Two Blue-and-White Dragon Bowls* (1996), in which he uses a hammer tapping the two Kangxi era dragon bowls into pieces, and *Dust to Dust* (2009) grinding Neolithic pottery to dust and storing it in a plain glass jar.[97] Alongside the performative fragmentation of antique objects, Ai's practice critiques cultural objects instrumentalized as 'soft power' in cultural diplomacy, weaponised by the state by exercising influence through persuasion and political value. Ambrozy discusses the significance of Ai's frustration that few Mainland Chinese people he had met chose to reflect on traumatic events in their historical past, aided by the Chinese state government's official erasure of the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.[98] Fifteen years later, Ai would further reflect on the nature of collective Chinese memory, speculating:

> 'in the era in which I grew up, ideological indoctrination exposed us to an intense invasive light that made our memories vanish like shadows. Memories were a burden, and it was best to be done with them; soon people lost not only the will but the power to remember. When yesterday, today, and tomorrow merge into an indistinguishable blur, memory–apart from being potentially dangerous–has very little meaning at all.'[99]

Ruminating on Ai's comment, I assert that *Coca Cola Vase* (Fig.1.12), a culturally revered Han dynasty vase painted over with the Coca Cola logo, symbolizes his exploration of this distinct conundrum of Chinese erasure of identity and a reconciliation with history. Ai describes his selection of the signature American trademark thus: 'to me the Coca-Cola Logo is a clear announcement of property and of cultural or political identity, but it's also a clear sign to stop thinking. It's full of

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[97] Bingham, 'Introduction,' 23.
[98] Lee Ambrozy, 'Introduction,' in *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, Trans. Lee Ambrozy (Boston, MIT Press) xi.
[99] Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 15.

ignorance, but it's also a redefinition.'[100] The juxtaposition of a twentieth-century Western corporate logo onto a two-thousand-year-old vase epitomises the historical and prescient tensions between Chinese transnationalism and Western capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. *Coca Cola Vase* implies China's contradictory identity in a state of friction, a country that has not reconciled the trauma of its past Cultural Revolution history even while it is propelled into the globalized future of international corporate logos and brands.[101]

Figure 1.12: Ai Weiwei, *Coca-Cola Vase*, 1994. Tang Dynasty vase, paint, 9 ½ x 7 ⅛ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

From the 1990s-2010, Ai would construct several readymade artworks, focusing on reshaping cultural traditions by countering historical narratives. *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) would lead to *Stool* (2007), a reconfiguration of two Chinese antique stools together to be rendered unfunctional; and *Bang* (2013), 886

[100] Ai, *Ai Weiwei,* 92.

[101] I expand more on the concepts of friction and collisions of history in Chapter Four of this thesis. I am in debt to Anna Tsing's *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

antique wooden stools reshaped into an organic installation of unfunctional Qing and Ming furniture (1997-2002); a compressed minimalist block of Pu-er tea leaves in *A Ton of Tea* (2011); and *Sunflower Seeds* (2011), the engagement of Jingdezhen ceramic craftsman to create hundreds of millions of the innocuous sunflower seeds in porcelain, a snack eaten across China for all occasions.[102] In *Sunflower Seeds,* Ai reinvigorates the historical Chinese techniques of pottery by commissioning Jingdezhen craftsmen to reproduce over ten million ceramic sunflower seeds using traditional methods of ceramic craftsmen.[103] Ai's insight into which sacred cultural objects shed their original meanings and accrue new ones when removed from their initial context is encapsulated in a short parable about a historical building reused as artistic materiality: 'we could once all believe and hope in it. But once it has been destroyed, it's nothing. It becomes another artist's material to build something completely contradictory to what it was before.'[104]

Uli Sigg refers to Ai's artistic practice as fusing 'two contradictory paradigms of art creation: Western avant-garde art, encapsulating a radical destruction of tradition, mirrored with the classic Chinese respect for tradition, drawing from the lineage of art as an evolving continuum drawing from the wealth of Chinese culture.'[105] I build on Sigg's comment by adding that Ai's extrinsic perspective fostered both Continental and Chinese art positions, distinctly encapsulated in his art of the readymade. In several interviews, Ai has referred to not only cultural artifacts but China itself as a 'readymade' materiality to be used in his artistic methodology.[106]

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[102] Mark Siemons, 'China as Readymade,' 27.

[103] Jingdezhen is the traditional village that has for centuries made porcelain and pottery vases for the emperor as early as 6th Century BC.

[104] Ai Weiwei, 'Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation with Ai Weiwei', in *Ai Weiwei*, ed. Karen Smith, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bernard Fibichier, (New York: Phaidon Press, 2009), 39.

[105] Uli Sigg, 'The Better Argument: A Portrait of Ai Weiwei,' in *Ai Weiwei* ed. Hans Werner Holzarth, (Koln, Taschen Press), 9.

[106] Juliet Bingham, 'Introduction,' in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 14.

Ai's fragmentation of antique items in reshaping of historical objects suggest an individual's confrontation with hermeneutic historical systems. His own performative gestures are a conduit through which he reshapes historical narratives, becoming a primary theme in his artistic practice. Lu comments on the distinction of Ai's practice between respecting the cultural object while challenging authoritarian power and traditional values elaborating that:

> 'As seen in many of his works in which he collages, breaks, repaints, deconstructs, re-arranges and reinvents elements of traditional Chinese culture—whether antique statues or porcelain-making techniques—Ai understands, and more importantly respects, the specificities as well as the fundamental ideas behind these objects and the culture around them while at the same time continuously questioning and challenging the authoritarian power, agency, and traditional values associated with them.'[107]

Ai engages with the cultural object's materiality while simultaneously expressing contempt for the totalitarian agencies that have harnessed its cultural power for their own ideological purposes. He is deeply engaged with the heritage artifacts that he manipulates into readymades in his contemporary art practice. As Lu explains, what Ai challenges is not the object itself, but the associations of cultural power embedded in the object. Confronting authoritarian power and 'aura' is what interests him in his engagement with the readymade object, a practice that evolves not only from classical Chinese art, but also, as Sigg points out, the continental Duchampian conceptual art movement. The distinction of Ai's art practice is to reconstruct the fragmentation of historical narratives using pre-Cultural Revolution materiality. He reinvigorates Chinese cultural practices while simultaneously challenging dominant state-sanctioned narratives. Ai is uninterested in parting ways with history but fascinated with instilling new life into traditional stories through narrative reinvention. As Ai moved increasingly towards engagement in social and political practice, he

[107] Lu, 'Ai Weiwei's Relevance,' 36.

intentionally questioned these fundamental attitudes behind accepted notions of hierarchical power and culture.

Ai Weiwei's Social Practice: Reframing Historical Memories

In the early 2000s, Ai redirected his art practice to focus on internet communications, using social media platforms such as a personal blog, Twitter, and Instagram, to express his thoughts in the public sphere. His artistic process evolved to using his blog as an online art practice platform, relating to his activism and stories of injustice. From 2007 onwards, Ai's strategic tactics of countering historical narratives became a primary part of his art practice in engaging individual participants and their stories. Through the lens of documentary and participatory artwork, Ai featured Chinese participant identities filtered through his own artistic methodology and practice. *A Citizen's Investigation* (2008) and *Remembering* (2009) were pivotal artworks that prominently featured in his artistic trajectory towards social activism. His activism led to friction with the Chinese Communist Party government while simultaneously moving towards a civic openness in his everyday life. Mark Siemons concludes that Ai's blog, tweets, posts, and interviews that elaborated on his art practice were 'no longer simply adjuncts to his work but have become its content.[108] In the section that focuses on his social practice, I examine Ai's art that utilizes social media platforms, news interviews and blogging to strategically build visible rhizomatic relationships with a fascinated Chinese population and global public.

On May 12th, 2008, China was shaken by a devastating earthquake in the central region of Sichuan province destroying entire villages and towns. A disproportionate number of victims were primary and secondary schools and died due

[108] Siemons, 'China as Readymade,' 27.

to poorly constructed schools built by corrupt real estate developers, paid by the local government. Almost 90,000 people were counted as either dead or missing including 5300 school children.[109] Inadequate and unsafe building construction was permissible in China due to the corruption of government officials taking bribes from real estate developers.[110]

Galvanized by the Chinese government's inaccurate polling of the dead and missing, Ai issued a general call for volunteers on his blog initiating *The Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (2008). *The Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* was conducted by more than fifty researchers, volunteers, and employees from Ai's studio to collect the names of deceased primary school students. Potential participants were asked to fill out a simple questionnaire (a format in which he had already used with great success in *Fairytale*), asking such wide-ranging questions as: 'Do you think that truth is important?' 'Are you sure this is what you want?' 'Are your stomachs ready for Sichuan food?' and 'Are you afraid of the dark?'[111] Ai and his team visited the homes of private residents, asking Chinese citizens to list the names of missing or deceased family members and recounting the memories and stories of their lost ones. This list of deceased names was distributed on the internet, via twitter messages. In formulating his own census surveys and documenting the names and numbers of the deceased, Ai's investigation acted as a counternarrative to the official Chinese state media accounts. When asked of his objectives behind such a citizen led investigation,

[109] John F. Rafferty, 'Sichuan Earthquake of 2008,' *Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/event/Sichuan-earthquake-of-2008.
[110] For a more comprehensive coverage on this widespread investigation into 'tofu' buildings, please see Edward Wong, 'China Admits Building Flaws in Quake,' *New York Times*, September 4th, 2008.
[111] Ai Weiwei 'Talk with Ai Weiwei,' interview by Mathieu Wellner, in Ai *Weiwei: So Sorry*, (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 106.

he answered: 'to remember the departed, to show concern for life, to take responsibility, and for the potential happiness of the survivors.[112]

The Sichuan Earthquake Names Project explored the possibilities of empowering local Chinese communities to speak the narratives of their own loss publicly, challenging the account of events given by government controlled media and press. Ai engaged participants, (in this case grieving family members), to tell their tales in which notions of plurality were celebrated. Ai experimented with transforming activist documentation into a reframed visual art practice through storytelling forms.

Remembering (2009) (See Fig. 1.13) is another particularly apt example of Ai's minoritarian storytelling practices. Also derived from his research into the Sichuan Earthquake Project, the art installation consisted of nine thousand children's backpacks assembled on the facade of the Haus der Kunst museum, Germany, spelling out the following sentence in Chinese characters: 'She lived happily for seven years in this world,' a quotation was taken from a grieving mother whose daughter had died in one of the crumbled schools during the earthquake.[113]

[112] Ai Weiwei, March 20th, 2009 (Blog).
[113] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrow*, 855.

Figure 1.13: Ai Weiwei, *Remembering*, 2009. 8783 backpacks, metal structure, 362 ⅛ x 4,173 ¼ inches; Haus der Kunst Munich, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Remembering exemplified Ai's local and extrinsic art practice. By placing the words of a singular grieving Chinese mother on the Haus der Kunst, a building built by Adolf Hitler during the Third Reich, and the monumental facade covered up with the children's backpacks, the artwork challenged the parochial monumentalism not only of the Chinese government, but a Western European history of dictatorships and totalitarian governments.[114]

Remembrance (2010) was another foundational artwork that evolved from *A Citizen's Investigation* consisting of a sound installation composed of the deceased student's names from the earthquake. The list of dead is recited 12,140 times by 3,444 participants crowdsourced from Ai's personal Twitter campaign and edited into a sound work that lasts three hours and forty-one minutes. Zheng Bo argues that *Remembrance* constitutes a rare public emotion: civic mourning and grievance,

[114] The project simultaneously evokes the totalitarian regime and violent loss of voices both in China and during Nazi rule in Germany during World War II. For more information on the Nazi history of the Haus der Kunst, and Hitler's conception of the building as a temple to 'pure German art,' please see Catherine Hickley's 'Should Munich Contemporary Art Museum reveal or obscure it's Nazi History?' *The Art Newspaper*, March 1st, 2017, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/should-munich-contemporary-art-museum-reveal-or-obscure-its-nazi-history

uncommon in Chinese history.[115] Zheng elaborates that mourning in China has historically tended to be either private, among family members and friends, or state-sponsored, for political leaders or canonized heroes, though sometimes people had 'usurped state rituals by improvising upon an official script to make it serve subversive ends.'[116] In defiance of state censorship, the sound work began circulating on the internet.

Remembrance, like other commemorative projects after the Sichuan earthquake, was initiated by strangers, for strangers. Zheng argues that these elements of public mourning establish stranger-relationality, because to mourn someone is to assume the existence of an attachment to the loss of that person.[117] The recording of each individual reciting the dead student names created an emotional fortitude and weight acting as a counterpoint to the official state narratives of obfuscation and the deliberate misrepresentation of facts by the state media. *Remembrance* was also the first project to harness the power of the internet to induce temporary relationships that encouraged people to enter collaborations with strangers for common projects.[118] Ai's deliberate turn towards public engagement in his art practices focused on illuminating minoritarian cultural community identities which reshaped Chinese cultural identities.

After *The Sichuan Earthquake Project,* Ai's interactions with the Chinese government became explicitly adversarial. From 2008 until leaving China in 2012, he prioritised uncovering Chinese Communist Party government corruption, subsequently leading to his own arrest and detainment in 2011. During this period of tense confrontation, Ai's exchanges with the Chinese Communist party reveal that the

[115] Bo Zheng, 'The Pursuit of Publicness: a Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects,' (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012).
[116] Zheng, 'The Pursuit of Publicness,' 80.
[117] Zheng, 'The Pursuit of Publicness,' 80.
[118] This transient community building has much in common with *Fairytale* (2007) a shared journey largely disbanded once the art project ended, discussed at length in Chapter Five of this thesis.

tragicomedy of Chinese governance was a primary part of Ai's art practice. He recounts one story that describes the circular logic and strange parody of Chinese bureaucracy that he encountered in his studio living in China on a regular basis:

> The police came to me here and tried to use the old-fashioned way to convince me of their views. But before they could open their mouths, I wanted to see their IDs. To prove you are really allowed to exercise the law, you have to show your identification. But they did not have any legal documents. So I told them, 'You have no right to talk to me...' But nobody dares to check them—they are so powerful, like a secret police. So I called the police station, dialling 110, and made a complaint. I told them, 'I have a person in my house without identification. I want him to be out, but he refuses. Can you come over?' So they came. It was very funny because of course they knew each other. 'It's our boss here,' they said. 'Okay, so if this is your boss, you have to take him to the station. How about the two of you show me your identification?' The two guys acted very nervous. I asked them to show me their police badge but they did not have one either…the whole night we went back and forth. Four hours later, I walked out of the station.[119]

This story reveals the absurdity of the unlawful encounter with law enforcement; Ai reports an intruder in his house to the police station, the intruder is the police captain. Refusing to be complicit in an untenable situation, Ai insists that the police follow their own laws and regulations and report the intruder (their superintendent). By doggedly going through the performance of due process in reporting crimes to the same police who are committing them, Ai exposes how government systems break the contract of citizenship. As Christian Sorace suggests, Ai persists in living in a version of China that is at odds with state-sanctioned corrupt realities. [120] Sorace asserts that Ai's political power derives from the political conditions that surround him (namely the contradictory machinations of Chinese law and bureaucracy), that are materiality for his artistic practice. His insistence on adhering to the government's own civil system in a corrupt state procedure discloses the performative gestures of acting or believing in civil order and fair systems to facilitate a change in dynamics.

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[119] Ai, 'Talk with Ai Weiwei,' 106.

[120] Christian Sorace, 'China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 40, no. 2 (2014), 396-419.

Ai's engagement as an artist includes not only deconstructing cultural objects but a series of protests, negotiations, and involvement in the Chinese state, exposing the labyrinthine bureaucracy defying logic and prohibiting rights. His persistent negotiations with bureaucratic departments expose the Kafkaesque absurdity in daily interactions with the government and police, interpreted through public, civic storytelling. Artworks directly related to his confrontation with the Chinese government include *Brain Inflation* (2009), an MRI scan print series showing a brain hemorrhage in Ai's head caused by a Chengdu police beating and *Surveillance Camera* (2010), a CCTV camera fabricated out of the traditionally commemorative material of marble, repurposed as an anti-monumentalist sculpture.

In 2011, Ai was detained by the Chinese police for eighty-one days under strict surveillance in an anonymous undisclosed holding centre. A worldwide fervor and international outcry ensued including protests all around the world that were advocating for his release (See Fig. 1.14).

Figure 1.14: Tate Modern

Upon his release, Ai was warned that one of the extenuating conditions was to remain silent about the details of his incarceration.[121] Instead, Ai, true to his artistic

[121] Ai Weiwei, pers. comm.

practice of countering totalitarian suppression, countered with going public with his detainment to the press, eventually producing 'S.A.C.R.E.D' (2013), a six-part work composed of iron boxes depicting scenes of surveillance and captivity during his 81 days of incarceration. Viewers were invited to peep into the unit through small apertures where Ai had posed realistic models of himself with his captors (see Fig. 1.15). Ai's defiant decision to publicise his incarceration aligns with his artistic practice of foregrounding visibility in his interactions with state surveillance. In the breadth of his artistic practice and in his personal history, he has shown himself to be an artist that refuses to compromise in countering dominant state-sanctioned narratives.

Figure 1.15: Ai Weiwei, *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2011-2013. Six diagrams, fiberglass, iron, each 148 ⅜ x 60 ¼ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

In this chapter I have brought together visual modes of exploring cultural adaptation and legitimacy in transnational moments through Ai's artistic practice. Ai's photography, cultural readymade objects, eliciting participants, and the bureaucratic machinations of the Chinese government, are used as artistic mediums to represent minoritarian counternarratives in his artworks. Ai intervenes as an interlocutor who critically reinterprets migration and home within and outside China. His artwork is laden with historical materiality, often modifying traditionally antique artefacts, which, through his intervention, re-examine Chinese cultural identity. Ai's

art practice has the salutary effect of linking history and contemporaneity in forging new forms of cultural identity and performing counteractions to dominant state-sanctioned histories.

Through visual methodology, readymades, and fragmented narratives, Ai elicits and compiles singular experiences with individual subjects, illuminating their informal cultural histories. His exploration of individual tales that counter state-sanctioned narratives reveal that constructions of Chinese communities are at stake. Migrational and minoritarian stories are subject to ongoing modification by Chinese nationals as agents of their own representation. These identifications are shown in the methodology used to explore China as a readymade object, exposing the machinations of Chinese government systems as peculiar, obsolete, and defunct. Ai expresses the absurdity of these dominant narratives through strategies of blasphemy and profanation, stripping the assumed historical power of nation states. His burgeoning interest in activism relates to artistic themes that emphasize minoritarian storytelling, in which multiple stories counter dominant narratives. Ai's artwork is particularly generative of my own research questions and thesis arguments as I focus on creative practitioners who foster a transnational turn in the reconceptualization of home and citizenship through text and image.

Ai's art practices represent a wider interest in not only experimenting with knowledge forms in multiple fields, but in demonstrating a passion for engaging in individual narratives used as microcosms of informal cultural histories. He merges his own memories and experiences in parallel with a vast political and social commentary. In *Breaking a Han Dynasty Vase*, his artistic process fosters a destruction and rebuilding of a found heritage object and government systems. *A Citizen's Investigation* and *Fairytale* artworks, in which participants share their own

minoritarian stories, are a tapestry of voices, representative of text and image in their presentation. Ai's artistic practice encompasses political artworks on nationhood and border control, while simultaneously raising broader artistic questions about Chinese migrational storytelling. I argue that Ai's commitment to critiquing systemic hierarchies enable an overarching methodology of countering state narratives, grappling with the politics of knowledge production and the relationship of art to power and advocacy.

Ai's practices of encompassing text and image enable me to read literature differently in the context of this thesis, adding to the proliferation of meaning in contesting traditional modes of parochialism and monolithic national identities. Using the medium of literary narratives, as I move to Chapter Two and Ha Jin's two novels *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*, I maneuver towards exploring performative roles of immigration and citizenship in fiction, illuminating narratives of historical illegitimacy and antipathy as undeniably coded in cultural and racial exclusion. By moving from visual image to literature, I aim to show that representations of contemporary Chinese identities hold open the gap between language and image, in their complicated reconstruction of memory and narrative, generate different constellations of storytelling.

Chapter Two

The Immigrant: Performing Cultural Adaptation and the Economies of Affect

In an interview with Emory Magazine in 1998, Ha Jin described the process of writing fiction in a non-native language as: 'having a blood transfusion, like you are changing your blood.'[122] This brutal bodily metaphor viscerally underlines the turbulent psychological trauma that an immigrant faces in negotiating the language and culture of a new environment. As part of the arbitration of settling into unfamiliar surroundings and claiming citizenship, immigrants are compelled to replace their native language with a new form of expression.

In Chapter One, I examined how Ai's extrinsic perspective contributed to his ability to interrogate state discourses through his art practices, opposing state sanctioned narratives. A primary example of which Ai was a real-life precedent, were the New York Chinese artistic communities of the 1980s-1990s, a temporary overseas cultural hub with long-standing historical influences due to immigratory exchanges between the United States and China. These concentrated groups demonstrate that the collective storytelling of past homelands produces an informal country's history through a diasporic perspective. In Chapter Two, I explore references to these same artistic communities fictionalised through the perspective of Ha Jin's protagonist Nan in *A Free Life*.[123] Ha Jin alludes to these significant expatriate factions by having his protagonist Nan contribute as an editor in a New York based Chinese poetry journal.

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[122] Ha Jin, 'Across an Ocean of Words, 'interview by John D. Thomas, *Emory Magazine*, Vol 74 no 1, (Spring 1998), https://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/spring98/hajin.html.

[123] Although Ha Jin does not specifically refer to the particular New York expatriate art community that Ai belonged to in the 1990s, in *A Free Life*, the protagonist Nan works at an underground Chinese literati of poetry journals based in New York post-Tiananmen Square Protests. Ha Jin, *A Free Life* (New York: Pantheon Press, 2007).

Nan's association with these groups pertains to Sara Ahmed's discussion of how individual and collective identities are not formed by singular acts, but through the forming of communities 'that create multiple identifications through collective acts of remembering in the absence of a shared knowledge or a familiar terrain.'[124] Acts of remembering foster knowledge networks and combine shared histories, constructing a newly mythic past and a fantasist narrative that inevitably fails to deliver in reality. This is what many immigrants realize upon their successful immigration and capitalist success into a new country.

Linking back to Chapter One's exploration of expatriate deterritorialized subjects, in Chapter Two, I focus on how creative representations of immigrants subvert identity by the performance of assimilation, encoded at the heart of contemporary socio-migration practices. I use textual examples to explore the internal conflict of immigrant characters, who struggle to assimilate and enact performances of cultural integration with adverse repercussions. In both novels by China-born American author Ha Jin, I examine the tension between citizenship and illegitimacy through the lens of the immigrant archetype. The reconfiguration of Chinese cultural identity is outlined by national and patriotic borders through the study of a cultural binary opposition: the model American Chinese immigrant and the traitorous spy. These two novels examined in this chapter underlines the hybridity of cultural identity emerging in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Situating my work in the context of scholars who critique colonial late liberalism and [im]migration—Sara Ahmed, Elizabeth Povinelli and Aihwa Ong,—I propose that readings of contemporary migratory writings have been focused too heavily on adaptation in the newly immigrant country, and alternatively, should be re-

[124] Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 2, issue 3 (December 1999), 332.

examined as a reciprocal exchange of leaving and shaping 'homes,' evoking temporary situations that provoke uncertain, volatile and changeable identities that destabilize dominant Chinese discourses.

In Chapter Two, I examine performing assimilation as an act of guile, artfully functioning as a screen of calculated resistance to subvert the process and projected end point of cultural adaptation. I delve into the complex methods by which China-born American-based author Ha Jin questions immigrant novel tropes of the 'American Dream.' Ha Jin uses characters to 'perform' assimilation, thereby problematizing Chinese cultural identity myths and strategies, as exemplified in *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Map of Betrayal* (2014). Nan Wu and Gary Shang are protagonists in both novels assimilating to society norms in return for the hospitality of belonging and citizenship. Ha Jin's novels explore the implications of affect for the Chinese immigrant experience, scrutinizing the consequences of a protagonist's body experiencing what Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth has characterized in their study on affect and the novel as 'non belonging' through insecurity, ambivalence, and drastic changes in one's identity.[125] Characterized by Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo as possessing a 'flat alienating style,' Ha Jin's narrative strategies of displacing emotion also reveal how Chinese subjects negotiate self-representational practices of displacement. Characters do so by interrogating culturally specific definitions of home, probing immigrant cultural identity and presence in America.[126]

In both of Ha Jin's novels, immigrant characters are featured who only reluctantly subscribe to quintessential American Dream ideals, and who acknowledge, instead of genuine cultural integration, performative gestures of cultural belonging.

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[125] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers,' in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 50.
[126] Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, 'I Dare Not: The Muted Style of Writer in Exile Ha Jin,' *LA Review of Books*, January 11th, 2015.

This chapter proposes new methodologies for interpreting immigrant identities by examining the affective actions that lie behind assimilative performances, derived from a resistance to succumb to adaptive cultural norms. I explore how an im[migrant] is compelled to assimilate through the subjugation of their cultural identity in a new environment, subscribing to new nationalisms in their host countries. In Ha Jin's novels on disillusionment and failed desire, I focus on two immigrant protagonists that include: a model American Chinese immigrant, and an immigrant spy.

Chapter Two focuses on the psychological and corporeal ramifications of immigrants performing assimilation in both *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*. Both novels were written by Ha Jin at a pivotal moment after China's 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The novels revolve around interloper Chinese subjects compelled to perform assimilation as immigrants, navigating the cultural foreignness of suburban family living, or adopting the capitalist economics of monetary gain. Protagonists are obliged to integrate into American society, enacting performative gestures towards assimilation, resulting in complex, illegitimate feelings of identity and belonging. Immigrant characters are featured who mimic the performance of assimilation rather than wholeheartedly subscribe to American Dream ideals. Characters who handle the subsequent psychological ramifications that result from these differences are aptly portrayed in the novels. *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal* both feature protagonists who raise their families in America, negotiating positions in between conformity and retaining cultural sovereignty. The immigrant figure is welcomed but only by undergoing a process of assimilation that includes a successful bid for citizenship.

Two paradigms of performative immigrant identities are studied here: firstly, 'subversive' behaviors performed by protagonists to elide assimilation and secondly,

the engagement of suburban family myths strategically used to mask insurgency, and the secrecy of hidden identities. Characters trespass hospitable boundaries masked by seditious performances that mimic assimilative identities, allowing migrants to elide coercive and paternalistic discourses. In *A Free Life,* Nan's performance of assimilation elides racialized forms of conformity that immigrant communities are often compelled to acquiesce to upon settling in a foreign country. Nan implicitly feels the burden placed upon him by thinking and negotiating in a foreign language. Gary Shang, a foreign language interpreter in *A Map of Betrayal*, is fluent in English but has conflicted loyalties as a secret Chinese Communist spy.

The immigrant archetype is studied in this chapter as an individual suspended between one's original and present place of abode, resulting in complicated maneuvers in response to cultural adaptation. I build on and diverge from Chapter One's themes of a transcultural outside-ness by transversing towards performing assimilation and legitimacy in Chapter Two and focusing on immigrant tensions between peculiarity and inclusion. In both *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*, main characters perform the role of an economically upward-moving immigrant, their fiscal success aligned with their path from immigrant to citizen. However, in both novels, the acquisition of economic capital and legal citizenship demonstrates a debilitated ambition, the inadequate trappings of late capitalism. Both novels conflate identity and citizenship with economic success and materialism, revealing that the common trope of binding economic prosperity to national belonging is ultimately unsatisfactory and futile. Both *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal* examine tension faced by [im]migrants negotiating residency and citizenship, as well as the reconfiguration of an individual's patriotic identity and loyalty upon leaving home.

These feelings of inadequacy and exhaustion are at the centre of my research on cultural adaptation in this chapter. Performing assimilation masks the inherent emptiness of achieving the 'American Dream,' a hollow transactional exchange that is ultimately a bait and switch of unfulfilled ambition and distinctive conformity. Chapter Two explores how performative assimilation in *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal* plays a primary role in adapting an 'illegitimate' identity to conform—ultimately unsatisfyingly—to supposed cultural norms of American national aspirations and identity.

A Free Life: Performing Assimilation and Psychological Restraint

'Finally Taotao got his passport and visa.'[127] The first sentence of Ha Jin's novel acknowledges the tangled relationship that centers *A Free Life*'s major themes of illegitimacy, [im]migration and assimilation. *A Free Life* begins in the middle of the Wu family's immigration, with both parents, Nan and Pingping, anxiously awaiting their six-year-old son Taotao's arrival from China. The first word, '*Finally*,' also emphasizes the enduring but delayed process for travel documents that have separated the Wus from their son for two years.[128]

The novel emphasizes how precarious family situations complicate individual decision-making about migration and permanent residency. Neither Nan nor Pingping can return to China to fetch Taotao as the pivotal moment in the main characters' lives coincides with the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, resulting in the cancellation of all flights between the United States and China. At the beginning of

[127] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 18.

[128] Many of Ha Jin's novels revolve around the themes of enduring patience, anticipated but delayed gratification. Ha Jin's earlier novel *Waiting* is a plot that revolves around an army nurse waiting eighteen years for her lover to divorce his wife. Ha Jin, *Waiting*, (New York: Vintage, 2000).

the novel, the Wus have been separated from their son for over three years. Nobody in the Wu's extended family in China owns a passport, and neither Nan nor Pingping can return to China to fetch Taotao, due to visa regulations that effectively immobilize them across the Pacific Ocean.[129] Ha Jin shapes the primary themes of the novel to centre on how bureaucratic systems of formalising identity have ramifications for characters and migratory travel. This emphasis on the psychological strain of state-sanctioned inclusion builds tension to the novel's primary plot where characters travel back to China or remain in America because of pivotal legal and citizenship implications.

In addition to this traumatic family separation, Nan himself is suspected of counter-revolutionary plotting against China and his passport has been cancelled by the Chinese government while on temporary visitor status in the United States. The forcible revocation of Nan's Chinese citizenship demonstrates how the precarious nature of a legal residency orchestrates a possible outcome, where an individual is compelled to abandon his national identity. Nan's dismay over China cancelling his passport compels him to renounce his home country in return, although he has only been granted temporary United States residency status. [130]

When the novel begins, we learn that formerly, Nan and Pingping had never intended to immigrate permanently to America. When they are stranded in the United States because of the Tiananmen Square protests and the option to return to China is taken away from them, their reactions are an ambivalent response to their insecure immigration status. Nan is a newly married man who has fled from China due to a mixture of political unrest and personal unhappiness in his relationships. Driven into the role of immigrant family father, Nan reminisces about China and his previous life

[129] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 15.
[130] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 83.

with his ex-girlfriend Beina with a mixture of longing and desire for freedom. In the United States, he performs the role of a hard-working American immigrant, his behavior manifesting as a series of obedient and assimilative cultural gestures that enable him to blend into society. Nan's preoccupation with his tangled personal history left behind in China is a form of rebellion against this model minority identity. Ahmed suggests in her writings that estranged immigrants not only interrogate their own identities, but through patterns of estrangement, partially reconfigure their own home country's collective identity upon leaving.[131] Similarly, Nan's indefinite stay as a temporary American has him reorganising historical and political memory in his reconstructions of China as home and origins.

As the plot progresses, Nan is compelled by his wife Pingping to enact an immigrant's assimilative activities, such as capitalistic entrepreneurship and property acquisition. The longer his time in the United States, the more he is expected to adapt to cultural customs and, in doing so, legitimize his status. Culturally distinct intellectual activities, contrary to the accustomed immigrant path of economic entrepreneurship fails him. Nan abandons both graduate school as well as a short interlude working as a New York poetry editor when the magazine folds. The only actions that result in success are succumbing to capitalist economies: moving into conventional service spheres for new Asian immigrants such as working in a Chinese restaurant, buying his own house, and adopting the impersonation of suburban conformity by dutifully devoting himself to his wife Pingping and his son Taotao. Nan achieves success as a restaurant entrepreneur, buying his own house and 'naturalizing' into a United States citizen. Acquiring an American citizenship protects him from any China based repercussions that may occur due to political involvement

[131] Ahmed, *Strange* Encounters, 79.

or writings. As his son, Taotao, becomes an American citizen, Nan is compelled to stay in the United States offering his son a facsimile of the American Dream success. Nevertheless, upon obtaining these goals, Nan is plagued with an existential emptiness, wondering why 'success didn't mean as much to him as it should,' faced with the cynical realization that 'the whole notion of the American dream was shoddy, a hoax.'[132]

Performing adaptation also functions as a pretense of cultural assimilation, superficially conforming an interpretable 'foreign' identity to supposed cultural norms upon arrival. Nan's illegitimacy is alluded to as he performs non-native 'unamerican' values that are at odds with 'model immigrant behavior' such as a capitalist acquisition of home, property, and an evolution towards cultural assimilation. Persistence in speaking a foreign language or any adherence to an unfamiliar home country norm is viewed with suspicion. This is exemplified with Nan imagining the scorn of a Chinese–American stranger he encounters at the airport, envisaging her unheard comments as inspecting Nan as unsuitably 'unamerican,' with pro-Chinese sympathies making him 'red, if not red to the bone.'[133] Nan's fantasist scenario of other Asian-Americans disdaining his presence, exemplifies his anxiety about binary oppositions, determining the choice of his newly evolved American identity. The parameters of his identity are 'either/or'—he can either be Chinese or American, father or playboy, restaurateur, or poet, Democratic or Communist. These narrow parameters also determine the intentions behind his assimilative performance that he is compelled to exercise as a passing American. Conventionally, immigrants and travellers are compelled to conform quickly and unnaturally, as well as allow eurocentrism, among other systemic hierarchies to become the 'natural' order of

[132] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 419.
[133] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 5.

linearity. Assimilation is often aligned with Westernization or a colonisation of self. In *A Free Life*, immigrants must 'perform' cultural adaptation, emulating an 'expected' desire for an outsider to transform into expected identity configurations in society.

The performance of assimilation is problematized by representations of the Asian model minority myth in the tradition of Chinese diasporic novels, as discussed in the comprehensive scholarship of Yuko Kawai and Qin Zhang on Asian American stereotypes.[134] Chinese–American immigrants portrayed in novels actively labour to legitimize their presence as the 'model minority' by impersonating enthusiasm toward 'American Dream' goals such as economic stability, free market capitalism, and creation of nuclear immigrant families. Contemporary Chinese immigrant novels such as Eric Liu's *The Accidental Asian,* David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish*, and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* complicate foundational assumptions about the 'naturalness' of cultural assimilation purporting that minority or marginalized groups are only able to successfully live in new societies by incorporating cultural adaptation.[135]

Nan performs the role of the economically upward-moving immigrant, his fiscal success directly proportional to their permanent residency claims. Ha Jin portrays him as experiencing a subdued hollowness even as, or perhaps because, they reach their economic and American Dream goals too soon. Nan successfully buys his own Chinese restaurant and house. Becoming a United States citizen paradoxically offers protection from China, allowing him to travel back to his birth country without

[134] Yuko Kawai, 'Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril,' *Howard Journal of Communications*, 16:2, (2005), 109-130 and Zhang, Qin, 'Asian Americans Beyond the Model Minority Stereotype: The Nerdy and the Left Out,' *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, vol 3:1 (2010), 20-37.

[135] Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), David Henry Hwang, *Chinglish* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: Square Fish Publishing, 2008).

repercussions. His son Taotao becomes an American citizen, a fundamental reason that Nan chooses to stay in the United States, offering his son more access and opportunities. Nevertheless, upon obtaining these goals, Nan is plagued with an existential emptiness, wondering why 'success didn't mean as much to him as it should,' and faced with the cynical realization that 'the whole notion of the American dream was shoddy, a hoax.'[136]

Affect has a rich tradition of phenomenological and post-phenomenological work, exploring the dynamic, kinaesthetic processes that enable bodies to respond to changes in both morphological structure and environment. In alluding to bodily affect, Ahmed discusses 'the intrusion of an unexpected space into the body suggests that the experience of a new home involves an expansion and contraction of the skin, a process which is uncomfortable and well described as the irritation of an itch.'[137] Ahmed elaborates on bodily intrusion further in relation to memory and place, explaining that: 'the experience of leaving home in migration is hence always about the *failure of memory to make sense of the place one comes to inhabit*, a failure that is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body that feels out of place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by which appears as familiar.'[138]

Nan's struggle between the desire to live singularly as an individual, as an alternative to conforming to suburban family dynamics, is interpreted through an understanding of how emotional experiences physically traumatize the body. Introduced by Lisa Blackman, the concept of an open system is pertinent here, actively participating in the flow or passage of affect, and characterized by reciprocity

[136] Ha Jin, A *Free Life,* 553.
[137] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters,* 90.
[138] Sara Ahmed, Strange *Encounters,* 91.

and co-participation, rather than boundary and constraint.[139] Both Nan and Pingping have recurring physical issues in *A Free Life* that affect their psychology and temper, indicating that the body becomes intimately connected to significant change in their lives, including cultural integration or the fearful prospect of returning to China.

The Wu's assimilative journey of cultural integration aligns with the psychological and contractual shifting of their identities, as they learn to prioritize capitalism and free market economies exemplified in entrepreneurship and owning property. All these economic pursuits are the quintessential aspirations of the model American citizen. Ha Jin also uses figurative expressions of lightness and heaviness to represent the Wu's negotiation of daily American life, their emotional tempo measured in the psychological tension that affects their physical bodies. Nan's decision to apply for American citizenship weighs heavily on his mind as he refers to the immigration process as not originating with a 'light heart.'[140]

In the Wu family, the distinct identifications of 'heaviness' and 'lightness' reflect Nan and Pingping's attachment and estrangement to the United States and China. Nan's 'heavy heart' weighs him down as he experiences the assimilative actions desired to acquire citizenship. In contrast, Pingping's limbs feel 'lighter' because of her happiness in America, together with her son Taotao.[141] Pingping body is light and joyous when she envisions remaining in America, as if 'an internal glow expanded in her' as she 'hummed Chinese folk songs when she was cooking or sewing.'[142] The visceral happiness that Pingping experiences when she envisions remaining in America is magnified by the dread she experiences when contemplating

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[139] Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (New York: Sage Books, 2012), 2.
[140] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 868.
[141] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 38.
[142] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 49.

a return to China. Thoughts about an ominous return to her home country provoke nightmares, involving cultural inadaptability intimately associated with the body. Pingping's recurring horrified visions of returning to China, involve the inability to rest one's body or physically adapt. In her dreams, Pingping frantically searches for a clean toilet in China to no avail, refiguring the conception of the body as an organism directly related to the trauma of adaptation..[143] In *A Free Life*, bodily urges are significantly tied to psychological character anxiety, specifically vomiting, stomach-aches, headaches, blurry vision and back pain.[144] At a pivotal moment in the novel, Nan describes his body as desiring to 'travel light' by discarding the 'China baggage' he carries with him to the United States.[145]

Emotional bodily feelings hold special significance to the Wus' everyday immigrant life. Nan's love for his ex-girlfriend Beina has him 'gripped by paroxysms' of physical pain.'[146] The heart, rather than a conventional symbol to convey emotion, is described as a physical organ that is 'crushed', and 'dumped somewhere' that Nan neglects to recover.[147] These recurring examples of his greatest feelings directed towards an absent character in the novel, reiterate the affectiveness of physical connotations, largely gesturing towards the psychological trauma that migrants feel towards a missing presence. As time progresses, Nan begins to forget his ex-girlfriend Beina, but in keeping with the interconnection of emotion and physical body pain, Nan describes the 'numb pain' as still 'lingering in his chest,' no longer as 'acute' as

[143] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 78. For more on the fascinating connections between physical function and legitimacy, see Rohinton Mistry's short story 'Squatter', a story of a South Asian protagonist who is unable to culturally adapt to Canada by sitting on the toilet. Rohinton Mistry, 'Squatter,' *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, (Toronto: Emblem Editions, 1997).
[144] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 21-22.
[145] Ha Jin, A *Free Life*, 117.
[146] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 58.
[147] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 59.

before. [148] In the context of his loss of emotional complexity, he describes his mind as deteriorating into banality, his body remaining physically strong. As he succeeds in assimilating as a model immigrant in capitalistic endeavors, his mind becomes 'empty', and he 'simply didn't have the energy to think of ideas, much less write anything.' [149]

Nan's daily activities in America expose the emotional instability that results from adapting to immigrant life and formalising his presence through acts of performing assimilation. He attends a church service held by an exiled Chinese dissident, who converted into a Christian pastor upon American immigration. Nan finds that one of the pastor's phrases resonates with his feelings, the words echoing meaningfully in his head: 'we have gained the freedom of the sky but lost the gravity of the earth.'[150] He contemplates how this expression describes the existential condition of Chinese exiles such as himself, living in the United States and forced to confront a terrible freedom of choice and government that they have never asked for.

