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## Embodying Resistance: The Performance Art of Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, and He Yunchang

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EMBODYING RESISTANCE:  
THE PERFORMANCE ART OF MA LIUMING, ZHANG HUAN, AND HE YUNCHANG

by

Jianda Wang

Honors Thesis  
The Art and Art History Department  
Macalester College  
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## Abstract

Chinese performance artists Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, and He Yunchang produced works in the 1990s that responded to various forms of oppression prevalent in the Chinese society at the time. Relying on critical theories of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, this project interrogates the biopolitical domination of the Chinese Communist Party, revealing the strategies these three artists deployed to retaliate against government-sanctioned subjugation. Examining their works within China's unique sociopolitical reality, this project places Ma, Zhang, and He within transnational cultures of dissent and contends that their performances constitute forces of political resistance that effectively undermine the sovereignty of the Chinese state.

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## Introduction

Contemporary performance art in China generates significant societal impact by directly engaging with cultural discourses and the ever-changing sociopolitical landscape of everyday life. Responding to China's turbulent history and precarious contemporary reality, performance artists candidly visualize their personal and collective struggles. In this process, they contentiously dispute deeply naturalized conventions and explore new means of artistic expression. Among these artists, Ma Liuming (born 1969), Zhang Huan (born 1965), and He Yunchang (born 1967) produced works that represented some of the most radical voices of protest against unjust and oppressive ideologies. In their performances, Ma, Zhang, and He often placed their bodies in unusual, extreme, or dangerous situations to probe the limits of their physical endurance and challenge cultural and political norms. By embodying the discrimination, violence, and exploitation inflicted on marginalized communities by the state, their bodies became sites of cultural contestation and political resistance. Valorizing suppressed experiences of gender nonconforming, ideologically disobedient, and economically disenfranchised individuals, their works empowered marginalized communities and established a legacy of radical dissent in Chinese avant-garde art.

Born in the 1960s, Ma, Zhang, and He benefited from the reinstatement of the National College Entrance Examination in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Each of them attended art institutions to receive professional training in painting, a medium prescribed as official art since ancient times. Witnessing the authoritarian government's censorship of oppositional voices, however, they became increasingly disillusioned with mainstream artistic practices that adhered to official ideology. In search of individual agency, these artists each relocated to remote areas, retreating from public vision. Zhang and Ma established their homes

and studios in Dashan Village on the outskirts of Beijing, and He lived and worked in several artist villages including Songzhuang, Caochangdi Village, and Heiqiao Village. Before they became important gathering places for experimental artists from the 1990s onward, these villages mainly housed impoverished migrant laborers. Both artists and villagers there experienced destitute conditions and were constantly subjected to violence and discrimination by authorities in the region on the grounds of their poverty and ideological disobedience. Zhang, Ma, and He thus became acquainted with lives at the spatial and societal margins and empathized with socially excluded communities. Motivated by their intimate experiences with marginalization, they were determined to create works that battle the oppressive environment created by the Chinese government.

Ma, Zhang, and He took different approaches to embodying their dissent against injustice, each addressing distinct aspects of China's sociopolitical reality. Often conducted under his feminine alter-ego Fen-Ma Liuming, Ma's works valorize the suppressed voices of gender nonconforming individuals under the Communist regime. Alternatively, Zhang's and He's works engage extensively with government sanctioned violence and economic exploitation, effectively exposing the state's unjust means of exerting domination. Their individual concerns reflect their personal experiences, lending veracity to the narratives of their performances. Their diverse social commentaries oscillate between reality and allegory, materializing the otherwise invisible struggles of individuals and communities. Positing their bodies as vital sites of protest and empowerment, Ma, Zhang, and He contributed to a robust force for social change, and established a legacy of radical dissent in China's experimental art scene.

## Literature Review

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the enforcement of the Opening Up Policy in 1979, China's newfound impetus of globalization combined with its continued Communist oppression attracted international attention. Consequently, contemporary art in China that emerged at this moment was interpreted by scholars either exclusively as retaliations against the Communist regime or as simple manifestations of Western influence. Chinese art historian Wu Hung identified these reductive approaches in his book *Making History* (2008), and pointed out the importance of dismantling the local/global dichotomy in examining Chinese contemporary art. In his work, Wu aimed to develop a methodology that places emphasis on the heterogeneous discourses that Chinese contemporary artists respond to and produce.<sup>1</sup> Cohering with this approach, Chinese art historian Gao Minglu proposed the concept of "Chinese modernity" to distinguish China's avant-garde from its Western counterparts while acknowledging its connections with Western Modernist thought.<sup>2</sup> Wu and Gao produced scholarship that considered contemporary Chinese artists as unique contributors to an intrinsically diverse movement rather than as members of a homogenous agenda.

Under this multifaceted model of interpretation, Wu's and Gao's writings on Ma, Zhang and He evaluate their artistic agencies with attention to their individual concerns in China's complex sociopolitical climate. In his *Transience* (2003) and *Rong Rong's East Village* (2003), Wu based his examination of Ma's and Zhang's works in their personal experiences before and during their careers as performance artists in 1990s China, providing insight into the

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<sup>1</sup> Wu Hung et al., *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, First edition. (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Minglu Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 1.



introspective nature of their social commentary. Similarly, Gao's *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011) saw their works as manifestations of their emotional and psychological responses to distinct features of everyday life in 1990s China.

While Wu's and Gao's attention to the three artists' personal connections with their works dispels generalizing classifications of their artistic intentions, the social and political implications of their transgressive performances are nevertheless palpable and significant. In his *Performance Art in China*, art historian Thomas J. Berghuis illuminates how historical events and governmental actions in China impacted the performance art of this era. He positioned Ma, Zhang and He in the Chinese society's politically, economically and culturally precarious condition in the 1990s, which provided context for their dissident voices. Berghuis also recognized the crucial role of China's Confucian past in interpretations of Chinese performance art as a culturally specific phenomenon, an approach further developed by Chinese scholar Sheldon Lu in his analysis of Ma's and Zhang's performances. In "The Naked Body Politic in Postsocialist China and the Chinese Diaspora," Lu considered the deep-seated Confucian beliefs in the Chinese society in conjunction with the biopolitical characteristics of the Chinese Communist regime, proposing a nuanced framework that recognizes the multilayered meanings that Ma's, Zhang's and He's works generate.

The scholarship of Wu, Gao, Berghuis and Lu placed Ma's, Zhang's, and He's cultural and political interventions within China's unique sociopolitical reality. A rigorous interrogation of the oppression and violence that prompted the three artists' dissident endeavors would further articulate the social and political significance of their works, and a more thorough inquiry into the theoretical constructs that underpin their creative strategies could help elucidate their revolutionary impacts on China's contemporary culture. Ma's, Zhang's, and He's performances

are rife with symbolism that alludes to the injustice that Chinese citizens experience on a daily basis. An in-depth analysis of their works should thus account for specific events that exemplify the Chinese government's abuse of power, as well as the mechanisms with which this abuse is carried out. The diverse political techniques and processes to ensure governmental domination conceptualized by French philosopher Michel Foucault and Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben aptly demonstrate the modalities of power that Ma, Zhang and He work to disrupt. Basing the discussion of these three artists' performances in political theory also reveals the transnational dialogues they initiate with global cultures of dissent, which testifies to their works' political potency across national borders. Engaging with current scholarship with a focus on the theoretical foundations of their ideological defiance contributes a nuanced appreciation of these artists' dissident voices in a study of their performance art.