The sudden loss of their Chinese homeland, a country that is framed in Nan's mind as authoritarian and tyrannical, differs from his earlier impressions of America as a country of freedom and opportunity. However, his freedom comes at the price of losing his sense of 'gravity' and acknowledged place in the world as Nan ruminates on this subject to himself in an interior Mandarin monologue:

> Men from Mainland China tended to have a devil of a temper because they had lost their sense of superiority, especially some college graduates who had been viewed as the best of their generation in their homeland; here as new arrivals they had to start from scratch like others and mentally they weren't primed for such a drastic change. Worse still, their former privileged life had deprived them of the vitality and stamina needed for grappling with adversities

[148] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 339.
[149] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 399.
[150] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 574.

> in order to take root in the American soil; as a consequence, the emigration blighted many of them.[151]

Nan demonstrates his knowledge of both transformative identities and a vulnerable emasculation that occurs after immigration, where immigrant men are stricken with a blow to their self-confidence by having their traditional masculinity usurped. Particularly for Nan, an exile who never chose to leave his country permanently, the assimilation process into citizenship brings its own difficulties.

In *A Free Life*, the novel explores not only the complications of when immigrants transform or perform assimilation, but also the consequences when the American Dream no longer measures up to the promises offered. In Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, she explores the fraying components of American Dream fantasies that include 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, lively and durable intimacy.'[152] Berlant analyzes the intimacies of public communities, affective components of citizenship and aspects of the public sphere that influence relations of love and the law in America. *Cruel Optimism* discusses the possibility of desire to act as an 'affectively stunning double bind,' where one's desires effectively block the satisfaction of happiness, and yet individuals are bound to the promise of optimism that those fantasies have come to represent.[153] The relations of attachment are desirable and aspirational but also represent 'compromised conditions of possibility,' where one discovers that the possibility of success in attaining these fantasies is 'impossible and sheer fantasy,' or 'too possible, and toxic.'[154] Berlant's cruel optimism is meaningfully applied to the promise and disappointment of the American Dream in immigrant strivers, specifically Nan in *A Free Life.* Textual examples of

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[151] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 406.
[152] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
[153] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51.
[154] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51.

these disappointments are exemplified in Nan's fantasies of his ex-girlfriend Beina in China inhibiting him from finding real happiness in his contrived role as a motivated American father in a nuclear family.

Nan's illegitimacy is amplified by the rules of cultural integration he must follow in a new country. He must learn the English language and engage in commerce by opening a restaurant to interact with locals and become a part of the community. In a broader sense, Nan must do his part as an immigrant in performing per the rules of assimilation to become a part of the American community. He is a successful college graduate with an established career path in China, who is now compelled to forgo his dreams to adapt to American society and culture. Disillusioned, he is prone to violent outbursts as a means of coping with the psychological anxiety of immigrant assimilation. Nan despairs about his speaking, acting, writing, difficulties exclaiming that 'I feel like crippled man here.' [155] His sacrifices to acquiesce and compromise in forging new cultural ties within his own psyche as well as with others, also reveal the heavy trauma of an inevitable disappointment in the failed promises of the American Dream, referencing Berlant's cruel optimism of a dream promised yet never delivered.

Throughout the novel, Nan grapples with emotional turmoil when confronted with performing cultural adaptation and integrating into American culture. It is the successful integrative actions characteristic of an assimilative immigrant that leave Nan's mind most troubled. Although he pursues a model of economic immigrant success and outwardly assimilates into American culture, his mind and feelings are described throughout the novel as increasingly 'disordered and unclear,' his body is

[155] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 51.

always unwell, 'running a temperature, about to collapse.'[156] Nan's difficult relationship with his son, Taotao, is part of this disappointment, interpreted throughout the novel because of an early separation between him and Nan when he had first moved to America. The promise of familial utopia and the safety of patriarchal systems, represented in the ties of father and son, are expressed as disappointment and rage in *A Free Life.* The estrangement between father and son is implied because of the separation of time and distance between them. Taotao was born in China and did not meet Nan until he arrived in America at six years old.

A frightening example that occurs later in the novel underlines this disappointment, exemplified in Nan threatening Taotao in a rage after he discovers his son disobeying him. Nan acts out in physical violence, brutally slapping his son's face and head and shouting that he's 'had enough of this miserable life.'[157] Escalating tension is depicted in the novel when Nan is driving his son Taotao to the library, and he accidentally scrapes a police officer's car. When the police officer jots down his license number and is about to let him off with a warning, Nan irrationally bursts out in response: 'Why don't you [shoot me] now? Keel me please!'[158] In reprisal, the officer, taken aback, revokes his license largely due to his unbalanced outburst, but Nan continues yelling: 'Why not keel me instead? Come on, put me out of this suffering! I'm sick of zis uncertain life. Please fire your gahn!'[159]

Nan's irrational outburst at the policeman hints at the crushing tension he feels at performing assimilative behaviours indicative of American cultural integration. Both examples of Nan's outbursts (the interaction shown between the policeman and Taotao, his son) follow similar language patterns and escalation, exposing the

[156] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 159.
[157] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 623.
[158] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 399.
[159] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 164.

psychological trauma behind his seemingly placid exterior, and the frustration of performing an adapted assimilation that is below the surface of his American 'free' life. Nan's outburst of being 'sick of zis uncertain life' suggests that living in uncertain, illegitimate limbo and being compelled to mimic a successful immigrant adaptation causes him psychological and emotional duress. His conflict with law enforcement also affirms the madness of his actions, his foolish plea of 'keel me!' underlines a need to free himself from the inevitable performance of adaptation into a bonafide American.[160]

Nan's ambivalence about citizenship and assimilation (both American and Chinese) intensifies in his conversations with other characters illuminating the emotional differences in citizenship and identity. In addition to adapting to American life, Nan's vocal outbursts and frustration are associated with his desire to renounce China as his home. His perceptions of China are a mixture of ambivalence and bitterness originating from the way the country treats its citizens. He bitterly relays his feelings to Danning, another Chinese American exile:

> China isn't my country anymore. I spit at China, because it treats its citizens like gullible children and always prevents them from growing up into real individuals. It demands nothing but obedience. To me, loyalty is a two-way street. China has betrayed me. So I refuse to remain its subject anymore.'
> 'Come now, you're not an American citizen yet.'
> 'I've wrenched China out of my heart.' Nan grimaced, his eyes brimming with tears.[161]

This passage illuminates a pivotal turn in the novel as it significantly divulges Nan's decision to officially renounce China's sovereignty. Nan's emotional reaction reflect the difficulty of his decision and his ambivalence towards his homeland. The

[160] There is a long history of protagonists in Chinese contemporary literature that are portrayed as 'mad' to reveal to readers the truth about a corrupt or unjust society. For more Chinese stories on the theme of the Madman, see: Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), Yu Hua's '1986' in *The Past and the Punishments* (Manila: Ataneo de Manila Univ Press, 1996), and Yiyun Li's 'Love in the Marketplace' in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, (London: Harper Perennial 2005), 92-111.
[161] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 290.

Chinese government's revocation of Nan's passport is, to him, a clear indication of his country's choice to punish those citizens who disobey. Nan views the revocation of his passport as a 'betrayal' and, in return, he feels that he can deny China's sovereignty and claim independence after this action from his country of origin. His exchange with Danning encapsulates the agony that the exile feels when faced with the option of willfully choosing to forget his homeland. Danning declares to Nan that he cannot 'renounce' China as he is 'not an American citizen yet.'[162] Danning's assertion is significant, as it reveals to the reader the commonly held assumption that an individual should not 'break' with a nationalistic identity until they have assimilated and become legal citizens in a new country. Nan's doubts in this passage problematize the belief that an individual must *belong* to a country, where legal status implies identification.

In *A Free Life,* Nan and Pingping are foil characters who differentiate in their performance as immigrant subjects. In contrast to Pingping's joy at living permanently abroad, Nan feels unenthusiastic about the American immigration process. When the Wu's finally achieve their economic goals of owning their own home and business, instead of joy, Nan is baffled. He berates his own uncertainty, reflecting that he should 'feel successful,' yet 'somehow the success didn't mean as much to him as it should.'[163] Ha Jin emphasizes the conflict between the young couple's attitudes towards money as an overarching metaphor for their differing attitudes towards assimilation and citizenship. Pingping, with her eagerness to save money, buy a restaurant and pay their mortgage, represents the capitalist aspirations of the model American immigrant. Nan admits that 'before he met Pingping, he had

[162] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 290
[163] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 419.

always spent every penny of his salary each month.'[164] Nan's disinterested attitude towards fiscal responsibility allows him to realize that he was never 'possessed by the hunger that drives new immigrants to wrestle with fortune.'[165]

In *A Free Life*'s representation of immigrant assimilation to American society, freedom is equated with financial security, which the novel actively questions by underlying Nan's psychological distress at adapting to these economic choices. When the Wus finally purchase their home, the sellers (also Chinese immigrants) congratulate them by noting that their economic and assimilative success in America is intertwined. A brief conversation ensues in which the real estate agent Mr. Wolfe chimes 'A home is where you start to build your fortune,' and the seller Mr. Shang agreed with 'that's right,' and 'this is a major step toward realizing your American dream.'[166] Both men's comments demonstrate that the Wu's cultural assimilation includes adopting the materialist values of capitalism, striving to be a successful businessman and owning his car and home. By seemingly adopting American aspirational values, Nan performs a cultural transition from being Chinese to Chinese American.

Nan's pursuit of capitalist success centering around a nuclear family is with mixed feelings; he prefers writing poetry and pursuing his wild ex-girlfriend Beina to settling into a staid family life with Pingping and Taotao. He aspires to be a poet, not an immigrant entrepreneur. He performs the actions leading towards capitalist success but finds it spiritually unfulfilling. Nan ponders bitterly that in America, 'your worth was measured by the property you owned and by the amount you had in the bank.'[167]

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[164] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 207.
[165] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 137.
[166] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 313.
[167] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 129.

He is ambivalent about the trappings of American assimilation that prioritizes cultural belonging through capitalism commenting:

> In this place if you didn't make money, you were a loser, a nobody. Your worth was measured by the property you owned and by the amount you had in the bank. On the radio, the host of *Money Matters* would ask callers blatantly, 'what's your worth?' You couldn't answer, 'I hold two master's degrees' or 'I'm a model worker' or 'I'm an honest guy.' You had to come up with a specific figure. On TV, jolly old men would declare, 'I feel like a million bucks!'.....Money, money, money—money was God in this place.[168]

In Nan's experience, successful adaptation to American life is correlated with capitalistic economic standing. His psychological apathy towards economic striving is a telling example of resisting American materialistic trappings of cultural success. Nan's temporary immigrant situation is made permanent under mitigating circumstances, revealing the psychological ramifications that result from this prolonged journey.

Through Nan's character, immigrant identity is explored in a way that counters the assumption of moving inevitably on a trajectory towards cultural assimilation. Sara Ahmed's research on migration and estrangement is formative in my understanding of immigrant identities as inherently transgressive, their presence compelling national patriotic systems to reimagine relationships to privilege, social marginality, and historical acts.[169] On immigrant subjects, Ahmed writes that: 'memory is a collective act which produces its object (the 'we'), as a construction of identity rather than a reflection on an identity already set.'[170] This introduces settler and immigrant identities as determinate upon relationships, communities and environment, as well as constructing an instinctual improvisation that contradicts historical patterns of estrangement. The emergence of nationalism and cultural

[168] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 129-130.
[169] Ahmed, 'Home and Away,' 333.
[170] Ahmed, 'Home and Away,' 334.

identity is remediated and challenged from the extrinsic perspective of those who have left home.[171]

Nan may feel economic security in America, but it is significant that his vocally strong opinions against the Chinese government differ from his reticence in giving opinions on America. He is unfamiliar with the freedom of articulation, noting that he 'wasn't a citizen yet and couldn't vote, or he'd have argued more often with Dave over politics and the upcoming presidential election.'[172] In *A Free Life*, freedom of expression and creativity contrast with the accelerated economic engine of late capitalism, made transparent through the exemplification of the right to vote. Nan believes that he only has the 'right' to discuss politics after his American assimilation. As a visitor on a temporary visa, he feels that he does not have this same right to voice his opinion on the United States government, where he is not a permanent resident. This differentiation that he feels between China and the United States shows a lack of a sense of ownership. In *A Free Life,* national belonging has filled Nan with disappointment and punctured his aspiration towards either country's citizenship.

Nan's feelings about his inability to participate in the American democratic system suggest how assimilation does not encompass the psychological ownership that is part of belonging to a country. In *A Free Life*, the state allows property purchase and working rights, but will not allow residents to participate in elections. Thus, residents (permanent or otherwise) are both included and excluded simultaneously. New immigrants can participate in the freedom of enterprise and capitalism but are unable to access less materialistic citizenship markers of belonging such as democratic vote. Nan's participation in the American capitalist enterprise of owning property is also anticlimactic. The novel problematizes this attitude of

[171] Ahmed, 'Home and Away,' 334.
[172] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 254.

equating freedom with materialism and economic security through Nan reflecting on their economic freedom, indicative of the purchase of an American Dream.

In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) about *A Free Life*, Ha Jin describes Nan as not 'mentally ready' to apply for citizenship as he had always intended his stay in the United States to be temporary. When his Chinese passport is taken away from him and the Tiananmen Square Protests meant he could no longer return to China, he had to 'mentally adapt himself to American life and the idea of freedom…he was given freedom, but he couldn't use it.'[173] Nan eventually legitimizes his presence in America transforming from visitor, permanent resident, to citizen. Ha Jin explores how American citizenship limits and constrains Nan's behavior, as his citizenship status begins to function as a form of legitimacy and normalization.

Several characters emphasize Nan's good fortune, including Shubo, another Chinese immigrant. When reflecting on Nan's family and property, tangible markers of immigrant success, he emphasizes that Nan was a 'lucky man who had everything.'[174] Dick, an American poet beleaguered by the fleeting nature of academic success, also wistfully remarks upon Nan's good fortune to have not only a family, but 'your own home and business, a solid base.'[175] The significance of both observations is that they dwell upon Nan's accomplishments in achieving the nuclear family unit as well as his financial success in his own property and business, both of which are quintessential markers of American Dream achievement goals. These goals, after all, can seem hollow. In Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, she explains how they become aspirations of disillusioned desire, the achievement, once realized is ultimately of disappointment.

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[173] Ha Jin, 'Immigrant Struggles to Find Meaning in *A Free Life,'* interview by Jacki Lyden, November 4th, 2007, *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15900901.
[174] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 43.
[175] Ha Jin, A *Free Life,* 617, 758.

At the end of *A Free Life*, Nan returns to China for a holiday due to a fortunate windfall; he wins a ticket back to China through a supermarket lottery. On the plane to China, he experiences intense physical illness; his throat is itchy, and his windpipe is tight. Nan's anxiety about returning to China is manifested as aggressive physical symptoms; he is quite simply, unable to breathe. When Nan confesses his China specific illness to his friend, Danning laughs and replied 'when my wife came back from America, she had the same problem. It took her a month to get used to the air here, to become a Chinese again.'[176] Again, the trauma of cultural adaptation is interpretable through physiological and bodily strain shown by the immigrant main characters in the novel. As Berlant expresses on immigrant archetypes, potential change that affects an individual is 'somatic,' an 'impact lived upon the body before anything is understood.'[177] Nan recalls this cultural adaptation occurring in reverse when he remembers his first experience of travelling to the United States, equating his foreignness to physical illness and realizing that he and fellow Chinese travellers had 'experienced nausea due to a 'typical American odor that sickened some new arrivals.[178] The visceral memory of this olfactory bodily sensation affects Nan, 'so much that he is unable to swallow the in-flight meal of Parmesan chicken served in a plastic dish' and substantiates the psychological trauma that relates to bodily discomfort.[179] In *A Free Life*, everywhere in the United States has this 'sweetish smell, like a kind of chemical, especially in the supermarket, where even vegetables and fruits had it,' before finally near the end of the novel 'Nan suddenly found that his nose could no longer detect it.'[180]

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[176] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 533.
[177] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 39.
[178] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 533.
[179] Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 533.
[180] Ha Jin, *A Free Life,* 526.

It is significant that the longer Nan remains in the United States, the less he can detect once he discerns a foreign smell. Acts of performative assimilation have infiltrated his identity so that he no longer notices differences as an outsider. Nan's olfactory symptoms are an example of affective trauma that instigates major changes in the body. The differences in Nan's body, connoted in his sense of physical smell, demonstrates that he has enfolded the foreign into himself, adopting his host's language and culture. Nan is no longer an outsider; his body and physical reactions imply the disturbances and strain on adapting immigrants.

In Walter Kirn's *New York Times* review of *A Free Life,* he elaborates on the disillusionment of immigrant strivers such as Nan and Pingping upon reaching their American dreams of success:

> The novel's sole mystery is how satisfied the Wus will feel when they pull up the rope ladder behind them and kick back in their little piece of heaven. The range of possibilities is narrow. They won't be euphoric—it's not their way—but they won't be radically disappointed, either. A headspinning windfall might unhinge them, yes, but what seems most likely, and what we watch occur, is their introduction to the faint melancholy of 'Is this all there is?' American comfort, followed by Nan's resolution to aim higher on the spiritual and mental plane the instant his mortgage is paid off.[181]

Kirn's critique pinpoints Ha Jin's exploration of Nan's feelings in the larger issues of malaise, performance, disappointment, and disillusionment that beset impermanent residents before they are granted the supposed end goal of citizenship. Kirn explains how, significantly, citizenship, rather than being a host's unalloyed gift, contains the double-edged sword of assimilation and homogenization of values. The fact that Nan belongs to neither country for most of the book liberates him sufficiently that he feels an ambivalence of identity in *A Free Life. A Free Life* suggests a philosophical inquiry into different kinds of freedom, or what constitutes independence, privilege,

[181] 'Walter Kirn, 'Pleased to Be Here,' review of *A Free Life*, by Ha Jin, *New York Times*, November 25th, 2007, Sunday Book Review, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/books/review/Kirn-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

and opportunity. It also ironically asks the question of whether a free life as a citizen is possible, or whether an individual must always adhere to a certain country's cultural values, in which case one is never free.

Nan's illegitimate feelings are a metaphor for his legal situation as a visitor, resident, and citizen in *A Free Life*. As he becomes a legitimate citizen, he learns to perform the transition into American society more successfully. However, his assimilation is incomplete. This is demonstrated by the lack of fulfillment he feels throughout the book, not fully belonging to a Chinese community in America, and finally no longer belonging in China either. The English dictionary that he carries in his pocket to communicate and the Chinese food at his restaurant that he 'americanizes' for the Western palate (egg foo yung, stir fry) are signifiers that reveal his imperfect cultural assimilation. By becoming a permanent American resident, Nan no longer belongs in either country, but through political circumstances, is forced to accept legal status in the United States. This is exemplified through his trappings of American capitalism, which he adopts but does not embrace. In short, *A Free Life* offers the story of an immigrant, compelled through various circumstances to transform a temporary immigration into permanent, and thus, perform assimilation into subverting nationalist boundaries of both Chinese and American evolving cultural identities.

A Map of Betrayal: The Immigrant as Spy

If *A Free Life* centers on the complex performance of assimilation as a demonstratively model citizen, then *A Map of Betrayal* focuses on performing citizenship as insubordination, addressing themes of traitorous behavior. In analyzing this second novel, I further explore deterritorialized perspectives that challenge

dominant discourses by examining an interloper Chinese subject. Spanning over three decades and involving the trading of secrets, surveillance, espionage, and spy craft, Gary Shang, the novel's protagonist, is accused of betraying both China and the United States. In Shang's emotional and familial ties to both countries, the novel portrays him in a double bind as both a model immigrant and traitorous citizen. *A Map of Betrayal* reflects on the same assimilation struggles as *A Free Life*, although the difference is the earlier novel features a model Chinese American immigrant and the latter novel a foreign spy. Ha Jin's exploration of performing assimilation and citizenship moves from an immigrant's naturalization in *A Free Life* to deviant espionage in *A Map of Betrayal*.

A Map of Betrayal is a doppelganger to *A Free Life* with protagonist Gary Shang eerily mirroring Nan. Instead of Nan's Chinese immigrant family, Shang marries into an Anglo-American family, making life choices derived from providing financial stability for his growing household. As a Chinese Communist Party spy, Shang's career and American residence choices are plausibly decisions made from nationalistic fervor for his motherland. However, although he proclaims loyalty to his veiled Communist employers, he also outwardly pursues capitalist and democratic aspirations, such as the enterprise of owning his own business and applying for United States citizenship. In *A Free Life*, Nan's return home to China for a short vacation results in a bodily reaction of turmoil and repulsion. In Gary Shang's case, he never returns to China and is eventually imprisoned in American exile.

A Map of Betrayal focuses on events in the 1960s and 1970s when Sino-American relations were experiencing a dramatic change from the termination of relations during the Korean War, to the beginning of a rapprochement during

Nixon's visit to China in 1971, finally evolving to official United States recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1979. During these turbulent decades of change, Gary Shang joins the American foreign translation office largely due to his fluent ability to translate Chinese to English. Later in the novel, he becomes a high-ranking Chinese Communist spy, infiltrating the upper echelons of American government service, and moving into the heart of the Department of Defense headquarters in Arlington County, Virginia. Shang is consulted for his assessment and expertise on Sino-United States relations by both United States and Chinese governments, essentially transforming him into a double agent.

Analogous to the themes in *A Free Life*, *Shang* also grapples with assimilation in America, like Nan. However, the differing circumstances being that in *A Map of Betrayal*, he is instructed by China to acquire American citizenship to betray the United States as a spy. Although the events in *A Map of Betrayal* take place historically before *A Free Life*, I consider Ha Jin's spy surveillance novel a sequel to issues that center on the traumatic and affective changes relating to evolving transnational identities. *A Map of Betrayal*'s plot of an immigrant transformed into an interloper suggests a maturing of Ha Jin's exploratory subject on model immigrants, the complexity of assimilation, the nuclear family, and the indifference of late capitalism.

In *A Free Life,* the Wu family immigrates not through planning or design, but due to circumstances relating to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which result in the cancellation of Nan's Chinese passport. The revoking of Nan's Chinese citizenship causes him to 'wrench China from his heart,' painfully embarking on a gradual transformative process of assimilation in American society. In *A Map of Betrayal*, the protagonist, Gary Shang, also performs assimilation but in affiliation

to a different set of circumstances: a fortuitous job opportunity resulting in the hastening of circumstances that lead towards his American immigration. Instead of bitterly renouncing his homeland like Nan, Shang resignedly convinces himself that there is 'glory in serving his country' and obeys China's orders to remain in America undercover as an immigrant.[182] Shang's path to legitimate American citizenship status compels him to infiltrate American society as an informer, an outsider masking himself as an insider. However, the reward for his undying patriotism is treachery. Once Shang is exposed as a spy, the Chinese government refuses to acknowledge his citizenship, suggesting that all his years of nationalist loyalty in favour of China are unreciprocated.

A Map of Betrayal continues similar themes explored in *A Free Life*, with immigrant characters experiencing the failure of both countries to live up to the promise of citizenship and homeland. Ha Jin explores the concept of both immigrant and spy as an outsider in society, reluctantly 'acting' the part of an assimilative individual, hiding the deep ambivalence and complex sacrifices that a migrant feels upon adapting to a new country. The novel explores further iterations of assimilation by using the spy concept to 'perform citizenship.' This doubling of identities is exemplified in the performance of the nuclear family, the failed promise of the immigrant American Dream and an individual's choices between private family loyalties and state nationalism.

Pal Ahluwalia problematizes assumptions about the close relationship between nation-states and citizenship by implying that postcolonial subjects are more authentically portrayed as immigrants with multiple identities 'shaped continually by the practice of everyday life in which they have the capacity to resist, to speak and to

[182] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 159.

act as citizen subjects.'[183] Migrant subjects who play the role of outsiders are detached from a specific geographical space and practice 'alternative forms of citizenship,' that become vital to forming identities.[184] Artful acts of adaptation produce legitimate identities, but the artfulness reveals the work and cost of doing so. The necessity of labour requires an ethics of care that is often invisible and neglected in the machinations of society. Performative identities constructed by immigrants collide with actively belonging in a new place of residence and affect immigrants both spiritually and economically. The character Gary Shang explores the psychological ramifications of illegitimate immigrant identities that conform through artful acts of performing cultural adaptation.

Ha Jin intentionally reiterates [im]migrant assimilation themes that connect Nan in *A Free Life* and Gary Shang in *A Map of Betrayal*. *A Map of Betrayal* reflects the same ambivalent struggles as *A Free Life*, although the earlier written novel features a Chinese American immigrant, and the later novel a foreign spy. Both novels centre on a protagonist who is disillusioned with suburban and familial conformity and experiences similar hardships—psychological and economical—during their years spent in America. In *A Free Life*, Nan's reluctant participation in capitalist economics and the creation of a nuclear family unit complies with integral cultural ideals of American identity. He must cooperate with acquiring the trappings of a successful American life, until he internally assimilates to American culture. In *A Map of Betrayal*, Gary Shang is encouraged by China to mimic assimilation by marrying an American woman, constructing long-lasting ties that will be difficult to untangle. He performs this assimilation on behalf of Chinese

[183] Pal Ahluwalia, 'Towards (Re)Conciliation: The Post-Colonial Economy of Giving,' *Social Identities*, vol 6, (2000), 185.
[184] Pal Ahluwalia, 'Towards (Re)Conciliation,' 185.

espionage rather than due to an authentic desire to culturally adapt to American culture. Shang successfully performs adaptation in multiple ways: visibly becoming an upstanding citizen by owning his own home, marrying an American citizen, and beginning his own nuclear family, finally even receiving a medal for distinguished services by the United States Central Intelligence Agency.[185]

However, much like Nan's hollowness in performing assimilation in *A Free Life*, Shang's emotions are described as uncharacteristically numb during these triumphs. He is denigrated by his American wife, Nelly, as 'cold' and his daughter, Lilian, characterizes her father's heart as absent, explaining 'wherever he went, he'd feel out of place, like a stranded traveller.'[186] Shang reflects in his own diary, 'If he were a regular immigrant, he'd have felt like a success, like those who would brag to the people back in their native lands that they had made it in America.'[187] Recalling *A Free Life*'s protagonist Nan feeling equivalently numb at similar accomplishments in achieving immigrant capitalist success, Ha Jin's purpose in both novels is to expose that the suppression of original cultural identities often causes affective psychological harm and repression that manifests in insidious and affective ways.

The subterfuge of Weimin Shang's spy career begins when he is renamed with the English first name Gary Shang in *A Map of Betrayal*. Informed by Chinese officials that his infiltration into the United States government sector will be akin to a 'Trojan Horse' strategy, Gary is commanded by the Chinese government to insinuate himself into the American foreign diplomatic services. His name is legally changed to 'Gary Shang' under the auspices of sounding more 'savvy' and

[185] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 221.
[186] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 103.
[187] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 197.

'fashionable' for a young Chinese man to have an English name.[188] From this pivotal moment of renaming, Shang begins to live a dual life, doubling his performance of nationalism in two different countries. He performs assimilative actions in the United States, succumbing to American culture on the surface, while also dutifully reporting back to China. His life consists of a doubling of families, bank accounts, names, and identities, emphasizing the divided loyalties that fragment his identity in two countries. He is ordered by the Chinese government to seek legitimate status in America only to penetrate secrets of national security. Although citizenship is meant to contain the threat of Shang's Otherness, instead, it merely allows him further license to infiltrate.

In July 1950, Shang is dispatched by the United States government to Busan, Korea, to assist in interrogating Chinese POWs held by the United Nations. He serves as an interpreter for US prison officers and Chinese prisoners. During this period, Shang is also ordered by the Chinese government to shoot furtive photographs of the Chinese prisoners and those who declare themselves anti-communist. He diligently follows orders and manages to send the films to Hong Kong and onwards to China. Months later, Gary meets Bingwen Chu, his spy handler, who informs him that several men were sentenced and executed in China as a direct result of Shang's photos. Shang is appalled at the consequences of his actions, but his reflexive response is to evade, he refuses to address the issue. Later, while in Hong Kong, he condoned his own actions with the self-defence that 'whatever I did was out of my deep love for our motherland.'[189] This well-intentioned portrayal of a patriot of both countries is complicated by exposing a complex ambivalence in some of Shang's more sophisticated spy maneuvers that result in death for those he informs on. In *A*

[188] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 175.
[189] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 451.

Map of Betrayal, Gary Shang's fantasy of himself as an integral peacemaker who mediates between China and the United States also reveals his conditions and environment are, by nature, already corrupted by his impossible desires in compromised conditions in his new country.[190]

Family is instrumentalized for spy surveillance purposes through affective infiltration and betrayal. Both *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal* explore distinctive immigrant archetypes and the two main characters Nan and Shang experience similar psychological anguish during their American years. In *A Free Life,* Nan's business entrepreneurship and suburban family contribution are reluctant but integral in assimilating into America's cultural ideals. He must acquire the economic trappings of American life until he internally assimilates to the culture. In *A Map of Betrayal,* Gary Shang is encouraged by China to mimic assimilation into American life by marrying an American woman, buying a home, creating long-lasting ties that will be difficult to untangle (such as having children), making it abundantly clear that it is a performance of Chinese loyalty rather than genuine American adaptation.

Neither Nan nor Gary is adept at performing the role of natural family men. They are uncomfortable with enacting the guise of the suburban American father. Ha Jin intentionally reiterates the struggle of immigrant assimilation, connecting Nan and Shang through suburban family archetypes. The suburban family is satirized in *A Map of Betrayal* with Shang's pregnant American wife Nellie parodying a zanier version of the character Lucy from *I Love Lucy*, the mixed-race sitcom about family suburbia.[191] The novel describes Nellie as `dy[ing] her hair fiery red like Lucy's, and when she

[190] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 45.

[191] *I Love Lucy* (1951) was an American sitcom that featured Lucy, a red-headed Anglo-White woman and Ricky Ricardo, her Cuban American husband.

didn't like what Gary said, she'd grunt "Eww" in imitation of that funny woman.'[192] The emphasis on American family as a parody genre reiterates the staged nature of immigrants expected to assimilate and perform in stable, suburban family homes and participate in collective socially prescriptive identities. Shang performs a fatherly role and is characterized to some extent as 'a good family man,' with his neighbors impressed by his home's upkeep with its aesthetic facade and the chrysanthemum flowers he had diligently planted around his house as signifiers of suburban conformity. Yet, his neighbors and his American in-laws also suspiciously describe him as 'detached from what was going on around him,' refusing to 'mix with others,' and acknowledging his outsider nature.[193] Shang is described as numb and unfeeling in many instances. On his wedding day to his American Anglo-wife Nelly, his father-in-law remarks: 'Jesus Christ, the dude kept a poker face even at his own wedding. I wonder what can make him happy.'[194]

Shang dissembles often in the novel, portraying himself as a well-intentioned spy, in earnest about fabricating positive relationships between the United States and China through analysis and information. He is a 'spy analyst,' advising China with his privileged insider information on international affairs. He cleverly shapes his portrait in the novel as an ambivalent area between betrayal (passing on illegal secret information to foreign countries) and foreign service (absorbing information and smoothing the path towards bi-country diplomacy). At the novel's conclusion, when Shang is exposed and compelled to testify at trial, his words reveal the tension that has underpinned his precarious positioning. Shang emphasizes that 'the two countries [China and the United States] are like parents to me, so as a son I cannot separate the

[192] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 92.
[193] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 134.
[194] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 91.

two and I love them both.'[195] The suburban family metaphor, both in major and minor situations in the novel is significant in shaping a novel of acculturation, assimilation, surveillance, and betrayal.

Migration has a broader and more complex impact than individuals moving or relocating across borders. Where they consider home, or leaving home, affects the history of their previous and present environments. Ahmed explores the possibilities of how bodies reconstruct space, identity, and environments as they move from their countries of origins to new environments. She argues that an immigrant's imperfect fading memories of home and evolving identities placed in a new context can transform a national sense of identity for communities. According to her research, a country's collective history and national identity evolve with the departure of its citizens and, subsequently, the transformed imperfect memories of their homeland. Immigration complicates our notion of what 'home' means, both for the narrative of 'being at home' and for the narrative of 'leaving home', arguing that through immigration, one's historical past and present is forever changed.[196] Shang's divided loyalties between China and the United States exemplify how an immigrant's identity and body transform in adjusting to new rules of culture.

Ultimately the doubling of citizenship and private lives result in severe consequences for Shang's psychological turmoil. Conflicted feelings pull him in different directions toward both the country of his residence and his birth. Lillian discusses this struggle with Uncle Bingwen, her father's old comrade:

> 'But I know this: he loved China and did a great service to our country.'
> 'So he was a patriot?'
> 'Beyond any doubt.'
> 'Did it ever occur to you that he might have loved the United States as well?'

[195] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 531.
[196] Ahmed, 'Home and Away,' 331.

> 'Yes. We read about that…in some newspaper articles on the trial. I could sympathize with him. No fish can remain…unaffected by the water it swims in…'[197]

Similarly, to Nan in *A Free Life*, Shang's identity is divided between two countries and his loyalty is a double performance. This division of loyalties began early in his espionage career when, upon hearing the news that the Chinese Army had ambushed US troops east of Yalu, he reacted viscerally 'hiding his face in the glossy leaves while tears streamed down his cheeks.'[198] In another telling example, upon hearing of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Shang again is overcome with emotion, bursting into tears at work in front of empathetic colleagues. Shang's overwrought emotions demonstrate his complicated ambivalence and reflect his desire to perform cultural obedience to both nations. He admires the American Constitution, 'a document he had read with great admiration on the one hand, for its careful attention to citizens' rights defined and protected by the amendments'—but admits that his emotions are still tied to China.[199] He equates his time in the United States as just another expatriate 'caged like a pair of birds that could only chirp and warble only to each other,' no one else understanding their culture or language.[200]

Shang's sentiments of prioritizing his country contrast with his daughter Lillian's need to place her family first. Written in alternating chapters, Lilian's life story is told in the present day and diverges from her father's disjointed existence of psychological turmoil. Compared to her father's zealotry, she is immovable in her belief that patriotism should come second to family and personal freedom. As an American professor researching her father's history, she seeks to learn the truth

[197] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 56.
[198] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 83.
[199] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 83.
[200] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 290, 399.

behind his subsequent imprisonment and suicide. Lillian endeavors to investigate her father's double identity as both 'the biggest Chinese spy ever caught in North America' and the man who played Chinese chess with her and picked her up from school every day.[201] Her narrative involves deciphering her father's double life and feeling connected to a Chinese family heritage that was mostly absent in her childhood. In a heated discussion with her nephew Ben, Lillian declares her love for the United States to be lesser than the love she feels for her husband. Lillian replies thus to Ben's queries about her logic: 'It's unreasonable to deify a country and it's insane to let it lord over you. We must ask this question: On what basis should a country be raised above the citizens who created it? History has proved that a country can get crazier and more vicious than an average person.'[202]

Lilian asks a poignant question in this passage that is personal to her: On what basis should one's country take precedence over an individual citizen? Is it a priority that is only acceptable in times of war or espionage? The final sentence's explicit reference to a country's 'crazy viciousness' alludes to events in China's turbulent twentieth-century history: the Cultural Revolution, the Great Famine, and the Tiananmen Square protests. Unlike her father's unquestioning loyalty towards his homeland, Lillian is suspicious of 'loving a country [China] unconditionally,' as she has experienced first-hand how such patriotic sentiments have placed her father's love for her in second place. In a telling passage describing Shang's love for his daughter, it is with the caveat that 'in spite of his love for Lillian, he [Shang] planned to send the girl away in the near future to prevent her from getting in his way [spying],' again demonstrating Shang's divided loyalties.[203]

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[201] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 422.
[202] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 311.
[203] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*, 420.

Through first person narration, the alternating chapters of Lillian's life reveal that she also practices small deceits of citizenship, not for the sake of her country, but alternately for the sake of her family. Her dissembling reiterates the theme of doubling in *A Map of Betrayal*. Having been granted a Fulbright lectureship at Beijing Teachers College, she capitalizes on the opportunity of moving temporarily to China to contact her father's relatives and contacts in his home village. Since Lillian is an American citizen, she is legally unable to stay in Chinese local hotels without registering as a foreigner. She and her Chinese student Min check into local guesthouses to avoid anyone asking for her Chinese ID card and *hukou*; documents that every Chinese citizen carries on their person. Lillian, the American daughter of a Chinese spy, must masquerade as a Chinese citizen to travel around China easily. She visits her father's old village and speaks to the local villagers, allowing them to assume that she is a Chinese citizen, as revealing her American citizenship would have complicated matters, 'drawing officials and even the police to the village.'[204] In China, guests are legally forbidden to stay at residences without formally registering their name and identity. Ha Jin orchestrates Lilian's subterfuge, an uncanny doubling with her father's espionage in America: twenty years after Shang posed as an American, his daughter masquerades as a Chinese citizen. As Lillian is introduced to Ben, her estranged half-nephew, the novel affirms another dissimulation: Ben has also been recruited to be a Chinese spy. When she discovers that Ben is working in small-time espionage for China, Lillian counsels him to quit and prioritize a happy family over patriotic loyalty to China. Ben's final decision of choosing his family over his country destroys the

[204] Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal,* 145.

cycle of nationalistic loyalty that began with Gary in the Shang family. Ben refuses to masquerade as a spy and instead vanishes, choosing his new family instead.

In *A Map of Betrayal*, immigrants negotiate their burdened position as presumably responsive and susceptible subjects to cultural adaptation. The calculated failure of prescribed assimilative identities fosters both performance and subversion in characters. Adapted performance by Shang, Lilian and Ben serves as armament and seemingly compliant disguise, affecting behavior in a desire to blend into new environments. For the Shang family, the artifice of ostensible obedience acts as a buffer that problematizes the concept of genuine integration.

Instead of privileging assumptions about immigrants on a trajectory towards assimilation, *A Map of Betrayal* traces the emergence of dissonant Chinese subjects enacting subterfuge and modes of concealment, cloaking foreignness in a hostile society. The performance of adaptation in fact enables immigrants to critique the transformation of social cultural norms and behaviors within a society while maintaining a critical distance, commentating on, and remaining in between both societies. Through this performative assimilation, immigrants evade assumed and typical behaviors that strengthen pre-existing power structures. This underlies the psychological ramifications and burdens of this pretense on Chinese immigrants. The novel contemplates the problematic topic of why immigrants are presumed and expected to be susceptible, culturally changeable subjects—that is, to adapt—when entering new environments.

In this chapter, I have focused on the immigrant archetype by closely analyzing protagonists in two Ha Jin novels who exercise the tactic of 'performing assimilation' when settling into America. I tease out literary enactments of cultural adaptation as a strategy that enriches the visual art performances described in the last

chapter. Examples of performing assimilation from both novels include language adaptation, citizenship exams, the acquisition of property and the establishment of nuclear family systems. These actions are performed with the lack of enthusiasm and optimism frequently portrayed by new immigrants that counter the inevitability of succumbing to coercive and racialized cultural identities. The unenthusiasm expressed by Ha Jin's main characters demonstrates the artificial self-construct that immigrants are compelled to perform when assimilating to strange and foreign environments.

As an immigrant and spy, both Nan Wu and Gary Shang have uneasy motherland relationships, encountering the deep psychological ramifications of altering their language and culture with new American forms of expression. In *A Free Life*, Nan lives in the United States but returns to China as an outsider with an extrinsic perspective. Gary, in contrast, continues to assume adaptation out of a mistaken sense of loyal duty to China for paternalistically indoctrinating him in his career. Both protagonists are deterritorialized subjects featuring outlier narratives and perspectives, probing preconceived notions of immigrant Chinese cultural identities.

In *A Free Life*, economic and citizenship objectives are intertwined to the detriment of a teleological resolution for Ha Jin's characters.[205] Nan's economic and immigrant transformation is an ongoing journey of performative legitimacy that intertwines capitalist and cultural integration. Such inherited affect is the generally unspoken counterpart to what Ong calls 'flexible citizenship,' a combination of travel, displacement and capitalist accumulation allowing subjects to react opportunistically

[205]The Bildungsroman novel in a Chinese American context, as defined by Lisa Lowe, is the plot of following a main character from 'youthful innocence to civilized maturity' of which the progression of identity is dependent on reconciling the individual with the established social order. In *A Free Life*, Nan's success with achieving the capitalist oriented goals of the American immigrant leaves him dissatisfied and resentful. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press).

to changing political and socio-economic conditions.[206] This happens to both characters in *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*. Nan leaves America after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and Gary Shang leaves China after the Cultural Revolution. These economic goals along with the tension of cultural integration causes harm to new immigrants in Ha Jin's novels, manifesting in anger, psychological stress, and nonbelonging.