## Chapter 1. Transgressing Gender

Since the early 1990s, Ma Liuming's performances were marked by his exploration of gender fluidity and constant interrogation of hegemonic heteronormativity. He often performed as his invented persona "Fen-Ma," an androgynous figure who juxtaposes feminine features with his masculine anatomy. As the artist explained himself: "The character 'Fen' in Chinese means fragrance and is most often seen in feminine names. My name is very masculine. By putting them side by side, I mean to point to the same question of sexual ambiguity and indistinguishable-ness as in my performance."<sup>3</sup> In these performances, Ma produced a body that transcended the binary of male and female, thereby destabilizing the social construction and categorization of masculinity and femininity. By fabricating a gender-ambiguous identity through cross-dressing, Ma revealed the exteriority of gender as a performative act, rather than an immutable reality. This effort to question the stability of gender identity confronted China's deep-rooted tradition of policing cultural defiance, and disrupted the hierarchy of gender difference that oppresses and persecutes gender nonconforming individuals.

While heteronormative expectations of sexuality underpinned China's pre-modern culture, there had been a relative tolerance of gender fluidity before early 20th century. Prior to the advent of Communism and its endeavors to battle Feudalism, cross-dressing was a common practice in the male-monopolized traditional Chinese opera and a prevalent theme in fables and folklore. Many famous legends such as Mulan and Butterfly Lovers featured women disguising as men to fulfill their pursuits of love and honor, and theater masterpieces such as *The Peony Pavilion* have traditionally employed male performers to play female roles. During the New

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<sup>3</sup> Huan Zhang, Liuming Ma, and Zhijian Qian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/777949>.

Culture Movement in 1919, intellectuals vehemently criticized female impersonation in theater, arguing that it was the greatest barrier to gender equality in the arts.<sup>4</sup> During the Cultural Revolution from 1967 to 1977, Communist activists instigated campaigns to condemn the “Four Olds,” which were Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas, claiming that they were “fostered by the exploiting classes, [and] have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years.”<sup>5</sup> The Red Guards carried out extensive iconoclasm against material remnants of traditional culture, and banned all cultural activities that did not adhere to their conception of “modern.” The Revolution forcefully removed traditional theater and classic folktales from public vision, erasing the existence of cross-dressing and gender fluidity from Chinese culture.

In early Communist China, the sin of cross-dressing lay not only in its roots in traditional culture, but also in its deviance from heteronormative views of sexual attraction. Lu Xun (1881 – 1936), arguably the best-known revolutionary writer in modern China, criticized the sexual deviancy that cross-dressing represented, and denounced its artistic significance:

Our country China’s greatest, most universal and “eternal” art is men playing women. The worthiness of this art lies in the fact that it is entrancing on both sides; or we can call it “the middle path”! What men see is “playing women,” what women see is “men playing.” On the surface it’s neutral, on the inside it is of course still all the same still a man. However, were it not for the disguise, could it still be an art? <sup>6</sup>

In this comment, Lu suggests that cross dressing in Chinese opera is merely a frivolous attempt to entertain the heterosexual desires of both men and women. Lu’s criticism centered around

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<sup>4</sup> Guanda Wu, “Should Nandan Be Abolished? The Debate over Female Impersonation in Early Republican China and Its Underlying Cultural Logic,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 30, no. 1 (2013): 190.

<sup>5</sup> Li, Kwok Sing. *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People’s Republic of China*. Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1995, 427.

<sup>6</sup> Siu Leung Li, “Lu Xun’s Straight Words and the Queer World of Chinese Opera,” in *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 15.

heterosexual identity as its frame of reference, which was highly representative of the public discourse on sex and gender throughout modern China. In an effort to break away from its feudal and Confucian past, intellectuals since the 1920s saw the ignorance around sexuality as a key feature of obsolete worldviews, and they treated medical science as the ultimate force to achieve modernity. As Dutch historian Frank Dikötter suggested, in these modernizing discourses, “physical bodies were no longer linked to the cosmological formulations of the universe: bodies were produced by biological mechanisms inherent in ‘nature.’”<sup>7</sup> Operating under this logic, radical thinkers and universities in the early 1920s propagated biologically oriented understandings of human anatomy and sexual difference, which led to the perpetuation of a binary gender narrative that persisted until the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> This perspective, which precipitated ideological productions of taboo and sexual perversion that castigated cross-dressing as abnormal and immoral, was reproduced and promoted by a number of publications circulating in China. Published in 1994, *The Sex Culture of China* exemplified popular discourses that referred to cross-dressing as “sexual displacement,” categorizing it as “a commonly seen psychological anomaly.” The author goes on to state that “in fact, this kind of psychology aptly reveals the sickness of Chinese society.”<sup>9</sup>

Emerging in this environment, Ma’s gender-bending performances asserted one of the first voices to confront the discriminatory and oppressive public sentiment against gender nonconforming individuals. Ma’s first works assuming his feminine alter-ego “Fen-Ma” were mainly portraits of his face and body in meticulous detail, explicitly displaying the juxtaposition

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<sup>7</sup> Frank. Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China : Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Li, “Lu Xun’s Straight Words and the Queer World of Chinese Opera.” 23.

of masculinity and femininity in his persona. His “Fen-Ma Liuming Series” (1993) captured him posing and dressing up in several positions and costumes in order to adopt the Fen-Ma persona. One of the images in the collection titled *Fen-Ma Liuming* (1993, Figure 1) shows Ma wearing a flowery dress, chiffon scarf and large earrings, while a pair of hands to the right styles Ma’s hair. Ma does not look into the camera, presenting himself as a passive object of the viewer’s gaze.

Although Fen-Ma’s appearance and pose in this image adopt exaggeratedly feminine tropes, the artist does not intend to create a unified female subject. Showing viewers his transformation into Fen-Ma through the adoption of exterior adornments, Ma is able to perform a gender identity that deviates from his anatomical sex, thereby severing the conventional ties between them. As the artist observed: “‘Fen’ is homophonic with ‘fen’ in Chinese, which means ‘separation.’ . . . What I want to imply is that this figure can be Ma Liuming myself, but at the same time he/she is just the performer and also an outsider participant, just like any participant from the audience. He/she is Ma Liuming, but not the pure and complete one.”<sup>10</sup> In this comment, Ma articulated his intention to portray a character that does not assume a singular gender identification but represents the dissonance between different aspects of gender identities.

This perspective on gender coheres with American gender theorist Judith Butler’s writing on drag in *Gender Trouble* (1999), in which she proposes that the act of drag invalidates the concept of a true and stable gender and reveals the fluid nature of gender. She critiques the binary narrative of truth and falsity in considering gender identities, contending that by imitating gender, the drag performer exposes the performative nature of gender.<sup>11</sup> In *Fen-Ma Liuming*, Ma enacted a fictional gender identity through gestures and costumes, thereby revealing the

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang, Ma, and Qian, “Performing Bodies.” 74.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999). 175.

dependency of gender identity on visual representations and subverting the commonly accepted notion of gender as a unified interior essence.

Ma continued to criticize the naturalization of binary gender in *Fen-Ma Liuming II* (1993, Figure 2) and *Fen Ma Liuming III* (1993, Figure 3), in which he further explored the social mechanisms of gender construction by confronting the heterosexual norms of patriarchal society. Appearing nude in both works, Ma evokes Fen-Ma by applying makeup and wearing jewelry, while drawing attention to his male genitalia through his posture and gestures. The opposition of gender markers in Ma's persona was exaggerated in Ma's 1994 performance *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch I* (Figure 4), in which the naked Fen-Ma laid on a couch where he masturbated and later drank a mixture of semen and water. He then attached a large laundry tube to his penis and began sucking it and breathing at the other end of the hose, evoking a stark contrast between the large phallic object and his made-up, feminine face. In a later reenactment of this performance *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II* (1994, Figure 5), Ma stood naked in his courtyard while boiling fish to serve to his audience, imbuing the audience's consumption with sensual and erotic overtones.