Both Ha Jin's texts involve main characters raising their families in foreign countries, positioned in between homes and legal identities. Nan Wu and Gary Shang undergo a process of performing assimilation that has legal, economic, and familial ramifications such as relinquishing one's former country, purchasing property, and introducing a family in a new home environment. The two texts differ in that in *A Free Life*, the landed immigrant reluctantly performs assimilation to adapt, whereas in *A Map of Betrayal*, the immigrant performs assimilation out of patriotism to one homeland and in betrayal of another. The differences in motivation between the two characters derive from their feelings towards China, their shared country of origin.

In the next chapter, I turn from immigrant subjects adapting performing assimilation as a critical strategy to migrants who fail at conforming to hierarchal power systems. Countryside migrants feeling out of place in the metropolis, compelled to perform assimilation and labour, demonstrating a conflation between economic disparities and residential belonging. I examine the performance of adaptation through the lens of Chinese social power dynamics in Geling Yan's *The Banquet Bug* and Yiyun Li's 'Love in the Marketplace.' I explore how the pursuit of various emotions and desires is ultimately tarnished by migrational flows associated with late capitalism and impoverished economies.

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[206] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship* (Durham Duke University Press, 1999), 24.

Chapter Three

The Migrant: Rural Guests in Metropolitan Cities

In the last chapter, I explored Ha Jin's *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*, studying protagonists that negotiate their cultural identities under the guise of surveillance, immigration, and citizenship. Both novels inquire into culturally distinct definitions of home, probing Chinese immigrant presence in late twentieth and early twenty-first century American society and surroundings. Ha Jin scrutinizes a complex perception of the American Dream, with characters adapting to the 'performance of assimilation,' by refuting racialized and domestic bindings and negotiating displacement. In Ha Jin's novels, immigrants reluctantly subscribe to quintessential American Dream ideals, enacting performative gestures of belonging rather than conforming to genuine cultural integration. These immigrant performative acts incite bodily and emotional disturbances for those in the process of becoming residents or citizens. Representations of the American Dream or the 'good life,' are exposed as ambivalent promises, corrupt fantasies for immigrant protagonists to negotiate in *A Free Life* and *A Map of Betrayal*.

In Chapter Three, I further explore presence and belonging by focusing on the *migrant* archetype, exploring cultural adaptation by examining two different texts, written by Chinese writers residing in America. I move from Chapter Two's immigrant archetype to Chapter Three's rural migrant journey, continuing my examination of Chinese protagonists influenced by major pivotal events such as the Open Door Policy, and Tiananmen Square protests in contemporary Chinese history. This chapter is distinctive in focusing on the migrant figure within China, analyzed in Geling Yan's *The Banquet Bug* and Yiyun Li's 'Love in the Marketplace,' seen

through Chinese-born transnational authors residing in the United States. I continue exploring literary narratives as a means for delving into the complex interior psychology of characters that complement the visual imagery that I study in Chapters One and Four.

Yan has referred to herself and other Chinese immigrant authors as 'nomads of Chinese literature,' estranged from Mainland China and perched on the cultural margin of another country.[207] Inspired by Shelley Chan's research of reinterpreting the entirety of Chinese history through its diaspora moments, I examine the migrational pressures that accrue from an intermingling of labour and desire on the body, told through stories by transnational Chinese American authors. I concur with Yang Ying in characterizing Chinese migrant literature as a perpetuity in transnational crossings, translation, production, and dissemination.[208] Yan's and Li's extrinsic authorial viewpoints capture a transnational perspective that shapes different representations of Chinese identities. Both texts feature rural characters who move to city metropolises: a migrant labourer in Geling Yan's *The Banquet Bug* and a rural scholarship student in Yiyun Li's 'Love in the Marketplace.' The two protagonists are compelled through economic and familial circumstances to adapt from rural environments to stratified metropolitan hierarchies. These examples that I draw from Chinese American literature emphasize transnational flows between rural and metropolitan areas in Chinese identity.

Chapter Three identifies a new critical focus on texts written by China-born, US-based authors who explore tensions between the rural and the urban in pursuing late capitalist objects of desire. In this chapter, I refer to Ahmed's research on

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[207] Geling Yan, quoted in Pin Chia Feng, *Diasporic Representations: Reading Chinese American Women's Fiction* (Germany: LIT Verlag Münster Press), 172.
[208] Yan Ying, 'Migrating Literature: Reading Geling Yan's *The Banquet Bug* and its Chinese Translations,' *Meta*, vol 58, Issue 2 (August 2013): 303–323.

afflictive migrants, perceived as an intrusion in society, and Berlant's disillusionment of objects of desire that fail to live up to capitalist expectations as useful theoretical research to decipher both texts.

Fredric Jameson's writings on the logic of late capitalism and class hierarchies, are also foundational theoretical texts that I use in this chapter to inform my research on rural and metropolitan tensions, including the integration of labour and capitalism. In *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he discusses the waning nature of affect on the labour of cultural production as an unequivocal aftereffect of late capitalism.[209] He gives the example of a critical image or particular moment, customarily perceived as richly sensual and powerful (such as Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*), but which, because of late capitalist postmodernism, is rendered flat and superficial.[210] Here, I use a similar methodological process and apply it accordingly to forms of hospitable social relationships or *guanxi* in *The Banquet Bug*. In this chapter, I demonstrate that hospitality—once a warm and generous open notion—is rendered flat and devoid of feeling in the novel due to the influence of late economic capital. In Yan's novel, reciprocal exchanges are structural moves, involving 'guanxi' relationships to consolidate power and influence. Through a series of lectures and collaborations in the late 1980s, Jameson's formal involvement with Peking University and informal relationship with a range of China-based scholars have been a compelling reason for

[209]Jameson uses the example of Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* as 'dead objects,' shorn of their larger context or environment due to the artificial postmodern period of late capital. One wonders whether Jameson's critique on Ai's *Coca Cola Vase* would be of a similar context to Warhol. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 10.

[210] Jameson, *Postmodernism, and the Cultural Logic*, 8-9.

my decision to contextualise his theoretical research into this Chinese migration chapter.[211]

In Chapter Two, I explained in detail how Berlant and Ahmed's theoretical underpinnings inform my analysis on how affect influences Chinese immigrant bodies. Chapter Three further demonstrates how their theoretical research provokes new concepts in the context of hospitality and reciprocity in Geling Yan and Yiyun Li's texts. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant's methodology on disillusioned capitalist desires, dovetails with Jameson's seminal writings on late capitalist labour. Her research on affect and late capitalist aspirations to 'live a good life,' focuses on objects of desire that fail to live up to expectations of disaffectedness and disappointment. In contextualizing these theoretical writings with Chinese migration research, Dai Jinhua has also written extensively on how post 1989 political advocacy for reform or democratic ideology, have been replaced by 'economic deliverance' or 'commercialization;' which she defines as 'the single most important contributor to the social and cultural tableau' of post-1989 China.[212]

Both texts in Chapter Three critique metropolitan and rural tensions, positioned in an environment that becomes a dueling ground for disparate values derived from elitist hierarchies. Relationship structures that favour advantaged metropolitan citizens, capitalize on naive and impoverished country migrants. The capital city of Beijing haunts Ha Jin's American Chinese immigrants in Chapter Two, while in Chapter Three, it plays a pivotal role in characters escaping to new transitional identities. In both texts discussed here, characters either refuse to, or

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[211] For more on Jameson's involvement in China please see Wang Ning, 'The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity,' *Boundary 2* Vol. 24, No. 3, (Autumn 1997): 19-40.

[212] Dai Jinhua, 'Invisible Writing: The Politic of Mass Culture in the 1990s,' trans. Jingyuan Zhang, in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang and Tani E Barlow (London: Verso Books, 2002), 220.

reluctantly perform, assimilation. Performing assimilation is a critical strategy deployed by rural migrants confronted with the imperative to adapt, in their pursuit of late capitalist objects of desire through the context of urban and rural tensions.

In Yan's *The Banquet Bug*, the performance of adaptation is viewed through the lens of Chinese social power dynamics, referred to as 'guanxi' and gift giving. Hospitable actions construct powerful social relationships, upholding coercive frameworks in China's capital city Beijing, epitomised in transactional relationships favours in China known as 'guanxi.' Favours act as the binding power of social relationships, obliging a return and exchange, enabling the existence of entrenched social hierarchies. As of a result of the merciless need for economic survival, Dan as a rural migrant performs cultural assimilation in the metropolitan city. In *The Banquet Bug*, the hospitality contract upholding these societal frameworks is examined as both welcoming and hostile, the novel uses terminology such as 'host,' 'guest,' and 'reciprocity' to establish a hierarchy of relationships that oppress rural migrants into assimilated belonging. Rural outsiders, however, fail spectacularly at conforming to metropolitan relationships following hierarchical power systems in *The Banquet Bug*, and the novel ultimately charts their tragic demise. Provincial and rural outsiders such as *The Banquet Bug*'s protagonist Dan Dong, begin at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In the novel, social hierarchies are refuted by rural migrants who ultimately refuse to perform corrupted hospitality relationships that are implemented through state-sanctioned late capitalist exchanges and rhetoric. These debased relationships upholding Beijing's hierarchical power systems, cause Dan to experience affective bodily symptoms of physical repulsion. The commodified relationships viscerally affect him, demonstrated by his intense physical reactions in the novel such as physically vomiting the bribes out of his body at the novel's conclusion. This use of

affective traumatic symptoms relates to similar examples in *A Free Life* in Chapter Two wherein the performance of assimilation causes psychological illness, manifested in bodily disorders in the text.[213] *The Banquet Bug* capitalizes on affect and emotion to sustain hierarchical power relationships within which rural migrant characters are reluctantly caught and compelled to participate.

In Li's 'Love in the Marketplace,' optimism and objects of desire are the fundamental components of imbalance in power-centric discourse. A love triangle is redressed through an immigration visa marriage in this short story, inciting disillusioned desire that indicates both incentives and blockages to living well in society. Rural migrants Sansan and Tu move to Beijing to become university students and, inadvertently, bystanders to the 1989 Tiananmen Square student protests that become a pivotal plot point during their studies. Li's 'Love in the Marketplace demonstrates that the repercussions from the Tiananmen Square protests have ramifications not only for Beijing metropolitan residents, but also rural countryside migrants such as Sansan, returning to their rural village homes and causing reverberations throughout both urban centres and the countryside.

'Love in the Marketplace' takes place in the year 1999, told from the disillusioned perspective of Sansan as a local teacher living in her rural hometown. She returns to her provincial village after she is jilted by her fiancé and best friend, both who have left her behind in China for the United States. In this short story, rural characters pursue various desirable attachments but ultimately fail to realise their desires. Characters' identities are entangled with the possibilities of [im]migration and other life-changing journeys. Migrational flows and the allure of foreign citizenship plays a pivotal turning point, interfering with emotional desires for each of the

[213] Please refer to page 89-90 of this thesis.

characters. The desire to leave their homelands result in a legally binding marriage and migrational escape, as tarnished commodified affect replaces genuine emotion. Sansan strives to retain her own individual agency, refusing to adhere to the assumptions of her judgemental hometown, but is shamed through public opinion. 'Love in the Marketplace's ending emphasizes Sansan's reluctance in pursuing objects of desire in a late-capitalist society and noncompliance in performing assimilation.

Both *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace' differ in their stories on migrant assimilation, yet their very disparity represents a multiplicity of Chinese transnational migrational flows. Performativity impels and motivates actions for the main characters as they enact identities—wife, husband, immigrant, migrant— and act out desires, specifically for objects of optimism, attachment and 'the good life,' which, however, ultimately serve to their detriment. By examining these two texts, I show how specific migrational axes are pertinent across a range of diverse Chinese lives and experiences, significant in examining evolving cultural identities. Each protagonist refutes the institutionalised social hierarchies in which they reside, their non-compliance challenging societal power structures.

In both texts, whether the migrant subject has a desire for improved economic circumstances, marriage, or citizenship, all aspirations remain conclusively unsuccessful, due to the affective trauma on the body and psyche, derived from late capitalist labour flows in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It is critical to note that although metropolitan and rural dichotomies may seem reliant on stereotypes that determine the 'naive migrant outsider,' and 'jaded city insider,' it is the deconstruction of these tropes that formulate a post–Cultural Revolution identity. As Carlos Rojas suggests in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century

ideologies, capitalism was offered as an antidote and 'anticipatory promise' to over a quarter century of Communist rule in China, resulting in economic oppression and extreme poverty as leading socioeconomic vulnerabilities.[214] These susceptibilities played a large part in shaping the future of generations of Chinese migrants moving into larger cities, or immigrating abroad to other countries, which I demonstrate using *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace' as Chapter Three examples.

In *The Banquet Bug*, Dan Dong is a rural migrant from Gansu province who moves to Beijing with his wife, Little Plum. He aspires to improve their economic livelihood once living in the city, with the hopes of escaping the fatalistic poverty of the countryside. While lingering in the lobby awaiting a security guard job interview, Dan is inadvertently mistaken for a journalist and stumbles upon the unorthodox profession of posing as an invited member of the press. He discovers that Beijing journalists make a lucrative living attending food banquets and receiving cash bribes to promote new products and services in the city. Dan seizes the opportunity to impersonate a reporter, ascending Beijing's professional hierarchy established on an exchange of favors. The novel begins with Dan's counterfeit journalist career quickly launched, he becomes a savvy guest of multiple corporations, treated to generous banquets and cash incentives. These benefits however, come at a price; reciprocal favours are expected from journalists through writing product advertisements disguised as news articles.

Beijing society functions through a series of mutual gestures in payment for reciprocal hospitality in *The Banquet Bug*. Known in China as 'guanxi', these material gains derived directly from social relationships, adhere to, and validate

[214] Carlos Rojas. 'Specters of Marx, Shades of Mao, and the Ghosts of Global Capital,' in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China,* ed. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

entrenched power relations and norms in hierarchical society systems. 'Banquet bugs' or uninvited banquet crashers are migrant outsiders caught impersonating 'real' guests and have thus failed in performing cultural integration. The term 'banquet bug' is embedded into official city language, with public ordinances and newspaper articles cautioning Beijing society about their parasitic frequency. Dan's refusal to assimilate concludes in his eventual imprisonment and outcast from society. Banquet bugs are frequently characterised in the text as 'parasites,' or 'cockroaches,' implying that outsiders' prey on society's resources by accepting favours but refusing to reciprocate.

In the 1990s (post Tiananmen Square protests), the phenomenon of migrants 'drifting' or floating from the outer countryside into the inner cities, is thoroughly documented in contemporary China sociological and historical trends.[215] Differences between urban and rural labour production contribute to power imbalances in these among other stories deriving from the post-Cultural Revolution of the 1970s, and the hyper-capitalist Chinese society in the 1980s. From 1968 to 1978, an estimated 17 million Chinese youth were relocated from metropolitan cities to work in remote villages. City and rural political tensions were depicted as firmly divisive in China, formulating from the political history of city dwellers being sent to the countryside to learn 'honest rural values' from Chinese peasants during the Cultural Revolution. The 'Down to the Countryside Movement' was enacted based on Chairman Mao's belief that 'it [was] very necessary for the educated youth to go to the countryside and

[215] In 2010, over 220,000,000 residents did not live in their officially registered homes in China and over 130, 000, 000 were rural migrants who moved to metropolitan cities to work. For more information, please see Carlos Rojas, 'Specters of Marx, Shades of Mao, and the Ghosts of Global Capital,' *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger (Duke University Press, 2016). Gao Minglu estimates that by 2020, the population of Chinese migrant labourers will reach three to five hundred million, 'a number unprecedented in human history.' Gao Minglu, 'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth,' *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, 150.

undergo re-education by poor peasants.'[216] A decade later in the 1980s, this migration occurred in reverse, with rural folks populating the cities, facilitating a late capitalist production of labour in China, contrary to exacerbating escalating tensions between the rural and the metropolitan. Following two decades of turmoil, the late 1980s were defined by the events of the 1989 Beijing Tiananmen Square protests.

In Cindy Fan's comprehensive research on post–Cultural Revolution movements, she argues that Chinese migration and labour market processes are deeply influenced by state-sanctioned hierarchies that place temporary migrants at the bottom and city-born residents at the top.[217] Fan has conducted extensive research on city-born workers and their entitled hierarchical positions in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Metropolitan insiders receive noticeable privileges in state-mandated systems that aid their pursuit of upward mobility, in contrast to rural outsiders who succumb to vastly different and tragic fates. Fan writes that 'the young, distorted, and segmented labour market fully reflects the institutional barriers blocking peasant migrants from prestigious jobs, as well as individual positions in a rigid institutional hierarchy.'[218] She argues that the bias the Chinese government has enacted against rural migration, has been built into the stratification of entitlement towards metropolitan residents. This favouritism towards urban dwellers was implemented in socialist policies, interpretable in the long-standing *hukou* system that limited citizen movement, particularly focused on rural migration between different Chinese communities and regions. Formalized as a permanent program in 1958, the

[216] For a closer note at primary materials (diaries, photographs, artifacts) related to this countryside movement period, I am in debt to the Dartmouth University library, which, since 2016 has been collecting first-hand eyewitness accounts related to this experience. 'Down to the Countryside Movement,' Dartmouth Education Library, accessed November 7th 2021, https://www.dartmouth.edu/library/digital/collections/manuscripts/rusticated-youth/index.html.
[217] C. Cindy Fan, 'The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders: Migration and Labor Market Segmentation in Urban China', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Mar. 2002), 103-124.
[218] Fan, 'The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders,' 103.

hukou differentiates rural and urban residents, according to their birth. It limits rural *hukou* holder rights in receiving social protection and health insurance if they reside in a Chinese city not assigned to them at birth.[219] Rural migrants who depend on menial city work, are accordingly given a subservient institutional status, ultimately relegating them to 'outsider status' in urban areas.[220]

Carlos Rojas has noted that, although rural migrants are penalized in accordance with the city *hukou* program, according to China's 2010 census, over 220 million residents live away from their officially registered homes and over 130 million were rural to urban migrant workers. These migration numbers relegated a large population of China's migrant workers to the status of 'partially disenfranchised second-class citizens.'[221] The entrenched *hukou* government system reflects the state's bias toward urbanites, to which it has favourably pledged full responsibility in welfare entitlements such as food, housing, work, and education. The rural Chinese citizen who migrates to city centers, however, is expected to be self-reliant once arriving in the city, having traditionally been shut out from receiving state support. The larger implications of the *hukou* policy creates an ever-widening gap that fosters a greater disparity between rural migrants flowing into cities that assist capitalist flows, and entitles city-born residents, a further chasm broadened by their differing economic fates.

Critics such as Pu Ruoqian and Li Huifang have emphasized that *The Banquet Bug* focuses on the hypocrisy of the Chinese metropolitan upper class, forging a connection between sordid social realities and corruption in Chinese modernity.[222] Pin

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[219] Fan, 'The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders,'103-124.
[220] Fan, 'The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders,' 24.
[221] Rojas, 'Specters of Marx,'2.
[222] Pu Ruoqian & Li Huifang, 'The Translingual Expressions in Overseas Chinese English Writings,' *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, Vol.3, No.2 (June 2019), 268.

Chia Feng has also discussed the repercussions of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese diasporic writers, focusing on trauma writing specifically in the context of Geling Yan's translingual texts.[223] These late twentieth and early twenty-first-century discrepancies between rural and metropolitan fates derives from the tremendous socio-cultural repercussions of Mao Ze Dong's *Down to the Countryside Movement* (1968-1978), a policy which introduced pivotal shifts in Chinese identity amidst those living in China, as well as Chinese immigrants who migrated abroad.[224] *The Banquet Bug* carries an allegorical dimension to these historical moments, critiquing wider migrational trends in Chinese late capitalist labour. This is expressed through image and text narratives focusing on the migrant who is vulnerable to late capitalist economies and used to propel the engine of industrial labour and identity. Broadening social gaps coincide with a new migrant population's affective feelings of impermanence and belonging, inadvertently challenging ingrained hierarchical structures through mass migration.

These privileges and disparities are illuminated in Yan's *The Banquet Bug* through rural migrant characters failing to assimilate to metropolitan living. Dan's experience, as a migrant labourer in an abandoned factory, represents the extortion and vulnerability of countryside migrants used to fuel late capitalist industrial production in metropolitan cities exemplified by Beijing.[225] Yan demonstrates the tragic fate of migrant outsiders such as Dan and Little Plum, exposing the merciless punishment for non-compliance to hierarchical metropolitan relationships. Dan and

[223] Feng, 'Diasporic Representations,'171.

[224] 'Down to the Countryside Movement,' Dartmouth Education Library.

[225] For more information, please see Kam Wing Chan and Ying Hu's 'Urbanization in China in the 1990s: New Definition, Different Series and Revised Trends' *The China Review* vol.3, no 2 (2003): 49-71 and C. Cindy Fan's *China on the Move: Migration, The State, and the Household,* New York: Routledge Press, 2008.

Little Plum's misfortune in the novel uncovers society's ruthlessness when punishing migrant transgressions in city politics and upholding entrenched Beijing class hierarchies.

Powerful images of excess and poverty abound in *The Banquet Bug*, demonstrating the tense era between the Cultural Revolution's end and the rush to industrialize, enabling China's late capitalism in the 1980s and onwards. Luxury property developers hold lavish banquets but decline to pay impoverished labourers for months on end. Chemical company initiatives elbow out local farmers, and microeconomics and restaurateurs promote the exclusivity of their cuisine by serving fish sashimi on exploited naked female bodies. Beijing's late capitalist excess is mirrored through Dan's naivete, depicting his innocent incredulity when attending luxurious banquets that serve exotic dishes such as 'one thousand crab claw tips, pigeon meat shaped into snowballs and snails the size of a pinky finger transformed into something strange and unpalatable.'[226]

Dan's adoption of both rural and city identities is informative of this bias as he experiences Beijing concurrently as a discriminated rural migrant, and an elite city journalist with unique privileges. Dan's character is indicative of a post–Cultural Revolution generation, marked by the visible poverty of the Great Leap Forward, as well as witnessing the late capitalist Open Door policies in the metropolitan centre of Beijing. Destitute memories of the Cultural Revolution, resonant with historical trauma, pertain to Dan's rural background. In the 1960s, during the Cultural Revolution and Mao's 'Great Leap Forward,' Dan's village in Gansu province was one of many areas that was plunged into poverty,' producing tension with the

[226] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 55.

gluttonous excess of the late capitalist labour of Beijing's industrial present.[227] Remembering sparse countryside meals in his recent past, Dan thinks indignantly if they catch him eating as an uninvited guest, 'what could the charge be? Being a banquet freeloader? All the banquets are sinfully copious and much of the food would have been leftover and dumped anyway. What difference would it have made if he had not eaten it? None.'[228] Dan's private memories of countryside poverty reinforce the widening division of poverty, scarcity, and consumption between agrarian and metropolitan Chinese residents, further exacerbated by state *hukou* policies that overwhelmingly favoured city residents in Yan's novel.

In *The Banquet Bug*, hospitality engrains patterned behaviours of kinship and exclusion in stratified hierarchical relationships. The novel replicates a prevailing Chinese rural and urban polarization reinforced by the *hukou*, a government mandated program put into position to regulate domestic migration.[229] Rural migrants, represented as among the most vulnerable in Beijing's city environment, refuse to conform to preconceived modes of communal behavior, visibly disrupting social harmony with actions outside of normative hierarchical society relationships. Dan, Little Plum, and other 'banquet bugs' decline to return favours, thus breaching the societal contract, resulting in critical repercussions to their Beijing living status.

Metropolitan and rural behavioural norms deepen class differences in the text in which migrants are castigated for resisting the cultural assimilation of the city

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[227] Gansu province, as one of the provinces in North Central China, was plunged into poverty because of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' in the late 1960s.

[228] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 14.

[229] 'Changes to China's hukou system are creating new divides.' *The Economist*, August 19th, 2020. https://www.economist.com/china/2020/08/19/changes-to-chinas-hukou-system-are-creating-new-divides. The article details the impact of China's hukou system on rural migrants and their families reveals that migrants without a hukou are only ever 'passing through.' The difference between larger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and smaller urban centres is also noted. For a more thorough study of China's hukou system impacting migrants, please see Jason Young's *China's Hukou System: Markets, Migrants, and Institutional Change*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

through the guise of hospitality. Dan's failure to reciprocate is epitomized through his imperfect mimicry of the notable social figure of the journalist, evolving into rebellious gestures that refuse reciprocity, inviting reprisal. In *The Banquet Bug*, the role of the journalist is not a writer who investigates and reports on newsworthy events, but a guest who accepts bribes by eating at banquets and writing complimentary articles in return. Dan's compelling anomaly is that as the novel progresses, he dons the actions of a journalist by publishing investigative articles in newspapers but refusing to write promotional articles for banquet hosts. His imminent downfall is foreshadowed, not because he is deficient in completing a reporter's work, but because he refuses to adhere to the contract of hospitality and reciprocity that upholds Beijing's social hierarchies. The corrupt malaise of Beijing's society, built on returning favours, is viewed through the internal focalisation of Dan the migrant outsider, demonstrating his exclusion through his unsophisticated 'rural manners.'

In *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, Mayfair Yang discusses hospitality and reciprocity represented as 'guanxi' relationships in Chinese society. 'Guanxi', or 'guanxixue' (characterized as the practice of 'guanxi'), is defined in China as involving: 'the exchange of gifts, favors, and banquets; the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness.'[230] Yang suggests that 'guanxi' became prevalent in China post-Cultural Revolution, as a method for citizens to subtly assert their autonomy from rigorous state-sanctioned control. She analyzes an evolution to the social practice of 'guanxi' in contemporary China, when

[230] Mayfair Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 6.

capitalist culture thrived, simultaneously eluding and colluding with state power and control.[231]

Alexander Des Forges also suggests that contemporary Chinese market and labour owe a particular debt to 'guanxi' networks, noting that these relationships were derived from unequal power relations between individuals, their social groupings determined by education qualifications, or government and university employment. Dan's transformation from rural migrant to respected journalist exemplifies the power inequality in *The Banquet Bug*, indicative of late twentieth and early twenty-first century migrational flows of capital and labour.[232]

Yang explains that 'guanxi' acts as the 'binding power' of ethical and emotional relationships and represents the acquisition of cultural capital in a systematic relationship of reciprocal exchanges.[233] Social relationships involving the return of gifts, favours and banquets interweave a mutual dependence on giver and receiver.[234] In *The Banquet Bug*, cultural capital accrued through journalist promotional writing becomes a symbiotic relationship with banquet gluttony and cash bribes. These bribes are given by corporations and government departments that benefit from publicity, epitomizing the acquisitive relationships of Beijing's late capitalist society. Reciprocity is portrayed as a calculated return, involving a transfer of power, moves and countermoves to gain security in *The Banquet Bug*.

Happy Gao, a metropolitan journalist embraces this exchange game, and is introduced as a foil to Dan's moral values in the novel. She is the quintessential

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[231] Mayfair Yang, 'The Resilience of Guanxi and Its New Deployments: A Critique of Some New Guanxi Scholarship,' *The China Quarterly*, no. 170 (2002): 459-76, 468.

[232] Alexander Des Forges, 'Hegel's Portfolio: Real Estate and Consciousness in Contemporary Shanghai' in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 79.

[233] Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets*, 8.

[234] Yang explains in more detail in a later chapter that the giver is often in a superior position and gifts are knowingly placed in that position. *Gifts, Favors and Banquets*, 53.

cynical city journalist who offers favours expecting a return. She tempts Dan with gifts including a pre-written article accompanied by his byline, and a foot massage from a courtesan in exchange for the artist Ocean Chen's phone number.[235] Happy's understanding of provisional gift-giving with 'strings attached,' demonstrates her ingrained role as an insider in Beijing's culture of reciprocal favours, just as much as Dan's place is that of a marginalized outsider.

Hospitality expeditiously transforms into hostility, problematizing the notion of generous gift giving. Chinese 'guanxixue' represents a double-edged duality, unmasking the treacherous side of human relationship networks. In *The Banquet Bug*, to reciprocate 'guanxi' is an obligatory behavior, integral to cultural integration and cultivating hierarchical power relations in society. The host's extravagant lavish banquet hospitality is designed to compel reciprocity from their guests, further strengthening Beijing's corrupt power relationships. Gift giving transforms into hostile intimidation, when guests such as Dan and Little Plum refuse to reciprocate.

From the early pages of the novel, the labyrinthine network of Dan's 'counterfeit' banquet-eating profession is one of many examples of relationship cultivation requiring a reciprocal exchange of favours, (or entering a 'guanxi' relationship), a metropolitan practice in the novel that is integral to society's machinations. The plot is driven by Dan's debased relationships with various characters, including a foot masseuse, artist, journalist, and a real estate developer, offering distinct forms of remunerative hospitality in exchange for eliciting reciprocal gifts. Dan and his wife, Little Plum, visit a housing development site to contemplate buying a home. Because Dan is a journalist, the housing developer offers him an

[235] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 43.

apartment lease in exchange for a promotional article.[236] Dan accepts the housing developer's hospitality but is perturbed by the looming expectation of either returning the giver's bribe or facing repercussions.[237] Ultimately Dan's refusal to reciprocate hospitality demonstrates his inability to assimilate to Beijing metropolitan society and uphold hierarchical power structures.

In alluding to Derrida's theoretical discourse on migrant and hospitality, Sarah Gibson has characterized asylum and asylum seekers as 'parasitized by hostility, [hospitality's] apparent opposite when searching for new definitions of home.'[238] Gibson's definition, derived from Derrida's 'hostipitality' essay, discusses 'hospitality' originating from Latin (*hostis*), or 'the hostile stranger' and *potis* ('to have power'), in acknowledgement that social relationships constructed through hospitable actions 'are implicated in power relations,' affecting both host and guest.[239] The network used to smooth these obstacles is by means of hospitality centred relationships, capitalizing on power and social hierarchies. Alan Smart has discussed how the contradiction of late twentieth and early twenty-first century China is the establishment of enterprises that run on a capitalist basis within a socialist nation, raising a wide range of obstacles that must be overcome in the pursuit of profit.[240]

The Banquet Bug contextualises hospitality as the fundamental building block of Beijing's exchange relationships, which Dan imperfectly and superficially mimics but declines to fully enact. Dan does not renumerate favours, a key component of

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[236] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 122.

[237] Derrida also famously discusses this hostile / hospitality dichotomy in his article 'Hostipitality', where the word 'hospitality' is playfully changed to reflect the duality of the concept. 'Hostipitality' *Angelaki*, Vol 5, No 3, (2000), 4.

[238] Sarah Gibson, 'Abusing our Hospitality: Inhospitableness and the Politics of Deterrence' in *Mobilizing Hospitality: The Ethics of Social Relations in a Mobile World* (London: Routledge Press, 2016), 169.

[239] Derrida, 'Hostipitality,' 169.

[240] Alan Smart, 'Gifts, Bribes and Guanxi: A Reconsideration of Bourdieu's Social Capital,' *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 8, No. 3 (Aug 1993), 397.

Beijing society exchange, and is punished with tragic consequences. In *The Banquet Bug*, this formulation of calculated favour and deficit of codependent hierarchical relationships is scrutinized by Dan as he critiques the system as an outsider, collapsing the chain of obligation. [241] Reciprocal favours are performed at all levels of society, institutionally through government-sanctioned luxury dinners and cash bribes, and intimately through calculated amorous relationships with masseuses giving physical pleasure. Bodily orifices sampled and massaged by gluttonous citizens are envisioned in banquets with diners chewing, 'everyone's chopsticks stand at the ready,' and shoulders massaged with water 'ooz[ing] into his skin and flesh,' accentuating a coddling of fleshly pleasures critiqued and satirized in the novel.[242] 'Guanxi' relationships derived from reciprocal exchanges are so indispensable to society machinations that manager Zhu, the owner of the Green Grove Club massage parlor, astonishes Dan by carrying business cards in his pajama pocket, prepared to elicit the most meager opportunity of orchestrating exchanges.[243] These mutually beneficial relationships affirm a corrupt underbelly that problematizes social relationships derived from gain and market profit in *The Banquet Bug*. The struggle, and ultimate failure of rural characters, such as Dan and Little Plum to survive in Beijing is the novel's critique of society's degradation.

In *The Banquet Bug*, the concept of 'free' has broad implications, used to imply obligation and constraint instead of 'not in servitude to another.'[244] Dan is a 'freelance' reporter, a career defined for him in the novel as a journalist who 'needs no employer; neither a company nor an office,' meaning 'he doesn't get paid to write

[241] Yang has discussed the philosophy of guanxi as being an exercise in power where those that 'give' are more powerful than those that 'receive.' Yang, *Gifts, Favors, Banquets*, 34.
[242] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 45.
[243] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 39.
[244] "free, adj., n., and adv.". OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/view/Entry/74375?rskey=Zm7qzO&result=1 (accessed February 06, 2022)

what they tell him to write.' [245] These concepts are a perfect career metaphor for Dan, a migrant to the city without a registered address or confirmed profession. However, he learns that posing as a journalist is not freedom from obligation, as he had originally perceived, but replete with reciprocal behavioural demands on his purported profession. His relationships are vacuous once he realises that Beijing residents only offer favours as bribes, to receive reciprocal favours in return. Dan meets several characters who enthuse him with their generosity, but also mystify him with their need to enact a reciprocal payment for their assistance. Banquets, apartments, written articles, relationships are transactional exchanges where nothing is free. Happy Gao persuades Dan that the massage she ordered for him is 'on the house,' but in return, he must take Happy to the artist Ocean Chen's house, so she is able to exclusively interview him. [246] Dan takes his young mistress for an expensive meal and, in exchange for promising to write a promotional article, the restaurant proprietor waives the bill.

Dan befriends Old Ten, a young masseuse girl working at the Green Grove Club Massage Parlor where he begins what he believes to be a passionate love affair. Old Ten is a pivotal character who is originally from the countryside, but successfully assimilates to the city by capitalizing on the commodity of desire and affect with hospitality's machinations. Dan observes her drink whisky with professionalism 'watch[ing] her dainty fingers holding the foggy glass, examining how she has developed these habits,' and concluded that it was through the exchange of her youth and time that she learned to assimilate, bitterly reflecting on 'those fat-ass wealthy guys have taken her out and given her an education in cocktails and brandies.'[247]

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[245] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 41.
[246] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 44.
[247] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 132.

Old Ten exemplifies girls in the Beijing professional hospitality industry, making a living servicing rich men and, in return, depend on transactional exchanges in the form of expensive meals, jewelry and fashionable clothing. Old Ten's moral culpability is indicative of the corrupt values in a society that Yan critiques through the degradation of her character as the novel progresses. When Dan takes her out for lunch at a nondescript Sichuan restaurant, she nonchalantly orders the most expensive dishes on the menu to compensate for her physical manifestations of love in the form of massages and sexual intercourse. The more expensive the dishes (shark fin soup, imported foreign brandy, one-hundred-year old Chinese liquor), the proportionally larger the valuation of her physical love favours already given to Dan.

After Dan and Old Ten consummate their relationship, Old Ten immediately asks Dan to write a news article about her sister, unjustly imprisoned by the Chinese government. Dan realises that their intimate connection was a performative relationship based on *guanxi* exchange after all, sadly musing that she has commodified her body and affection as a transaction of favours, 'just as she has done it with all the other men, from whom she thought she could get help for her sister.'[248] 'Feelings' in the form of affect or affection are contaminated in the novel and used as a bartered currency, contributing to the economics of exchange and labour. Derived from the context of China's late capitalism, the commodified affections used as exchange within traded city relationships are unemotional and flat. An important distinction here is that Old Ten's feelings for her sister are genuine and garner genuine sacrifice in contrast to the feelings that she performs for Dan and other men 'mimicked' as tradable currency.

[248]Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 118.

Although remuneration is demanded by multiple parties, money is rarely exchanged for transactions in *The Banquet Bug*. A housing developer swaps an apartment for a public relations article, a restaurant offers a complimentary meal for a laudatory food review and a massage parlor owner gives a foot massage as reciprocity for a publicity article. Dan and Little Plum squat illegally in an abandoned factory where Dan previously worked, bathing themselves by diverting existing leftover hot water. The factory, in turn, owes Dan and other workers a full year of wages. Instead of paying their wages, the factory transforms them into 'reserve workers,' they are given only twenty percent of their salary paid in 'coupons instead of real money.'[249] The workers are unable to cash coupons for money, and instead the vouchers are further devalued in exchange for expired sardine cans stripped of their labels.[250] The performative nature of relationships in *The Banquet Bug* is exposed by how conventional forms of payment, such as cash currency, are rarely used. Instead, relationships operate in a system of exchanges that barter emotional feeling, time, and labour. These exchanges, often derived from reciprocal transactions, also corrupt the fundamental nature of hospitality as a form of generosity. *The Banquet Bug* operates with all characters performing their role of the societal contract, dependent upon hospitality for *guanxi* relationships and reciprocal favours instead of cash currency in Beijing.

Dan's bewilderment at witnessing *guanxi* reciprocal exchanges implies his naiveté as an outsider and lack of belonging in society. His incorruptibility serves as an authorial critique of late capitalist labour in Chinese urban gentrification, dependent on entrenched hierarchies and self-serving relationships. He forges a kindred relationship with the artist Ocean Chen largely because they share the same

[249] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 2.
[250] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 57.

provincial Chinese hometown. When Chen gifts Dan and Happy the journalist with a painting each, Happy explains to Dan that the artist expects a laudatory profile article in return, otherwise he would not have gifted the paintings. Dan's astonishment at the unspoken expectation of repayment causes Happy to jeer at his naiveté: 'Do you think you can just accept thirty thousand yuan without doing anything to deserve it?'[251] Happy's cynical understanding of the barter and exchange contract in society intentionally contrasts with Dan's incomprehension of the performative aspects of city relationships, exposing his lack of belonging as a rural migrant. As an outsider, Dan innocently believes in a hospitality without reciprocity, his incorruptibility ostensibly deriving from his rural background. An integral element of this difference is the rural to urban migration and performative assimilation practices that critically reveal specific aspects of Beijing's social hierarchies.

The artist Ocean Chen represents a creative unknown element in the novel and his incentives—whether they remain pure or are corrupted remain inconclusive in the novel. This ambiguity relates to his profession as a creative artist and therefore outside the purely transactional commodity and exchange portrayed in *The Banquet Bug*. However, the valuable monetary value of Chen's paintings is Yan's subtle reference to the explosion of the contemporary Chinese market that was prominent during this same time of post-Cultural Revolution migrant and rural movement.

In *The Banquet Bug*, Ocean, Dan, and Little Plum forge sympathetic connections derived from their rural backgrounds, reflecting like-minded attitudes, discordant with the urban rhythms of the city. In Beijing, the rules that rural migrants follow adhere to entrenched hierarchical positions. Nowhere is this more egregious than country farmers performing contrived social relationships in deference to the

[251] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 75.

rush of capitalist labour in China. In a memorable passage, Dan contrasts the virtuousness of country farmers, 'smiling so innocently at a newborn calf,' or 'a chick, pecking her way out of an eggshell' to the dark red lips of Happy the urbanite city journalist, espousing on peasant corruption and natural selection.[252] Dan is compelled to eat the farmer's feast that is prepared for him and, quavering at having to enact a transactional *guanxi* exchange by highlighting their plight in a news article, he throws money on the floor 'fear[ing] to see their gratitude, which would twist their miserable faces, making them even harder to look at.'[253]

Dan's alarm at enacting an exchange of favours is not because he is unsupportive of the rural farmers. Instead, it affirms his reluctance to participate in the city's hierarchical social dynamics, and unwillingness to act as a critique of the government's *hukou* system of regulating migrational flows. He eventually writes an article on the farmers' behalf, not to return a favour, but to satisfy his own moral conscience exposing the injustices of corrupt city developers. The article is a forthright critique of the injustices faced by being a part of Beijing's marginalized residents, a victim of entrenched hierarchies derived from reciprocal favours and limited hospitality. The peasant farmers' cause succeeds, ironically because of the intercession of corrupt society mechanisms that guarantee success. Dan's investigative article is published only after an unscrupulous city official's son intervenes, using his clout to distribute the article without even bothering to read it.[254] Yan illuminates the complicated process of upturning corruption that is compelled to adhere to complicit systems for positive transformations to occur.