The conspicuous coexistence of supposedly opposite sexual identities calls to mind Lu Xun's criticism of the potential of cross-dressing to evoke sexual attraction in both men and women. According to the vision of modernity that Lu Xun sought to promote in China, such public provocations of sexual desire were seen as improper, corrupting forces in national theater. The sexual ideology implied by Lu's comment is grounded in binary heteronormativity, whereby heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable standard for human relationships.<sup>12</sup> Subverting this construction, Fen-Ma's body provokes the desires of both men and women, rendering it abnormal, unruly, and deserving of exclusion and abolition.

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<sup>12</sup> Li, "Lu Xun's Straight Words and the Queer World of Chinese Opera." 20.

The marginalization of and discrimination against androgyny in Chinese society is reflected by its linguistic characterization. In late twentieth-century China, the gender ambiguous body commonly called forth the term *biantai*, literally translating to “a change in the state of affairs.” While the basic meaning of this term is rather innocuous, it is usually deployed as an insult to people who display real or imagined perversions, ranging from masculine women and feminine men to exhibitionists and pedophiles.<sup>13</sup> The more drastically incriminating term *renyao*, meaning “human monster,” often describes transgender individuals who have undergone gender reassignment surgery, whose bodies are permanently altered to deviate from heteronormative gender constructions.<sup>14</sup> These terms reveal China’s epistemological production of gender ideologies that dehumanize and subjugate those who transgress the binary model of gender.

The discussion of gender normativity in China should not assume that “Chinese culture” is fundamentally distinct from “Western culture,” and that the gender codes in China are independently and particularly oppressive. Considering the influx of scientific research from Western secular nations during the New Culture Movement in mainland China and the dominant presence of European imperialism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, China’s naming and categorization of sexual perversion originated in part from European gender constructions.<sup>15</sup> In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault identifies this phenomenon by raising the example of baptismal names coined by nineteenth-century psychiatrists. These terms, such as “mixoscopophiles,” “presbyophiles,” and “sexoesthetic inverts,” alienate nonconforming individuals by transforming them into aberrant species, thus creating “a natural order of

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<sup>13</sup> John Nguyet Erni, *Law and Cultural Studies: A Critical Rearticulation of Human Rights*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 181.

<sup>14</sup> Li, “Lu Xun’s Straight Words and the Queer World of Chinese Opera.” 21.

<sup>15</sup> Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China*, 180.



disorder.”<sup>16</sup> Foucault views the classification and medicalization of gender and identities as a product of power relations that work to reinforce societal control over the body, stating that the unique mechanism this type of power deploys did not aim to suppress nonconformity, but rather to analytically and permanently categorize it as abnormal.<sup>17</sup> Through this production of reality Ma’s gender ambiguous body could be immediately identified as perverse and abnormal by conventional society.

By materializing an identity outside the scope of heteronormative gender categorization, Ma refutes devices that regulate sexual behavior. In his portrayal of Fen-Ma, he also actively defies and reverses the configuration of power that constructs the dichotomy of the normal and the deviant. In another image in his “Fen-Ma Liuming” series, *Fen-Ma Liuming I* (1993, Figure 6), as in *Fen-Ma Liuming II*, the dressed-up and made-up Fen-Ma looks brazenly into the camera, returning the viewer’s gaze. Traditionally, the master of the gaze can look, embodying the desire, fetish, and judgment of the dominant and heterosexual male, while the object can only be looked at, thereby becoming the feminine and submissive “other.” This hierarchy not only applies to man and woman but colors all relationships between majorities and minorities, between the protagonists of history and those who are seen as exotic, alien, and existing outside civil society, as in the case of heteronormative society and those outside the gender binary.<sup>18</sup>

In these two images of Fen-Ma, he gazes back at the subject with a confrontational expression that may be read as an erotic invitation or a dismissive glare. In both cases, the privilege and pleasure attributed to the gaze are compromised and the subject-turned-object

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Olin, “Gaze,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 323.

internalizes the gaze, involuntarily relinquishing his power. Not only does this radical act reclaim the agency of the “exotic other,” it puts the identity of the hypermasculine subject at risk. As Butler argues, the legitimacy of the gender hierarchy is dependent on the construction of the autonomous masculine subject. When the simple reversal of the gaze questioned and threatened his masculinity, the validity of his existence is proved to be completely dependent on the construct of the transgressive “other.”<sup>19</sup> Ma exposes here the illusory and arbitrary power that the patriarchal hegemony is contingent on.

Ma’s portrayal of Fen-Ma reveals the mechanism of hegemonic power and its constructed nature. In some of his later performances, he also vividly enacted the pain this power inflicts on transgressive bodies by evoking experiences of despair, misery, and death. These states of being are closely connected to the artist’s lived experiences as a gender nonconforming individual in China’s oppressive social environment. While Ma was performing *Fen-Ma Liuming’s Lunch II* in his private courtyard, several passersby reported this event as an “obscene activity” to the local authorities, causing the police to raid the courtyard and arrest everyone who was present. Ma was subsequently imprisoned for two months under charges of public indecency and disruption of social order.<sup>20</sup>

After his release from prison, Ma continued to incorporate fish into his performances, but as a metaphorical substitute for his own body. In *Fen-Ma Liuming and Fish* (1995, Figure 7), the naked Fen-Ma stood in an alleyway and fried fish until it was charred. In an interview, Ma affirmed that he wanted to represent his fear during his imprisonment in this performance: “In my mind and body was an overwhelming feeling of the unreliability of human security and the

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<sup>19</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*. xxviii.

<sup>20</sup> Hung Wu, Rong Rong, and Chambers Fine Art, *Rong Rong’s East Village, 1993-1998* (New York, NY: Chambers Fine Art, 2003), 85.

reality of their exposure to harm in such difficult circumstances.”<sup>21</sup> By performing this violent act upon the fish, Ma creates an allegory to the inevitable and senseless violence committed against individuals who are considered sexually deviant. The helplessness of the fish is intensified by the narrow and claustrophobic space in which it was positioned, thereby drawing the viewer into its, or Ma’s misery.

This theme persisted in Ma’s performance *Fish Child* (1995, Figure 8), in which he washed himself in a poorly maintained shower with live fish suspended from the ceiling. While the notion of showering is commonly associated with sanitation and comfort, Ma’s shower was comprised of rusty pipes and writhing fish, an unsettling image that evokes fear and disgust. Juxtaposing his androgynous body with its filthy surroundings, Ma suggested an association of gender ambiguity with obscenity, one that saturates a contemporary Chinese understanding of gender and sexuality. The suffocation of fish adequately captures the misery that results from the humiliation and persecution that gender nonconforming individuals experience. The privacy of the shower illustrates the pervasiveness of this violence, accentuating the enormity of the social conditions faced by transgressive bodies.

Ma’s performances also work to intervene in the oppressive gender regulations that bring about discrimination and violence. By addressing and radically disrupting the cultural norms inherited from China’s ancient history, Ma envisions an alternative discourse of gender in China by reinventing the image of the traditionally coded body. In his performance *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall* (1998, Figure 9), Ma applied lipstick in front of a mirror at the foot of the Great Wall and proceeded to walk naked on it, an act that bore great cultural significance because of the symbolic potency of the Great Wall. Since its initial construction in the Qin

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<sup>21</sup> Zhang, Ma, and Qian, “Performing Bodies.” 76.

dynasty, the Great Wall functioned as a border between nomadic groups and the ethnically Han community, serving to divide between the “barbaric” and “civilized” China. In modern China, this act of exclusion is still very much present, as exemplified by cultural categorizations of the “vulgar” and the “obscene.”

After the Opening-Up of China in the late 1970s, the Great Wall underwent a transformation from a historically loaded symbol of Chinese civilization to a tourist spectacle. Chinese tourism industries capitalized on its monumental appearance, drawing thousands of international visitors, who, unaware of its history, imposed on it their own imaginary constructs. This process adheres to what anthropologist Noel B. Salazar called “tourism imaginary,” namely, a collection of images that circulates socially and interacts with people’s own imagination, which can be used as devices to produce new meanings and values within people’s consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Illustrating the malleability of the meaning of “tourism imaginary,” Salazar explained: “Global tourism dis-embeds images and ideas of peoples and places from their original context, making them available through their transformation, legitimization, institutionalization, and distribution.”<sup>23</sup>

Such possibility of reimagining historically grounded symbolism inspired many experimental artists to probe the limits of the Great Wall’s implications. In 1990, Chinese artist Xu Bing carried out his *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (Figure 10), in which a crew of students and local farmers labored for twenty-four days to produce an ink rubbing of a 30-meter segment of the Great Wall. The ink rubbing covered the four walls of the gallery, displaying ghostly shadows of the Great Wall’s monumental fortresses. By reducing the Great Wall’s material

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<sup>22</sup> Noel B. Salazar, “Tourism Imaginaries: A Conceptual Approach,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 2 (201204): 863, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.10.004>.

<sup>23</sup> Salazar, “Tourism Imaginaries: A Conceptual Approach,” 867.

presence to a two-dimensional surface and displaying it in a contemporary art gallery, Xu recontextualized the Great Wall's historical and cultural significance and urges a consideration of the malleability of the Great Wall's meanings in modern times. Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović perfectly demonstrated the adaptability of the Great Wall in artistic contexts when she performed *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988, Figure 11), in which she and her erstwhile lover Ulay each walked twenty-five hundred kilometers of the Great Wall to meet in the middle in a dramatic ending to their relationship. Abramović utilized the monumentality of the Great Wall as a strategy to emphasize the spectacle of her personal tragedy, removing the millennia of cultural memories the Great Wall symbolized for Chinese audiences.

The same flexibility of interpretation allowed Ma to intervene in the hegemonic discourse of the Great Wall by destabilizing its history and reinventing its future. By photographing his walk and distributing these images on a global scale, Ma's nude, androgynous body became increasingly embedded within the Great Wall's globalized meaning. As digital productions of this performance circulate internationally, Ma continued to perpetuate an empowering sentiment in which transgressive bodies are included and celebrated. American queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz characterized this condition of empowerment as "queer futurity," a not-yet-obtained place of collective belonging that "embraces experimental modes of love, sex, and relationality,"<sup>24</sup> 24 one that breaks free from the totalizing power dynamic dominated by compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormative violence. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he asserts that "We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality . . . we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways

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<sup>24</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009),1.

of being in the world, and ultimately a new world.”<sup>25</sup> While discrimination against transgressive bodies still remains a lasting reality, Ma’s valiant rejection of the oppressive present circumstances contributed to an impetus to achieving the utopian future that Muñoz envisioned.

In the late 1990s, Ma immigrated to Europe as a result of heightening government censorship of radical art. In his performances outside of China, he continued to disturb the societal and ideological exclusion and elimination of queer bodies in literal and concrete terms. In works named after his sites of performance such as *Fen-Ma Liuming in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec* (1997, Figure 12), the naked Ma sat still on gallery benches facing a camera, and invited viewers to pose and take pictures with him. In the photographs captured by the camera, viewers approached Ma in very different ways – some sat solemnly with him, some took off their clothes, while some posed next to him humorously. These images harken back to American performance artist James Luna’s *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (1991-93, Figure 13), in which the artist stood outside Union Station in Washington, D.C. wearing Native American garments and invited his audience to take pictures with him. Unaware of Luna’s satirical intent, participants eagerly posed next to him, producing images that epitomized the commodification of Native American culture. Susan Sontag’s comments on the act of picture taking in *On Photography* captures the mechanisms at work in both Ma’s and Luna’s engagement with the public: she proposed that to take a photograph with a subject is to be complicit in what makes the subject interesting and what constitutes that subject’s pain or misfortune.<sup>26</sup> By prompting the audience to take photographs with them, Ma and Luna employed the audience’s interest in their peculiarity to different ends. While Luna sought to capture the pain and misfortune of fetishized Native

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989, 12.

Americans that the American public capitalizes on, Ma aimed to document the public's empathy for the adversities faced by gender nonconforming individuals.

By personally and equally interacting with viewers, Ma eliminated the authority of the artist and the voyeuristic nature of the gaze. In place of the oppositional artist/viewer relationship, he instituted solidarity and community, intentionally resisting the exploitation traditionally attributed to the ways of seeing queer bodies. Muñoz noted that “art functions as a manipulation of nature’s vastness and thus a site of contemplation and critique.”<sup>27</sup> By rehearsing “queer futurity” in gallery spaces, Ma resists the discrimination against queer individuals naturalized by society, thereby resisting the status-quo of oppression and struggling toward an ideal and alternative future for gender nonconformity.

Ma’s performance of gender ambiguity evokes empathy and solidarity. The coexistence and juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity in his Fen-Ma persona revealed the artificial and illusory construction of gender dichotomies while defying the classification of transgressive bodies that produces discrimination and exclusion. His enactment of pain and misery evocatively portrayed the violence committed against gender nonconforming individuals by the hypermasculine society, imploring viewers to identify with those whose existence this heteronormative society attempts to erase. Through creating conditions that reimagine naturalized gender codes to include queer bodies, he attempted to establish a narrative of gender that empowers alternative gender identities and to realize a utopian space that cultivates respect for difference. Ultimately, Ma’s performances combat hegemonic culture and the modalities of its power through a radicalization of gender discourses, in both Chinese and global contexts.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 146.

The impact of Ma's performance art is not limited to the subversion of constructed sexual normalcy. By attempting to emancipate the gender nonconforming subject from the heteronormative societal discourse, Ma reveals and combats strategies of patriarchal societies to control and regulate the bodies of individual citizens. As Foucault noted, sexuality is a highly politicized issue in the authoritarian society's exercise of power; he suggests that sexuality illustrates a society's strength by revealing both its political energy and its biological vigor. The regulation of sexuality is part of an "ideological campaign for raising standards of morality and responsibility."<sup>28</sup> Due to the close link between the sexuality of the individual and a society's stability and legitimacy, the systematic control of sexuality is significant for maintaining the sovereignty of societal control over citizens.

The vital role sex plays in political authority stems from society's effort to gain total control over individuals by exercising its power across all aspects of life. This endeavor entails a magnitude of devices that monitor and govern human bodies and aims to claim every human being as an entirely docile property of the ruling nation. Foucault defines this control as "biopolitical" and suggests that its realization depends on two poles: the discipline of the individual body and the regulation of the human species.<sup>29</sup> Bearing great moral implications and dictating human reproduction, sexuality accesses both the life of the body and the life of the species. Human sexual activities must therefore be strictly regulated in order for the ruling regime to achieve both the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.<sup>30</sup>

The Chinese government's meticulous supervision of its citizens parallels Foucault's conception of biopolitics. Of the Confucian ideologies that figure into China's contemporary

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 146.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 146.



politics, the concept of *Li* is particularly pertinent to disciplines of the body. Literally translating into “ritual sacrifice,” *Li* dictates the standards of ceremony, ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, good form, good custom, and so on.<sup>31</sup> In modern Chinese society, *Li* manifests in the policies governing acceptable attire and conduct, which naturally implicate the expression of sexuality. In 2001, the Chinese government issued an official circular declaring its legal intervention in “indecent” performance art, stating that some artists’ displays of nude bodies are

ugly behaviors [that] violate state law, disturb social order, degrade social conduct, do harm to the physical and psychological health of the public and have bad social influence. In order to maintain social order, purify the cultural environment and eliminate cultural rubbish, we shall resolutely prohibit such performing behaviors... and have those who violate the criminal laws bear penal responsibilities.<sup>32</sup>

Categorizing the public display of nudity as an impurity to the cultural environment and a violation of social order, the Chinese government justifies its punishment of transgressive bodies in an attempt to exercise total domination over its citizens.