[252] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 91.
[253] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 87.
[254] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 255.

Ultimately, the number of articles that Dan publishes will never substantiate him as a legitimate guest in *The Banquet Bug*. Dan's growing interest in writing investigative articles allows his character to evolve into becoming a bonafide journalist, and yet he is punished by the state for his illegitimate performance of assimilation. Only reciprocity or *guanxi* relationships (which he refuses to perform) are acceptable actions in the metropolitan society into which he infiltrates. This further illuminates the corruption and hypocrisy present in city politics; it is not the lack of journalist work that makes Dan an outsider, but the displacement of his allotted place in Beijing's social and labour hierarchy.

Dan's noncompliance with Beijing's social hierarchies is perceived as both calculated rebellion as well as his marginalized migrant identity adopting 'rural' or provincial attitudes. Happy Gao admits Dan's difference is a virtue, commenting that she likes him because 'you don't have the phony look the others do,' intimating that his refusal to adhere to Beijing's hierarchical *guanxi* structures is admirable.[255] Other characters also remark on his commendable difference, distinctly expressed by his rural country birth. Upon learning that Dan is from the same countryside village as himself, Ocean Chen is immediately persuaded of his trustworthiness, remarking that 'only a landsman of mine would be so tall and strong and straightforward.'[256] Ocean Chen's implied trust of Dan due to his shared rural background emphasizes the vast difference and inherent polarization between rural and metropolitan characters in *The Banquet Bug*.

As Dan's character evolves, his actions reflect coded symbols of mimicry. These impressions are reminiscent of a phenomenon discussed by Homi Bhabha as colonial subjects acting as 'at once resemblance and menace,' in a performance of

[255] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 28.
[256] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 11.

disguised similarity with detectable differences only noticeable upon close observation.[257] Bhabha likens the colonial subject's outward appearance to 'mottled vision,' in its design of warfare camouflage visible to the oppressor as outwardly conforming and producing a recognizable yet Othering subject; 'a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.[258] Equally, Wang Yanjie has written on simulations, migrant false realities and late capitalist labour in Jia Zhangke's film *The World* (2004), set in contemporary China. The film revolves around rural migrant workers who travel to Beijing seeking wealth by visiting and working in *The World Park*, an amusement park giving local Chinese visitors an opportunity to experience the wonders of the world without leaving China. Wang argues that Jia's *The World* is a Baudrillardian simulacrum of perceived reality, analyzing the construction of passing as a metropolitan resident, whereby Chinese migrant workers discover only the veneer of prosperity without experiencing any of the city's wealth benefits.[259]

In *The Banquet Bug*, similarly to *The World*, the showcase of wealth is only a pretense of abundance in which rural migrant workers labour to uphold the veneer of capitalist excess. The richness of banquet food and impressive large-scale office buildings are imperfect facsimiles that mask hundreds of unpaid labourers and factory workers (of which Dan and his wife Little Plum are examples). Young girls, exemplified by Dan's mistress, Old Ten, live in the subterranean depths of karaoke bars, corrupted into selling their bodies for a living. Beijing has been referred to as a

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[257] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 122.

[258] On colonial subjects and performing assimilation, significantly Bhabha quotes Lacan's 'The Line and Light' at the beginning of his article equating the colonist's mimicry to camouflaged warfare. He writes: 'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage .... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled- exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.' Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,' *October*, Vol. 28 (Spring, 1984), 125-133.

[259] Yanjie Wang, 'Displaced in the Simulacrum: Migrant Workers and Urban Space in The World,' *Asian Cinema*, 22(1), 160.

'palimpsest city' by theorists Ackbar Abbas and Yomi Braester, where simulations of an aspirational and imaginary world infiltrate everyday urban life.[260] Both Yan's novel and Jia's film are indicative of a post 1978 Open Door trade policy narrative that critiques late capitalism and labour movements in large cities, particularly in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

Mimicry is akin to palimpsest, an artifice and performance that continues the theme of mirage in *The Banquet Bug*. Dan is ambivalent about merely passing for a journalist and surveys the society in which he impersonates one who fraudulently belongs. In Dan's case, he mimics to critique hierarchical oppressive structures in which he moves undetected through as an assimilated performance. Mimicry represents a form of agency in 'intensif[ying] surveillance' of colonial hierarchies, a tactical posture threatening 'normalized' knowledge, and questioning disciplinary powers of enforced oppression through infiltration and subterfuge. [261] As a migrant attempting to 'pass' or adapt in society, it represents an 'ironic compromise,' the desire for an Other that is recognizable, but 'as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite,' is subversively used to critique established hierarchical values.[262]

Dan's performance as a journalist reverses the power dynamics of rural migrant labourer and privileged city insider. He begins his fraudulent metropolitan journalist career with an arsenal of visual disguises, acquiring material possessions that enable him to superficially pass as an honored guest at banquets. His disguise propels him towards a series of actions that uncover Beijing metropolitan corruption

[260] Yomi Braester, 'Traces of the Future: Beijing's Politics of Emergence' in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A Litzinger (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.
[261] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.
[262] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.

by exposing the structural damage of reciprocal relationships. These hierarchical exchanges uphold a late capitalist system, inflicting harm on its most vulnerable migrant residents. Dan's impersonation conjures Bhabha's mimicry in that the oppressor is produced by the mimic, and 'reproduc[es] a partial representation of the colonial object, disrupting authority in a manner that is insurgent with counter-appeal.'[263] At first, Dan only visually invests in the role by acquiring damaged objects designed to pass him as a journalist. Suitably equipped in superficial appearance, 'he set out for the banquets as a new person' becoming a recognizable and regular face at multiple banquet functions.[264] These objects include 'thick-framed glasses,' a 'microphone attached to a broken tape recorder,' and 'a cheap camera that he had no intention of loading with film.'[265] However, as Dan's character evolves, he is soon propelled by his own conscience to write investigative articles on injustice. In the novel, he appeals to the same society constraints and mechanisms that deign to punish him. Even his lack of reciprocity is a form of mimicry. He superficially accepts the hospitality contract but reneges by refusing to reciprocate. These alternative subversive forms evoke a contemporary Chinese identity resisting calcified forms of hierarchical archetypes, reminiscent of Ai smashing an iconic Han Dynasty Vase in *June 1994* (Chapter One), and Gary Shang's double agent infiltration in *A Map of Betrayal* (Chapter Two).

Analogous to immigrant protagonists performing assimilation in Ha Jin's novels, Dan also visually gives cultural signifiers of adaptation in Beijing society. He prints fake business cards, buys a broken camera and recorder, and wears lens-less glasses to impersonate inclusion in an invited group of press journalists at a luncheon.

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[263] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 87.
[264] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 6.
[265] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 6.

Significantly, he discovers that several other guests at his banquet table are also uninvited, donning disguises to blend in as invited media. In a humorous twist, Dan is outraged when he recognizes that a fellow fake guest has duplicated his outfit by wearing a pair of khaki pants and sports jacket and distributing a business card 'modeled on the phony business card Dan stopped using two months ago.'[266] Increasing his bewilderment, Dan follows the man after he leaves a banquet to determine with certainty whether he is a fake guest. He is astonished to hear the man's familiar repartee with fellow reporters, speaking authoritatively on news articles and photographs. Dan's perplexity about the man's authenticity places his own migrant status and belonging into question. If the man Dan thinks is copying him is a real guest, then has Dan inadvertently replicated him without knowing it? Dan's impressions are further problematized because he himself is unable to discern whether his fellow diners are real or fake guests. His own imitation game is so convoluted that he writes genuine newspaper articles, making him technically a legitimate Beijing journalist.

Although reciprocity is expected of those with journalist status, Dan has no intention of returning favours, only mimicking participation by imitating the actions of an invited guest. On the subject of 'passing,' Sara Ahmed discusses how the mobility of disguise allows for an unlocatability in eliding and slipping 'in the reopening of histories of encounter which violate and fix subjects.' [267] Dan's transformation from a labouring migrant to an investigative journalist is representative of Ahmed's elision and slippage, exemplified by Dan navigating a refusal to adhere to stratified Beijing hierarchical roles. In one pertinent example, Dan attends the lavish banquet of a non-profit bird watching organization where guests are provided such

[266] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 53.
[267] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 129.

delicacies as pigeon breast, and endangered peacock.[268] Exotic rarified food served at opulent banquets by metropolitan hosts symbolizes a late capitalist excess and estrangement from shared community values. Ahmed writes that the bodily process of consumption situates an ethnic exoticism through food relationships that is incorporated into gourmandization by capitalist consumers.[269] Dan's enjoyment of these extravagant food items is limited. It is incorporated into his diet but is regurgitated by his body in its entirety at the end of the novel to symbolize his rejection of the commodified exchanges valued in society.

In *The Banquet Bug*, the illustration of a non-profit ornithology association which serves exotic birds for consumption at their fundraising gala wryly demonstrates the corrupted values of excess in late capitalist Chinese society. Dan's character represents the recurring theme of the deterritorialized subject, used here as a migrant archetype to question stratified forms of cultural and society. After flipping through several newspapers, Dan realises that the outrage expressed at the banquet by the guest of honor, artist Ocean Chen, has been deliberately censored and silenced in the media. To right the injustice and report an accurate version of events, Dan sits down to write the article and an account of events himself in an article, 'feel[ing] compelled to write it because the journalists did not.'[270]

Beijing journalists do not report on newsworthy events, but instead, reciprocate bribes. In *The Banquet Bug*, we realize that Dan's illegitimacy is independent of working as a journalist but rather, related to his inability to return Beijing favors that provoke repercussions. The cynical exchanges that uphold Beijing society are linked to maintaining embedded power structures in contemporary

[268] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 17.
[269] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 117.
[270] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 20.

Chinese metropolitan cities. Dan's imperfect mimicry of 'city culture' as a freelance journalist is exemplified by two articles that he writes idealistically expounding social labour concerns.

Yan portrays Dan's character as resistant to assimilation in this reciprocal exchange of city *guanxi* relationships prevalent in *The Banquet Bug*. Dan's distaste for returning favours and betraying his newfound friendship with Ocean Chen is interpretable in the following exchange: 'Dan hears a dial tone in the cell and realizes that Happy has hung up. What Happy has asked him to do feels terribly dirty. Secret of secrets? Does he have to sell *that* in order to make a living? Do they *all* sell that to make a living?'[271] The *'that'* Dan is referring to with such consternation is assimilation to the city's structural system of labour in exchange for bribery and influence, corrupt values that are encouraged and implemented in Beijing.

Beijing is portrayed as a late capitalist metropolitan city that thrives on relationship imbalances, demanding obligations and betraying genuine friendships for personal gain. Dan's repulsion at succumbing to Beijing rule in favour of personal gain and influence in the city further illuminates his marginalized position as a rural outsider. He is averse to writing an article for his mistress, Old Ten, in exchange for sexual favours, and feels distaste at taking advantage of the artist Ocean Chen, unwilling to trick the old man into revealing his personal life to benefit Happy the journalist. Dan's unassimilated rural values lie in refusing self-serving relationships, a concept that is foreign to *The Banquet Bug*'s Beijing metropolitan residents. These tensions between the rural and metropolitan residents featured in the novel are not unique to Beijing but are indicative of larger tensions between rural and metropolitan communities post-Cultural Revolution. The acceleration of labour and capitalism that

[271] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 168.

took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century feature in the novel as embedded fatalistic structures in Beijing's metropolis.

The innocent farmer archetype, a polarizing innocent figure of good, contrasts with the elegant businessman trope, portrayed as a cosmopolitan figure of greed. The tycoon's over-exalted place in Beijing society is depicted by city businessmen at the pinnacle of the societal structure, ruthlessly taking advantage of the impoverished vulnerability and labour of the rural migrant working class to maximize their own gains. The novel satirizes this exaltation when Dan changes his eyeglasses to 'pair with thin silver frames that give him an almost businessmen's elegance.'[272] This costume re-emphasizes that Dan is adopting only a superficial transformation of appearance in the novel, rather than a genuine adjustment into Beijing's hierarchical society.

As migrant outsiders, Dan, and Little Plum's refusal to reciprocate favours impedes the operating wheels of Beijing relationships in society. Dan's mistress Old Ten's sophistication contrasts with Dan's wife Little Plum's rural naivete in which she refuses to lavishly spend money or experience the luxuriously exotic. When Dan takes Little Plum, his simple rural wife on a picnic laying out alluring cookies and tangerines that he has brought from Beijing, she only eats a piece of bread from their local country bakery, leaving the rest of the food untouched because of her self-proclaimed ignorance in eating exotic food.[273]

Little Plum refuses to engage in a relationship with the city, and instead, remains at home supporting Dan, signifying her disinterest in corrupted metropolitan luxuries. This contrasts with Old Ten's insistence, when eating out with Dan, to order shark fin soup, an exotically luxurious Chinese banquet dish. Just as Happy Gao's

[272] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 256.
[273] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 107.

cynicism is a foil for Dan's rural virtue, Little Plum's purity contrasts with Old Ten's urban knowingness.'[274] Both women's names are evocative of their character and experience, 'Little Plum' signifies innocent pastoral nature and 'Old Ten' insinuates world-weary experience. The differences between Little Plum and Old Ten's character further illuminates the conflict between rural tropes and city stereotypes in *The Banquet Bug*.

When Little Plum attends a shark fin soup banquet, Dan cautions her to superficially perform the role of a reporter by 'writ[ing] something, just move your pen.'[275] The banquet ends disastrously, with Little Plum failing to follow guest etiquette, boldly asking the organisers for a 'cash gift,' exposed by authorities as fraudulent, and only narrowly escaping from the restaurant. When Little Plum recounts the story to a tense Dan, he realises: 'It was such a rotten idea to take her there and leave her alone with the damned staring fish eyes that made her puke, and with those damned bully snobs with staring eyes who always look for innocent country people to harass.'[276] Dan's contempt of the 'damned bully snobs' illustrates the widening labour divisions and tension between rural migrants and city residents in Beijing's late capitalist economy. Little Plum's ineptitude in adapting to the banquet rules signifies the integral difference between rural and metropolitan identities, of which Dan values the countryside as unaffected and authentic.

Dan prizes Little Plum's clumsiness at mimicry as sincere. He values Little Plum's incompetent journalist impersonation, seeing it as a reflection of her unworldliness, revealing an incapability in adhering to the corrupt relationship mechanics of Beijing. His character deliberately refuses to reproduce a partial

[274] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 132.
[275] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 77.
[276] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 89.

representation of the colonial object and instead, incite confrontation by defying assimilation. Dan and Little Plum's noncompliance in reciprocating favours mark them as Beijing 'foreign' interlopers. Their insubordination conflicts with assimilated city residents, such as Happy Gao and Old Ten, who demand payment for unwanted favours and play strategic relationship games to offset the balance of power.

Latent tensions of the darker, performative aspects of hospitality have been explored by a range of theorists, from Jacques Derrida, J.H. Miller, to Sara Ahmed, who contribute to our understanding of the reciprocal obligations that pertain between guest and host. In 'The Critic as Host,' Miller's deconstruction of a parasite is a compelling parallel to Yan's depiction of banquet bugs in her novel. Miller defines a parasite thus: originally something positive, a fellow guest, sharing food with you. Later, 'parasite' came to mean a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return.[277] Miller suggests a complicated fluidity between guest and parasite emphasizing a symbiotic relationship with the giver. This is exemplified in *The Banquet Bug* where the relationship between host and guest is co-dependent: the host provides exorbitantly luxurious banquet dishes for guests who return the favour by writing laudatory articles for the host.

In fact, all characters who participate in the hospitality contract in *The Banquet Bug* uphold a corrupt performative friendship, sustaining and aligning power hierarchies. Dan and other 'banquet bugs' deliberately break this contractual exchange with their actions, eating lavish banquets without offering anything in return, exposing the inherent corruption of societal favours entrenched in Beijing. Miller's interpretation of parasitical hospitality can be contextualized with Mayfair Yang's 'guanxi.' In Miller's characterization of 'parasite,' he gives the example of an

[277] J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host, *'Critical Inquiry*, vol 3. no 3 (Spring, 1977), 442.

expert dinner guest who takes advantage of generous dinner invitations without reciprocating hospitality. Using *The Banquet Bug* as an example, in Yang's *guanxi*, banquets are primarily offered to elicit and demand an expected reciprocity. In *The Banquet Bug*, there is a twist to Miller's parasite in that the parasite is the host not the guest.

The concept of city hosts as parasites is further explored by indicating that Dan and the other journalist impersonators— 'banquet bugs'—who eat for free are not the unscrupulous residents of Beijing, but principally, those who uphold and participate in corrupt hierarchical social dynamics. Dan condemns the extortionate nature of contemporary society by comparing the extravagant excess of wasteful banquet food with the poverty-stricken meals of his youth that consisted of 'boiled peachtree worms, tree bark, and acacia flower pies.'[278] False guests who take advantage of free meals without remuneration are derisively labeled 'banquet bugs' and 'parasites' in the novel.

Vermin imagery associated with parasites abounds throughout the text. A pertinent example is a rat gnawing through the hole in Dan's pocket and eating the snail he has saved from a banquet for Little Plum.[279] The name 'Old Ten' (Dan's mistress) also sounds like 'Laoshi' or the word 'rat' in Mandarin, indicative of vermin, a city dweller. The term 'banquet bug' draws direct reference to an unwanted cockroach, feasting without permission on a host's hospitality while knowingly offering nothing in return. When Dan refrains from returning favours, he confronts the fundamental principles of Beijing urban society and problematizes the contractual notion of the hospitality relationship. He accepts hospitality but, adopting the role of a

[278] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 14.
[279] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 37.

'false guest,' refuses to foster an assimilative identity by reciprocating. He is eventually arrested and imprisoned because of his 'bug' status.

In *The Banquet Bug*, the refusal to assimilate in society or the decision to enter the host and guest relationship under false pretenses is punished with dire consequences. To survive in Beijing society while refusing to assimilate fully to its city culture (i.e., that is, returning favours), Dan practices an 'empty' or 'false' reciprocity, removing himself from the situation. When Happy pressures him repeatedly for Ocean Chen's telephone number, boldly offering him various bribes, Dan is only able to extricate himself from the situation by giving her an invented number and running away.[280] Not only is Dan unable to reciprocate, but he is helpless at subterfuge and pretending to fulfill relationship quid pro quo. Dan and Little Plum's inexpert mimicry of Beijing insiders becomes an allegory for rural migrants and the consequences that surround them when they refuse to assimilate in the metropolitan city. Dan's rural migrant position, which elides in multiple guises, remains extrinsic, allowing for an external social critique of corrupt Beijing urban society. He engages this critique throughout the novel and transmits to the reader the underlying corruption in Beijing's urban society.

At the conclusion of the novel, Dan continues to attend banquets but technically as a bonafide 'freelance' journalist as he has already published two articles. As the story progresses, Dan is offered multiple opportunities throughout the novel to publish newspaper articles, writing about the maligned injustices from those marginalised, significantly from the rural countryside. After publishing two articles in legitimate newspapers, he is still thrown into prison for impersonating a journalist as a 'banquet bug' at the end of the novel. It is with tragicomic effect that, in the middle of

[280] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 30.

Dan being hauled off to the police station by two police officers, he suddenly stops short and is violently ill. Dan's body has an immediate visceral reaction as it 'roars, doubling up, and begins throwing up. There seems to be a powerful pump down at the bottom of his stomach, and solid and liquid substances spew forth…. he feels the exquisite banquet food he has been eating for a year and a half go out of him.[281]

Dan's regurgitation of countless hospitality banquets is a crowning metaphor for his repudiation of Beijing's hierarchical society. The purging of food is symbolic of his refusal to assimilate, implying that he chooses to remain an outsider, declining to relinquish his independence to Beijing's paternalistic society. Implicit in the text is that his moral ethics reflects his inability to return favours or participate in the structure of power relationships as network exchange. By refraining from reciprocating the *guanxi* relationship, Dan declines to participate in the hierarchical balance of power conceived by accepting and receiving gifts. Posing as a journalist, Dan's relationship with every character who he meets is symbiotic, based on a mutual need and exchange. The action of giving hospitality is with the expectation of establishing a reciprocal relationship, exemplified by company owners treating reporters to banquets and apartments to secure relationships. Dan's refusal to assimilate to this culture of favour relationships is ostensibly because of his own outsider rural perspective, exposing Beijing's corruption at the end of the novel. The *Banquet Bug* ends disastrously for our protagonists; Dan is carted off to prison and Little Plum is left alone in poverty to visit him. The novel tragically exposes the oppressive hierarchical structures in Beijing's post Open Door society and the consequences for those who challenge entrenched systems.

[281] Yan, *The Banquet Bug*, 260-261.

The conclusion of Dan and Little Plum's employment in Beijing is allegorical in foretelling the consequences of a rural migrant's refusal to adhere to engrained power structures of stratified metropolitan societies, ultimately resulting in exclusion and relegation to society's marginalised, excommunication, and eventual imprisonment. Dan's refusal to return favours from developers, banquet hosts and masseuses ultimately leads to his tragic demise. Impersonating a role in society, he is arrested for his 'banquet bug' role, subverting hierarchical power structures, and imprisoned. *The Banquet Bug* reveals the tension between outside rural migrants who are compelled to contribute to the late capitalist labour of Chinese cities, while reaping none of the benefits of an upward moving and aspiring class. In 'Love in the Marketplace,' I further explore migrant characters who challenge hierarchical societal systems by pursuing objects of desire to their own unhappiness and demise. I examine a rural community in detail and the prejudices and stereotypes that damage the main character who is constrained through desires of bodily affect.

Optimistic Attachments and Flexible Citizenship in 'Love in the Marketplace'

In *The Banquet Bug*, tensions between rural and urban settings are exacerbated by agrarian farmers, restaurant owners, and city developers labouring to bribe Dan to become a sympathetic city journalist. In Yiyun Li's 'Love in the Marketplace,' rural and urban identities also play a role in labour value and class production, ensuing that characters equalize power relationship imbalances through 'guanxi' practices. In this short story, a young teacher, Sansan, brokers a 'guanxi' relationship with her friend Min to lever these power relationship imbalances and tip them in her own favour. In 'Love in the Marketplace,' feelings and relationships between rural and metropolitan characters are commodified towards potential migrations and border crossings, central

to escaping the confines of China's paternalistic society. Characters perform and pursue various desirable attachments to escape and live 'a good life,' but ultimately fail to realise their aspirations for intimacy and desire. These failures relate back to implicit narrative tensions that occur due to rural and metropolitan imbalances, largely related to China's sweeping historical movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In examining this short story, I explore how rural migrant characters Sansan, and Tu's identities compel 'guanxi' practices offered to Min, a city-born fellow student whom they become close friends within Beijing. I analyze how Sansan strives to retain her own individual agency in genuine love and emotion but is thwarted by the promise of American citizenship and the rural attitudes of the community public sphere in which she resides.

Li's 'Love in the Marketplace' focuses on three Chinese students (Sansan, Tu, and Min), representing a particular migrant / student archetype in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The short story begins in 1999, centering on a Chinese generation that grew up in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and came of age during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. It begins by examining the affective components of citizenship and public sphere through the disenchanted perspective of the protagonist Sansan. Analogous to Dan Dong in *The Banquet Bug,* Sansan is conflicted between metropolitan and rural identities as she and her fiancé, Tu, leave their nameless rural Chinese hometown to attend university in the capital city of Beijing.

Similarly, to *The Banquet Bug*, the differences between rural and metropolitan residents play a significant role in 'Love in the Marketplace,' gleaning from imbalances in labour value. Rural countryside characters are portrayed as vulnerable, either ceaselessly toiling in the difficult abiding production of labour or innocently

offering their capital, both in labour and financial currency, in exchange to right power imbalances. Both Sansan and her mother are 'spending' more than they receive, encouraging savvy and metropolitan city folk to take advantage of their naivete.[282] Sansan's mother sells boiled eggs, spending more on buying tea leaves than the money she earns. Her daughter rents a room nearby instead of staying with her mother for free. These imbalances result in commodified affect and psychological strain on the main characters in the text. The ensnarement of affective emotions intertwined with financial capital is a primary theme that drives the plot forward in the story.

'Love in the Marketplace' is a significant example of the entanglement of commodified affect and economic labour, situating emotional attachments during market and capitalist production in the story. Sansan's name, *san* meaning 'three' in Mandarin, is a persistent reminder of the love triangle and embroiled ties between the three young people who feature in this short story. The tale begins ten years after the love triangle's pivotal events have already taken place, drawing on the complexities of political reparations and divisions, which counterbalance Sansan's insecurity as a rural outsider and Min as a Beijing insider. Sansan is characterized as a girl from a small town with rural attributes, including 'a heavy accent and a plain face.'[283] She acts as a foil to Min, who is beautiful and impenetrable to criticism as being 'one of the girls who would have anything they set their eyes on, and of course they only set their eyes on the best.'[284] The vast character differences between the two girls are a microcosm of the wider, prevalent tensions between the urban and rural in the short

[282] A 1985 essay by transnational literature scholar Wai Chee Dimock's 'Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*' provides an interesting parallel to this short story as characters are described in relation to 'cost' and 'currency.' Wai Chee Dimock, 'Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,*' *PMLA* Vol. 100, No. 5 (Oct 1985), 783-792.
[283] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 97.
[284] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 97.

story. The two girls' divergences are a consequence of the ambiguity of state-sanctioned belonging, compelling the plot forward in the entangled tripartite relationship combining nationhood, migration, and love.

The girls' friendship begins in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests once Min has become an outcast amidst the other students in their class. The failure of the protests is euphemistically referred to as 'the crashing down,' resulting in punitive measures taken towards participating students. This acts as the transformative starting point for Min and Sansan's relationship, emphasizing the disparity of actions and feelings between their two characters.[285] Min is voted 'Miss Tiananmen' and dresses as the Statue of Liberty for international reporters during the protests, while Sansan declines to participate, forging a romance with her childhood friend Tu and in the students' absence.

Min's passionate political involvement culminates in other classmates consequently shunning her once the protests have failed. Min becomes a pariah, 'checked and rechecked' by police security, 'belonging to the category that did not need imprisonment but nor have the right to any legal job after graduation either.'[286] After state punishments are mandated for students who were involved in the failed protests, Min is excommunicated from her elite city status and finds solace in Sansan's friendship, finally conjoined as fellow outsiders. The disparity between Min's metropolitan popularity and beauty and Sansan's rural, plain, and shy background makes Sansan feel guilty that 'she had taken advantage of Min's bad fortune; they would have never become friends under normal circumstances.'[287] Sansan's conviction of her own inferiority to Min drives a recognition of an

[285] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 98.
[286] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 98.
[287] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 98.

imbalance of power dynamics, indicative of a wider rural to urban divide that she is eager to transgress in their relationship.

As the story unfolds, the reader learns that a tragic love triangle was instigated by Sansan's own actions as it was; 'Sansan alone nudged Tu and Min towards the collective American Dream for all three of them.'[288] She convinced both Tu and Min to stage a sham marriage to facilitate Min's successful departure from China for the United States, escaping the political fallout from the protests. Sansan has negotiated her marriage and Tu's love for Min's citizenship. This desire to help Min escape to America is also a politically motivated guilt. Sansan and Tu's failure to take part in the protests is what allows their intimacy to grow, implying that their disassociation and ambivalence in the Tiananmen Square movement results indirectly in their love.[289] Sansan's feelings of debt, owing Min for her unequal friendship and, indirectly, reparations for Min's passionate involvement in the protests, compared to her and Tu's neutrality, leads her to suggest her own sacrifice in 'lending' her fiancé to Min to facilitate American immigration.

Sansan's desire to right the power imbalance between her and Min ends in disaster. She uses Tu and the promise of citizenship to equalize relationships between her rural status and Min's metropolitan identity, resulting in failure. Similarly to Ha Jin and Geling Yan's characters, performing assimilation plays a role here. Tu and Min enact the role of husband and wife in exchange for American citizenship. Migration, citizenship, and the pivotal Tiananmen Square Protest events are primary factors in the exchanges between the three characters, influencing their decisions in the love triangle.

[288] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 100.
[289] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 98.

Sansan regains control of their friendship by her temporary sacrifice of Tu, adopting a proprietary ownership of the love triangle, reinventing herself as the giver and establishing the balance of power relations in her favour. She imagines with Min and Tu that 'she was the one to make them husband and wife, and even if they would be too ashamed to admit to each other, she would always hover above their marriage bed, a guardian angel that blesses and curses them with forgiveness.'[290] Sansan exercises both hospitality and hostility by re-envisioning their friendship to include a shifting of roles in which she acts as instigator and host, controlling objects of desire, represented by marriage, family, and American citizenship. Once objects of desire and optimism are contextualized in the language of ownership between the three characters, it becomes a strategic maneuver in the larger struggle to claim power, maintaining the opposition of self and the other. Power is exercised with unspoken assumptions of a discursive shift to the language of ownership, where an imbalance occurs and the host gains agency, enforcing obligation and guilt to reciprocate objects of desire.

Sansan and Min's *guanxi* agreement acknowledges the context of power dynamics intermingled with hospitality. Gibson writes that gestures of hospitality, generosity, tolerance, and compassion are all reminders that implement a power imbalance in a relationship and are therefore distancing gestures that maintain 'the opposition of self and the other.'[291] Sansan regains control of the relationship and equalizes what she believes to be her deficiencies by offering her property (Tu) to Min. A power imbalance derived from Min's metropolitan identity and appearance is tipped in Sansan's favour once she makes the offer for the two of them to escape

[290] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 100.
[291] Gibson. 'Abusing our Hospitality,' 170.

China. Tu becomes an instrument of freedom for Min, granting her the opportunity to leave China for the United States.

Much like the machinations behind *The Banquet Bug*, Yang's interpretation of 'guanxi' plays a pivotal role in this short story's power dynamics. A contractual relationship between the three main characters is established with the reward consisting of immigration and a rebalance of power. Min and Tu's performance of marriage is a prerequisite to fulfilling the dream of American citizenship, connecting to the overall themes in this chapter of performing assimilation or aligning with societal hierarchies and paternalistic values. Sansan also persuades her fiancé to acquiesce with the plan, primarily because of the punitive restrictions of government *hukou* regulations. She persuades Tu of the plan's desirability by reinforcing the inherent prejudices that China's rural community face, escaping from the complications of *hukou* by arguing: '"Don't you want to go to America, too?" We don't have to go back home after graduation, and work at some boring jobs because we don't have city residency. Nobody will care about whether you are from a small town when you get to America.'[292] The allure of their impending departure liberates each of the three marginalized characters from entrenched state-mandated structures that privilege Beijing's metropolitan class.

Sansan's offer is finite as it is under the assumption that Min will divorce Tu upon safely reaching America next year when he will then be free to marry Sansan for love. At the time of the agreement, Sansan reflects 'the engagement between Sansan and Tu, just as the marriage between Min and Tu, was the contract for all three of them.'[293] After Min and Tu break their promise by falling in love and reneging on their deal to Sansan, she justifies this betrayal by reshaping the narrative between the

[292] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 99.
[293] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 97.

three of them as her sacrifice. Sansan imagines the sanctity of Tu and Min's marriage as her doing, compelled to believe that her sacrifice sustains control in their triangular relationship. She consoles herself by adopting the role of an angel 'watching over them' contemplating: 'The fact that they both broke their promises to her, hurtful as it is and it will always be, no longer matters. What remains meaningful is Tu and Min's marriage vows to each other.'[294] Much like Dan, a fake guest transforming into a bonafide reporter in *The Banquet Bug*, a paper marriage for visa purposes is legitimized with Min and Tu falling in love. In both stories, characters embark on a pretense or falsification for the purposes of eliciting labour but become affectively, emotionally involved in the deception. When Min reneges on the conditions of Sansan's offer by refusing to divorce Tu, she disrupts the 'guanxi' agreement by refusing to reciprocate, declining to return the objects of desire represented by her fiancé and marriage.

Sansan's return to her village after experiencing heartbreak in Beijing marks her difference from the rest of the rural community. She becomes an outsider with the notoriety of an unsuccessful migrant who fails at city life. Rural village opinions oppress Sansan as she becomes marked as: 'one of the two children from the town who have ever made it to the most prestigious college in Beijing, and the only one to have returned.'[295] The village's criticism of her return home heightens the tension between provincial attitudes and city social structures, defined in this short story. Sansan's failure to marry Tu gives the impression to her parents and their community that she is 'ruined,' her father purportedly commits suicide over the humiliation. Sansan's exchange with her mother illustrates how her disgrace permeates through their community, tarnishing her family's reputation in the small village in which they

[294] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,'101.
[295] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 96.

live. Her mother asks poignantly 'But whose problem is it when you make people talk about you?' Sansan defiantly replies 'Theirs.' 'You've never known how to spell the word 'shame,' concludes her mother.[296]

Objects of desire evolve and deviate during the ten years that 'Love in the Marketplace' takes place. Sansan pines over Tu, a union that symbolizes love, marriage, community, and respectability to her, but she is also smitten by Min, representing a metropolitan beauty, idealism, and carelessness. American citizenship is an optimistic aspiration for all three characters to disentangle themselves from a preordained place in Chinese society. The illusion of an American escape is described wistfully as 'the collective American Dream for all three of them.'[297]

Jiayang Fan has astutely commented that in Yiyun Li's stories, individuals oppressed by their families are 'eaten alive,' either by 'gnawing hunger, soul-consuming guilt' or, more simply, 'the inexorable loneliness of living in society in which secrets perennially sabotage any semblance of community,' concluding in 'a society upended by its own draconian illogic.'[298] Sansan is an illustration of a character who embodies this guilt and loneliness, compounded by her family and community's censorious judgements and expectations. Her compromised desires for a better life are visibly represented as disillusioned expectations in her own rural community, playing a significant part in Sansan's isolation and shaming her for several years through the court of public opinion after she publicly loses her fiancé.

When Sansan returns in defeat to her rural hometown to teach at the local teacher's college, she is mockingly known to her students as 'Miss Casablanca,' for insisting her students watch the 1942 film featuring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid

[296] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 95.
[297] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 95.
[298] Jiayang Fan, 'So Many Mysteries,' review of *One Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, by Yiyun Li, *Los Angeles Review of Books,* October 25, 2013.

Bergman at least five times each semester.[299] Film is a staged form of performance and Sansan watches Hollywood movies to enact her romantic life role, a variation of performative behavior indirectly mirrored in her life. From Sansan's perspective, the plot of *Casablanca* emulates her own personal life drama. Tu and Min have married and deserted her to immigrate to the United States. When she believes Tu is coming back for her, she watches *The Sound of Music*, replicating themes of joy and escape.

The plot is driven by Sansan's need to escape the preconceptions of her community through watching old Hollywood films mimicking her life story. Once Tu and Min write that they will not return to China, she watches *Casablanca* on a repetitive loop. She is Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca*, sacrificing her happiness to be left behind for the greater good. Sansan lives with the aftermath of her story, incessantly watching the same film with her students year after year; musing that the film '*Casablanca* says all she wants to teach the students about life,' reluctantly living in the rural hometown in which she becomes infamous for her humiliating story.[300] Just as Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* refuses to reignite an affair with old flame Ilsa Lund in a selfless act to support Ilsa's patriotic husband, so Sansan constructs a narrative that she is sacrificing her fiancé Tu for the greater good, facilitating Min's immigration and reprisal from participation in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

Sansan's compulsive viewing of *Casablanca* is an optimistic attachment of her life transformed into a fantasy love film. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant examines objects normatively on offer for 'the good life,' including couple and family sexual intelligibility, national culture, and upward mobility, acting as blockages to living

[299] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 92.
[300] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,'95.

well.'[301] Berlant describes an insistence of normative fantasy objects in characters where those situations do not exist. There is an 'absence of a world for them' in the environment in which they live in, so they supplement with the creation of projections. Berlant elaborates that this fantasist reality is not psychotic or personal, but a broad situation in which people see that they no longer have an account of how to live. Cruel relations exists when the objects of optimism are ironically 'blockages to the achievement of desire for immigrants to fulfill happiness.'[302] 'Love in the Marketplace' examines the futility of this behavior, found in Sansan's urgent demand that her students repeatedly watch *Casablanca*, and her compulsive eating of opium-laced sunflower seeds to forget her bitter desires for a life that was denied to her. Sansan's inability to materialize objects of desire (her marriage and American citizenship), haunt and defy her ability to live happily in her provincial hometown. Her students openly mock her escapism through American films while Sansan, in return, is contemptuous of her students 'petty desires, the opportunity to escape the inexorable future of rural labour from their own hometowns.'[303] Escape from rural living permeates the story not only amidst the main characters of the story, Sansan, Tu and Min but also the students who tease Sansan a decade later when she returns to her rural hometown.[304]

Marriage, love, and escape have been appropriated from Sansan and she is left with what Berlant has defined as 'dramatic patterns, in which she must live a life that 'once held the space open for the good-life fantasy' but instead is caught up in

[301] Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, 'Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,' *Biography*, Winter 2011, Vol. 34, No. 1, 182.
[302] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 182.
[303] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 95.
[304] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,' 96.

cruel bindings of optimistic attachments.'[305] The broken promise represents not only personal desires, but the possibility of attachment to the world that she aspires to reside in, so that their potential loss is a double loss: both the fantasy and details of those particular aspirations and hopes. Affective components of identity work alongside state-sanctioned transformative markers such as migration and citizenship, critically examined through rural characters who pursue various desirable attachments to live 'a good life,' but ultimately fail to realise their desires. In the face of this overwhelming double logic, Berlant concludes that people are tethered to bad lives, to objects that do not work, that exhaust and defeat them, analogous to Sansan's life when she returns as a teacher in her rural hometown.[306] The ending of Tu and Min's marriage, contractually joined for the possibility of a better life in the United States, ultimately acts as a reminder of the futility of aspirations of marriage, love, and citizenship, all representing objects of promise playing a singular role in driving feelings and desires.

In 'Love in the Marketplace,' late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese history of pivotal events align with personal objects of desire and optimism in each character's life. A decade later, Tu and Min divorce, and Sansan refuses to take Tu back, aggrieved about the futility of her own sacrifice years ago for Min. She reflects crossly, 'what will become of her, when neither of them will be obliged to think about her nobleness?'[307] She bitterly recognizes that 'people in this world can discard their promises like used napkins', but she does not want to be one of them.[308] Sansan believes that their marriage must be an aspirational dream that they all believe

[305] In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant goes into detail on objects of attachments, with each chapter focusing on different examples from literature.
[306] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 57.
[307] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,'102.
[308] Li, 'Love in the Marketplace,'102.

in, otherwise her sacrifice becomes meaningless. In the last scene, the story ends ambiguously on a note of horrific violence. In her village, Sansan encounters a beggar that requests mutilation at the train station of her village, and she obliges with the first slash on his body. Sansan's seemingly irrational violence at the end of the story is also a bid to regain control of her own life choices.

The merciless end echoes the avant-garde postmodern writer Yu Hua's '1986,' in which a history schoolteacher returns as a beggar, obsessed with cruel and unusual punishments that he inflicts upon himself. The teacher returns to haunt his family who have deliberately forgotten the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, as the past 'receded farther and farther behind them until it almost seemed to have dispersed like so much mist in the air, never to return.'[309] '1986' takes place after the Cultural Revolution, in a village where executed Chinese citizens return from the countryside as lost ghosts to haunt their newly settled families.[310] The mad beggar acts as a chaotic disruption to the stable family unit in '1986,' emulating a Freudian 'Return of the Repressed' figure and reiterating traumatic historical memory to the Chinese communities who have forgotten the lessons of the Cultural Revolution. The spectre of an eerily similar madman from Yu Hua's '1986' appears at the end of 'Love in the Marketplace,' facilitating a return to prior traumatic historical memories.[311] Li aligns 'Love in the Marketplace' with the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests as an allusion to Yu Hua's '1986' placed against the backdrop of the end of the Cultural Revolution.

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[309] Yu Hua, '1986,' in *The Past and the Punishments: Eight Stories*, trans. Andrew F Jones (Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press), 132.

[310] There is much speculation that the year '1986' was deliberately chosen as a reversal of numbers by Yu Hua to signify 1968 (the beginning of the Cultural Revolution), like Orwell's technique in *1984*. Yu Hua, '1986,' in *The Past and the Punishments: Eight Stories*, 132-180.

[311] The madman in '1986' is depicted as a beggar with long hair, sitting on the street with a long blade that cuts himself, yelling out archaic torture words that no longer exist in spoken language. The similar physical description between Yu Hua's '1986' madman and the madman who incongruously appears at the end of 'Love in the Marketplace' imply a direct allusive symmetry. Yu Hua, '1986,' 140.

In dramatizing individuals' perceptions of the uncertainties of and emergent risks to life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Graham Matthews has argued that Li's short stories demonstrate that China contains within it multiple competing perceptions on modernity and risk, producing a spectrum that covers the dynamics of Western risk society through to traditional conceptions of misfortune and fate.[312] These risks and perceptions are driven by unescapable historical memories that are noted as pivotal events in contemporary China. Sansan's impotent surrender becomes a metaphor for the greater student sacrifices of the Tiananmen Square protests, powerless and obliterated by state policy. She acknowledges this betrayal of memory by her first cut into a beggar's flesh into an outsider who has entered their hometown. Sansan's violence signifies that she has renounced her place in the community and, aligned with an outside stranger, the mutilation transforms her psychological trauma into visible scars. Arthur and Joan Kleinman have scrutinized how the Chinese national preoccupation with post–Cultural Revolution trauma is manifested in narratives of neurasthenic sickness, in which symptoms of illness, dizziness, chronic pain, sleeplessness and fatigue are exhibited.[313] The desires of Chinese citizens are haunted by the memories of past shared cultural histories that necessitate a return of memory. These physical symptoms relate to the bodily influence of affect and trauma on post Cultural Revolution migration in specific late capitalist literary texts that I examined in this chapter.

In Chapter Three, rural migrants in *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace,' address the complex trauma of performing assimilation and question

[312] Graham J. Matthews, 'Framing risk in China: precarity and instability in the stories of Li Yiyun,' *Textual Practice*, 31:3, (2017) 505-521, 519.
[313] Arthur and Joan Kleinman, 'How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance and Delegitimization following China's Cultural Revolution,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (Summer, 1994), 707-723.

legitimate belonging in small towns and large cities. Both stories reveal how rural-born newcomers interpret unfamiliar surroundings in metropolitan cities, either welcomed or shunned by other residents, compelled to either stay indefinitely or leave to go home. Both *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace' underline the tension in the value of rural labour conflicting with hierarchical structures examined in large metropolitan cities. This disjuncture is traced back to the political tensions between the metropolitan and the agrarian from Mainland China historical movements such as the '*Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside Movement*,' Open Door Policy, and the Tiananmen Square protests. Through examining these texts, I scrutinize migration, assimilation and belonging as complicated relationships that interface with a country's hierarchical power systems. Both texts demonstrate themes of performativity and citizenship by using newcomers to interpret unfamiliar surroundings. Migrants are welcomed with the caveat that they must assimilate. They are given the choice to either assimilate or leave to go back to their place of origin. In *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in The Marketplace,' citizenship, migrancy and belonging are interrogated through the tangled relationships of commodified affect and labour, garnering compromises between an individual and a society, community, and country.

Throughout this chapter, I focus on the migrant archetype, placed in vulnerable situations from rural origins to the metropolis. Rural outsiders move to metropolitan cities and perform assimilation, conforming to metropolitan hierarchies in their desire for economic security and citizenship. Characters such as Dan and Little Plum in *The Banquet Bug* and Sansan in 'Love in the Marketplace,' are marginalized figures becoming lost and disaffected amidst metropolis city spaces and commodified relationships. Characters cope through the performance of assimilation,

Dan in the guise of a journalist and Sansan through the role of facilitating a contrived romantic relationship between her fiancé and best friend for citizenship. Characters perform beyond their assigned role to escape hierarchical systems in Mainland Chinese society. I study how rural outsiders elide and evade their role at the bottom of the hierarchy through performance, disguise, guile, and the imperfect performance of assimilation. In Chapter Four, I continue my research on countryside migrants, but turn to visual and performative art to meditate on the relationship of text and visual representation running cross currently in contemporary Chinese identities. I examine performance art practices led by artists inspired by rural imagination, ingenuity, and collaborations.

Chapter Four

The Countryside: Performance Art Narratives

'Movement helps us visualize forms of mobility with cultural and political definition—not just transcendent freedom.' [314]

-Anna Tsing

In 1978, rural migrants moving to the city were presumed to be self-reliant, automatically excluded from state support due to the difficulty in acquiring *hukou* government-issued cards, permitting migrants to legally work in metropolitan cities away from their rural hometowns. The Chinese government's state system reflected a bias toward urbanites, to whom it favourably pledged full responsibility in welfare entitlements. This included food, housing, work, and education for those who were born and remained within the metropolitan city centres. These disproportionate benefits given to city residents relegated a large population of China's lower income migrant workers to the status of 'partially disenfranchised second-class citizens.'[315] Although China's economic industrialization was solely reliant on migrant labour, Chinese citizens who participated in the mass Chinese migration movement were inadvertently penalized by the government, deemed ineligible to receive state benefits after moving to cities to work. In Chapter Three, I depicted the vulnerability of these rural migrants in *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace.' In Chapter Four, I turn to performance art practices to further illuminate cultural shifts related to Chinese migration and industrialization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Focusing on collaborative projects such as *Dancing with Mingong*, *Bishan Commune*

[314] Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, 214.
[315] Carlos Rojas. 'Specters of Marx, Shades of Mao, and the Ghosts of Global Capital,' in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China,* ed. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

and *Peasant Da Vincis*, I centre on artists who veered away from the industrialization of metropolitan cities to collaborate with rural migrants and residents who were integral to the formative transformation of China's cultural identities. These interrelationships were visible in a series of art practices that institutionally critiqued the fraught relationship between the rural and the metropolitan.

As I demonstrated in analyzing Ai Weiwei's anti-monumentalist artworks in Chapter One, minoritarian stories are implemented in both text and image forms to illustrate tensions between dominant and counter histories. Labour and desire are examined in Chapters Two and Three through the enactment of performative assimilation, which induces psychological anxiety for migrants that leads to physiological affliction. In Chapter Four, I build on previous chapters' exploration of cultural integration within and outside China, strengthening my research focus on migrating identities and more deeply examining the cultural relationships between the metropolitan city and the countryside.

Moving to an examination of visual art in this chapter permits my research to be more critically penetrative by focusing on the evocative images and performances of China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century. My focus on Chinese performance art explores how artists propel rural and urban migrational flows by engaging in the imagination of the countryside. I focus on how contemporary artists explore and collaborate with rural migrant bodies and labour as instruments of counter-history and sites of protest to the hyper-acceleration of capitalist labour that has benefited the industrialization of the cities.

Chapter Four emphasizes rhizomatic contemporary Chinese art systems as a counter response to linear chronologies, proposing evolving Chinese cultural identities as a series of collisions and encounters related to larger historical

movements. I focus on approaches in which performance art critiques hyper-industrialization, using visual art practices to critique migration movements in contemporary China. The first section of the chapter examines *Dancing with Mingong*, hypothesizing how performance art advanced from key late twentieth and twenty-first century Chinese historical moments to the employment of the body in increasing industrialization. This provides context for the second part of the chapter focusing on the *Bishan Commune* artist project, exploring how metropolitan artists' disillusionment with the city leads to a retreat from hyper-capitalism and social practices in the countryside. The final section of Chapter Four studies how the imagination and ingenuity of the countryside influenced the inventiveness of the cosmopolitan city, through transnational Cai Guo-Qiang's artistic practices.

In this chapter, I examine how performance and social practice art have contributed to minoritarian storytelling and, as such, countered totalitarian collective discourse. I demonstrate how dramatization has integrated with subversive forms of sedition, critiquing China's hyper-capitalist industrialization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Anna Tsing's migration as movement theory plays a role in my understanding of art as a means of visualizing and reconfiguring metropolitan and rural collective identities.[316] Adjacent to deterritorialized flows, I examine how Sasha Su-Ling Welland has framed Chinese art practices as a series of happenstance encounters; artists focus on Chinese migrational movements, visualizing the interconnectivity with larger geopolitical flows that pose broader questions that relate to labour and capitalism.

The opening section of this chapter characterizes how performance art and social practices were generated by pivotal contemporary events such as the 1978

[316] Tsing, *Friction*, 214.

Open Door Policy and 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, focusing on the distinct nature of evolving cultural identities. I place such early art performances as Xiao Lu's *Dialogue*, Song Dong's *Breathing,* and Zhang Huan's *Twelve Square Meters* in context, critiquing the intersection of mass rural labour migrations into metropolitan cities against the backdrop of revolutionary moments of change. I demonstrate how visual art's anti-monumentality movement is disillusioned by ideological myths, amassing renewed interest in a retreat to the countryside.

Dancing with Mingong (2001) is the first art performance this chapter examines in depth, exploring the intersection of migrant labour and hyper-capitalism. This uniquely commissioned site-specific performance engages rural migrants as performers, using non-professional actors to hyper-visualize the bodily choreography of repetitive factory labour. The migrants' performance demonstrates the invisible costs of a hyper-consumer driven system. The palimpsest metaphor, explored in Chapter Three, is echoed in this performance as migrant labourers are invited to perform factory labour for artistic purposes instead of employed to industry and capitalism. In Chapter Four, I examine how these migrant / artist collaborations artistically critique the acceleration of China's industrial labour force and the economic precariousness of rural to metropolitan migrations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In 'Rural Utopias: Collaborative Artists and Peasant communities,' the second section of this chapter, I continue to explore Chinese migration movements by focusing on the reverse flows of metropolitan artists constructing social practice art projects in the countryside. I examine *Bishan Commune* (2010-2016), a socially engaged art project taking place in the countryside, characterised by metropolitan and rural migrant collaboration. Founded by visual artist Ou Ning, *Bishan Commune* is

emblematic of this reverse flow of metropolitan to rural movements, envisioning and building a hybrid community of transnational Chinese citizens in the small village of Anhui. City-folk decamping to the countryside in *Bishan Commune* unexpectedly echoes the 1968-1978 *Down in the Countryside Movement*, a compulsory program for metropolitan university students during the Mao era, referred to in Chapter Three.

The third section of Chapter Four focuses on New York-based Chinese-born artist Cai Guo-Qiang's *Peasant Da Vincis*, derived from an art project in which he travels to the Chinese countryside to acquire technological inventions made by rural peasants for his exhibition. Cai exhibited these peasant inventions in the inaugural and widely publicized Shanghai Rockbund Museum, an institution thus named for the luxury real estate development surrounding it, in the most consumer driven of Chinese metropolitan cities.[317] I study the juxtaposition of the rural and the metropolitan in art collaborations focusing on intra migrational crossings, rural ingenuity, and Chinese imagination in Cai's art practices.

Chapter Four further expands the interplay from Chapter Three between rural and metropolitan Chinese migrations, focusing on visual art practices. I study the performative aesthetics of migrant labour that artists in collaboration with rural migrants perform through unorthodox projects, fostering temporary transient communities. I focus on the countryside, examining metropolitan artists that interpretively critique the impact of migration labour movements in late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In this chapter, I turn to performative social practice art to articulate new approaches in interpreting the tension between rural and metropolitan residents through movement and dramatization. Of particular focus are nomadic waves or 'flows of deterritorialization' that Deleuze and Guattari describe as moving

[317] Christopher Moore, review of 'Cai Quo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis,' *Leap*, August 1st, 2010. http://www.leapleapleap.com/2010/08/cai-guo-qiang-peasant-da-vincis/.

from the centre to the periphery, creating new origins and boundaries and modifying original axis points.[318] These territorialized flows chronicle back to Chapters Two and Three, centering on im[migrants] unconventionally adopting seditious performances of identity, testing the limits of assimilation in totalitarian and foreign governments and through integrative channels, creating new flows to the metropolitan cities and returning into the countryside.[319]

Performance art and social practices evolved with pivotal contemporary Chinese events, including the Cultural Revolution (1976), Open Door Policy (1979), and Tiananmen Square protests (1989) as specific histories of engagement and encounters, shaping global trajectories of labour movements and im[migration]. Wu Hung has described a historical 'rupture' in Chinese contemporary art, signifying a fragmentation and gap in knowledge from the previous Cultural Revolution era.[320] Chang Tsong-Zung has attributed this breach to the failure of the Tiananmen Square protests movement to accomplish its democratic goals.[321] The concurrence of Chinese historical movements and industrial progress fueled the expression of social practice and performance art, melding with what Anna Tsing has described in the context of other rapidly industrialized countries as a 'descriptive frontier localism.'[322] Tsing

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[318] Deterritorialized flows refer to Deleuze and Guattari's movements of reterritorialization and deterritorialization, also mentioned in my thesis introduction, invoking a fluidity and disbursement possible in human subjectivity when contextualized against capitalist cultures. Please see Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 222.

[319] Deleuze and Guattari briefly mention the migrant figure whom they equate to 'barbarians' as 'they come and go, cross, and recross frontiers, pillage, and ransom, but also integrate themselves and reterritorialize. At times they will subside into the empire, assigning themselves a segment of it, becoming mercenaries or confederates, settling down, occupying land, or carving out their own State (the wise Visigoths). At other times, they will go over to the nomads, allying with them, becoming indiscernible'. Deleuze and Guattari, A *Thousand Plateaus*, 222.

[320] Wu Hung, 'A Case of being "Contemporary:" Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,' *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008), 293.

[321] Chang Tsong-Zung, 'Into the Nineties,' *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), qtd in Wu Hung, 'A Case of being Contemporary," 293.

[322] Tsing, *Friction* 68.

discusses how a country's conjuring act of reinventing regional imagination, typically makes room for a lawlessness in extracting resources and obliterating invisible histories, antagonistic towards hyper-industrialization.[323] Tsing's interpretation of frontier culture is a valuable explanation for contemporary China's hyper-industrialization, and how artists assembled subversive counter-narratives to demonstrate the vulnerability of migrant labour and creative possibilities of international vernacular identities. Contemporary China reimagines the invented landscape through hyper-development, extracting not only land resources, but people as collateral assets, repurposed through the migration of industrialized labour.[324] This would inform the practices of such contemporary Chinese artists as Ai Weiwei, Song Dong, and Xiao Lu in subsequent artistic practices in China following the economic industrialization and disillusionment of the Tiananmen Square protests. Rojas speculates that, in the late 1990s, prominent Chinese artists shifted from traditional practices of painting, drawing, and sculpture to iconoclastic installation and performance works that 'seek to challenge conventional assumptions about the limits of art itself.'[325] Artists began to use their own body to subtly espouse minoritarian performance practices to conflict with state sanctioned narratives of Chinese histories.

A climatic moment in contemporary Chinese performance art transpired on February 5th, 1989, when artist Xiao Lu fired a handgun shattering a mirror in *Dialogue* (1989), an art performance in the *China Avant/Garde* exhibition, held in the National Art Museum of China, Beijing (See Fig. 4.1).[326] Immediately following her performance, the local authorities shut down the exhibition for three days. Xiao Lu and fellow artist Tang Song were arrested as the main perpetrators. Both the police

[323] Tsing, *Friction*, 68.
[324] Tsing, *Friction*, 68.
[325] Carlos Rojas, 'Cai Guo Xiang,' *Diacritics,*133.
[326] Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing* (Durham: Duke University Press), 17.

and international press interpreted the artistic gesture as a political action in direct reference to the emerging 1989 Tiananmen student protest movements.

Figure 4.1: Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In a recorded interview, Lu recalled that *Dialogue* 'became known as the first gunshots of Tiananmen,' as the protests occurred only a scant few months later in the same year.[327] *Dialogue* as a performance narrative about the artist's body was appropriated as one of many storytelling myths surrounding the protests. The original premise of Lu's *Dialogue*, derived from the artist's personal story of a traumatic rape by a family friend is subsumed by the origins of the Tiananmen Square protests.[328] In 2004, fifteen years after the Tiananmen Square protests, Xiao Lu reclaimed the narrative of the original *Dialogue* artwork by writing a book and restaging the performance in *Fifteen Shots-from 1989-2003*, firing a gun fifteen times to represent the interlude of years. Lu announced herself as the sole artist for the artwork, recentering the themes of performance on her own physical body by writing four

[327] Xiao Lu. 'Dialogue.' MOMA, 1989. https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/290/3759.
[328] David Borgonjon, 'Can we talk about Dialogue? A Prescript to Art and China after 1989,' MCLC Resource Publication, December 2017, https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/borgonjon/.

letters to Gao Ming Lu, the original curator of the *China/Avant Garde* exhibition, reclaiming the artwork as contextualized into her own personal art practice and individual life history.[329] Gao interpreted Lu's letter writing as a 'bitter memory as well as farewell to the past.'[330] *Dialogue* was part of a movement in evolving late Chinese performance art that focused on veering away from the restaging of the Tiananmen Square protests and towards singular untold minoritarian stories that were upstaged by monumental events.

Alexandra Munroe has contextualized the larger body of Chinese performance art in the 1990s emerging after the Tiananmen Square protests as focusing on a brutal realism, inferring 'a turn to performance because the body was the only reality, they [Chinese art] could depend on.'[331] She reflects on contemporary Chinese artists and the cynical turn in the brutal remnants of their spatial environment commenting:

> It's gritty and tough and brutal because that is the world these artists have lived in. They are not just witnesses—they are the agents of so much change that happened so fast and with such mighty force all around them from the '60s and '70s to the 2000s that no single individual could possibly have any control over it. It was like a maelstrom. These artists are asking themselves what it is to be an individual, how they can reclaim their bodies, their minds, against this tide, where we can believe in nothing. Huang Yong Ping's answer is that we can believe in reality. Reality is the first and last resort.[332]

Munroe emphasizes that artists chose to focus on the material presence of their own performative bodies as a retreat from the sweeping ideology of China's multiple reform periods. The body becomes an anchor and a rebuke to the intangible philosophies that were a part of institutional mythmaking sanctioned by China's state

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[329] Gao Ming Lu, 'Particular Time, Specific Space,' 162.
[330] Gao Ming Lu, 'Particular Time, Specific Space,' 162.
[331] Kelsey Ables, 'How the Tiananmen Square Protests Forever Changed Chinese Contemporary Artists,' *Artsy*, June 3rd, 2019, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tiananmen-square-protests-forever-changed-chinese-contemporary-artists.
[332] Alexandra Munroe, 'The Guggenheim's Alexandra Munroe on why "The Theater of the World" was intended to be Brutal,' interview by Andrew Goldstein, *Artnet News*, September 26th, 2017, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/alexandra-munroe-theater-of-the-world-interview-pt-1-1095470

government. This focus on reality, with an abrasive rawness in reforming cultural representations of identity, provided a reprisal to historical monumentalism.

Pertinent performance artworks centering on the physical body include Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* (2000), in which the artist commissioned a calligrapher to inscribe intimate family histories on his face; and testing the physical lines of bodily demarcation in *12 Square Meters* (2003), a performance involving sitting naked on a backless iron stool in a public latrine for over an hour, smothered in honey and covered in flies. *12 Square Meters* focuses on everyday practices that were antithetical to the rapidly changing capitalist environment that surrounded the individual. Zhang's artist statement interpreted the contradiction between identity and place, explaining that:

> 'the source for my creative inspiration comes from the most inconspicuous aspects of daily life, the matters that are easily neglected. For instance, in the common activities of everyday life, such as eating, working, resting, and defecating, one experiences the most essential aspects of being human while also experiencing a kind of contradiction between human nature and the environment in which we live. *12 Square Meters* was produced in this way.'[333]

Zhang's performances were emblematic of performance artists interested in the countryside or simple rural village routines to stimulate more preponderant assertions on the evolving nature of contemporary Chinese identities.

Chinese artists negotiated spatial environments with their bodies, foregrounding the physicality of the individual over state sanctioned mythical narratives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Art performances featured the body in presenting the transformation of social class and identity in front of monumental China landmarks such as Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Gao Minglu emphasizes that Chinese artists appropriated the urban private and public spaces with

[333] Zhang Huan, '12 Square Meters,' trans. Kristen Loring, in *Black Cover Book*, ed. Zeng Ciaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Feng Boyi (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company, 1994).

their body to express detachment, dislocation and 'estrangement in the current Chinese urban spectacle.'[334]

On June 4th, 1989, the international press was captivated by the visual images of students demonstrating for democracy during the Tiananmen Square protests. Students from the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, China's preeminent art school, had taken a pivotal role in the protests by constructing the ten meter high *Goddess of Democracy* statue, placed squarely in opposition to the portrait of Mao Zedong during five tense days of confrontation (See Fig. 4.2).[335] *Goddess of Democracy* was inspired by New York's iconic *Statue of Liberty* and Soviet artist Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* sculpture, amalgamating a transnational cultural focus that Chinese university students alluded to on both sides of the Cold War for their vernacular protest aesthetics.[336] This direct political involvement motivated an incendiary turn in Chinese contemporary art. The commitment to dissident politics along with accelerated real estate growth development along Tiananmen Square's main city area were primary factors in CAFA's relocation from the city centre.[337]

[334] Gao Minglu, 'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth,' 150.
[335] Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 63.
[336] Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 63.
[337] The Beijing Central Academy of Fine Art or (CAFA) is known as one of the foremost art schools in China. The construction of a massive Hong Kong-financed shopping complex in CAFA's original location happened in the 1990s. Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 63.

Figure 4.2: Charlesworth, Peter, *The Goddess of Democracy in Tiananmen Square*, 1989. Color photograph during the student protests in Tiananmen Square. Courtesy of the artist.

Wu Hung interprets the *Goddess of Democracy* statue location as abruptly altering Tiananmen Square's existing spatial structure and political significance,' with much of the heightened tension surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests as 'a battle in the war of monuments.'[338] The students ultimately lost this battle when the Chinese army tanks that turned on the demonstrators also toppled the *Goddess of Democracy* statue.[339] The arts students' construction of the statue fostered an understanding that artistic political activism would strategically place the visual image of their 'Goddess of Democracy' sculpture in a contemporary vernacular, illuminating themes of anti-monumentalism and counter-narratives onto the world's international centre stage.

Song Dong's *Breathing, Tiananmen Square* was another such artwork that alludes to political themes surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests. The artwork consists of a forty-minute performance of the artist lying in Tiananmen Square, in sub-zero temperatures frostily exhaling on the cement pavement. The respiration of Song's breath produces a thin sheet of ice on the ground, yet also momentarily warms and melts the ice particles before refreezing onto the frozen ground. His performance

[338] Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, 18.
[339] Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, 16.

confronts the challenges of an individual's impact on a political environment, acting as a microcosm for larger social issues, the emphasis on minor perspectives represented by the individual physical body rather than a vast mythic state history. *Breathing, Tiananmen Square* became recognized as a performative recollection of the Tiananmen Square Protests, a single breathing body instilling temporary life and remembrance into a failed movement, systematically erased from historical memory (See Fig. 4.3).[340]

Figure 4.3: Song Dong, *Breathing, Tiananmen Square*, 1996. M+ Sigg Collection, M+ Museum, Hong Kong.

Song's artistic performances of the 1990s evolved into the dramatization of the individual body, used to frame turbulent differences in Chinese identity against the landscape of a rapidly changing environment. Performance, often intertwined with social practice, was mobilized as a form of advocacy and counter-narrative, integral in illustrating the histories of Chinese labour and capitalism. In the next section, I will delve more deeply into *Dancing with Mingong*, a collaborative artist / rural migrant

[340] Wu Hung, 'Mapping Contemporaneity in Asia Pacific Art,' *Asia Pacific Triennial*, 2002, 20. Exhibition Catalogue.

performance that directly addressed the complicated relationship between migrant labour and economic capital.

Labour and Industrialization as Performance: *Dancing with Mingong*

Dancing with Mingong (2001) was a site-specific experimental performance, compellingly exploring the complex entanglement of migrant labour and hyper-industrialization in contemporary China. The performance originated as a collaboration between dancer and choreographer Wen Hui, filmmaker Wu Wenguang, and visual artists Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen. Wu Wenguang is a documentary filmmaker who had previously made films on various subjects, related to China's material culture and society, including the fervor of the Chinese Youth Guards in *1966* and *My Time in the Red Guards* (1993), and *Bumming in Beijing* (1990), a film focused on the after-effects of the Tiananmen Square Protests.[341] Wu collaborated with the avant-garde dancer Wen Hui, famed for the engagement of non-professional dancers in her choreography. Together they founded Beijing's *The Living Dance Studio* (1994), committed to exploring artistic interventions into society through dance and performance. Wu and Wen partnered with visual artists Song Dong and Yin Xuizhen in creating *Dancing with Mingong*. With separate conceptual practices and thematic interests in material culture, a dance choreographer, documentary film director, and two visual artists, melded interdisciplinary practices to create a performance focusing on art and migrant labour.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese artists and curators have chosen versatile non-exhibition spaces that enabled them to 'bring works of contemporary art to the public

[341] Wu Wenguang, *IMDB*. https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1253769/

in a dynamic guerilla fashion.'[342] Amidst a burgeoning 1990s economic development and contemporary art scene, artists have occasionally chosen commercial spaces to exhibit or showcase their artwork, as a means to reflect the curators and artists' interest in China's hyper-capitalism of the late twentieth century.[343] The East Modern Art Center, which commissioned *Dancing with Mingong*, was originally a textile factory that was retained by the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), and converted into a real estate housing development on Beijing's industrial outskirts.[344] The artists' absorption with engaging Chinese migrants and presenting art in an unconventional factory space was an analysis and commentary on how industrial factory spaces could be reappropriated to form social practice environments.

The Chinese character 'Min,' the first part of 'Mingong' (民) is a shortened form to refer to 'nongmin,' (农民), commonly associated with a peasant, farmer, or rural resident. This Chinese character had significant origins to China's late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century migrant and industrial labour movement. The second half of the word and Chinese character (工) has been in common usage since the 1990s to exclusively refer to migrant workers within China.[345] In Welland's performance analysis, she emphasizes the centering of the Chinese migrant movement in her research, referring to it as 'Dancing with *Mingong*,' specifically focused on rural migrants who moved to the city to work.[346] The word *Mingong* differs from

[342] Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 81.
[343] New World Development, a Hong Kong Real estate and infrastructure company branched out into 'art malls.' Led by collector and CEO Adrian Cheng, the art malls were called K11 with branches in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang, Tianjin, and Wuhan https://www.k11.com/en/.
[344] Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 81.
[345] For more on 'mingong' migrants, please see Wang Fang's 'Beijing in Transition: The Mingong: A Photographic Essay,' *The Town Planning Review*, Vol 79, no 2, 227-235.
[346] Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 81.

Wu's 'Dance with '*Farmworkers*,'" obliterating the migrant identity, central to the performance.

In 2001 when *Dancing with Mingong* premiered, it was a noteworthy year for China due to the following changes: the acceleration of mass migrant migration, the economic industrialization of the cities, and the restriction of rural rights. The Chinese government's reluctance to adapt their strict hukou policies created a chaotic time of industrial expansion in which migrant workers were simultaneously necessary for industrial production, but also made vulnerable due to a lack of economic and labour rights. *Dancing with Mingong* critiqued this government policy oversight of failing to protect rural workers in their performance collaboration with migrant performers.

In *Dancing with Mingong*, the artists invited thirty migrant construction workers to perform with nine professional dancers (six Chinese citizens, two French Nationals and one American) for a Beijing cultural foreign press audience. The migrant workers commissioned to dance for the performance were primarily men from rural villages across Sichuan Province. These labourers had migrated to Beijing to participate in the hyper-accelerated industrialization of metropolitan infrastructure in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[347] Rural migrants were taught interpretative dance movements by the choreographer Wen Hui, who broadcasted instructions through a loudspeaker. The migrant workers were given directions that would be understood by inexperienced dancers, such as slapping arms, miming waiting for a train, carrying each other piggyback, and throwing bricks in a long line to each other. To mimic the assembly of labour production, the migrants and professional dancers would frantically stitch on sewing machines, lamps askew, swinging in a rhythmic beat. This part of the performance directly reflected the

[347] Sasha Su-Ling Welland, 'Ocean Paradise,' *Journal of Visual Culture* vol. 6, 3: 419-435.

building's history, a cotton mill that was staffed by over eight thousand primarily female factory workers.[348] *Dancing with Mingong* emphasized the performative process, centering on rehearsals, conversations and a temporary community of rural migrants and artists brought together by a collaborative art performance. The evolving documentation of movement and interaction between migrants and professional dancers during the nine days of rehearsals reveals the widening gap between rural migrants and metropolitan residents. The process of the plays, rehearsals, and evolving relationships were prioritized over the final culminating performance. The performance was only shown on a single night, underscoring the fleeting nature of the collaboration between professional dancers, rural migrants, and visual artists. *Dancing with Mingong* articulates China's rapid late twentieth and early twenty-first century factory industrialization fuelled by rural to urban migration and the subsequent transformations that influenced collective Chinese identities (See Fig. 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Wu Wenguang, *Dance with Farm Workers* (Timecode 25:26), 2001. Still photograph from ExperimentalBeijing.com website. Courtesy of Sasha Su-Ling Welland.

[348] Welland, *Ocean Paradise,* 420.

The documentary revealed the migrants' mistrustful feelings towards the artists on their first day, negotiating ongoing payment in the interim, the performer's feedback during rehearsals, ending with the performance premiere. The performance was formulative in mediating the artists' site-specific social practice art project that engaged migrant workers for cultural production instead of industrial factory labour in an environment that was originally built for manufacturing but used instead for performative dance.

Wen encouraged migrant performers to philosophically express their aspirational dreams in Beijing's transforming infrastructure and environment. There was a disjuncture however, between the migrant's desires and the artists' intentions with rural migrants bluntly expressing their concerns about unpaid labour at previous factories and the precariousness of working without their *hukou* residency, much to Wen Hou's distress. One rural migrant openly spoke of his motive for participating, plaintively remarking: 'We came to Beijing to work. Sometimes people in Beijing hire us and don't want to pay us after we finish the work. Will this performance help us get back these unpaid wages...?'[349] Flustered by the labourer's questions, Wen turns to her assistant in the film asking, 'Is someone taking notes on this? I can't solve these problems.'[350] The migrants' concerns about poverty and displacement during the process of creating the performance revealed the vulnerability of human capital, and how art was often embedded into capitalist processes in late twentieth and early twenty-first century China.[351]

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[349] Wu Wenguang, *Dance with Farmworkers*, video file, 21:57, YouTube, posted by New Movie Asia, December 24th, 2015, YouTube Channel.
[350] Wu Wenguang, *Dance with Farmworkers*.
[351] I am in debt to Sasha Su-Welland's *Experimental Beijing* that highlighted the importance of this exchange in Wu Wenguang's *Dance with Farmworkers* documentary.

Wen elaborated on their artistic vision showing their differing perspectives in creating *Dancing with Mingong* and why they invited migrant labourers to participate in the site-specific historical context of the building's environment explaining:

> We got interested in this old factory, then we began to realize that it's related to our current environment.' Now so many houses are being built in Beijing, they are all being built by *mingong*. ``We felt you guys were at the bottom of the social hierarchy but you are important to the change of Beijing.' 'We try to express what you want to express, say what you want to say.[352]

Wen and the other artists' optimistic but ultimately misguided desire to elevate the migrant labourer's aspirations for *Dancing with Mingong* reveals that the gulf between rural migrants and their concern for paid labour and well-meaning metropolitan artists' conceptual actions were too vast.

Dancing with Mingong's intention was to visualize the evolving strands of hyper-capitalism, vulnerability, and capitalization of labour happening in contemporary China. Instead, it ambivalently critiqued as well as promoted the East Modern Art centre that commissioned the artistic performance. The performance brought together the cultural elite, migrant labourers, factory developers, and media in a temporary encounter, revealing the different factions contributing to economic upheaval and the hidden ecosystems in China's rapid societal changes. Instead of a social advocacy project illuminating the difficulties of the underprivileged, the performance's complex machinations had the ulterior purpose of visualizing the intertwined nature of economics, rural labour, and the capitalization of cultural agency during China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century industrialized boom.

Dancing with Mingong leveraged cultural value to critique the exploitation of migrant vulnerability and labour, placing luxurious commodities of art and culture

[352] Wu Wenguang, *Dance with Farmworkers*.

onto hyper-capitalist development. The performance showcased migrant workers and the disparities between the rural and the metropolitan. Although the collaborative performance was short lived, it was prescient in preceding the emergence of a series of art districts in China that would focus on revitalized abandoned or cheap factory buildings, fueling the burgeoning industrialization of China's economic boom. Concurrently, the performance was also instructive in visual artists raising pertinent ethical questions on topics of labour and hyper-capitalism leading to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. These factors, coupled with the artists' intentions, disclosed conflicting ideas unpublicised or recorded beyond Welland's research in *Experimental Beijing* and Wu's *Dance with Farmworkers* documentary. The vestigial traces of the *Dancing with Mingong* performance are found in personal recollections of those who participated in or viewed the performance and Wu's documentary.

By engaging migrant labourers to perform their own alienated experiences of the mechanization of work, the exploited migrant class made visible their own presence and agential opposition to the method in which their labour was opportunistically extracted and used. Migrant labourers performed labour but as a performative action rather than related to industrialization and capitalization of labour and work. Performative forms of expression remained integral to revealing social injustice as marginalised migrant communities gain agency to respond to rational critical debate. In *Dancing with Mingong*, the entanglement of migrant labour, cultural capital and economic real estate development is echoed in the complicated interrelationships presented in the documentary between the performers, artists, and audience.

Song Dong, one of the artists who collaborated on, *Dancing with Mingong* elaborated that the performance's primary purpose was to intermingle migrants with

the cosmopolitan culturally elite audience. His earlier comments on migrant labourers provide more insight into the motivations behind the performance as he emphasizes: 'I do not wish to pay tribute to them [migrant labourers] in my artworks and idealize them. Instead, I wish to represent this important human symbol by means of both viewing them [the migrant labourers] and looking at how they view us [so-called urbanites, especially so-called upper-class people].' [353] Song's comments illustrate diverse perspectives found in China at the time, as well as the shifting currents of conflicting class tensions between the rural and metropolitan. The performance demonstrated an unorthodox collaboration between creative practitioners, migrant labourers, and factory developers. This disjuncture between professional artists, migrant labourers and invited cultural elite alludes to Tsing's friction, conflicting social interactions that spark evolution and movement in contemporary China. It raises questions about the evolving nature of Chinese identity, inextricably tied to industrialization, migration movements and hyper-production.

In this section, *Breathing* and *Dancing with Mingong*, juxtaposes physical bodies into two pivotal historical turns of China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century contextualized against the landscape of such pivotal events as China's 1979 Open-Door Policy of economic industrialization and the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests. In *Breathing*, the performance is staged against the backdrop of Tiananmen Square, a monumental landmark and place of historical protest juxtaposed against the foreground of his gently breathing body. *Dancing with Mingong*'s performance backdrop was an abandoned sewing factory featuring professional dancers and migrant labourers, a juxtaposition that revealed widening cultural gaps between metropolitan and rural communities. The performance emphasizes the artists'

[353] Song Dong, quoted in Gao Minglu, 'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth,' 152.

burgeoning interest in the entanglement between culture and infrastructure during China's industrial changes in the late 1990s.

Both performances used the physical body juxtaposed against the environment, anchoring reality against a palimpsest of moving and shifting historical moments. In the next section, I further explore this intersectional relationship between artists and rural villager collaborations focusing on artists who retreated from China's hyper-capitalism to the countryside to build new emerging transnational communities.

Rural Utopias: Collaborative Artists and Peasant Communities

In the 1990s, inspired by James Yen's New Rural Reconstruction projects in the 1930s and Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin's theories of mutual aid, a growing movement of metropolitan artists and philosophers aspired to construct a finer society in the Chinese countryside.[354] These metropolitan to rural projects were led by academics, community activists and state workers, loosely named the Chinese New Left, dissatisfied with insufficient benefits given to farming and rural communities during industrialization and determined to rebalance economic benefits through a reimagining of rural life.[355] In the mid-2000s, the New Ruralist Movement was inspired by the historic 1930s New Left Agricultural movement, sparking over two hundred initiatives in rural and village rejuvenations in China. This enthusiasm and focus on the countryside was a reaction towards the hyper-accelerated industrial boom of China's metropolitan cities, causing serious issues linked to a shared environmental

[354] In an interview conducted with curator Hou Hanru, Ou Ning mentions how several writers studied the nineteenth century United States communitarian utopian movement for inspiration in contemporary farming. Ou Ning, 'Test of Our Vision: A Conversation,' interview by Hou Hanru, E-*flux Journal* 113 (November 2020), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/113/359621/test-of-our-vision-a-conversation/

[355] For more information on the New Ruralist movement, please see Wen Tiejun, 'Centenary reflections on the 'three dimensional problem' of rural China,' in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2:2 (2001): 287-295.

commons. The issues included concerns about food safety, sustainable development, and cultural heritage preservation.[356]

In 2010, artist Ou Ning and curator Zuo Jing founded *Bishan Commune*, a self-initiated art project conceiving of a pastoral respite from the stratospheric development in Chinese metropolitan cities.[357] *Bishan Commune* originated from philosophical ideologies which developed from a significant tradition of artists and poets retreating from the cares of city life.[358] A filmmaker, publisher, writer, poet and activist, Ou had worked on multiple transnational projects before founding *Bishan Commune*, exploring dichotomies between China's rural and urban life. He was known for transnational non-linear projects, instigating friction between unlikely collaborators. Such projects included eight-hour continuous interviews with China's leading figures from the fields of media, economics, politics, architecture, arts, science, and technology.[359] As a film director, Ou co-directed *San Yuan Li* (2003) with artist Cao Fei, an experimental documentary centering on a traditional village within the surrounding skyscrapers of Guangzhou City. Premiering at the 2003 Venice Biennale, the film represented his abiding enthusiasm in the tension between China's metropolis and the countryside.

As metropolitan cultural figures, Ou Ning and Zuo Jing established a framework for *Bishan Commune* by migrating from the city to the countryside. Ou moved his family from Beijing to Bishan, committed to 'restoring the artistic

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[356] Olivia Krischer, 'A New Cultural Ecology,' *Pollution*, ed. Gloria Davies, Jeremy Goldkorn, and Luigi Tomba (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 140.
[357] Mai Corlin Frederikson, *The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[358] As just one example, English Romanticism and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) about a philosophical retreat from nature began during the time of the Industrial Revolution (1820-1840).
[359] For more on the themes of the marathon event on China's burgeoning economy, rapid industrialization, and artistic development. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/37362/shenzhen-marathon-with-hans-ulrich-obrist-rem-koolhaas/

traditions of its historical community' through founding multiple festivals, among them *Bishan Harvestable* (2011), *Yishan International Photo Festival* (2011), and *Yixian County Baigong Folk Art Exploratio*n (2012).[360] Through a mixture of cultural infrastructure planning and the gentrification of metropolitan residents migrating to Bishan, Ou and Zuo aspired to develop an 'open and international village' inspired by an amalgamation of metropolitan city cultures with rural village vernacular.[361]

Ou and Zuo drew inspiration from the practical applications of rural community architecture, often small-scale units such as a commune, farm, or youth housing, primarily focused on devising collaborative exchanges and engagement. 'Commune' in the art project's title implies a congregation of people living together and sharing responsibilities, gesturing towards an integrative community union. In a conversation with artistic director and curator Hou Hanru, Ou Ning elucidates on the deep connection that resonated between the countryside and the city elaborating that the countryside has long been a 'landing site for crisis transformation,' absorbing the city's catastrophes.[362] Using the 1997 and 2008 financial crises as examples, he gives these intervals as late twentieth and early twenty-first century examples of when the Chinese metropolitan middle class became newly interested in agrarian living. The historical context of this interest reinforces the entanglement of the cities' industrial engine and the countryside. In Ou and Zuo's *Bishan Commune*, they endeavor to bring together a combination of metropolitan culture and rural identities, fostering a vernacular that was indigenous, localized and yet internationally focused on emerging transnational communities.

[360] Mai Corlin Frederikson, *The Bishan Commune*, 105.
[361] Ou Ning, 'Test of Our Vision,' *E-flux Journal*.
[362] Ou Ning, 'Test of Our Vision,' *E-flux Journal*.

Ou and Zuo document their *Bishan* social and community practices by founding *Bishan Journal*. In this new publication, they produced a series of articles and photo essays on art and agriculture linking ephemera to a localized Chinese cultural identity, and a wider transnational movement. *Bishan Journal* contextualized *Bishan Commune* by featuring articles on earlier generations of rural reform, historically the 1930s Rural Reconstruction Project as well as the May 4th, 1919, movement in China, pivotal twentieth-century events that significantly influence both protest and rural reform. In 2015, Ou was also commissioned by OVO Denmark press to construct a Bishan Commune artist book entitled *How to Start Your Own Utopia* with a series of photos, observations, and a simple sketch with text in both Chinese and English under a created banner Ruralism + Anarchism (See Fig. 4.5).[363]

Figure 4.5: Ou Ning, 'Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia,' 2010. Moleskine Foundation Collection.

[363] Ou Ning began his sketches in a Moleskine notebook in which the company now displays his original sketches on his website. Ou Ning, 'Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia,' *Moleskine Foundation*. https://www.moleskinefoundationcollection.org/to-start-your-own-country/.