In addition to disciplining individual behavior, the Communist Party administered regulations to control the general population. During Mao’s rule from 1949 to 1976, China’s birth rate rose 2.5 percent, resulting in an increase of 250 million people.<sup>33</sup> After the Cultural Revolution, the government put forward the One Child Policy to enforce population control, limiting families to only one child and urging women to surgically install contraceptive devices after the birth of their first child.<sup>34</sup> By regulating fertility, the Chinese government sought to extend its power over sex to the management of an entire population, or what Foucault defined

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<sup>31</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 790.

<sup>32</sup> 南方网, “文化部对行为艺术发出的通知,” December 1, 2002, <http://news.southcn.com/gdnews/hotspot/qqbqzwxwys/xwysjs/200212010226.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Penny Kane and Ching Y. Choi, “China’s One Child Family Policy,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 319, no. 7215 (1999): 992.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 993.

as the “species body.” Operating in this context, Ma’s works traverse overtly political realms. Through his performance of gender ambiguity, Ma created a sexually deviant and biologically infertile body, one that not only disobeys and transgresses legalized moral codes but also evades standards of productivity necessitated by governmental regulation of the population. Ma’s works thus defy the mechanisms of biopower, reclaiming the human body from society’s all-encompassing system of political control.

## Chapter 2. Performing Pain

Employing the medium of performance to expose and subvert governmental oppression, Ma demonstrated the potency of the gender fluid body in representing social commentary. Working alongside Ma in the 1990s, Chinese performance artists Zhang Huan and He Yunchang explored the political significance of the body in pain. Although the latter two artists never collaborated, their works reflected on the tumultuous social reality in modern China, exposing the violence and misery that permeated the daily lives of Chinese citizens. Zhang stated that for him performance most vividly embodied lived experiences of suffering. In an interview with artist and critic Qian Zhijian, Zhang commented:

I often found myself in conflict with my circumstances and felt that the world around me seemed to be intolerant of my existence... painting could not make me feel the existence of my body in my work. I realized that any medium beyond my body seemed too remote from myself. Thus, I decided that the only way I could be an artist was by using my body as the basic medium and language of my art.<sup>35</sup>

Zhang's and He's artistic language translated to jarring spectacles of physical pain that implored viewers to contemplate the cruelty of China's authoritarian government and endeavored to resist its attempt to establish legitimacy through violence.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist government not only sanctioned official prosecutions of disobedient individuals but purposefully encouraged violence among citizens. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the Party glorified and publicized the brutal treatment of what it considered the "degenerate bourgeoisie," thereby inciting a hostile atmosphere that encouraged organized violence against suspected dissents. Not only did the officially appointed Red Guards humiliate, torture, and execute millions of "counterrevolutionaries," unofficial massacres were perpetrated by private

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<sup>35</sup> Zhang, Ma, and Qian, "Performing Bodies." 63.

loyalist factions in rural areas across China.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, at least four hundred thousand and possibly as many as three million people were killed in rural villages by fellow villagers who were devoted to serve the Communist Party's political agenda.<sup>37</sup>

After the Cultural Revolution, the reformed government attempted to maintain stability within Chinese society by boasting the rhetoric of democracy, assuring the populace more freedom of thought and speech. When reality failed to fulfill these promises, dissident sentiments prevailed among the public and culminated in pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square from April to June 1989. On June 4, 1989, the Chinese government took military action, sending army troops and tanks to suppress protesters. The number of casualties of this crackdown has not yet been officially disclosed, but estimates ranged from hundreds to thousands.<sup>38</sup> After this incident, the Chinese government amplified its efforts to suppress voices that deviated from official ideologies, increasingly relying on police force and the military to prevent civil unrest and insurgency.<sup>39</sup> Officials scrutinized television broadcasts, social platforms, and publishing industries to both police and prevent antigovernment activities. Those who expressed oppositional sentiments would be promptly summoned by the secret police for questioning.<sup>40</sup>

Under such oppressive tension, dissident artists feared for their safety while their work underwent unsparing censorship. Like many performance artists at this time, Zhang and He

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<sup>36</sup> Su, Yang. *Collective Killings in Rural China During the Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Walder, Andrew G., and Yang Su. "The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing and Human Impact." *The China Quarterly*, no. 173 (2003): 92.

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 154.

<sup>39</sup> Chen, Jie, and Peng Deng. *China since the Cultural Revolution : From Totalitarianism to Authoritarianism*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995. 81.

<sup>40</sup> Béja, Jean-Philippe, Fu Hualing, and Eva Pils. "Introduction." In *Liu Xiaobo, Charter 08 and the Challenges of Political Reform in China*, edited by Jean-Philippe Béja, Fu Hualing, and Eva Pils, 1–12. Hong Kong University Press, 2012. 4.

believed their bodies to be battlegrounds for freedom of expression. As He stated in an interview with art historian Wang Meiqin: “Society is brutal and suppressive. I feel the lack of freedom and I am dying for it. As an artist, I feel that challenging my body and mental status is a way of breaking the unbreakable social confinement and achieving a temporary state of freedom.”<sup>41</sup> In his interview with Qian, Zhang expressed a similar belief in the body’s potential to provide refuge from the horrors of everyday reality:

When one is driven by such unnamable pressures to the edge of real madness, I kept saying to myself, the best way to get rid of the horror and to return to a state of ease might be to torture the body itself to calm it... However, the tendency of self-torturing is not just a personal problem. It is a common phenomenon, especially so in the present circumstances of China today... Some are conscious of it, while others don't want to admit it.<sup>42</sup>

For both Zhang and Ma, performances of pain acted as a catharsis for the misery they experienced daily as well as a means to visualize the suffering in Chinese society.

In *65 Kilograms* (1994, Figure 14), Zhang suspended himself three meters above the ground in his studio with ten iron chains and stayed in this position for about an hour. He instructed two medical doctors to draw 250 milliliters of his blood, which dripped slowly onto a hot plate on the ground. The sight of Zhang’s hanging body and the sickening smell of his blood created a gruesome scene of torture and confinement. In one of his interviews with Qian, Zhang explained the work’s intended impact on the audience:

Once the audience members step into the site of the performance ... they become involved in the reality before their eyes. They have nowhere to escape, just as they have no way to escape reality. The smell of blood was a reminder that further stimulated and reinforced their realization of the truthfulness of the cruelty they were witnessing... They were just as bound as I was. They, too, had nowhere to escape.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Meiqin Wang, “The Primitive and Unproductive Body: He Yunchang and His Performance Art,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 4 (2014): 10.

<sup>42</sup> Zhang, Ma, and Qian, “Performing Bodies.” 64.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Rong Rong, the photographer for this performance, corroborated Zhang's evocation of hopelessness within the audience. He wrote in a letter to his sister that *65 Kilograms* "made everyone feel like death was approaching."<sup>44</sup> This comment testified to the hopelessness that *65 Kilograms* elicited for its viewers, reflecting on the public sentiments within Chinese society at the time.

The setting of *65 Kilograms* alluded to government-authorized killings that had occurred rampantly during the past three decades by evoking an illusion of safety in Zhang's self-harming act. During Zhang's performance, the floor of his studio was covered with hospital sheets while two doctors in full uniform stood directly under him, all of which evoking the sterile environment of a hospital. Instead of preventing and ameliorating Zhang's injuries, however, the presence of medical paraphernalia and personnel only served to monitor and facilitate their execution. With his mouth taped shut and his body chained to roof beams, Zhang resembled a torture victim, a brutally persecuted "counterrevolutionary," a restrained and silenced Chinese citizen.

This scenario bore great metaphorical significance in China's recent history, in which institutions created by the government to support and protect citizens deliberately and systematically brutalized them. Within China's legal system, murderers often faced the death penalty, yet the perpetrators of millions of killings during the Cultural Revolution were automatically atoned and mass casualties in the Tiananmen Crackdown remained unaccounted for. Ironically, the Communist Party justified its military suppression of the Tiananmen protests

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<sup>44</sup> Wu, Rong Rong, and Chambers Fine Art, *Rong Rong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 85.

by framing it as the victory of the “rule of law” against riots that jeopardized public safety.<sup>45</sup> Under the pretense of protecting life, the law sanctioned massacres. In his book *Homo Sacer* (1995), Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposed the concept of “sovereign exception” to capture this phenomenon.<sup>46</sup> He stated that within every rule of a totalitarian nation that prohibits a certain behavior, there is a presupposed exception that automatically condones the transgression of this rule.<sup>47</sup> Within such a state, citizens are stripped of their legal rights and reduced to bare biological existence that can be erased at whim.<sup>48</sup> Agamben names this act of erasure “the sovereign decision,” which occurs at “a threshold in which life is both inside and outside of the juridical order.”<sup>49</sup> Individuals who constantly faced the circumstances of sovereign exception, including experimental artists such as Zhang, exist in the liminal spaces of mainstream society.

Attempting to remove himself from the public sphere, Zhang often suffered such lawlessness and violation of human rights. He recounted an experience of police brutality:

One summer day after midnight, I went to the War Wash bar with some friends. The bar was full, and only a few seats were empty. Right after we sat down, a guy came over and shouted, “Get out!” Before I knew it, he struck me with a beer bottle. Another person smashed a glass on my head. I was covered in blood and sent to a nearby hospital. I was bleeding badly, but the doctors didn't care because we didn't have any money with us. We had to make phone calls to borrow money. A friend finally came with some money, and it was only then that a doctor stitched up my head. I heard that the people who were responsible were policemen. I didn't know where they were from or why they beat me.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Philippe B  ja, “Introduction: 4 June 1989: A Watershed in Chinese Contemporary History,” in *The Impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen Massacre* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Daniel Heller-Roazen, and Stanford University Press, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Meridian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Huan Zhang, “A Piece of Nothing,” in *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (New York: Charta and Asia Society, 2007), 62.

Subject to unlawful violence yet ineligible for legal and medical support, Zhang experienced an epitome of the “sovereign exception.” The Communist Party’s ardent promotion of its attention to the people’s interests justified its arbitrary punishment of those who were deemed as threats to society. The Party reinforced this strategy by framing it as the government’s exercise of democracy. In an article from 2007 titled “China Is in Fact the World’s Largest Democratic Nation,” published in the CCP political magazine *Qiushi*, Han Zhen, the Party Secretary of Beijing Foreign Studies University, stated that “democracy is a kind of contract arranged between members of society in order to achieve the distribution of benefits so as to achieve the order of public life.”<sup>51</sup> Han further elaborated upon the Chinese government’s success in executing democracy:

China is steadily moving towards a new realm of people's democracy. After more than 60 years of hard exploration and practice, China has made decisive progress in many aspects of democratic political construction. Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics is the most extensive, real, and practical democracy that safeguards the fundamental interests of the people, and it is constantly demonstrating its authenticity, effectiveness, and superiority.<sup>52</sup>

According to the Party’s propaganda, “Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” is the result of revolutionary struggles since the establishment of the PRC, and serves to secure the rights and benefits of citizens. Such reasoning then establishes the Party’s authority despite its unpunished crimes in the public’s recent memory.

Sixteen years after Zhang’s *65 Kilograms*, He Yunchang’s *One Meter Democracy* (2010, Figure 15) radically disrupted the Chinese government’s attempt to reinforce legitimacy. In this performance, He invited twenty-five friends to vote in a ballot box to decide whether an opening

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<sup>51</sup> Zhen Han, “Zhongguo Caishi Dangjin Shijie Zuidade Minzhu Guojia (China Is in Fact the World’s Biggest Democratic Country),” *Qiushi*, November 15, 2017, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-11/15/c\\_1121947684.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-11/15/c_1121947684.htm).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



1 meter long and 1.5-centimeter-deep should be cut into his body. Twelve voted yes, ten voted no, and three abstained: He instructed a surgeon to execute a cut from his shoulder to his knee, without anesthesia. Evoking a stark contrast between He's vulnerable suffering body and the impersonal voting process, One Meter Democracy displayed an act of gruesome violence justified under the guise of democracy.

The voting process in One Meter Democracy also referenced China's farcical claims of practicing democracy. In an email interaction with art historian Wang Meiqin, He revealed that he was "determined to get a 'yes' vote by all means" and "intended to re-vote, coerce, or bribe his friends to get a 'yes.'"<sup>53</sup> The mechanisms at work in the infliction of He's wound parallel the Chinese government's strategy in facilitating and justifying violence to fulfill the interest of the state. Beatings and killings during the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Protests were not personally executed by ruling officials but were carried out through their persuasion and coercion of lower-level administrators or even citizens themselves.<sup>54</sup> Maintaining the facade of a democratic rule has been an effective strategy for the Chinese government to suppress all challenges to its authority.

Wounding oneself with the hands of others has long been employed by artists as a vehicle for social commentary. Transforming his body into a powerless object, He's submission to the audience's will alludes to Marina Abramović's performance *Rhythm 0* (1974, Figure 16). During this six-hour performance, Abramović stood still while the audience was invited to do whatever they wished to her using one of seventy-two objects she had placed on a table: pen, scissors,

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<sup>53</sup> Meiqin Wang, "The Primitive and Unproductive Body: He Yunchang and His Performance Art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 4 (2014): 25.

<sup>54</sup> Perry Link, "June Fourth: Memory and Ethics," in *The Impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen Massacre*, ed. Jean-Philippe Béja (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 17.

chains, axe, and others. The performance ceased when an audience member pointed a loaded pistol to her head. In a similar vein, American artist Chris Burden performed *Shoot* in 1971 (Figure 17), in which he arranged for a friend to shoot him in the arm. Much like He's and Zhang's works, these two performances took place amid political turbulence. During the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975, the American public experienced a heightened sense of disillusionment toward the U.S. government, as well as a crisis of human rights. While soldiers were employed as weapons of the state, victims became abstracted symbols of military prowess. Broadcasts of the war on radio and television attempted to present atrocities as victories of the people, completely stripping human beings of power over their own lives.

Unable to defend themselves against extreme pain and cruelty, Abramović and Burden displayed palpable sights of vulnerability and loss of agency. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović's body became a complete object of the audience's abusive whims, creating a metaphor for those who were defenseless in the face of war. Yet neither of the works were mere imitations of the horrors of war. Despite the passivity in the artists' endurance of pain, it was their choice and intention to partake in the violence committed against them. Ultimately, Abramović's and Burden's display of suffering was a performance of individual subjectivity and autonomy that subverted the mechanisms of political violence.