In ‘A Case of being Contemporary,’ Wu Hung discusses Chinese artists participating in an ‘international language,’ confirming their own transnational presence yet also incorporating ‘indigenous art forms, materials and expressions into contemporary art.’[364] Although *Bishan Commune* was situated in the Chinese countryside, it participated as part of an international movement of metropolitan artists based in Asia retreating to the land in favor of the Commons, demonstrated in Chiang Mai-based artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert’s *The Land* (1998) project and Hong Kong artist Lo Lai Lai’s *Sangwoodgoon* (2011). Ultimately, a wider scope of Asia-based artists retreated to the countryside with an aspiration to devise a new self-sustaining utopian community, coalescing the finer aspects of cosmopolitan city identity, with the transcendental desire to live and be closer to the commons, the land, or the countryside.

Bishan Commune and Ou’s desire to construct a contemporary agrarian cultural identity is exemplary of an international language striving to bring together the rural and the urban cities. Ou’s ‘contemporary vernacular’ focuses on illuminating and broadening Bishan Village’s natural aesthetics, encompassing restoration materials taken from second-hand goods in Bishan’s Yi County province and designing elements derived from an amalgamation of collaborative experiences with metropolitan artists and rural villagers. Much like Ai’s artistic practice of obtaining heritage objects and contemporizing these artifacts into new cultural meanings, Ou saw the rural Bishan village as an opportunity to juxtapose a heritage way of life with an art aesthetic that was defined by ‘contemporary vernacular.’[365] This includes connections made between the rural villagers and metropolitan artists, resulting in

[364] Wu Hung. ‘A Case of being “Contemporary,’ 296.
[365] Ou Ning, ‘Test of Our Vision.’

extended discourse and new forms of cooperation and collaboration in the countryside.

A Bishan bookstore was built with the primary purpose of hosting a series of self-initiated collaborative public conversations. International artists were invited to intervene with rural community projects, building infrastructure by using beloved heritage artifacts, metropolitan visitors arrived to boost economic tourism. Bishan village became a place where transnational, national, and local discussions fostered interconnections between different communities, which conjured both an internationalism and a regional tribalism. Ou's methodology fostered a unique 'Bishan identity' with characteristic regional signifiers, but was also indicative of a contemporary spirit, constructed by metropolitan artists who migrated to Bishan in partnership with the local community.

If Bishan was immersed in an economic revival, it spoke the same vernacular as the capitalist acceleration of the cities that met with the approval of the Chinese state government. As is often the case in provided infrastructure, artists were given funding and opportunities through grants and partnerships with corporate entities that had an underlying motive to increase economic development. Artistic creativity, arguably with guarded parameters, was allowed to flourish during the 1990s due to the recognised reward of the development of an economic relationship as well as promoting Chinese art internationally. Artists could easily become co-opted into using their cultural value and power for promotional corporate gain. However, using the same tactics, artists would also have their own objectives in using corporations and resuscitating power to further creativity and inspiration.

Much like *Dancing with Mingong* in which the coalescence of the approved revitalization of old factories were both culturally and economically revived by real

estate development capitalizing on artists creativity, *Bishan Commune* was a project that was originally heralded and encouraged by the Chinese government as positive for the economic revival of the countryside. In *Dancing with Mingong*, the differing objectives included COSCO's ambition to promote and sell apartments with the cultural cache of an advertised, specially commissioned art performance. The artists, however, pursued their own principles in highlighting migrant creativity and vulnerability, whereas the migrant laborers' primary concern was to recover their lost wages. Art projects such as *Dancing with Mingong* and *Bishan Commune* explore the complications of China's rampant growth derived from a mixture of creative and economic underpinnings.

Significantly, during these same years that *Bishan Commune* was in operation, there was also a concerted effort by the Chinese government to promote contemporary Chinese art on the international market. Artists were encouraged to participate in and foster an evolving art ecology that included founding art spaces, exhibiting art in domestic and international exhibitions, and partnering with companies to create artist residencies. Carole Yinghua Lu remarks that for the 'Chinese art community itself the government has proven to be a promising promoter, offering much-needed platforms and opportunities.'[366] Lu cautions, however, that government promotion and artistic lenience came at a price. It also shaped the direction of artistic practice in China towards a particular trajectory, one that fails in creativity and radicalism by succumbing to government restrictions and approval.

In *Bishan Commune*, the Chinese government's aspiration to revitalize rural geographic areas dovetailed with Ou's intention to contemporize transnational

[366] Carol Yinghua Lu, 'From the Anxiety of Participation to the Process of De-Internationalization,' in *E-Flux Journal* 70, February 2016.

provincial identities through the lens of a rural imagination. However, the Bishan villagers' interest in speculation for economic and infrastructural wealth fostered cross-desires with Ou. These complex issues are at the forefront of many partnerships between artists, state and corporation power, migrants, and rural residents in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Lu suggests that 'China's process of globalization unfolds mostly on its own terms and in its own ways, while referring to a Western vocabulary to evoke empathy and familiarity.'[367] This metamorphosis of using a hybrid of Western language and Chinese-specific processes was a sophisticated cultural maneuver that influenced contemporary Chinese cultural identity. The aspirations reflected in text and image projects at the time fostered an arts system deviating from the restrictions and influence of the state-sanctioned narratives and towards minoritarian unheard narratives and histories.

In Mai Corlin Frederikson's research, she explores the multivariate processes by which *Bishan Commune* subverted, negotiated, and cooperated with Chinese government officials to succeed in establishing an international commune within a Chinese village. Frederikson discusses how the emphasis on Bishan-based festivals as cultural development re-emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the artists, villages, and local Bishan government officials, pivotal to the project's success.[368] City tourists would travel to Bishan to shop at the local bookstore and for villagers' hand-drawn Bishan landscapes, photographs and bamboo arts and crafts, which were exhibited at a locally run gallery. Yi County Minor (Bishan Province) and Huangmei opera performances were performed along with a facilitated mix of villagers in conversation with international artists, often at the newly purpose-built bookstore in which villagers could gather, drink tea and stage performances as forms of social

[367] Lu, 'From the Anxiety of Participation,' *E-Flux Journal*.
[368] Mai Corlin Frederikson, *The Bishan Commune*, 105.

practice and community building. All these activities depended upon the paternalistic approval of the Chinese government, which was in favour of the economic recovery of rural villages, post Open-Door policy.

In comparison to anti-government communes such as Denmark's Freetown Christiania, Chelsea Yun Chen has written that 'Bishan Project's approach neatly and strategically work[ed] within the radar of the Chinese government.'[369] In interviews, Ou Ning has stated that *Bishan Commune* was originally meant to be extraneous to local residents but continued to evolve by integrating into village life, responding to economic development needs for the rural community.[370] Ou Ning's earlier plans for *Bishan Commune* to operate separately evolved into an 'interconnection with surrounding society' and a contribution to the economic development for the villagers and surrounding village. [371] The villagers originally welcomed the flourishing of *Bishan Commune*, but when asked for their input in a town hall meeting, many local villagers remarked that they viewed *Bishan Commune* as a potential steering force towards increased economic prosperity. Villagers were more concerned with their local property value increasing rather than a focus on any intrinsic worth of heritage revitalization or cultural identity retention.

Bishan Commune's significance is that the project constructed awkward zones of 'friction' in a collision arising out of encounters and interactions with the metropolitan and the rural.[372] Much like *Dancing with Mingong*, *Bishan Commune* operated at similar cross purposes, placing migrants and rural villagers with different objectives than the facilitating metropolitan artists. In *Dancing with Mingong*,

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[369] Chelsea Yun Chen, 'Bishan Commune: Restoring an Artistic Heritage,' in *Catalyst*, August 17th, 2019. https://www.catalystreview.net/bishan-commune-restoring-an-artistic-heritage/.
[370] Mai Corlin Frederikson, *The Bishan Commune*, 2.
[371] Mai Corlin Frederikson. *The Bishan Commune*, 2.
[372] I am influenced in my analysis by Tsing, *Friction,* xi.

migrants were primarily interested in whether performance participation could be used as a platform towards receiving unpaid wages in previous metropolis working projects. In *Bishan Commune*, the rural villagers were dedicated to the possibility of an improvement in their economic fortunes with the advent of cultural and commercial tourism brought into their village due to the artists' initiative. In both situations, the artists' desires to engage a rural or migrant community in search of an artistic utopia became commandeered by economic realities fueled by, and related to, the economic industrialization of China in the 1990s. In 2016, ultimately, *Bishan Commune* was shut down by the Chinese state government leaving Ou to remark sardonically, 'Whose village really is this? It's not my village, it's not the villagers' village; it's the Party's [Chinese Communist Party's] village.'[373] The government decisively ended the project by shutting down Bishan's water and electricity supply.[374]

Ou's cynicism highlights the unavoidable patronage and benevolence of the Chinese Communist Party government that was crucial to the success of any artistic or economic initiative. It was ambiguous why *Bishan Commune* was eventually shut down, but many suspect that Ou's increasing collaboration with international art institutions and foreign artists led to an uneasiness in the Chinese government about unsanctioned international events and exposure. Chinese transnational art practices were beginning to be seen as a threat by the Chinese government beyond their immediate control, so there was a retreat to preordained hierarchical systems of control and power.

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[373] Ou Ning, quoted in Adele Morgan Kurek, *The Bishan Project: Cultural Production and Place Reconstruction in Rural China*, (MA dissertation, University of Toronto, 2015), 60.
[374] Krischer, 'A New Cultural Ecology?' 144.

Cai Guo-Qiang, *Peasant Da Vincis*: 'Never Learned How to Land'

In Chapter Four's final example exploring artist and rural collaborations, I focus on New York-based Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's *Peasant Da Vincis*, examining his partnership with rural Chinese inventors in producing technological inventions from the countryside which he transformed into art readymades in the metropolis. Cai's collaborations reveal that the preconceptions about China's industrial acceleration led by the city are a misconception, with a pivotal aspect of the ingenuity deriving from the countryside.

As an artist originally trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, Cai began experimenting with gunpowder's special effects while living in his hometown of Quanzhou refining it to an artistic material in Japan (1986-1995), before moving to New York to settle permanently. Although primarily residing in Japan and New York for most of his artistic career, he is renowned as one of China's most famous artists. In 1999, he was awarded the prestigious Venice Biennale Golden Lion Prize for *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a sculptural art installation inside the Venice / China pavilion. In 2008, he served as Director of Visual and Special Effects for the Opening and Closing Ceremony of the Beijing Summer Olympics, and in February 2022, he exhibited a major retrospective at the Beijing Palace Museum, Forbidden City, ahead of China's Winter Olympics. [375]

Cai's earliest artworks derive from a transnational sensibility and an attentiveness in revisiting historical narratives from the perspective of omitted minoritarian stories. His fascination with reconceptualizing history is exemplified by

[375] Cai Quo-Qiang, 'Artist Bio,' accessed November 7th, 2021, https://caiguoqiang.com/about-the-artist/.

his discussion on Soviet Realist representations in Modernist Chinese art. Cai is fascinated by the history of twenty-four Chinese artists who graduated from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing where Social Realist painter Konstantin Maksimov taught from 1955 to 1957. These artists eventually travelled to the United States and France as cultural delegates in the 1970s before becoming the influential heads of art academies across China. In *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999), Cai commissioned Long Xu Yi, one of the original Chinese artists as well as younger practitioners who studied under Maksimov in China to paint and sculpt the same artworks in Venice, Italy, painted during the collaborative Chinese / Soviet art era. *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* is a faithful recreation of the realist sculpture of life-size figures, dramatically representing the landlord's greed and oppression of workers and peasants, interpreted as a historical confrontation between the individual and the collective. Cai elaborates that the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965) was commissioned for the Chinese government to 'publicise the tragic existence of the exploited peasant class before the liberation.'[376]

[376] Cai Guo-Qiang, 'A Little About Me and *Peasant Da Vincis,'* in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis*, (Shanghai: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 21. Exhibition Catalogue.

Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard (1999). 108 life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li and nine guest artisan sculptors, 60 tons of clay, wire and wood armature, Installation views at 48th Venice Biennale. Courtesy Cai Studio.

Venice Rent Collection Courtyard was a studied duplication of the original China-based *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965), installed and exhibited at the Venice Biennale (1999). Cai engaged young Chinese artists to duplicate the original Socialist Realist sculptural work created at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 1965. Instead of emphasizing the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a nationalist Chinese work that was formerly proclaimed in China's history as one of the most symbolic artworks of the Cultural Revolution, Cai emphasizes the entangled relationship between Russia and China in art history by underlining that many of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* sculptors had transnational experiences and backgrounds. He elaborates: 'I wanted the artists and their destiny to become part of the artwork, and to reveal the relationship between artists and their time and politics.'[377] Restaging it in Venice during a

[377] Boris Groys and Cai Guo-Qiang 'A Conversation from a Studio Visit.' *E-Flux Conversations*. https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/boris-groys-and-cai-guo-qiang-a-conversation-from-a-studio-visit/7625.

prestigious international art exposition also reframed the art historical narrative lineage as transnational in the twenty-first century.

Cai's other transnational artworks include *The Dragon Has Arrived!* constructed out of salvaged wood from a sunken boat and composing a hybrid mythical creature originating in Quanzhou, China and ending in Venice, Italy, mimicking the 700 year journey of Marco Polo to China in a reverse direction. In *Everything is Museum No. 1* (2000) *DMoCA* (Dragon Museum of Contemporary Art), Cai deconstructs a kiln from the Chinese county of Dehua, renowned for porcelain, rebuilding in Japan's Niigata prefecture.[378] Cai's artistic process, which included appropriating found cultural objects with a deeply embedded history and transposing them to foreign contexts recalls Ai's adoption of similar historical objects in his own artistic practice. Cai's artistic and unconventional use of Chinese historical materiality (such as gunpowder in his firework series) contributes to the pivotal transformations of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese identity.

In Munroe's curatorial essay for Cai's, *I Want To Believe* exhibition (2009), she comments on a strong sense of 'socialist utopianism' pervading Cai's artistic process. His wide-ranging social engagement practices focuses on an 'unseen world' of historical memory, collaboration with local communities and non-art spaces in *Everything is Museum*, to purpose-built international contemporary art museums in remote rural villages. Cai's renegotiation of historical memory derives from the same socialist utopianism, exploring the relationship between the individual and the collective and 'understood in the context of China's cultural and political memory,

[378] Another artist with African American heritage used similar materials in a different context. Theaster Gates' use of porcelain and his fabricated history of master ceramicist Shoji Yamaguchi who settled in Mississippi married an African American civil rights activist and developed a unique plate for soul food similarly plays with fictional histories and materiality. 'Theaster Gates: Art, Lies and Pottery, *'Phaidon*. https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/august/27/theaster-gates-art-lies-and-pottery. Accessed November 7th, 2021.

including its modern revolutionary history.'[379] His interest in collaborating with countryside residents upturns the narrative of accelerated metropolitan technology, fueled by naive impoverished migrant labour. Instead, Cai paints a more complex picture of Chinese creativity and technological progress implying friction and symbiosis between the city and the countryside.

In 2010, in conjunction with Shanghai's inaugural World Exposition, the Rockbund Museum invited Cai for a one man show to exhibit their opening exhibition. At this pivotal moment hosting the World Exposition, Shanghai was heralded as the cosmopolis of the international future. Thomas Ou Yaping, Chairman of Rockbund Art Museum, proclaimed Shanghai 'a platform on which the world can observe the progress of material civilization across the globe, but also a stage on which to show the world the splendors of contemporary Chinese art and culture.'[380] Instead of conventionally displaying Cai's pyrotechnic fireworks drawing international acclaim in APEC Shanghai (2001) and the Beijing Olympics (2008), Cai exhibited an ongoing five-year project exploring rural identity and the creativity of the countryside in *Peasant Da Vincis*.[381]

Zhang Yiwu contends that if *Rent Collection Courtyard* tells a story of the twentieth century, then *Peasant Da Vincis*, as Cai's monumental social practice work, is 'a new dream for peasants in 21st Century China.'[382] Much like Beijing's East West Modern Centre's commission to commemorate their opening with *Dancing with*

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[379] Alexandra Munroe, 'Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe,' in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008), 22.
[380] Thomas Ou Yaping, 'A Message from the Chairman,' in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis*, (Shanghai: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2010), 35. Exhibition Catalogue.
[381] Cai Guo-Qiang, 'Cai Guo-Qiang discusses "Peasant Da Vincis,"' interview by Lee Ambrozy, *Art Forum*, May 3rd, 2010, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/cai-guo-qiang-discusses-peasant-da-vincis-25519.
[382] Zhang Yiwu, '"Anti-Gravity": A Surge of Chinese Imagination and the Significance of *Peasant Da Vincis*,' in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis*, (Shanghai: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2010), 35. Exhibition Catalogue.

Mingong, the Rockbund Art Museum's *Peasant Da Vincis* featured an intersecting relationship between rural migrant labour and the hyper-industrialization that propelled China on the international stage. The Rockbund Art Museum location is adjacent to Shanghai's famous Bund promenade, a waterfront space famed for its neoclassical architecture and luxury restaurant and shopping districts, revitalized in China's post economic revival. To inaugurate a brand-new museum and the futuristic city of Shanghai juxtaposed with rural countryside inventions, Cai focuses on nonlinear Chinese histories, brimming with the rural and metropolitan collaborative stories in a cross fertility of migration and creativity.[383] Cai's exploration of Chinese peasant inventions led him to *Twilight No.1*, a submarine built by Anhui peasant Li Yumin, the very first peasant invention in his collection.[384] His decision to stage an exhibition featuring the countryside was motivated by providing 'a counterpoint to the Expo's many upscale national pavilions.'[385]

One of the primary themes of the exhibition was Cai's observation of how Chinese society was arrested between 'made in China' (pertaining to factory industrialization) and 'created in China' (inventing and creating), paying especial significance to 'hundreds of millions of peasants who have paid the price for the construction of modern society and better urban life in the reform era.[386] The perception of rural citizens as compliant industrial workers was inverted in Cai's peasant inventors exhibition. Shown alongside the Shanghai World Exposition (2010), *Peasant Da Vincis* showcased narratives of technological creativity from the countryside, a bold juxtaposition during China's industrialization period. Several of

[383] For more on Shanghai's historical culture of being at the forefront of creativity and modernity, please see Meng Yue's *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire* (Minnesota University Press,) 2005.
[384] 'Cai Guo-Xiang: Peasant Da Vincis, May 4th, 2010- July 25th, 2010.' 'Rockbund Art Museum,' accessed November 10th, 2021. http://www.rockbundartmuseum.org/en/exhibition/overview/5d0fwz.
[385] Cai, 'A Little About Me and *Peasant Da Vincis*,' 21.
[386] Cai, 'A Little About Me and *Peasant Da Vincis*,' 21.

the artworks in the exhibition focus on slyly decamping stereotypes of rural naiveté and metropolitan sophistication. Zhang saw Cai's collaboration with rural villagers and their technological inventions as 'readymades' in which the process of becoming contemporary artworks was transformed and 'invested with a strange glory.'[387]

The thematic pursuit of extraterrestrial intelligence bridging the transcendence of environmental space, time, and location, is an overarching theme in Cai's art, substituting as a greater metaphor for China's underlying alternative migration and diasporic narratives. Yiwu analyzes the phenomenon of rural inventors featured in Cai's art exhibition, elaborating that 'these *Peasant Da Vincis* live in a countryside bound by geography, customs, and tradition, and whether submarine, aircraft, spacecraft or robot, the desire is for the possibility to transcend the bounds of gravity.'[388] Cai's exhibition title, *Never Learned How to Land*, directly references rural inventor Du Wenda's flying saucer in his collection.

The flying saucer image was a symbol of burgeoning optimism during China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century invention period, encapsulated in the creativity and invention of the countryside. The flying saucer also symbolizes travel, migration, and immigration—the ability to leave your *hukou* for aspirational dreams and accomplishing more than your birthright. Germano Celant observes that a key element of the peasant inventions that Cai collected is that they 'belonged to a specific trajectory of modernity,' relating the acceleration of technology, exemplified in the

[387] Zhang Yiwu, '"Anti-Gravity": A Surge of Chinese Imagination and the Significance of *Peasant Da Vincis*,' in *Cai Guo Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis*, (Shanghai: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2010), 32. Exhibition Catalogue.
[388] Zhang, '"Anti-Gravity:" A Surge of Chinese Imagination,' 32.

development of submarines, airplanes, flying saucers, and automated robots.[389] In *Projects for Extraterrestrials No 9: Fetus Movement II*, each of these art readymades takes existing objects, playfully transposing into something fundamentally new. Extraterrestrial intelligence merges with minoritarian histories in Cai's artwork to create a playful rendition of imagining other possible Chinese histories that he explores in his exhibitions. From *Projects for Extraterrestrials* to his twenty-year outdoor public art installation *Sky Ladder* (2015), Cai's artwork functions to initiate alternate, co-existing or multiple realities.[390]

Preconceptions of modernity are re-evaluated in *Peasant Da Vincis* where rural peasants are ingenious, daring and technologically apt, complicating the Chinese narrative of technological and industrial progress as inspired only by metropolitan city centres. Zhang explains that the use of the term 'uneducated' is significant, as it gestures towards the cloistered nature of the rural villager's knowledge; the technological inventions are a miracle without prior Western knowledge and inventions are 'dreams produced within an isolated environment starved of information.'[391] *Peasant Da Vincis* disrupts the ideology of the pastoral countryside, antithetical to the city's technological acceleration. Instead, it reverberates with friction, creating a symbiosis between the ingenuity of the countryside and the industrialization of the metropolis. This fluid interchange and crosscurrents between the city and the country also re-envision the dichotomous binary narratives put into place during the Cultural Revolution by transforming historical narratives with divergent methods of storytelling. Cai's fascination with the creativity of the

[389] Cai Guo Qiang, 'Germano Celant interviews Cai Guo Qiang,' interview by Germano Celant, *Art in America*, July 28th, 2010. https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/germano-celant-interviews-cai-guo-qiang-56141/.
[390] Munroe, 'Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe,' 20.
[391] Zhang, '"Anti-Gravity": A Surge of Chinese Imagination,' 32.

countryside derives from the unique character of Chinese peasant identities. He elaborates that:

> 'some of these pieces are not in my collection, but I know the stories behind them and will offer them here. My objective, anyway, isn't to exhibit my collection but to present the work of these peasants, whose creativity should be realized by everyone. Chinese society is typically regarded as a single entity, but I hope to demonstrate the importance of individuals—not a collective or a nationality.'[392]

Similarly to *Dancing with Mingong* and *Bishan Commune*, *Peasant Da Vincis* combines an aesthetic vernacular with an interest in rural identity, focusing on the vulnerability of peasant ingenuity to propel late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese capitalistic growth.

Unlike *Dancing with Mingong*'s absorption with unequal socioeconomic vulnerabilities, Cai's rural collaborations were more kinship focused, in affinity to his own artistic practice. He reflects that the peasants who he met were curious, had a pioneering spirit, and similar creative artistic pursuits declaring 'I see myself in them.'[393] Cai's identification of his own rural background is distinguished from Wen Hui, Wu Wenguang, Song Dong, and Yin Xuizhen's collaboration in *Dancing with Mingong*, Wen explaining that she wanted to give the migrants visibility as they were 'at the bottom of the hierarchy.'[394] Cai feels kinship with the rural inventors whom he collaborates with, admiring their pioneering spirit as akin to artistic fortitude. He explains that his own background, from a small village, also allows him to feel

[392] 'Cai Guo Qiang Interview,' May 3rd, 2010.
[393] Cai, 'Cai Guo-Xiang: Peasant Da Vincis, 'Rockbund Art Museum.
[394] Wu, *Dance with Farmworkers*, 21:57.

empathetically attune to a peasant's identity. He elaborates, 'When I'm overseas, and people ask me about my identity, I often reply, "I am an Asian peasant."'[395]

In *Robots*, Cai commissions cognitive machines from peasant inventor Wu Yulu to craft drip and dot paintings to transform the third floor of the exhibitions into a robot production workshop, a series of readymades as part of the *Peasant Da Vinci*'s exhibition. (See Fig. 4.6). Cai playfully explores a dichotomy and tension between rural migrants and the metropolitan elite in a similar binary that exists between Western and Chinese artists. The robots mimicked the 'classic acts of Modern Artists,' including such well-known artists as 'Yves Klein leaping off a wall, Damien Hirst painting dots, Joseph Beuys cradling a coyote, and Jackson Pollock splashing paint.'[396] A further layer of mimicry and duplication is the rural and metropolitan dichotomy, with rural 'uneducated' peasants building creative technological machines of art to be exhibited in the metropolitan cities. The robots' mimicked actions act as commentary on the Western art world patriarchy while slyly referring to China's contemporary (art) presence as an upstart duplicator in the Western art ecosystem.

[395] Cai, 'Cai Guo-Xiang: Peasant Da Vincis,' Rockbund Art Museum.
[396] Cai Guo-Qiang, 'Wu Yulu,' in *Cai-Guo Xiang: Peasant Da Vincis* (Shanghai: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2010), 161. Exhibition Catalogue.

Figure 4.6: Wu Yulu *Kneeling Jackson Pollock* (2010). Work commissioned by Cai Guo-Qiang and created by Wu Yulu using metal, electronics, second-hand material. 105cm x 52cm x 58cm, Cai Guo-Qiang Collection. Courtesy of Cai Studio.

Cai's art practice captures the evolving tension between Western and Chinese art forms, industrialization and migrant labour, an integral part of China's evolving late twentieth-and early twenty-first century cultural identities.

Peasant Da Vincis contains many of the same thematic movements as Ai's *Fairytale*, including the absorption with imaginative and creative stories, across diverse Chinese regions that illuminates unique Chinese identities. Both Ai and Cai feel an affinity for their diverse Chinese participants and view the countryside as an inspiration for their art practice. Cai's installation, also entitled *Fairytale* (2010), focused on themes of technological prowess (See Fig. 4.7). Cai's *Fairytale* (2010) artwork has the same title as Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* (2007), reflecting a late twentieth and early twenty-first century absorption that Chinese artists had in fictionalizing and remythologizing Chinese histories. Cai's *Fairytale* consists of a mixed-media installation of sixty live birds and a genuine grass lawn, placed in proximity to four technological inventions suspended in the air: a wooden airplane, submarines, helicopters, and flying saucers. The installation brings together a juxtaposition of natural greenery with birds chirping (symbolizing the countryside) and artificial

machines (representing industrialization and technology). Both combinatory elements together signify an amalgamation of fauna and rural prowess. The title *Fairytale* connotes a fantasist world, and the artworks imagine the speculative future of technology by bringing together different systems of mythmaking, both natural and artificial. This mix of optimism in fantasy and technology in reimagining historical narratives is significant to what artists such as Cai and Ai express in their art practices that centres on contemporary China's evolving cultural identities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Figure 4.7: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Fairytale*, 2010. Grass lawn, 60 live birds, wild flowering plants, including *Wooden Airplane* by Chen Zongzhi and *Wang Qiang No. 1* by Wang Qiang, submarines by Li Yuming, helicopters by Xu Bin and Wu Shuzhai, flying saucers by Du Wenda, Rockbund Art Museum, 2010. Courtesy of Cai Studio.

Cai elucidates his enthusiasm for collaborating with peasant inventors, commenting on the rapidly evolving industrialized identity of contemporary China that affected both the metropolitan cities and the countryside explaining:

> It's not important for people to regard these objects as contemporary art. We are using my name and the framework of this new museum to tell these stories, but these objects aren't necessarily art, in the same way these peasants are not artists.' It can be said that I am a storyteller using contemporary art as

> my language, and the peasants and their creations are the protagonists and the main theme of this story. [397]

The significance of Cai's statement is his focus on the rural individual as representative of minor stories in which he becomes the storyteller for the reframing of Chinese narratives. Much like Ai's *Fairytale*, it focuses on the untold, minoritarian and marginalized stories of Chinese individuals.

Ultimately, Yiwu believes that Cai's objective was to 'say goodbye to the role of the peasants in the 20th century', meaning preconceived notions relating to the rural vs urban dichotomy in China.[398] The movement of rural to metropolitan migrations demonstrated how countryside creativity was pivotal in inciting the energy and industrialization of metropolitan centres. After *Peasant Da Vincis*, Cai returned to the grand spectacle of fireworks in his art practice. His interest in the countryside was an imminent moment of optimism and absorption in a transitional moment in Chinese identity, which mirrored the optimistic moment of a cross collaboration and migration between the country and city.

In this chapter, I have examined three primary examples of artists and rural art practices featuring the Chinese countryside as playing a major role in the development of contemporary Chinese identities. In the three examples examined in depth, artists and rural migrants collaborate to create artistic projects that connect to the acceleration of labour and migration. In *Dancing with Mingong*, migrants and artists perform an interpretative performance exploring rural to city migrant themes in the context of Beijing infrastructure. In *Bishan Commune*, metropolitan artists and rural residents constructing community identities dependent on a hybridity of rural and

[397] Yi Gu, 'Letter in Mail: Cai Guo-Qiang's Peasant Da Vincis and the (Il)legibility of Transnational Art,' *Journal of History of Modern Art*, no. 30 (2011), 191-203.
[398] Zhang Yiwu, '"Anti-Gravity": A Surge of Chinese Imagination,'35.

heritage vernacular and metropolitan design with local ephemera. Finally in *Peasant Da Vincis*, rural villagers and their technological prowess are reimagined as alternative historical patterns of prowess and ingenuity, propelling Shanghai's imagination, and identity.

Cai's interest in the creativity and invention flourishing in the countryside is a precursor for the final chapter in my thesis on Ai's *Fairytale*, congregating minoritarian stories in framing imagined Chinese subjects. Through examining artists such as Cai and Ai, I emphasize that a transnational turn in Chinese art was embedded in the practice of contemporary Chinese artists, who reimagined historical narratives through the ingenuity and imagination of China's countryside. In the same method that Ai's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) is a reappropriation of individual tales of new historical narratives, so Cai is interested in unearthing dormant, undisturbed historical narratives.

In *Friction*, Tsing asks 'what kind of individuals and groups can make change?' [399] One answer may lie in a decentralized notion of gatherings where artists, migrants, and dancers agilely collide like so many atoms in representing and transforming China's identities. Tsing writes that motion can be seen as 'loosening the grip of local practice' and in *Dancing with Mingong* and *Bishan Commune*, the intervention of migrant labour into cultural performance, and likewise, the intercession of artists into the lives of migrant labourers interrupt the cyclical evolution of the environment.[400] Morin writes that *Peasant Da Vincis* asks us to imagine Cai and the peasant inventors as 'poets whose dream of flying to another

[399] Tsing, *Friction,* 214.
[400] Tsing, Friction, 214.

world...enables them to examine the complexities of their everyday lives in a rapidly changing nation.'[401]

In Chapter Five, I continue exploring transnational worldmaking through travel and microcosmic worlds featuring Ai's artwork *Fairytale*. *Fairytale* and the subsequent archive, *Fairytale Project*, inspire a more elaborate investigation into diverse migrational axes by reimagining minoritarian stories and histories. The artwork and archive are scrutinized as a significant example of transcultural migrational art practices representing the evolving nature of contemporary Chinese identities.

[401] Francis Morin, 'Cai Guo Qiang: The Artist, The Curator, and the Collector,' in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis* (Shanghai, Guanxi Normal University Press, 2010), 43.

Chapter Five

The Travellers: Fictionalizing the Social Script

In this final chapter, which focuses on Ai's *Fairytale* artwork (2007) and my subsequent co-founded research archive, *Fairytale Project* (2011), I demonstrate how both projects inspire imaginative iterations of performative migration. I analyze the significance of both artwork and archive as destabilizing dominant social and representational discourses by examining a selection of minoritarian participant stories. In this chapter, I return to Ai's art project to retrace a complex dialogical engagement with his transcultural art practice, situated at multiple entry points in my thesis. The focus on *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* creatively concludes my discussion on transnationalism enacting a microcosm of Chinese transcultural migration through the lens of a travelling art project.

Through the lens of *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project*, this chapter offers an illustrative analysis of the overarching themes of minoritarian stories and representations of diverse migrational axes in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. I focus on both *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* as models for how Chinese transnational practitioners mediate late capitalist post-industrial moments by using text, image and transmedial forms to navigate flexible citizenship. Text and image are dialogically in conversation in both artwork and archive, operating in tandem, at moments in friction, and at other moments, illustrative of various migrational axis at play in evolving cultural identities, both singularly and collectively.

Ai's *Fairytale* (2007) is an ambitious artwork in which 1001 Mainland Chinese citizens travel to participate in *Documenta XII*, a venerated quinquennial visual art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. *Fairytale* participants were selected from all

over China, a diverse country consisting of fifty-six ethnic groups with regional differences and variations between each of its thirty-four provinces. Participants enrolled from major cities in China including Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, and from smaller regions such as Xinlian, a remote village in Northwest China's Gansu Province.[402] *Fairytale* explored the cultural notion of travelling with participants ranging in age from two to seventy years, consisting of a diverse selection of regional Chinese citizens. The 1001 participants include an old couple who operated a simple sesame cake food stall outside Ai's studio, architects, businessmen (several who had travelled internationally), teachers, rock musicians and other creative practitioners, travel agents who had never travelled, second-tier city office workers, unemployed labourers, civil servants, and 200 Shanghai university fine arts students.[403]

The *Fairytale* participants were divided into five groups of 200 people each, travelling in two-week intervals between June 12th and July 9th, 2007. To meet the exigencies of this enormous art project, including the logistical components of transportation details and visas, Ai transformed his artist studio into a travel agency. The complex logistics of the various travel components included international visa applications from each participant's *hukou*, city or village. Ai's studio had to apply for German travel visas for all 1001 participants, one of the numerous intersecting legal and bureaucratic details integral to the success of the project. Visas were successfully granted for all but two of the participants, a major feat, considering that

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[402] In Xinlian, an extraordinary town meeting was called to deliberate on which of the residents would be selected for the immeasurable opportunity to travel overseas for the first time In the end, the village chose four people who could represent different age groups and thus convey and carry different experiences: Jin Nunu, 60; Jin Maolin, 45; Li Baoyuan, 43; and Sun Baolin, 27. For more information on this anecdote please see Mu Qian, 'Once Upon a Time.' *China Daily*. May 29th, 2007. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2007-05/29/content_882137.htm It is significant to note that Kassel is also considered a small village in Germany, population less than 200,000 in 2007. 'Kassel,' 'City Population,' accessed November 10th, 2021. https://www.citypopulation.de/en/germany/hessen/kassel_stadt/06611000__kassel/.

[403] Mu Qian, 'Once Upon a Time.'

many of the participants did not possess passports or valid Chinese identity cards. In one of many extraordinary examples in *Fairytale*, two participants from remote Chinese villages did not even possess registered legal names to officially apply for passports.

In one pertinent interview, *Fairytale* participant 247 relays his experience on bureaucratic procedure during the art project. Through the process of applying for passports for two of his elementary school friends and himself, he realizes that 'this whole event [*Fairytale*] was called into question, no one believed us as the idea of someone paying for this group to travel was impossible to imagine.'[404] Both artwork and archive critiqued pertinent contemporary Chinese social issues such as migration, travel, and transnational crossings, influencing cultural identities. Themes of migration, diaspora and travel became integral components that informed both *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* as the artwork and archive explore diverse migrational axes of Chinese identities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In addition to the selected Chinese participants, a material component of the *Fairytale* artwork was the repurposing of 1001 Qing Dynasty chairs as readymade art objects. The chairs were brought to Kassel as Chinese cultural objects, part of *Fairytale* and installed across three different *Documenta XII* exhibition venues (See Fig. 5.1).[405] The vacated antique chairs act as a symbolic reminder of the 1001 Chinese *Fairytale* participants wandering around Kassel as travellers. Ai consciously chose Qing Dynasty chairs as a classical symbol of Chinese culture to juxtapose with China's prescient twenty-first century travellers, many among the first in their local

[404] Please see FP247, www.fairytaleproject.net

[405] Readymade objects are minimally altered man-made or natural objects. The chairs allude to the found art objects of Duchamp's readymade, which were a tremendous influence on Ai's practice. The use of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) chairs as readymade objects brings together China's past heritage with the present journey. Please see earlier note on page xx for more details.

villages to travel to Germany.

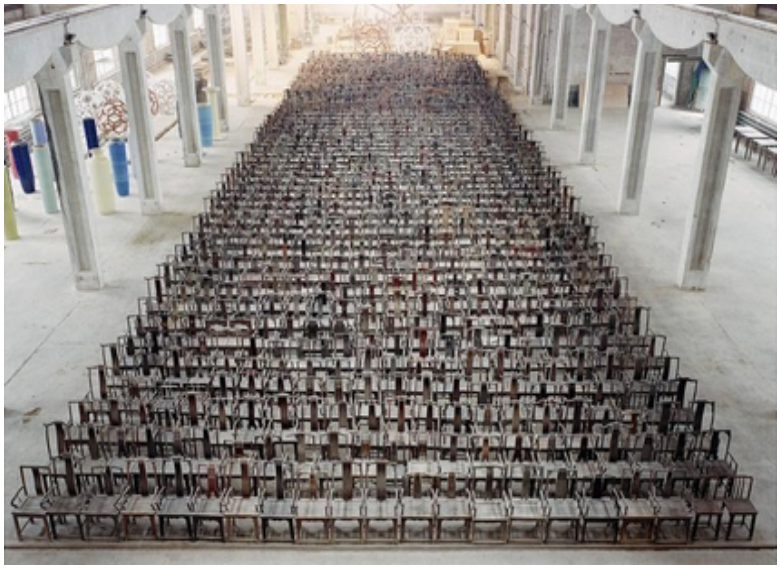

Figure 5.1: Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale Chairs*, 2007. 1001 wooden Qing Dynasty chairs, dimensions variable, photographed at Ai Weiwei's studio, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

All participants were given a camera and USB drive to upload pictures and were encouraged to record their ongoing travel experiences, resulting in the duration of *Fairytale* being recorded or transcribed. Many of the participants' experiences, such as their first time on an airplane, meeting local German villagers, and experiencing the Kassel countryside, were extensively documented in photography and on video as they experienced them firsthand.

Fairytale elicited participatory experiences, fostering shared forms of collective identities by bringing together China's various regions of people travelling to Germany. During the Kassel trip, the *Fairytale* participants would accumulate unusual and original encounters that were metonymically representative of the vast Chinese migrant and diasporic experiences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Hentyle Yapp describes this juxtaposition between the classical and new in Ai's *Fairytale* as situating citizenship historically within the parameters of modernity and implicating preconceived forms of cultural production in evoking contemporary

responses.[406] Elaborating further on Yapp's analysis, I would assert that Ai's evocation of these adjacent concepts is an acknowledgement of both the historical lineage and transcultural implications of pre-cultural revolutionary Chinese culture.

The art project became a well-devised intervention, effective in stimulating both individual expression and community practices, offering possibilities of transforming Chinese citizens into transnational travellers. Rather than featuring Ai's authoritative voice as artist and author, *Fairytale* privileged minoritarian cultural perspectives from a diverse array of Chinese travellers. The extraordinary mass choreography of Chinese citizens traveling outside of China, many for the first time, enabled Ai to explore fundamental questions concerning identity, memory and cultural dialogue between Kassel citizens and a diverse range of Chinese travellers. In *Fairytale*, fantasies and projections were nurtured in each of the participant's storytelling, forming transnational transient communities.

Inspired by *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, *Fairytale* mythologized the extraordinary journey of 1001 Chinese citizens travelling outside of China, enabling Ai and the participants to prompt questions pertaining to precarious memories and representations of home, inciting uncommon cultural dialogues.[407] Yapp discusses how *Fairytale* operated in signifiers of multiplicity, citing 'the many objects, mass circulation of 1001 individuals, and mediated distribution' as evidence of the artwork's tremendous network of bodies and objects orbiting around the Kassel trip.[408] Ai's expansion further illuminates the polyphonic nature of the artwork and the importance of numerology in the title as he specifies:

[406] Yapp, 'Minor China,' 62.

[407] Ai Weiwei invited 1000 Chinese participants making himself the 1001st traveller. This accomplished the dual objective of focusing on the singular and the group, as well as deliberately complicating his status as author of the project.

[408] Yapp, 'Minor China,' 62.