In tandem with Abramović's and Burden's works in the 1970s, Zhang's and He's self-harming performances resist the dehumanization of individuals instigated by the state. By intentionally staging spectacles of pain that reference government sanctioned massacres, Zhang and He dictated and controlled their suffering. Their assertion of will precluded their loss of subjectivity at the hands of others, thereby metaphorically reclaiming the agency of marginalized individuals who are vulnerable to the state's legitimized abuse of power.

Zhang's and He's deliberate staging of their suffering achieved its efficacy by virtue of their ingenious means to dramatize the display of pain. In the case of *65 Kilograms*, Zhang diffused the odor of blood with a hot plate to significantly magnify the sensory impact of his bleeding on his viewers. Having abstained from anesthesia in his *One Meter Democracy*, He candidly manifested his pain in his distorted face and uncontrollable trembling, accentuating the horror he intended to portray. These thrilling spectacles of misery substantially captivate viewers and are likely to be imprinted in their memories even after the performances. By inducing acute awareness of the performers' pain, *65 Kilograms* and *One Meter Democracy* augmented the public's recognition of the atrocities committed against Chinese citizens.

Public attention to state-sanctioned violence often engenders dissident sentiments against the ruling regime. The Tiananmen Massacre and its aftermath exemplified the Communist Party's strategies to prevent retaliations against its authority. The brutal killings of protesters allowed the Party to successfully demonstrate the consequences of dissent. By drastically downplaying the severity of the crackdown and enforcing strict censorship of all related media content, government agencies attempted to erase the event from the collective memory of Chinese people, thereby preventing public outrage. Immediately after the massacre, the pro-democracy protests were renamed "counterrevolutionary rebellions" by the government, and in ensuing years slowly became "incident" or "skirmish" (*fengbo*).<sup>55</sup> This rhetoric neutralizes the cruelty of culprits and invalidates the suffering of victims to instill docility and obedience in citizens. In stark contrast, the pain, disgust, and terror in *65 Kilograms* and *One Meter Democracy* were striking and corporeal, rendering their allusions to political violence

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<sup>55</sup> Link, "June Fourth: Memory and Ethics." 18.

particularly poignant. By reviving memories of political oppression against ideologically disobedient individuals, Zhang and He stimulated the public's desire for social change.

### Chapter 3. Voice for the Voiceless

Surrounded by marginalized communities, Zhang and He were concerned not only with the violent subjugation of dissident masses but also with the deprivation of human rights among economically disenfranchised individuals. During their residence in artist villages, Zhang and He lived amid dilapidated farmhouses that mainly housed migrant laborers who were willing to sacrifice their living conditions for a menial job in the distant city. Bearing witness to the rampantly widening social gaps and the consequent disregard for the lower class, much of Zhang's and He's work focused on this aspect of China's systematic oppression, giving voice and agency to those whose poverty excluded them from society.

The abuse of migrant laborers was symptomatic of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up Policies in 1979, which aimed to develop a market economy and to repair a social system that suffered from the political turmoil of the past decades.<sup>56</sup> Reformers at the time often summarized their pursuit with the slogan *fuqiang*, which literally translates to "wealth and power," creating an interconnected relationship between political power and economic capital.<sup>57</sup> Although private economic sectors started emerging under the adoption of Western capitalism, the vast majority of China's property was still controlled by state enterprises, and the maximization of wealth was entirely a governmental endeavor.<sup>58</sup> The Chinese government's totalitarian rule thus underpinned the guise of democracy put on by the Reform and Opening Up Policy. As a result, citizens' social and political rights depended on their ability to generate profit for the state.

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<sup>56</sup> Wu, Rong Rong, and Chambers Fine Art, *Rong Rong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Zhaohui Hong, *The Price of China's Economic Development: Power, Capital, and the Poverty of Rights*, (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

A large part of this massive political undertaking led to industrialization and urbanization, which drastically increased the demand for cheap labor in urban areas. The sudden emergence of new career prospects and potential business opportunities motivated millions of rural peasants to migrate to large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in search of urban living and a better life.<sup>59</sup> Yet, the government's housing registration policies (*hukou*) at the time could not accommodate such a sudden and massive influx of people, transforming them into a "floating population" (*liudong renkou*). Without legal residency status, this large demographic could live only on the outskirts of urban areas outside official supervision and was not afforded full benefits of citizenship.<sup>60</sup> They often worked for poorly regulated establishments such as construction sites, or roamed the cities individually as illegal street vendors. This resulted in the lack of equal and timely wages and welfare benefits.<sup>61</sup> With the constitution of labor rights lagging behind the rapidly expanding crises of human rights among migrant laborers, their struggles were easily ignored, and, due to the menial and replaceable nature of their work, it was in few people's interest to advocate for their rights. Particularly concerned with the suffering of marginalized communities, Zhang and He addressed this pervasive yet overlooked issue in their performances.

In his *12 Square Meters* (1994, Figure 18), Zhang sat in a public outhouse for an hour, with his naked body smeared with fish liquid and honey, attracting flies to feast on his skin. Despite the extreme discomfort, Zhang remained still during this time, before stepping into a nearby pond to dispel the flies. He described his performance as a reenactment of an everyday

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<sup>59</sup> Zai Liang and Zhongdong Ma, "China's Floating Population: New Evidence from the 2000 Census," *Population and Development Review* 30, no. 3 (2004): 467.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Hong, *The Price of China's Economic Development*, 140-143.

scenario in the village: “Twelve square meters is the area of the public toilets that are used every day in China. One day after lunch, I went to the toilet as usual . . . When I stepped in, thousands of flies swarmed toward me and I still had to squat down. This was my life, and no one could experience it but me.”<sup>62</sup> Eliciting physical sensations of heat and odor, *12 Square Meters* envelops its viewers and conveys meaning beyond the personal level, implicating the villagers who lived in such destitute circumstances.

The 12-square-meter poorly maintained bathroom evinced the living conditions of migrant workers. According to a study conducted in 2005, the average living space of a migrant worker in the city was between three to ten square meters per person. Some even lived underneath staircases and in other perilous temporary shelters. These cramped dwellings are often extremely unsanitary, which was conducive to the spread of diseases.<sup>63</sup> By sitting silently and passively while covered in viscous liquid and insects, Zhang was able to materialize the perpetual suffering of this demographic. By displaying the visceral misery of village living and articulating its prevalence, Zhang evoked the viewers’ sympathy of the cruel reality that economically marginalized individuals were living and problematized the government’s neglect of their rights to housing.

In his *25 mm Threading Steel* (1995, Figure 19), Zhang continued to explore the potential of self-torture in representing the cruelty of everyday reality. In this performance, Zhang lay flat on the floor closely beneath a steel worker’s table while the worker cut a nail every minute. In a photograph of this performance, a completely nude Zhang was visibly in agony as continuous streams of red-hot sparks shoot from the machine and land on his body. This performance took

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<sup>62</sup> Zhang, “A Piece of Nothing.” 92.

<sup>63</sup> Hong, *The Price of China’s Economic Development*, 139.

place at a construction site at Jianguomen in Beijing, where many migrant laborers worked, and many of them cut steel every day. Zhang addressed directly the dangers these workers constantly faced. As of 2011, 17.5 percent of migrant laborers worked at construction sites,<sup>64</sup> where they performed some of the most demanding work and were constantly exposed to myriad safety hazards. These dangers were exacerbated by their inability to acquire health insurance. According to a survey conducted in 2003, 136,000 people in China died of work injuries during that year alone, 80 percent of them migrant laborers who worked in mining, construction, and chemical production.<sup>65</sup> The severity and pervasiveness of migrant laborers' health and security crisis highlighted the social significance of Zhang's *25 mm Threading Steel*, and provided context to the importance of publicizing this concern.