'each participant is a single person, and that's why our logo is 1=1000—that means that in this project 1001 is not represented by one project, but by 1001 projects, as each individual will have his or her own independent experience.'[409]

Christian Holler has written that *Fairytale*'s group travel narrative alludes to the mass-choreographic images of communist China, with 1001 participants visiting Kassel standing in for the migrant imagination of an estimated '140 million Chinese people on the move throughout the world, particularly in connection with their work'.[410] Ai's return to seriality, the succession of children's backpacks on the façade of the Fridericianum (*Remembering*, 2009), and rows of Chinese porcelain antique vases (*Painted Vases*, 2009), echo Communist Chinese historical trends from the uniformity of the Mao Jacket to the ubiquity of the hundreds of millions of units of the Shanghai Wuling Chinese Car brand sold on the road, indicative of the overwhelming growth of the Chinese population in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Examples of Ai's works that fictionalise and reference historical events include his use of specific materials, such as Chinese jade, ceramics, Pu-erh tea leaves, and indigenous wood in the legacy of localised historical materiality. In *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), over 100,000,000 seeds filled the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, forged by ceramic makers in the town of Jingdezhen, China. *Sunflower Seeds* alludes to the same themes as *Fairytale* in the balance between the singular and multitude symbolizing as a larger metaphor to explore connections between an individual and society in China. In this monumental art project, Jingdezhen hand-painted ceramic sunflower seeds are used to represent singular Chinese citizens as

[409] Qtd in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London: Tate Publishing, 2010) 21. Ai Weiwei, interview with Natalie Colonnello. www.artzinechina.com
[410] Christian Holler. 'Like Machine or an Animal: Fairytale as a Mirror of Geo-Cultural Dynamics,' *Fairytale Reader* (Zurich: J.P Ringier, 2012), 85.

'sunflowers' under Chairman Mao's regime and the multitude of China's growing population.[411] This pursuit of eliciting and conceiving of transnational communities was exemplified in *Fairytale*, in which a group of individuals brought together by an expatriate Chinese artist into forming a collective community. Ai's practice would later evolve to create such transnational artworks as *Human Flow* (2017), focusing on the worldwide refugee crisis in the early twenty-first century.[412] Ai elaborates on the origins of the project, explaining that 'the idea came to me of bringing Chinese people on a trip. It is like a slice of cake cut from a whole, with that one slice containing all of the characteristic elements of the cake.' [413] The use of *Fairytale* participants represents the diversity of the Chinese nation with Ai elaborating that 'the individual identities of these people, their ages, the characteristics of almost all of the regions and provinces from which they came, all have an impact on cultural development and exchange.' [414]

The *Fairytale* participants' storytelling fosters dialogical patterns acting as a greater denotation for Chinese [im]migration. However, the +1 in *Fairytale*'s conception also implies the individual, or 1001 singular stories, in which each story is counted as a distinct, important voice (See Fig. 5.2). Beyond the specific allusion to the composite Persian, Arabic and Middle Eastern folk tales in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the chosen numerical abundance of *Fairytale* participants reflects the plurality of the Mainland Chinese population experience. The artwork contains multiple layers that captured the everyday lives of Chinese people and their population histories, involving not only cultural practices, but also marked themes of

[411] The choice of Jingdezhen artisans to paint the ceramic sunflower seeds alludes to centuries of craftsmanship from the same village used to construct and paint Chinese dynasty vases.
[412] A 2017 feature film directed and produced by Ai Weiwei on the international refugee crisis. *Human Flow*, directed by Ai Weiwei, written by Chin-chin Yap, Tim Finch, and Boris Cheshirkov, DVD.
[413] Ai Weiwei, 'Conversation between Ai Weiwei and Fu Xiao-Dong,' in *Ai Weiwei Fairytale: A Reader*, (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 19).
[414] Ai Weiwei, 'Conversation between Ai Weiwei and Fu Xiao-Dong,' 19.

displacement and cultural friction between vastly different countries and historical traditions.

In 2011, five years later, executive director of Slought Foundation, Dr. Aaron Levy, and I constructed an archive on *Fairytale* entitled *Fairytale Project*. It involved translating *Fairytale* participant materials such as their questionnaires, snapshots, and the recorded interviews that Ai and his studio collected with participants over the course of the 2007 project.[415] Ai's studio had in storage over 140,000 photos that were taken by participants during their Kassel trip, 1001 questionnaires, sixty in-depth interviews, and various multimedia and other visual imagery. With funding support from the Fairytale Foundation (the original group of donors that supported *Fairytale*) and Galerie Urs Meile, we built an online archive uploading the original, translated and catalogued material online.[416] The translation of these primary materials was predominantly accomplished through a transnational Chinese speaking volunteer network that could be found at www.fairytaleproject.net, the web archive conceived for the project. The succeeding *Fairytale Project* archive explored the aftereffects of *Fairytale* on the participants by examining the questionnaires and photographs taken during the Kassel journey, as well as introducing a process of re-interviewing the participants.

Our *Fairytale Project* archive examined Ai's *Fairytale* artwork in the context of cataloguing and translating the participant voices, simultaneously calling attention to their individual stories yet also emphasizing a nascent temporary community. The archive's purpose was to reflectively examine whether the journey had fashioned

[415] Aaron Levy is the founder and executive director of Slought Foundation, a Philadelphia-based institution on the University of Pennsylvania campus. It is an art space that functions as an art exhibition gallery, social practice community centre and research lab.

[416] At the beginning of *Fairytale* in 2007, participants signed a waiver form agreeing to the use of their images, photos, interview answers, and all related media to be used in the publicity of *Fairytale* and the artwork.

transformative moments for the *Fairytale* participants upon their return home to their own regional communities. *Fairytale Project* sought to discover the reorientation of shifting cultural identities, contextualized by each of the participant's own deterritorialized perspectives. We explored, years later, how relationships elicited during *Fairytale* would reverberate and echo with these participants at later stages in their lives. Our purpose was to re-interview as many participants as possible to record the vestiges of individual and collective memory that they had left behind.

Using *Fairytale* as an origin point and the subsequent *Fairytale Project* as in-depth pedagogical research into Ai's artwork, both art projects relay individual stories while simultaneously bringing together a multiplicity of people in creating communities. *Fairytale Project* demonstrates how participants engage in transcultural storytelling, using performance and visual imagery to broaden the parameters of Chinese cultural identity. *Fairytale* enacts performing identities derived from moments of cultural friction and interchange in Kassel, representative of larger transnational Chinese migrations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In 2007, *Fairytale* was exhibited at a particularly pivotal moment for the history of Mainland Chinese travel and migration. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the primary form of Chinese overseas travel had been for diplomatic purposes with outbound travel estimated at 2 million people annually.[417] From the 1990s to the 2000s, it continued to be complex for Chinese people to travel abroad, and yet China was amid a vast economic change that would alter the course of travel and migration for generations. Between 2000-2012, international travel would

[417] Rakotonanahary Fanomezantsoa Nasolomampionona, 'Profile of Chinese Outbound Tourists: Characteristics and Expenditures,' *American Journal of Tourism Management*, 3(1) (2014), 18.

increase from 10 to 83 million over twelve years.[418] Deng Xiao Ping's 1979 Open Door policy on economic reform was instrumental in opening China to the outside world, fueling the desire and curiosity of Chinese people for foreign travel, particularly after the Cultural Revolution. In the 1990s, when Chinese tourists began venturing into international cities, they were confined to travelling through tour groups due to strict restrictions placed on individual travellers by both China and the subsequent governments of foreign destinations. The travel that took place for *Fairytale* could be categorized as 'tourism' or 'leisure,' with participants travelling to Germany for recreational enjoyment. Only a decade earlier, most diplomatic or business-oriented forms of travel were slowly emerging after China's 1979 Open Door policy. According to a 2014 report, group travel remained the preferred mode of movement for Chinese tourists in both Asia and Europe with most Chinese tourists traveling in tour groups with official Chinese tourism agencies.[419]

Outbound tourism by Chinese citizens was considered a recent phenomenon that became popular only in the early twenty-first century, primarily due to the arduously bureaucratic process of travel outside China.[420] Chinese citizens were restricted by their *hukou*, a birth certificate document on which the birthplace and class of every Chinese citizen was inscribed, dictating a citizen's workplace, living destination, and marriage choice within their provincial birth-town.[421] To place *Fairytale* in a geopolitical context, Ai took his *Fairytale* participants to Kassel in

[418] Nasolomampionona, 'Profile of Chinese Outbound Tourists, 19.
[419] Nasolomampionona, 'Profile of Chinese Outbound Tourists,' 18.
[420] Nasolomampionona, 'Profile of Chinese Outbound Tourists,' 24.
[421] The *hukou* and how it has affected migration and Chinese identity was discussed in *The Banquet Bug* and 'Love in the Marketplace' in Chapter Three. Please see footnotes XX

2007, a mere five years after Germany became an approved destination by the Chinese tourism board.[422]

Chinese domestic migration was common between 2007 and 2011 and, as demonstrated in previous chapters, rural to metropolitan migrations was emerging as a leading issue, with migrants moving out of villages and across the country or to the nearest newly built factory industrial areas to find work in urban centres.[423] Mass rural to metropolitan domestic migrations involved shifting identities transforming local contexts into transnational moments. This transformation, as explored in my previous chapters, was exemplified by cultural practitioners such as Ai, Ha Jin, Yiyun Li, Geling Yan, Ou Ning, and Cai Guo-Qiang, using their transnational experiences to reshape Chinese identities. Cultural changes were propelled by travellers that began to explore internationally and subsequently return to China, contributing rapidly to evolving identities. *Fairytale*'s themes were influenced by these late twentieth and early twenty-first century circumstances of both travel and restrictions on migration and immigration, coupled with the rapidly opening nature of the country's post Open Door policy.

Both the possibility and impossibility of travel have motivated Ai's artistic practices, particularly in the context of *Fairytale*, a project centering on transcultural migration themes. Ai's childhood was influenced by his father Ai Qing's experiences, banished from Beijing, and forced to clean toilets for eighteen years in the Western province of Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution. Ai's life would reflect his father's history of displacement and insurgence with reference to his own alienation

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[422] Germany only became an approved destination status in 2003. For more on this subject, please see Arita, Shawn, Christopher Edmonds, Summer La Croix, and James Mak. 'Impact of Approved Destination Status on Chinese Travel Abroad: An Econometric Analysis,' *Tourism Economics*, 17:5, 983-996.

[423] For more on rural migrant workers in factories, please see Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

and exile. Ai tellingly explained in reference to his upbringing: 'I'm a product of displacement. We were always being pushed by ideology and political conditions. So, you know, I was born radical, I did not become radical.'[424] Themes of cultural and geographical disjuncture resonated with Ai, particularly in the context of his twelve-year sojourn in New York from 1981 to 1993. Ai's ability to travel and live in New York during the 1980s influenced his cultural perspective, particularly upon his China return in 1994. His personal and political situation pivoted again in 2011 when the Chinese government seized his passport, and he was unable to travel outside China for over two years. Ai's exile, displacement, immigration, and immobility experiences are reflected in the travel and transcultural migratory themes of *Fairytale*. He deliberately chose himself as the 1001st participant in *Fairytale* so that his personal life as a participant, not only as an artist, would become significant to the project's narrative.

In the early 2000s, Ai's practice was situated in an 'everyday' context with an artistic focus that prioritized simplicity, involving what Roger Buergel observed as 'looking and noticing,' entering a global conversation while remaining based in and actively engaged in native contexts.[425] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were a multitude of sociological art projects including, famously, the *Village Negre* during the 1878-1889 World Fair in Paris where 400 Africans were left to pursue their 'authentic' lifestyle for over 20 million visitors to see, and August Sander's *People of the 20th Century* (1920-64) consisting of over 600 photos of German citizens categorised and labeled by their professions.[426] In the early twenty-first century, Pawel Althamer's *Common Task* (2009) brought his Warsaw hometown neighbors to travel to Brazil and Brussels, acting as cultural tourists uniformly dressed

[424] Ai Weiwei, 'An Interview with Ai Weiwei,' interview by Eleanor Watchel, *Brick*, January 11th, 2018, https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-ai-weiwei/.
[425] Buergel, Roger M. 'Meeting Alterity. *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale Reader*. Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012, 27.

[426] Buergel, 'Meeting Alterity,' 40.

in reflective retro-looking gold clothing, easily identifiable as a communal group. Czech artist Katerina Seda's *Over and Over* (2008) actively critiqued social norms by encouraging transgressive social actions such as enlisting people to climb over the fence into a stranger's private residence. Cuban-born American-based artist Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (2011) addressed growing concerns about immigrant rights by implementing comprehensive educational, health and legal programming in the transnational community of Queens, New York.[427]

Drawing on the theoretical research of Guattari and Deleuze, Nicolas Bourriaud has elaborated on how relational art practices, such as those performed by Ai, challenged the 'territorialization' of conventional identity with subjectivity as a fulcrum around 'which forms of knowledge and action can freely pitch in, and soar off in pursuit of the laws of the socius.'[428] In other East Asian examples of sociological art practice, Japanese-born American-based Koki Tanaka's oeuvre of artwork, pertinently focuses on moments of collectivity and community shared after disasters. Deeply affected by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, Tanaka attempted to capture intuitive moments of shared humanity that emerged after catastrophic events, believing the juncture of mutual assistance uniquely fostered humanitarian bonding and community building. In *Precarious Tasks* (2013), Tanaka engineers these pertinent emotional moments in artificially contrived settings, where participants gathered temporarily to participate in specific situations orchestrated by the artist, including walking, drinking tea, and swinging a flashlight.[429] These

[427] For more on social practice artists and the everyday, please see *The Everyday*, edited by Stephen Johnstone, (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2008) 67, 71-72.
[428] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses Du Reel, 2002) 87-89.
[429] 'Abstract speaking, sharing uncertainty and collective acts,' The Japan Pavilion at the 55th international art exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, https://2013.veneziabiennale-japanpavilion.jp/projects/project_02.html

artistically orchestrated community gestures act as a performative substitute for genuine bonds of shared community feeling that were sparked after national disasters.

Social practice artists primarily elicit participatory experiments coupled with a deep commitment to 'social action,' to study the effects of society and behavioral interaction.[430] Ai's *Fairytale* relates to political activist education projects such as those of Bruguera, but also to such social psychologist experiments as Tanaka's art practices. The comparison of Bruguera, Tanaka and Seda's artworks in relation to *Fairytale* determines that Ai's *Fairytale* had less of an affinity to sociological experiments and is more closely aligned to narrative storytelling. While Seda's work derives from social investigation and the meticulous planning of complex relationship devices, Ai's practice diverges to illuminate everyday life as practice. He focuses on the evolving identity of Chinese citizens, derived from a regional context but, through travel and exposure, transforming into pluralistic communities. In *Fairytale*, Ai plays the interlocutor by teasing out narratives through interviews and visual documentation to enrich the textuality of each participant's story and actively encourage the expansion of Chinese cultural identity. *Fairytale* participants' knowledge and identities evolved through transcultural experiences. These transformational journeys include their return home to China, mirroring Chinese community identities of journeying back and forth.

Projects such as those conducted by renowned social practice artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Bruguera, Theaster Gates, Pablo Helguera and Ai often engage the public for a specific period but there is scant investigation into the after-effects or the project's consequences once finished. While *Fairytale* was both a diasporic model and anthropological cultural experiment exploring the parameters of collective

[430] Johnstone, *The Everyday*, 73.

identity, the subsequent *Fairytale Project* archive inquired into the remnants of an artwork's after-effects, particularly during the mass industrial and migrational changes in China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Grant H. Kester elaborates on the staging of 'micro utopias' or 'micro communities' enacted in artists' relational projects as a form of experimentation, with the purpose being to 'reorient artistic practice away from technical expertise or object-production and towards processes of intersubjective exchange.'[431] This was a key aspect of *Fairytale*'s process, exemplified in participant 608's Kassel photographs. This participant was an interior designer who took several photographs of the interactions between Chinese *Fairytale* participants and German citizens.

[431] Grant Kester, *The One and The Many*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 29.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3: *Fairytale* Participant 608's photographs taken during Kassel. Courtesy of www.fairytaleproject.net and the artist.

When asked in his initial *Fairytale* questionnaire what one gains from travelling, *Fairytale* participant 608 responds that travel 'changes' the observer and that voyages and visiting foreign countries instigates 'learning about other people's lives.'[432] Participant 608's travel assessment is pertinent to his ensuing Kassel photographs that showcase various interactions, including *Fairytale* participants and Kassel citizens mutually admiring the German landscape and having friendly conversations with local German citizens on a public bus. Both photographs reveal his interest in the fleeting interrelationships between Chinese and European cultures experienced through *Fairytale* (Figs. 5.2, 5.3). In participant 608's interview, he answers revealingly: 'I feel less hindered speaking with foreigners rather than with Chinese. Maybe it's because communication with foreigners is relatively shallow and short, while with compatriots the communication is deeper.'[433]

Ai's ambition was to elicit individual stories from everyday Chinese people countering monumental histories and shaping narratives challenging government

[432] *Fairytale Project,* www.fairytaleproject.net
[433] *Fairytale Project*, '608,' www.fairytaleproject.net

sanctioned notions of monolithic histories. In reference to the solicited *Fairytale* participants, Ai remarked: 'people have become a medium, and are also the inheritors, beneficiaries, or victims, and this adds to its complexity. But it is still consistent in asking fundamental questions about culture, values, and judgement.'[434] Catherine Wood comments that *Fairytale* is at its most meaningful when it evokes the fictionalising impulse, 'taking many participants back to their love of Grimms' fairy tales as children, a naive imagined idea of Germany, travelling to Europe, visiting a distant land.'[435] She reiterates that *Fairytale* travellers represent the mass migrational movement of Chinese citizens by comparing *Fairytale* to a 'living portrait of the Chinese nation.'[436] The *Fairytale* participants were a seemingly arbitrary segment of the population, acting as a notable microcosm of the entire Chinese population in creating communities to foster dialogical narratives, enriching the understanding of Chinese cultural identities. Drawing from this argument, I would elaborate that the lives of each of the travelling participants contain singular elaborate universes when displaced from Ai as author, each life influencing multiple communities during their travel and return trip back to China. *Fairytale* not only emphasizes the participant numbers but also gave equal measure to their shared participation and the storytelling nature of the project. It ties into minoritarian voices, separate and distinct, with the ability to operate together as a complete narrative. Ai's comments illustrate the tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic nature of the artwork, elaborating '*Fairytale* was a work that was formed as much by its individuals looking at each

[434] Ai, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, 123.
[435] Catherine Wood, 'Fictionalising the Social Script,' *Fairytale Reader.* Zurich: JP Ringier Press, 74.
[436] Catherine Wood, 'Fictionalizing the Social Script,' 70.

other within it, and looking out from within the work, as it was by 'us' (as viewers) looking at it from the outside.'[437]

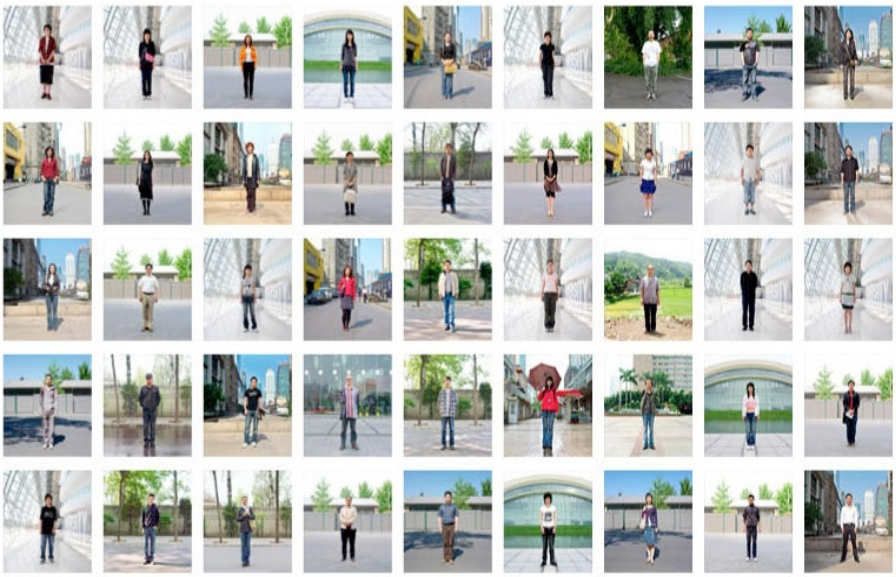

Figure 5.4: Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale Portraits*, 2007. C-prints, each 39 ⅜ x 39 ⅜ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Fairytale operates as multiple stories within an overarching fable, and, like many of Ai's artworks, instigates the production of meaning on multiple levels. Kassel was the setting for and origin of the Brothers Grimm *Fairytales*, one of the direct inspirations for Ai's project. The ability for a Chinese labourer, farmer, or villager from the countryside who has never left their village or province to travel on an airplane to a foreign country, alludes to the magic of journeying to distant lands and meeting strangers in a foreign environment.

Fairytale centers traveller's tales, creating dialogical patterns that trace participants' lives. The storytelling of these minoritarian voices captured their own images and experiences. In Maria Warner's *Stranger Magic: Charmed States of the Arabian Nights*, she refers to the fairytale genre as 'arabesque,' using a performative

[437] Catherine Wood, 'Fictionalising the Social Script,' 69.

metaphor to instill the concept of patterned narratives as recurring motifs, endlessly generated with a repetitive arrangement that references and engages previous themes, evolving original patterns into new stories.[438] This visual metaphor is not only analogous to dialogical forms of practice in which one story responds to another in a call and reflective pattern, but is more aligned with rhizomatic practice, a Deleuzian concept defining a celebration of minoritarian voices, chiming together in harmony as in distinct singular voices. Yanhua Zhou evaluates this positioning, stating that: 'in fact, *Fairytale* is divided into 1001 personal experiences, and at the same time, the 1001 personal experiences contribute to an entire work. This two-way process between the participants and the work itself together creates a duality....'[439] *Fairytale*'s engagement with participant storytelling acts as a larger metaphor for migration and minoritarian identities and stories. Similarly, this commitment to delving into multiple genres was a polyphonic humanistic and interdisciplinary art practice diversifying national identity, evolving into transnational moments for collective communities.[440] The lives of these singular individuals would interweave together to become a component of the early twenty-first dialogical Chinese narratives.

Central to *Fairytale* was the opening questionnaire that Ai conducted in 2007, prompting participants to respond to 99 questions to situate their individual

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[438] Maria Warner, *Stranger Magic* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2012), 7.

[439] 'The logo designed for the project strictly follows this logic: graphically linking the number to the "F" in *Fairytale,* and at the same time conceptually emphasizes '1,' and not '1001.' Yanhua Zhou. 'Ai Weiwei's Fairytale: A Unique Social Engagement,' *Journal for Cultural Research* Vol 21 (2017) 82.

[440] I am indebted to Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, specifically his discussion of the complexities of dialogism and polyphony in texts pioneered by Dostoevsky. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel which he signifies as 'not only objects of authorial discourse, but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.' This was a meaningful theoretical discourse for me in relation to the many voices of Ai's *Fairytale*. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

perspectives to the overall participatory artwork.[441] Ai's evaluation in accepting the participants was simply the following criteria as stated: 'those who are not able to travel overseas under normal conditions, or those to whom traveling overseas has a very important meaning.'[442] The initial *Fairytale* questionnaire was a voluntary experience of shared commonality that bonded the participants as a group, acting as a conduit to shape a reflective process and transform each of the participants.

The three interview stages in *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* began with: firstly, answering the predetermined questionnaire as an anchor and orientation point; secondly, in-depth interviews during *Fairytale* for 56 participants; and thirdly, the follow-up *Fairytale Project* interviews in which over six hundred participants were contacted and approximately one hundred people were interviewed.[443] These interview stages emphasize that the task of the *Fairytale* participants was to reconstruct memory, to document their experiences at different periods during the project which was divided into beginning (questionnaire), during the project (interviews in Kassel) and afterwards (with *The Fairytale Project*). The art project explored different phases of investigation, analysis, and reflection, dependent upon the *Fairytale* participant's reflexive analysis of past events. One pertinent question was how formal or structural hierarchies in narrative and memory also engage with various forms of social hierarchy and domination, particular in Western modes of understanding. The *Fairytale* participant answers, at times, assert and interrogate the complex and evolving nature of transcultural Chinese identities.

[441] Please see appendix.
[442] Mu Qian, 'Once Upon a Time,' *China Daily*.
[443] The 56 people who were chosen to be interviewed during *Fairytale* by the studio I believe were arbitrarily related to time and resources.

The *Fairytale* questionnaire ranged from practical to whimsical to fantastical, establishing a framework for the journey ahead. There were historical context questions, such as '8. Who is your favorite German historical figure?' to factual questions, such as '58. Have you been to Germany? Where have you traveled?' Fictional and magical elements were broached such as questions like '29. Which fairytale character do you imagine yourself as?' to questions encompassing individual beliefs, '56. What are your personal dreams, dreams for your country, and for humanity?' All-encompassing religious and ethical questions were also posed, including '74. What is fairness and justice?' and, finally, there were spiritual questions such as '87. Do saints exist?'[444] Ai elaborates about the importance of the questionnaire in more detail explaining that: 'Leading them in by beginning to think about issues of Western cultural background and their own personal situations was related to the nature of the entire artwork. The farmers just wrote, "I don't know," but as long as they complete the entire questionnaire and sign their name at the bottom, that illustrates that they are identifying with the activity. This must be voluntary.'[445] Ai's statement demonstrates that he was preoccupied with thinking about the intersections of Chinese regionalism with Western culturalism at *Fairytale*'s origin. Each participant's sense of reflection and self-identity was 'related to the nature of the entire artwork.'[446] The individual declarations on each questionnaire emphasized broader understandings of regional self-identity transformed into a wider, all-encompassing community project on Chinese identities.

[444] Ai Weiwei, 'Fairytale Questionnaire,' 'Fairytale Project,' www, fairytaleproject.net.
[445] Ai Weiwei, *Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture and Activism* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2014), 404.

[446] Ai Weiwei, *Spatial Matters*, 404.

When *Fairytale* participants began their trip to Germany in the summer of 2007, Ai was adamant that he did not want participants to engage in accustomed practices such as planned cultural activities. Ai believed that a critical aspect of *Fairytale* was each participant's personal experience, identity, and imagination. In an interview, he explained 'not doing anything will maximize the work, doing any one thing will cause its nature to change.'[447] *Fairytale*'s lack of dictated pre-prescribed activities manifested a seamless integration of art and life, integral to Ai's vision of the social practice artwork. The *Fairytale* participants were not on display in *Documenta XII*, although they had inhabited the performative roles of tourists, travellers, cultural ambassadors, and outsiders, by virtue of their presence in Kassel. The dynamics of spectatorship were not part of this work, although the work was inherently performative.

Fairytale became a well-devised intervention effective in stimulating individual self-expression among participants, offering alternate narratives, and expanded contexts in each individual's life. This abundant accumulation of disorienting experiences was, in essence, the encapsulation of a fictional diaspora experience in a six-week trip around Kassel. Although social practice projects primarily focus on participatory public engagement, they also represent a microcosm or a snapshot of a particular time in a community of people. Buergel insightfully views *Fairytale* as transformative in nature as it encompasses a mark on each individual's life, influencing the chosen Chinese communities to which they return after their Kassel trip.[448] Ten years later, Ai reflects on *Fairytale,* remarking:

> Public art has a clear obligation to benefit society, whether the work is critical or benign. Since the public is a complicated and diverse crowd, the art should offer a possibility for the mass audience to engage with at different levels or

[447] Roger Buergel, 'Meeting Alterity,' 21.
[448] Roger M. Buergel. 'Meeting Alterity,' 31.

> points of view. I tried to accomplish this with my first — and perhaps most notable — effort during '*Documenta XII*' in 2007. The work, *Fairytale*, was an effort to organize the travel of 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel to participate in the art event. The participants came from all over China — from diverse backgrounds — and was organized through the internet. That effort became the largest public artwork.[449]

It is pertinent to analyze Ai's own *Fairytale* reflections, particularly in the context of his evolving activist practice a decade later on an international stage. Ai's beliefs that public art has a 'civic' obligation to engage with diverse viewpoints derives from *Fairytale*, involving intentional dialogue, transcultural crossings, and an engagement with art and identity. Kester summarizes social practice artists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as 'renegotiat[ing] the conditions of art's autonomy,' and ultimately, shaping a 'new paradigm.'[450] *Fairytale* was the beginning of Ai's large-scale artistic involvement with multiple societies, acting as the interlocutor interpreting a variety of human stories. In 2007, it was this focus on relational practice that began to activate a new phase in his art.

Diaspora, travel, and immigration allow one access to another realm—or worlding—of imagination. In diasporic communities, the desire to return to one's native land often precedes a 'naturalisation' in new surroundings. This longing for home often anchors in diasporic, border, and transnational writing as well. Ahmed writes that 'the journey between homes provides the subject with the contours of a space of belonging, but a space that expresses the very logic of an interval, the passing through of the subject between apparently fixed moments of departure and arrival.'[451] *Fairytale* explores the journey 'between homes' as Ahmed expresses, in a

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[449] Carl Swanson 'Ai Weiwei on his massive upcoming public art project' http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/ai-wei-wei-good-fences-make-good-neighbors.html. Published August 25th, 2017.

[450] Kester, *The One and The Many*, 37.

[451] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 77.

six-week interval trip with travellers passing through an international travel space, consisting of arrival, departure, and returning home. Personally, for Ai, his sojourn of years in the United States and his subsequent return to China due to his father's illness is part of that same narrative of 'passing through' woven into the relational aesthetics of *Fairytale* in the journey during *Documenta XII*.

Travel and self-translation do not only signify an out-of-country displacement but also an out-of-culture, out-of-language, and out-of-oneself experience. In *Fairytale*, Chinese bodies migrating into Western European contexts are noted for the friction of cultural collisions, which were recorded in the visual and written impressions of the participants and archived in *Fairytale Project*. In *Fairytale*, we see several participants, by their very unaccustomed bodily presence; spurring friction launch unfamiliar bodies into a foreign environment with travellers resisting by adaptation. *Fairytale* participant 24 exemplifies this transformation of foreign bodily presence into a series of performative actions. His published Kassel photographs show him exuberantly jumping in different locations: on a German street, by the side of the Fridericianum art museum, in a department store, in a group with other *Fairytale* participants, and with Ai in the background as a spectator (See Figs. 5.5 to 5.8). When answering the question: 'What kind of people are artists?' He answers, 'people who live freely and without restraint,' elaborating that 'the use of art [is] to subvert traditional value.'[452]

[452] *Fairytale Project*, 'Participant 24,' www.fairytaleproject.net

Figures 5.5 to 5.8: *Fairytale* participant 24's performative jumping photographs taken in Kassel. Courtesy of www.fairytaleproject.net and Ai Weiwei.

Like Ai's *Study of Perspective* photograph series, participant 24 demonstrates agency over the contrived role of the *Fairytale* tourist. Instead of the observer, he has become a performative participant. By orchestrating his own spectacle, he modifies the nature of the artwork from the mass spectacle of a group participatory project into an individual performance of jumping in the German landscape. In these performative photographs, he subverts the primary theme of cultural difference and redirects the spectacle of performance with his exuberant actions. Ahmed writes how physically 'like' bodies deemed familiar are often adapted through a sense of shared community, while the same society, on the other hand, simultaneously expels strange nonconformist bodies from physical space.[453] In *Fairytale* participant 24's performative actions, he consciously refuses the societal construct of conformist crowd behavior, exploding in his own physicality in disjuncture with the European landscape.

[453] Ahmed, *Strange* Encounters, 50.

As expressed by Ahmed, the notion of journey deals extensively with pluralistic identities that revolve around issues of ethnicity, home, and homelessness. Ahmed elaborates that landed immigrants faced with strangers carry a 'different cultural history,' exhibiting an 'intolerance or resistance to the encounter and' relating back to larger themes of resisting assimilation through performance found in Chapters Two and Three.[454] Participant 24 illuminates the nature of travellers who are strangely out of place or unfamiliar in a new environment, referencing the larger minoritarian story themes present in *Fairytale*.

Fairytale Project (2011): The Archive

I first met Ai in Hong Kong at a dinner party that he was hosting for the post-1980s generation living in Hong Kong in 2010.[455] We conversed about *Fairytale*, which evolved into discussing his art practice and social activism. The relational aesthetics of Ai's art practice, directly affecting public life, had a strong effect on my research and curatorial practice. My parallel development as a scholar and academic oriented me towards the historical implications of an art project that involved public citizenship. It allowed me to conceptualize that public art could be a lasting memory for an individual's identity, instrumental when influencing society. Social practice art focused on live engagement through interaction and discourse and became pertinent to my curatorial methodology after seeing Ai's *Fairytale* at *Documenta*. *Fairytale* broadened my horizons to the notion of how public art intertwines with social

[454] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 51.

[455] The term Post-80s 八十後 came into use in Hong Kong between 2009 and 2010, particularly during the opposition to the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, during which a group of young activists came to the forefront of the Hong Kong political scene. A defining post-1980s characteristic is their "post-materialist" outlook, particularly on urban development, culture, and heritage issues. Political reform campaigns included the fight for the preservation of heritage streets such as Lee Tung avenue, the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, Choi Yuen Tsuen Village, and a citizen-oriented West Kowloon Cultural District. Their discourse mainly develops around themes such as anti-colonialism, sustainable development, and democracy.

relationships, influencing evolving community identities. A couple of months later, I went to visit Ai in Beijing and proposed *Fairytale Project*, an evolving digital archive available online for public access that would integrate translation, archival material, and new interviews on the after-effects of *Fairytale* on the participants' lives.[456] He agreed to the project, and gave me all the files, documents, photos, and folders that he had kept from the original artwork and told me to get started.

Fairytale Project's online archive consists of interviews and an ephemera of material presentation from the trip, documents, and translation. The archive aimed to reflectively examine *Fairytale* by exploring the participant's lives from studying empirical material questionnaires, photos, and documents, and comparing them to 2011 present-day, while also re-interviewing all participants.[457]Archival translated material and the participant interviews (in 2007 and 2011) reveal insight into their evolving attitudes on home and travel. All this gathered material revealed the experiences and memories of how the participants themselves reflexively interpreted their participation on the fifth anniversary of the project in 2011. *Fairytale* inspired *Fairytale Project* as a research paradigm and representational practice to examine literature and visual art spanning different scales, from site-specific to digital.

The follow-up interviews during *Fairytale Project* inquire into how participant's lives after *Fairytale* had fostered personal change and growth.[458] The *Fairytale Project* archive examined whether the significance of an artwork affects people's lives, particularly key participants who were part of the artwork. The questions in *Fairytale* and the new interviews in *Fairytale Project* encouraged a

[456] Please see www.fairytaleproject.net , the archive that is available online.
[457] Please refer to the appendix for an example of a *Fairytale Project* interview that I conducted, translated into English.
[458] I refer to the questions in *Fairytale Project* as redirected interviews as all participants answered the 99-part questionnaire in *Fairytale* upon embarking on the project.

continuous narrative of identity transformation across time and place, providing reverberations with and further meaning to the textual and artwork examples discussed throughout the thesis. *Fairytale Project* encompassed the encounters from *Documenta XII* and foregrounded such issues as the potential for artistic freedom and the challenges of conducting research in local and global conditions. We constructed the archive with the understanding that the process itself of interviews, compilation of material and archival photographs would be reflexively acknowledged and incorporated as it developed. This seemed indicative of the evolving nature of participant conditions of art, artists, and institutions in the contemporary environment.

To build the archive's design and infrastructure code, we engaged Natasha Jen from Pentagram, a prominent design consultancy, as well as a team of young programmers from Directus, a computer management systems company. Once the online archive was designed, I would fly to Beijing periodically to update Ai on our progress, and he would give comments that guided the project direction. Most of the feedback that was given to me by Ai was encouraging but nonchalant. He had expressed in interviews about the direction in which he operates, commenting 'to me, it's interesting to have very slack control, or no control at all, to disappear somewhere and to see how far the work can go by itself.'[459] In Ai's practice, he trusted the forces of natural physics or historical currents to propel the artwork towards its natural conclusion. To dominate the project with his will, he believed, would create a forced unnaturalness that would not allow people or projects to go on their natural path, stating that 'even though I contributed definitive creative ideas, I tried to allow each work's individual nature to develop.'[460]

[459] Ai, *Ai Weiwei's Blog,* 34.
[460] Ai, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, 44-45.

In my interpretation, this is a matter of trust in the individual's collaborative process, yet also a confidence in and optimism about the creativity of others, decentering the artist as author and allowing natural possibilities to grow. Sociologically, Ai was interested in people and their 'daily rhythms,' and how these habits could be maintained in an unfamiliar culture and environment. In keeping with the same spirit, when we contacted *Fairytale Project* participants, we had a set of questions to ask the participants but did not want to unduly influence the trajectory of their lives. If they did not wish to speak to us, or if the phone number provided was out of service, we moved on to the next participant.[461]

Fairytale Project differed from a conventional archive in that the project had a strong participatory component, including participants who were contacted individually through a laborious process of checking old telephone numbers and postal addresses. The original participants who we were able to contact and re-interview responded in a variety of different ways. Some were glad to speak to us and reminisce about their time abroad, but others seemed guarded as to why we were re-establishing contact and reiterated that *Fairytale* had little to no impact on their lives. Pertinent examples include re-interviewing *Fairytale* participant 90, in his 70s, who elaborated: 'Having travelled there [Kassel], just like what I said just now, opened my artistic mind,' or *Fairytale* participant 90 who responded: 'In fact the trip wasn't too long, I couldn't say I gained deep insights,' or *Fairytale* participant 96 stating that: 'After 2007, I have been to a number of places: Spain… Japan…' or *Fairytale* participant 319 replying 'not in particular' when asked if returning home in Kassel garnered her a different view on her life or city.[462]

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[461] Please refer to www.fairytaleproject.net

[462] www.fairytaleproject.net

One of *Fairytale Project*'s primary logistical challenges was re-initiating contact with *Fairytale* artwork participants five years after the end of *Documenta XII*. The contact information and data of the 1001 participants was given to me by Ai's studio, including passport identification details, current address, and telephone numbers, but it did not include email addresses, the most common way to reach people in 2011. A poignant example of the difficulty in establishing contact was when we attempted to re-contact 200 art students from a Shanghai university at the time of their participation in *Fairytale*. Five years later when we contacted participants, all their university addresses and telephone numbers were defunct as the students had graduated and moved on with their lives. The inability to reach many of the *Fairytale* participants was reflective of the parameters of larger migrational movements within China that happened between 2007 and 2012 when we began contacting them. The laboriousness of re-establishing contact with the *Fairytale* artwork participants became a primary theme of our archive, related to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century regional movements of the mainland Chinese population, as described in Chapters Three and Four.

Fairytale Project's difficulties in re-interviewing the participants was part of that transformation process, creating new iterations to question and interrogate the main artwork. The archive's purpose was to evaluate, reassess and critically understand the relational concerns of *Fairytale* by interviewing the participants as subjects, attempting to reflectively understand and engage with their past and present selves in the project. There was a performative quality in which we self-consciously returned to re-interview the same participants, we hoped to understand the parameters, borders, and differences that constituted the artwork and the archive. Ai elaborated in a 2007 interview that referred to the dialogical complexities of each participant's

participation thus: 'I think that past and future, these two realities which are both internal and external to each person, are all integrated in very different forms and possibilities that make each individual unique.'[463] In *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project*, we explored the past and present of each individual participant's lives over a duration of ten years from the beginning of the project 2007 to the end in 2017.

We decided to structure *Fairytale Project* as an archive instead of an art exhibition was made due to much of the project involving research and examination of historical documents. Archival analysis was primarily needed rather than an aesthetic presentation of objects falling into the category of an exhibition. The context of an archive is a pledge. As defined by Jacques Derrida, it optimistically imagines the archive as a 'token of the future' acting as a house for a collection of documents representing a community, 'marking the institutional from the private to the public.'[464] W.J.T. Mitchell has discussed memory as an 'imagetext,' a double coded system of retrieval (reliant upon both visual and written representations of language) that are used to recall a sequence of items in an individual's life.[465] *Fairytale Project*'s reliance on both visual artifacts (the participant's photographs) as well as their written questionnaires and interviews are part of the task of reconstructing memory through image and text. The individual recollections of *Fairytale* participants were only examined through the *Fairytale Project* archive when the documents, photographs and ephemera were compiled together into a public dialogue.

In Sara Ahmed's 'A Willfulness Archive,' she retells a Grimms' Fairytales in which a child's arm sticks straight up from her grave after death. The arm will not

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[463] Ai Weiwei, '1=1000: An Interview with Ai Weiwei,' interview by Natalie Colonello, *Artnet*, August 10th, 2007.
[464] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,' *Diacritics*, Summer 1995, Vol 25, no 2, 9-63, 9. 10.
[465] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 92.

bend until the mother eventually strikes it down with a rod. The child's arm is a symbol of willfulness, which persists after death and, in Ahmed's reading, refers to subjects that assert themselves against compliance, a disturbance in society or a refusal to conform to the norm.[466] Ahmed imagines an archive of individuals, distinctive through their fractious differences, but once compiled together, revealing an accumulation of selves not so much singular in their uncommonness but in their rebellious multitude. I similarly envisioned *Fairytale Project* and, in a broader sense, contemporary Chinese creative practitioners as integral to this rebellious multitude, redefining identities through minoritarian narratives, the very existence of their stories refuting state-sanctioned narratives.

The complex transition between an archive and exhibition was explored by presenting *Fairytale Project* at the Slought Foundation, University of Philadelphia, during the Creative Capital | Andy Warhol conference. In addition to the Slought Foundation exhibition, we held public workshops that took place at the Creative Capital Arts Writers Convening in Philadelphia. Creative Capital gave us a grant for the exhibition and invited Levy and I to speak at the 2011 Arts Writers Convening as keynote speakers.[467] We hung a selection of clipboards on the gallery walls, each clipboard representing a *Fairytale* participant (See Fig. 5.9). The decision to hang clipboards on the wall created an aesthetic functional element to the research project that playfully blurred the boundaries between archive and exhibition. The unfinished archive also mimicked the numerical seriality of Ai's other works, with a multitude being placed in a serial line.

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[466] Sara Ahmed, 'A Willfulness Archive,' *Theory and Event*, Vol 15, 3, 2012.

[467] 'The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Convening,' accessed on November 10th, 2021. https://www.artswriters.org/about/history and 'Fairytale Project, Slought Foundation. Accessed November 10th, 2021. https://slought.org/resources/fairytale_workshops.

Figure 5.9: Lee and Aaron Levy. Fairytale Project, Slought Foundation Exhibition, 2011.

Fairytale Project revolved around the translation of participant texts, questionnaires, and experiences across English, Mandarin and German, which became a separate form of cultural inscription and exchange. The priority was sourcing volunteer translation from Chinese to English and, because of the volume of documents, we sourced ten to fifteen crowd-sourced community translators that interacted with the text by translating the Chinese written interviews into English online on a weekly basis. Translators would contact us regularly and begin translating documents that we would upload, incrementally adding to the people who were able to read the text online in English, Mandarin, and German. In the spirit of international collaboration and crowdsourcing, we also created an online translation kit, readily

available for participants to download and for teachers to create their own translation groups. Workshops were facilitated for volunteers to attend and translate any participant's life that engaged their interest and were organized in the United States, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In November 2014, translation workshops continued in Hong Kong, and we remained committed to re-establishing contact with and documenting the lives and memories of the *Fairytale* participants. Our project arose out of an attempt to find meaning from an artwork that affected the lives of 1001 people and the lingering effects of participation in travel and a forged community on these same participant's lives, several years later.

On April 3rd, 2011, Ai was arrested in Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist Party government and transported to a secret Chinese detention center forbidding communication with the outside world. The continuation of *Fairytale Project* was put on hold, and I focused on organizing a series of protests in Hong Kong with the international art community that mirrored protests happening all around the world at the same time.[468] The detainment of Ai irrevocably influenced the direction of the archive and our methodology changed to one that focused on urgent political action to release him from detainment. The larger questions of cultural translation and border crossings transformed as Ai was detained and incarcerated, missing for eighty-one days. The Ming Dynasty chairs originally used in *Fairytale* to symbolize transnational narratives were transformed into a signifier of protest to oppose his incarceration.

A second major issue that became a larger theme in *Fairytale Project* was navigating the shifting and unpredictable government surveillance issue in China, Hong Kong, and the United States, the three separate places in which we were all

[468] Aaron Levy and Melissa Lee. 'Love the Future: Ai Weiwei,' *Domus*, June 23rd, 2011. https://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2011/06/23/love-the-future-ai-weiwei.html.

working and living for the duration of the project. In 2007, at the beginning of *Fairytale*, participants had signed a waiver form agreeing to their images, photos, interview answers and related media being used in the publicity for *Fairytale* and the artwork. However, we were concerned about repercussions from the Chinese government for *Fairytale* participants and their choice to re-engage in a project with one of China's most renowned and controversial visual artists. This concern was exacerbated because it was during our *Fairytale Project* research that Ai was taken illegally by the Chinese authorities and detained for eighty-one days. A pivotal moment in the project was our keynote speech in 2011 at Creative Capital while Ai was simultaneously detained, creating a crisis of conscience and an escalation in our protest activities.

Ai's own increasingly politically centered and socially active art practice in 2011 reoriented the perspective in which *Fairytale* was interpreted after *Documenta XII.* It is difficult to imagine now, but before 2008, Ai was an artist who was favored by the Chinese Communist Party government, lauded for being internationally acclaimed and, through *Fairytale*, promoting cultural exchange. In 2007, *Fairytale* was viewed as a favourable transcultural project. It received positive government press in state-sanctioned newspapers such as *China Daily*, which reported how the art project allowed villagers from all over China to travel overseas for the first time.[469] It was in 2011 that Ai became an internationally recognized name outside the international visual art community, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as well as official government representatives from France and Germany, calling on China to release him from detainment.[470]

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[469] Mu Qian, 'Once Upon a Time.'

[470] Please see Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Hillary Clinton: Chinese System is doomed, leaders on a 'Fool's errand',' *The Atlantic*, May 10th 2011.

A final challenge of the project was navigating the complex politics of collaborating on a significant art project with Ai amidst increasing international public scrutiny of his art practice, while also maintaining our own research autonomy. I negotiated with multiple project stakeholders and had to make decisions without Ai's guidance, which at times necessitated a compromise for all parties involved. Ai felt strongly that we should publish the names and faces of the *Fairytale* participants in the archive as it would reinforce their individual identity, but the shifting political currents in 2007 were different in 2012 in Ai's artistic practice. The complexities of this project were derived in part from the sensitivity of the subject matter, evidenced in our archive as redacted text. We redacted names of participants during Ai's eighty-one days of incarceration, including his own, so that our website could remain protected and would be of less interest to hackers. We compromised by pixelating the profile images of the participants found on the website, making it difficult to distinguish individual faces while still publishing their profile pictures, as well as their ages and professions.

In the introduction to *The Original Folk And Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes recounts how the Grimms' Fairytales were stories sourced by the brothers through the oral tales taken from Kassel and Munster villages.[471] There are structural parallels between the compilation of Grimms' Fairytales, taken from German villagers, and *Fairytale Project* stories and photographs, assembled from regional Mainland Chinese villagers. Ai's solicitation of participants and their life

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https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/05/hillary-clinton-chinese-system-is-doomed-leaders-on-a-fools-errand/238591/ and Tanya Branigan. 'Germany and France call for release of Ai Weiwei,' *The Guardian.* April 4th, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/apr/04/ai-weiwei-germany-france-call-for-release,

[471] Jack Zipes, 'Introduction: Rediscovering the Original Tales of the Brothers Grimm,' in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes, Princeton University Press, 2014, xxi.

stories across diverse regions of China for *Fairytale* mirrors the Grimm brothers' tales collected from various villagers across Germany. The specific *Fairytale* participant examples given in this text actively reflect the themes of the overall archive, demonstrating a diverse migrational axes, as well as minoritarian and individualistic to the participant's lives telling the story.

I include a selection of *Fairytale* participant stories that exemplify the evolving relationships derived from the transient community of Ai's 2007 transnational art project. The *Fairytale* participant voices I chose are wide-ranging, from participant 940 who chronicles falling in love with a Chinese Muslim woman and running away with her to Tianjin, to Ai's *Fairytale* posed questions related to nationhood and border control, and how travellers might transform cultural identity through new interrelationships and experiences. The following participant stories are representative of *Fairytale*'s themes of migration, cultural interrelationships, and performing assimilation.

Participant 90's Kassel and Chinese city impressions intertwine with the response that 'it's pretty much the same as I expected. Kassel is similar with those small towns in China. The changeable weather is like Dalian. It feels like an inland small city like Anyang, Henan-quiet and calm.'[472] One significant image that he captures is a German/Chinese restaurant sign advertising coffee and 'kuchen' (German cake) as well as a 'mittagsbuffet' buffet of Chinese food, indicating his interest in the mixture of Chinese and German cultural interrelationships (Fig. 5.10).

[472] *Fairytale Project*, Appendix, 287.

Figure 5.10: *Fairytale* Participant's 90 photograph taken during Kassel. Courtesy of www.fairytaleproject.net and Ai Weiwei.

Another pertinent example is found in *Fairytale* participant 48's photos, a female, from Shanghai, born in the 1980s. In her photographs, she confirms the thematic fascination of the outsider with a foreign experience (See Figs. 5.11 to 5.14).

Figures 5.11 to 5.14: *Fairytale* Participant 48's photographs taken during Kassel. Courtesy of www.fairytaleproject.net and Ai Weiwei.

Her photographs reveal a fascination with prototypes and how Germany is portrayed culturally and internationally. Photographs of an old German couple on the bench, a European boy hiking with his backpack on a stick, a row of German branded BMW automobiles and the uncanny largeness of a cat on a commercial ad become snapshots into what this outsider views as representative of German culture. Stereotypes, commercial brands, and queerness are all encapsulated in photographs taken by an outsider tourist. The very nature of the immigrant or traveller in a country necessitates an external and extrinsic critique of the cultural values and ideologies in the visiting country. In the *Fairytale Project* archives, the participants become outsiders evaluating and critiquing images that reframe and question quintessential German identity.

The final example studies *Fairytale* Participant 247, a male, from Gansu, born in the 1960s.[473] In these photographs we see four men from Gansu province, clearly out of place in the German countryside. Their awkward stiff poses and the German bystander of similar age participating in one photograph by beaming in the background, demonstrate a strange incongruity between the background and surroundings (Fig. 5.15).

[473] An interesting quotation from Fairytale participant 48's questionnaire: 'when you're dealing with bureaucratic procedures you have to think in a certain way, transform yourself a bit. This is how people think, and how they do things.'www.fairytaleproject.net.

Figure 5.15: *Fairytale* Participant 247's photograph taken during Kassel. Courtesy of www.fairytaleproject.net and Ai Weiwei.

In his interview conducted during Kassel, participant 247 discusses the intricate bureaucracies of passport application for himself and fellow travellers from his village, explaining the process in some detail:

> At the beginning we had to go to the local police station to file the applications. These were processed for two weeks before we were given them back. Then we had to go to the village police station, followed by the township police station, and finally to the county police station. No one wanted to believe what was going on, what were these peasants planning on doing? What are you doing? They were saying to themselves, "if the county commissioner went, he probably would be able to learn something, but these simple minded peasants are ignorant about everything".[474]

In *Fairytale Project,* we examined themes of multiplicity, a multitude of travel in a reversal of the European gaze, with Chinese travellers critiquing and evaluating the West as tourists. Lee Ambrozy discusses how *Fairytale*'s construct of bringing Mainland Chinese citizens from 'all walks of life' to Kassel originates a 'mass movement' of interpersonal cultural and social interactions that would reverberate through layers of society.[475] *Fairytale* is an atomisation of larger themes of Chinese migration, immigration and travel, Ai elaborating that 'it is like a slice of

[474] Appendix, 261.
[475] Lee Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, xii.

cake cut from a whole, with that one slice containing all of the characteristic elements of the cake.'[476] The themes of *Fairytale* are polyphonic, humanistic and interdisciplinary, with the after-effects diversifying national identity, evolving into transnational moments for collective communities.

In *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project*, the themes of cultural adaptation, illegitimacy, and hospitality that I have discussed in this thesis are explored through performing identities and belonging, a negotiation in which travellers are compelled to perform as a measure of visitors. A migrant or traveller who visits or plans to stay in a foreign country is compelled to construct a new identity, which, through the process of becoming someone else, is inherently performative in creating a new type of intersectional identity. Affinity and attachment to a nation's collective history relates to a singular sense of self and identity in relation to the world around them. In Ai's art practice, there is a complex negotiation with the world around him and the participants he engages, whether it is finding a place in one's country of birth, contextualising foreignness or reinventing cultural identities in defiance of a state controlled totalitarian regime. In *Fairytale*, the scrutiny that is turned towards the participants is focused not only on the European destination that they visit (Germany), but also, significantly, on their redefinition of their homeland, China, upon returning.

Fairytale and *Fairytale Project* actively reflected upon themes of migration, diaspora, and cultural identity by examining them at multiple levels. Firstly, the original *Fairytale* consisted of 1001 Chinese participants and their Kassel travel experience. Secondly, there was the presented exhibition of material at *Documenta XII* where the 1001 participants were represented by the 1001 antique Chinese chairs placed in the exhibition spaces. *Fairytale Project* examined the lives of those who

[476] Ai Weiwei, 'Conversation Between Ai Weiwei and Fu Xiao-Dong Regarding the Work *Fairytale*,' *Ai Weiwei Fairytale: A Reader*, (Zurich: JRP Ringier Press, 2012), 19.

were part of the artwork and how they were affected by it. The artwork was examined after the artistic process was finished and the artist had moved on to other projects. In art exhibitions, although a variation of 'before' the project is explored through the research context, the 'after' is rarely addressed once the project is over. *Fairytale* brought people together from diverse regions of China, from the countryside to metropolitan professional workers, to students at the beginning of their professional careers.

Ultimately, my co-founding of *Fairytale Project* spurred examinations of performing cultural adaptation that encompassed im[migrant]s and travelling identities in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The juxtaposition of text and image in dialogical discourse in *Fairytale Project* proliferates new possibilities of meaning, transforming dichotomous East and West ideas into a transcultural hybridity of evolving Chinese identities. The art project represented larger themes of transgressive storytelling and performative subjectivity that I have investigated throughout this thesis.

Conclusion

This thesis originates with *Fairytale* and, notably, its travelling participants as an inspiration. I was motivated to use my co-founded archive *Fairytale Project* as inspiration for examples of minoritarian storytelling, conducive to flexible forms of citizenship and a Chinese transcultural turn. I am engaged by such questions as: how does an artwork operate as a microcosm of intranational and diasporic [im]migrants and travellers? How does an artist maintain a position of resistance within the very dynamic forces of political, social, and cultural change? What happened to the 1001 *Fairytale* participants after the project officially ended?

In November 2021, Ai Weiwei published his memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*. Largely detailing Ai's family history, it also incorporates a lengthy explanation of his father Ai Qing's expatriate years during the 1920s in Paris. Ai remembers that 'father would look back on those three years in Paris as the best in his life…. the intellectual nourishment and idealistic notions he acquired in France would help him chart a course through the tumultuous years ahead.'[477] Similarly, Ai's decade in New York (1983-1993) would influence his artistic process for the turbulent China-based years ahead when he returned home and participated in moments of social and political upheaval, which are mediated through his art practices. Ai would reflect on how the city had influenced his practice as he looked back upon his time in New York: 'some things had taken root in my heart, though they would take time to come to the surface. What I knew was that from now on I would always carry around with me some of the city's ethos.'[478]

[477] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, 144.
[478] Ai, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows,* 679.

My research was motivated by exploring further than the inclined subjects of late twentieth century Chinese diasporic literary studies, which centred on immigrant assimilation in new homelands. Alternatively, my thesis addressed migration as a 'back and forth' concept, with both the new homeland and return journey shaping transnational implications for a community's collective cultural identities. I discussed three critical axes that have shaped this thesis's arguments: im[migration], transcultural experiences, and minoritarian storytelling. Rather than providing an analysis through the lens of Chinese diasporic theory, I have emphasised how Chinese identities are, in fact, transcultural, crossing back and forth between different environments—rural and urban, China and the United States—and returning, affecting each country and the communities they inhabit in turn. I distinctly traced these themes through the lens of deterritorialized Chinese subjects, enacting transgressive storytelling and performative acts, supporting Chinese transnational identity as ever present and evolving in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Contemporary Chinese cultural identities are explored by placing text and image in analogous chapters, rather than applying more conventionally used methods from visual studies and literary theory. *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project*, consisting of photographs, interviews, questionnaires, multi-media and individual participants, successfully use both text and image in tandem, which are referenced throughout my thesis. Both artwork and archive are richer because of the dialogical crosscurrents of text and image, often contradicting and fitting imperfectly, enacting visual and textual storytelling. Sara Ahmed has interpreted the failure of memory in a migrant's body as connected to the constraints of inhabiting an unfamiliar environment. Similar to Ahmed's analysis, through text and image mediums, I have used the analytical lens of

minor transnationalism to emphasise the disjuncture between memory, affective bodies, and inhospitable environments in Chinese rural and urban movements.

As W.J.T. Mitchell has discussed in his extensive analysis of the relationship between word and image, the two subjects are 'like two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange, and other forms of intercourse.'[479] This interpretation of text and image as intimately connected and yet imprecise encourages the evolution of community and encounter-driven cultural identities, conceived through [im]migratory and transnational moments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. As discussed in my introduction, image and text are instrumentalized to reveal instability or fissures in state-sanctioned narratives. This historiographic friction allows communities to construct, reinterpret and explore beyond state-sanctioned narratives through collective imagination.

The imperfect collisions that resonated between expatriate artist group meetings, migrants, artists, and villager collaborations did not evolve seamlessly and instead, demonstrate a friction of storytelling from the periphery. I have put forward the notion of minoritarian stories as a trope for deterritorialized migrant subjects. Instead of state-sanctioned counternarratives, there is a predominance of minoritarian stories told in my thesis, predominantly focused on the conjoining of transnational cultural identities and regional Chinese identities from within China. The overarching purpose has been to investigate the ways in which deterritorialized Chinese subjects use minoritarian stories to refute state-sanctioned narratives of historical storytelling, articulating themes of hospitality, cultural adaptation, and the performance of

[479] W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Word and Image,' in *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 53.

legitimacy. As I stated in my introduction, this thesis is not an exhaustive study of late twentieth and early twenty-first century transnational Chinese identities. Such a project is beyond the scope of the present work.

My goal has been to demonstrate, through the lens of Ai Weiwei and *Fairytale Project*, the ways in which a series of migrational axes have fostered these Chinese subjects, articulating their identities through a collective imagination. This thesis has argued that transgressive storytelling and performances of assimilation by migrants, immigrants and travellers reveal the complexity of evolving Chinese late twentieth and early twenty-first transcultural identities. I have argued for creatively interpreting a globalised identity network and decentering the origins of Chinese nationhood as expressed and told through the stories of migrants, immigrants, and travellers. A distinctive feature I chose to illustrate is the consideration given to how different migrational axes in travellers psychologically change their cultural identity and community and why it becomes important to include these transnational crossings in China's collective imagination.

Attention to how minoritarian stories and transcultural crossings counter historical discourses is integral to understanding the evolution of contemporary Chinese identities. These counternarratives operate by resisting state-sanctioned narratives and reframing Chinese historical and cultural identities. As demonstrated throughout the thesis, counternarratives function performatively through anti-monumentalism (Ai Weiwei), performing assimilation (Ha Jin and Geling Yan), disillusioned late capitalist affect (Yiyun Li), and countryside reinvention (Ou Ning and Cai Guo-Qiang). As China moves into a nationalistic phase of identity in twenty-first century politics, it has become more critical to contextualize the myriad cultural ties linking Chinese diasporic populations and intranational identities in both visual

and literary narratives. Chinese performing identities have directed us towards a repeated thematic of affect, assimilation and hospitality, both outside of China and within, through migrant and rural travel. I conclude by explicitly foregrounding my use of *Fairytale* and *Fairytale Project* as a critical analytic lens for the methods in which imagined Chinese archetypes are transculturally represented in China's late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

There are moments throughout this thesis that indicate how each concentrated archetype could be expanded in new directions, across multifarious political and social contexts. My thesis highlights the need for ongoing development of a more nuanced critical field delving into diasporic and transnational influences on Chinese identity. It is critical that these influences are integrated into an ongoing theoretical conversation, rather than a subgenre of the exploration of contemporary Chinese culture. Focusing on transmedial text and image, cultural practitioners should further illuminate and inform the ways in which we understand and critically approach the varied nature of Chinese cultural identities.

Appendix

Fairytale Participant 90, Questionnaire, and Interview 1 (2007) and Interview 2 (2012) Application

1.) Have you been to Germany?
No but I strongly yearn to be there.
2.) Can you name some of the cities in Germany?
Dresden, because Fyodor Dostoyevsky has lived there before.
Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Aachen.
3.) Can you name a few of Germany's neighboring countries?
Germany is in central Europe, there are Poland and Czech Republic bordering its east, Austria, and Switzerland to its south, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, and France to its West, and with Denmark as its northern neighbor, it is a European nation with the largest number of neighboring countries, while its northern coasts face the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.
4.) When Germany is mentioned, what is it that first thing that comes to mind?
Philosophy.
5.) Is there anything in your life that is of relevance to Germany?
I watch the telecast of the German football league, Bundesliga, every week. I read literary works by German authors that are translated into Chinese.
6.) Do you think Germany is eligible to be a permanent member of the United Nations?
I don't know, I am a book worm.
7.) Are you familiar with German history? If so, which period?
I understand a little bit of it. World War II.
8. Who is your favorite German historical figure?
Julius Caesar.
9. Who do you think represents German art?
Wagner.
10. What books have you read about Germany?
The World is Will and Representation by Schopenhauer, Grimm's Fairy Tales by the Grimm brothers.
11. What do you want to do most in Germany?
To see how Germans live their life.
12. What kind of people do you think Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were?
I don't know, I don't really know them.
13. Do you know Kassel?
I didn't know it before taking part in this activity. Now I know a little about it.
14. Do you know about Documenta Kassel?
I didn't know about it before taking part in this activity. Now I know something about it.
15. Do you know in which year Documenta Kassel began? How many times it has since been held?
It began in 1955. There have been 11 rounds of it.
16. Do you know who curated Documenta 7?
Rudi.
17. Why does Documenta Kassel have such an appeal on a global level?

It has an established history; it is where talents gather, and it has never ceased its avant-garde experiments.
18. What is your impression of Kassel?
Quiet. Clean. A place where all kinds of arts can meet.
19. Do you know which historical figures were from Kassel?
I don't know.
20. Will the audience of the West change their perception of China because of your visit?
I will strive to leave them a better impression.
21. Will Chinese culture receive a positive response because of your visit amongst audience from the West?
They certainly will.
22. The West perceives China as an emerging superpower that will threaten their existing economic superstructure. Will your presence in Kassel proliferate this sense of external threat?
No, they won't.
23. Do you understand the fantasies or fears of the West towards China?
Not Really
24. What would you like to tell the West?
I would like to Introduce Chinese poets and contemporary Chinese culture to them.
25. What is fairy tale?
Fairytale speaks about enlightening truths, and our very own story.
26. Why do you want to participate in this event?
I yearn to see more of the world.
27. How do you perceive your role in Fairytale?
A blessing.
28. Which fairy tale are you most familiar with?
The story of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf pretending to be her grandmother.
29.Which fairy tale character do you imagine yourself as?
Little Red Riding Hood.
30. How have fairy tales influenced you?
They initiate thoughts about the problems adults are required to face.
31. Can you name some fairy tales?
Bluebeard (Barbe-Bleue) and six or seven other stories.
32. Do you think that fairy tales exist now?
I believe they definitely exist, and they are beautiful.
33. Do you believe in art?
Without any doubt.
34. What is an artist like?
They are people who create the world and miracles.
35. What kind of art do you like?
Drawing.
36. Do you think we can live without art?
Life cannot be possible art. Friedrich Hölderin once said, 'one has to live poetically. Only art can lead to a poetic state'.
37. Can art change the world?
Yes, I strong believe so.
38. Can art enhance one's being?

The answer is, definitely.
39. Can you name a few artists?
Beethoven, Goethe, and Heine.
40. What is your impression of Chinese contemporary art?
Chinese contemporary artists are busy, their works are lonely.
41. What is your favorite piece of artwork?
Van Gogh's Sunflowers
42. What do you think is the difference between traditional and contemporary art?
I don't really know
43. What kind of influence do you think contemporary art has?
I don't really know
44. Do you think there is a difference between Western and Chinese art?
Yes
45. What is your most recent artistic experience?
Having a meal at Ai Weiwei's tavern last month
46. Do you think anyone can be an artist?
Yes, Everyone
47.Are you willing to spend money on art?
Yes, Absolutely
48. What is a dream?
To accept the call of the most beautiful object
49. Do you have a dream?
Yes, I do. Life without dreams is unimaginable.
50. Have you ever mocked people who have dreams?
Never, I always respect them.
51. Have your dream(s) ever come true?
They keep coming true, and I keep having dreams
52. Why do you think people dreams?
Humans have the instinct to transcend themselves.
53. What is the purpose of a dream to a person?
Dreams make people happier.
54. What would life be like without dreams?
We would be Zombies.
55. What would a country be like without dreams?
Uninteresting and lifeless.
56. What are your personal dreams, dreams for your country, and for humanity?
Happiness for myself. Prosperity for my country. Togetherness for humankind.
57. What significance do you think travel has in one's life?
Travel allows me to see more beautiful and new things in life.
58. Where have you traveled?
The southern and western parts of China.
59. What have you gained from traveling?
Beautiful views as well as meeting friendly and interesting people.
60. How has traveling changed your lifestyle or even your life?
It has heightened my belief in the meaning of life, life is beautiful, and it is worth cherishing.
61. Where would you most like to travel to?

Prague.
62. What kind of countries would you like to visit?
Countries that are free and open, rich in culture.
63. What do you think are the difficulties of traveling abroad?
Cumbersome formalities, expensive costs as well as a language barrier between people of different cultures.
64. What kind of person would you choose as your travel companion?
Friends who have seen much of the world and who love to chat.
65. Who are you?
My name is Name removed to protect participant, I am a freelance writer
66. Can you tell us about your current living situation?
I read and write daily.
67. How do you like your current lifestyle?
I like it very much.
68. How would you describe your occupation?
It is my ideal occupation
69. What would you most like to change about yourself?
My laziness.
70. How would you describe your most attractive attribute?
I view all people and things in a friendly manner
71. Do you love yourself?
Yes, I do, I love myself the same way I love all people.
72.Please rank according to your view of significance, of the individual, of social class, of ethnicity, of nationality, and of humanity. Humankind. Myself. Ethnic. Nation. Class.
73. Would you sacrifice for others?
Yes, I would. Everyone should have the spirit of self-sacrifice.
74. What is fairness and justice?
A fair start, a fair end, and fair rules. But they are all relative. I think justice is fairness comprising of social criticism.
75. Is freedom important in life?
Important. Very important. Freedom is the basis of truly living.
76. What are your views on the government, justice system, police, and the military?
I have no opinion about them. I hardly think about such questions.
77. What personal attributes do you value the most?
Honesty.
78. What personal attributes are you least tolerant of?
None
79. Can you cook?
Yes, I can. I know how to make home-cooked dishes.
80. What is your favorite object or person?
Books and people who love to read.
81. What do you like about the opposite sex?
Kindness.
82. Do you have a religious belief?
I consider literature my faith.
83. Have you had any spiritual encounters?

I am not sure. Maybe I have.
84. Do you think there is a difference between religion and faith?
I am not sure. Maybe there is.
85. How do you perceive Christianity, which is a prominent religion in the West?
There is, to a certain extent.
86、What is Buddha?
A ray of light.
87. Do saints exist?
They must have existed before, and they still do.
88. What is Jesus like?
I can't describe it, another ray of light. You can't describe the look of light.
89. What are the differences and similarities between Confucius, Laozi, Siddhartha, Muhammad, and Jesus?
They all possess great wisdom. They tell things that are more or less the same through different languages and thinking.
90. Does China have philosophy?
Of course, it does.
91. Have you read the Bible?
Once. I don't read it often.
92. Do you believe in evolution?
Yes, I believe
93. Do you believe in miracles?
Not really
94. Do you believe in the future?
Yes, I believe
95. How would you describe your relations with god(s)?
Spirits are also human beings, those who seize their own destiny are their own spirit.
96. How do you explain life? It is too mysterious. I dare not think too much.
97. Can you describe any stories of the Bible, of Buddhism, or of any other religion?
I can tell a bit about each of them.
98. Is it possible to be right, or wrong about religious beliefs?
There is no right or wrong.
99. What are the beliefs of the Chinese around you?
Working hard, taking care of their wives and children, and living their lives honestly and with satisfaction.

***Fairytale* Participant 90, Interview**

How do you feel about coming to Kassel?
I had no preconceived notions of Kassel beforehand. We are all part of Mr. Ai's work anyway. But it's good to be here. I was very curious about this city before I came but I am not now. I feel it's pretty much the same as I expected. Kassel is similar with those small towns in China. The changeable weather is like Dalian. It feels like an inland small city like Anyang, Henan- quiet and calm. I have seen people fighting over traffic problems, but I don't understand what they were saying.

I have seen those works in the exhibition, but I can't comment about them because I don't fully understand. Besides I watched pretty carelessly without familiarity of the context or background. There are a lot of barriers such as language and culture. I think communication problems are very normal among people, even within us Chinese.

Sometimes I feel less hindered speaking with foreigners rather than with Chinese.
Maybe it's because communication with foreigners is relatively shallow and short, while with compatriots the communication is deeper.

Are you still writing novels?
I didn't write novels for 5, 6 years. I write scripts now. This year I have been going over the things I wrote and preparing to write novels again. I feel unsuccessful about my first two novels, so I have been working on it for 5, 6 years. For example, I am studying the historical origin of Goth novels. They have their own rules and contexts.

Do you feel anxious when you are writing creatively? What are the origins of your creative work and how does it express itself?
Yes. I am worried about the quality of my work. It's mainly because although I keep telling myself that I should be prepared for being marginalized, on the other hand, every artist wants his work to be accepted by majority. Maybe this is the origin of my anxiety.

Are you satisfied with your life now?
Yes. Now I write 3,000 words every day. Writing is the ideal life for me. I like writing every day at home when I still have something to write about. In fact, I can't do anything else except writing. Besides, staying at home all the time saves me money too.

I am a bookworm. My life is reading. I read randomly before I was 30 years old, afterwards I found out there are so many books that I haven't read. So, I began to read those classical works. It's a depressing feeling knowing that there are too many books to read, but you don't know when you finish them whether or not things will just click into place, and you will be full of inspiration.

Do you think China is in an isolated position in this world or do you believe, like everyone says, that China is "globalized"?
I don't just write about Chinese people. I write about men and women, and I never think of myself as Chinese when I am writing. I haven't been in contact with any Europeans or Americans before, so I really don't know... I am just Chinese. I can't be a world-citizen. But there's no need to feel shameful or uncomfortable about it.

Do you think Chinese people have faith?
I guess they do. I am not quite clear about what constitutes faith so I can't answer for sure. Maybe it's up to everyone. Some might think they have a kind of faith, but Christians might feel that it is not faith at all. Once, there was a German Christian who tried to convert me. He spoke in broken Chinese to me. According to him, there are many religions in the world, but everyone else believes in man except Christians because they alone believe in God.

Which Western artists do you like?
The 19th century French writer Balzac and Dostoyevsky.

What impresses me the most deeply about Dostoyevsky is that his emotions are completely involved in spiritual self-torment and self-exposure. His works are strange and kind of filthy. But they are also pure and religious.
Yes, it is.

Do you think Chinese novels are behind Western novels?
Yes, far behind. Maybe we have inferior groundwork. I think some Chinese writers can't represent China, but they hold a high place in the literature circle. I guess Western people see Chinese literature in the exact way as we see Former Soviet Union literature. We found it has something special. Like Gao Xing Jian, Chinese readers are not familiar with him. I myself don't think he is very good, either.

As a man, what do you think is success?
My idea is pretty much the same as the rest of mainstream society. A stable job, a regular income, maybe 2 or 3 times higher than average. But personally, I don't feel successful. I think everyone is a loser. I used to drink with some friends, like Da Xian, but not anymore. It's horrible.

Do you approve of this kind of lifestyle? From the mainstream view it's decadent.
I think I do. You can live as you like. Every lifestyle, as long as it doesn't damage society, is good. I used to drink with them, later I felt it wasted too much time to drink every day. And then I got married and there's other life pressures. I must write books and scripts every day. I became too busy to drink because drinking would affect my work. But afterwards I got divorced and I began to drink again. I think it's nice to live this way.

Does your marriage experience make you feel frustrated about love?
No, because divorce for me is a relief. Maybe I understand love differently from most people. I think it's a lie to say, 'together forever'. Love for me is just about mutually feeling right. Marriage is just one kind of love.

So, you think love is short-lived, not long term?
Yes, definitely. When love begins it's fascinating. But after that it's just a long and dull process. Besides, love can't last as long as people because people need to try different things. So, I guess love is short-lived.

But I think most females won't agree with you.
This is because they are weak and need to feel secure.

Maybe you can't maintain your passion for a woman for a long time. But you are passionate about novels, what makes you keep a long term interest and passion in literature?
It needs self-adjustment indeed. I have moments of weariness. At the time when I wrote scripts, I used to think that I would never write again. I said to myself that outside the literature circle there are many people who don't read at all, but this does not affect their lives and their judgments. This makes me feel that writing is pointless... I can't really influence people's lives and writing is at best, a type of entertainment. But when I calm down and after mentally self-adjusting, I find myself still want to write.

Do you still expect and long for love?
Of course, I do.

Some people just have sexual impulses.
I used to feel love, the feeling that other women wouldn't be attractive to me anymore and how 'she' was the one and we would just live together from now on. But emotion is different from reason. There are certain things that belong to your body and are not controlled by your reason, such as desire. For me desire is part of emotion. It's actually a good thing to be sexually attracted by someone.

But men tend to produce this kind of sexual impulse far more frequently than falling in love.
It's right to distinguish between these two things. This is why people say love is rare and precious.

Some female friends told me that if you want to sincerely fall in love with a man over 40, it's almost like borrowing the skin from a tiger.
I think so.

Is it because you are not over 40 yet that you still expect love?

Love is my greatest motivation for writing. I remember it was Junichi Watanabe that said, although he was 70, he thought of himself as still in his adolescence. But some people are over 40 inside when they are just 30. Different mentalities, that's all. It's a question about how to live in this world, to live a young life or an old one. After all, I am about to be 40 too, and I have an open mind about what I lose and what I get. I am not confused about life.

What kind of women do you like?
It's hard to say. Sometimes I like bigger women sometimes I like slim women. There are many features that sometimes can't be embodied by a single person. Well, I have a big appetite.

What defect do you think you have?
I am lazy.

Second Interview Ding Tian FP 90 (2012)

Did you go to Germany in 2007?

Yes

What did The Fairytale Project change in your life?

It gave me a fond memory, it was very fun, I made many friends… otherwise my life didn't have a big change though.
What friends did you make there?

Those who went to the trip together, we became friends…
the trip, did you feel different?
I didn't feel much different…

Did it make any change on your taste of food or on your small daily practice for example?

No…

What is your job?

I am a writer

Did The Fairytale Project change your work?

It didn't change my work much because I mainly study traditional cultures

Did you become keener on travelling? Did you travel afterwards?

Didn't (travel) because of my tight work schedule… 2007 is far away now…yet I still remember it very clearly… I would like to travel more later on…

What part of German culture impressed you the most?
In fact, the trip wasn't too long, I couldn't say I gained deep insights… I rather think I was more impressed by my pre-trip readings…

Fairytale Project 247 Interview

Can you talk about your Village?
When I said I was going to Germany, they thought that this was unlikely. Usually when I speak, I'm very serious, so when everything was decided they were all willing, though afterwards of course they had a lot of problems. One was the problem of passports, we had to pay for the passports. Also, from our village we would have to go to Tianshui, from Tianshui we would have to take the train to Beijing, the cost of these trips, and whether they would be able to go, thinking back on it, these were big problems. The first time I phoned I was very relaxed, and I think they were very happy, but immediately following my [telephone] contact I was worried. As soon as the list of names for those applying for passports was confirmed I hurried back. From Lanzhou I hurried to my hometown, it was already dark out, but I gathered the whole village for a meeting to tell them about [the visa business]. I filmed this whole process. Their identification cards had already expired as they normally didn't leave home and had no need for them. The young people had to leave the village to work so their identification cards were still valid. The identification cards took a week to process; once this was done, we still had to apply for the passports. At the beginning we had to go to the local police station to file the applications. These were processed for two weeks before we were given them back. Then we had to go to the village police station, followed by the township police station, and finally to the county police station. No one wanted to believe what was going on, what were these peasants planning on doing? What are you doing? They were saying to themselves, "if the county commissioner went, he probably would be able to learn something, but these simple minded peasants are ignorant about everything." At the time I was worried about the passport problems. I talked a bit with the county commissioner and asked him if he was willing to let us leave, and he said they were still investigating everyone's political records to see if there was anything that might obstruct us from going. While this process was underway, I was constantly in contact with them. If I hadn't taken an active role in this matter, I reckon the possibility of them successfully applying for passports was not very great, they wouldn't know what to say to the county commissioner. This type of powerless group wouldn't stand a chance –they have no culture, no knowledge, and no ability—they're extremely feeble. In a word, in this type of situation they wouldn't succeed! They wouldn't be able to say anything, as of course they know nothing about "passport law." After nearly a month, the forms were finally processed. In reality, before filing at the county public security bureau we had filed the passport applications, but the first time we filed the person we filed with never came back, he fled the county. In addition, this whole event was in itself was called into question, no one believed us as the idea of someone paying for this group to travel was impossible to imagine. This was especially because of some county bureaucrats who, because they were suspicious that we were duping them, or for some other reason, called into question the whole thing. Once things had been settled at the county level, we had to go to Tianshui City; this was very easy. Once the section chief in charge saw five people, he didn't want to take responsibility, so we went to see the chief of the Tianshui public security bureau, who thought the whole thing was unbelievable, that this sort of possibility didn't exist. So, we didn't file that morning. In the afternoon I went back to the public security bureau alone and things were much easier. In order to save money, I had taken their passport photos for them. I didn't realize that the authorities would reject these passport photos, and that everyone would have to pay an additional forty Yuan to retake the pictures – they do this in

order to make extra money. We waited another three months on these applications, and then we went to Beijing. Basically, the whole process was a smooth one.

Did you have any misgivings during this process?
Of course, I did. I found this particular event very touching. Because of it I ran all over the place for more than a month. Coming to live in Beijing requires saving up a bit, and these two were my elementary school classmates, so I was emotionally involved. However, I also had to, to the best of my abilities, save a bit, so I did. When I think about it now, if things hadn't worked out, I would have figured out some solution myself. These sorts of things didn't really occur to them, though later they were very grateful. These past few days I've been chatting with them more and more. German television came especially to film one day. I hope this helps them to widen their scope of experience. This isn't a stated goal, and we don't have the ability to ameliorate the status quo. However, we can't help but think on the positive side of things – when you're dealing with bureaucratic procedures you have to think in a certain way, transform yourself a bit. This is how people think, and how they do things. Depending on the actual environment, they will learn something from the experience. In their village they didn't have any requirements, some didn't even go to high school, and others didn't even go to school at all, they're just good and honest. The most important thing is to take responsibility, on a small scale for your own family and on a larger scale you have to consider the affairs of the village. You can't just consider yourself. Opening up their way of thinking, this is the most important thing.

How do you feel about this art exhibition?
I'm personally involved in the production of art. Regarding the other artists, the biggest problem is language. I don't understand German or English; I can only rely on my immediate sensations. A good piece of art depends on whether or not we can visually understand part of it. Some oil paintings can be directly perceived by the senses. When examining the content of this type of painting, some of the tricks [used] and unique ways of thinking [by the artist] are of course easily understood. If [the art] is bad, you can feel it as well. I can manage, but I don't understand everything I see [here].

What first-hand knowledge have you gained during the course of planning this whole process?
They said it was well done, Ai Weiwei spent so much money and energy bringing strangers here, and he really did a good job. When I feel like I'm engaged in the production of art I'm interested in it, but if it's other people's work I'm basically not interested. In their hearts they are simple, kind, honest people; they also keep an eye on how other people are feeling. When we go out on the streets, there are foreigners who see us and are very excited, they want to stand in the middle of the street and take pictures with him, and he never refuses. Since we've been here it has rained non-stop; a German reporter asked him which was more important, art or rain. He replied, art is important, but rain is more important. They've probably thought of lots of things but don't know how to express them, as their ability to express themselves is pretty poor. Sometimes when you ask them questions, they would like to respond in a coherent manner, but in reality, most of the time they don't express themselves very clearly, and they worry about this. They're not like this Taoist priest from back home who really understands art. He gave a silk banner that read, "Achievements and virtue

are measureless." He can explain why achievements and virtue are measureless. [Removed to protect participant].

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