The display of pain in Zhang's performances was an incredibly effective visualization of the social phenomena they embodied. Bearing witness to the gross mistreatment of marginalized and impoverished people, Zhang uses his body to materialize this issue that was largely intangible to people who were unaffected by its impacts, thereby translating it into highly intelligible terms. Zhang facilitated his audience's direct contact with human rights crises that permeated their everyday lives.

Some of Zhang's later site-specific group performances approached power and justice in different ways. Instead of embodying the unjust exercise of power and its results, Zhang invited others to spaces traditionally associated with oppression. By creating radical means of engaging with these spaces, Zhang displaced and recreated these associations to disrupt the perpetuation of power instigated by the state and society. In *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



Figure 20), Zhang invited more than sixty migrant laborers, ranging in age from twenty to sixty years, to participate, instructing them to step into a pond to literally raise its water level. This seemingly innocuous act of engaging with water acquires layered sociopolitical significance in the Chinese context. Instead of straightforward engineering mechanisms, strategies of water control in China are historically infused with state ideology and legitimization of rule.

In Chinese mythology, floods often embodied prehistoric chaos and, conversely, flood taming was associated with the emergence of civil society. According to the widely known myth of the Great Flood of Gun-Yu dated to the third millennium BCE, the prince Yu successfully controlled an intractable flood and became emperor. He went on to found the Xia dynasty and institute the beginning of a tradition of dynastic succession.<sup>66</sup> Later accounts of this myth created an explicit link between controlling the flow of waters with the demarcation of land and formulation of a nation's center, peripheries, and borders.<sup>67</sup> By attributing the responsibility of flood control to governmental figures and directly relating this effort to the creation and definition of human society, ancient Chinese flood myths dramatized the political significance of water control, and established its role as a means to assert power and authority.<sup>68</sup>

After the advent of Communism in 1949, this deeply ingrained tradition developed new dimensions despite the Party's effort to break away from the feudal past. During the Great Leap Forward initiated by Mao Zedong from 1958 to 1962, the Party aggressively industrialized rural agricultural production in an attempt to transform China's then backward economy into a

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<sup>66</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). 43.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

modern communist society, whose power would surpass its European competitors.<sup>69</sup> Among many misguided efforts to manipulate and gain maximum yield from nature, irrigation projects caused some of the most massive natural and human disasters. The building of canals and water reservoirs were often carried out by starved farmers without much planning, and led to soil erosion, landslides, and river siltation, causing millions of deaths.<sup>70</sup>

As a measure to reclaim its international reputation and legitimacy within China, the Communist Party sanctioned many water regulation projects after the 1960s. Completed in 1965, the 15,000 kilometer Red Flag Canal was dug entirely by human labor.<sup>71</sup> The Three Gorges Dam, completed in 2000, was glorified internationally as the biggest power station in the world, though 1.3 million transient residents were displaced during its construction.<sup>72</sup> Water control schemes today, such as the South–North Water Transfer Project, have been among the most expensive engineering projects in history.<sup>73</sup> While these endeavors were widely featured in films and documentaries circulating globally, their byproducts of human labor and devastation were rarely brought to light. Viewed in this context, Zhang’s *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* subverted the deep-rooted disregard for human rights in China by inviting migrant laborers to control the water level of the pond. Zhang metaphorically reverted the asymmetrical power dynamics at play in national projects of water control, thus intervening in political reality and empowering disadvantaged migrant laborers.

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<sup>69</sup> Frank Dikotter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), xi.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>71</sup> David Clarke, “The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 4 (2006): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068499>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 67.

He engaged with water from a different approach. In his performance *Dialogue with Water* (1999, Figure 21) and *River Document in Shanghai* (2000, Figure 22), He attempted to separate and manipulate water manually, demonstrating the futility of human effort when faced with higher powers. In *Dialogue with Water*, He suspended himself upside down from a crane over the Lianghe River during a cold day in February. During this thirty-minute performance, He held a knife with two hands, stabbing into the water in an attempt to separate the river. He made an incision on his upper arm during the performance to let his blood drip and mingle with the water, initiating a “dialogue” with the river.

A description of the artwork provided by He suggested that his and the river’s mutual suffering constituted their dialogue. The artist noted: “The river flows at 150 meters per minute. The performance lasts thirty minutes. The river is left with a 4,500-meter-long and thirty-centimeter deep wound.”<sup>74</sup> Clearly, the river did not sustain any harm, while He suffered from the cold and blood loss from his cut. This invalid dialogue reflected the asymmetry of power between the river’s boundless, inanimate body and He’s frail, human one, creating a parallel with the relationship between the overpowering government and the helplessness of the individual.

Knowing that his knife cannot possibly sever the river, He carried out *Dialogue with Water* with hopeless persistence. This theme was magnified in his *River Document in Shanghai*, in which the artist attempted to transfer ten tons of water by bucket from the lower Suzhou River to its upper reaches. Over the course of almost ten hours, He fetched countless buckets of water into a boat and moved the boat to dispense the water upstream. He claimed that he “caused the

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<sup>74</sup> Yunchang He and Beijing Dongjing Yishu Gongcheng, *Ar Chang’s Persistence: an exhibition of He Yunchang’s works* (Beijing: Beijing Dongjing Yishu Gongcheng, 2004), 14.

river to flow in reverse for 5 kilometers.”<sup>75</sup> Once again, He performed a futile attempt to change the course of nature, demonstrating the triviality of human endeavors against unfathomable powers in which they are embedded.

*Dialogue with Water* and *River Document in Shanghai* harken back to the Chinese government’s attempts since antiquity to control nature. While the state’s irrigation and water control projects have been fruitful, they still operated within the inescapable laws of nature and were never able to permanently modify the flow and function of water to the ruling subject’s satisfaction. Similarly, when the common citizen is faced with the government’s forceful exploitation and violence, attempts to retaliate will inevitably always compare to He’s endeavors to sever or reverse the flow of rivers.

He’s contemplation of human futility recurred consistently in his works. In one of his earliest performances, *Appointment with Tomorrow* (1998, Figure 23), He covered his entire body with mud and proceeded to continuously dial random telephone numbers on a disconnected telephone for more than an hour. In a similarly unproductive endeavor, his performance *Golden Sunshine* (1999, Figure 24) featured He attempting to move sunshine: he covered his entire body with yellow paint and hung himself from a roof to paint the wall the same yellow color. He then held a mirror to deflect rays of sunshine onto a corner of the wall that was enveloped in shadow. This entire process lasted two hours, leading to He’s severe skin damage.

In his artist’s statement, He commented that the seemingly irrational persistence featured in both works was meant to demonstrate the resilience of disempowered individuals. He explained that this performance was inspired by a story he had heard, in which a family living in

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<sup>75</sup> Ink Studio, “Drowned in Faith’s Embrace,” Ink Studio, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/41-drowned-in-faith-s-embrace/>.

poverty could not afford to eat meat, but after their five-year-old son's persistence, the young father went to a meat shop and attempted to buy two ounces of meat. The butcher declined his request because the store did not sell meat by the ounce; after the father explained his situation, the butcher offered him three pounds of meat for free. Much to his dismay, the father accepted this charity but considered it a violation of his dignity. After returning home and conferring with his wife, the father decided that they could no longer stand their misery, so he poisoned the meat and killed all three members of the family.<sup>76</sup> He commented:

At the time I heard this distressing story my own circumstances were far from good. It made me realize that there were countless people facing similar situations, but however wretched their circumstances, and however great the pressure they were under, none of them chose to abandon life like that father. The sharp blade of reality can only pierce their limbs; it cannot wound their will. The persistence and tenacious spirit of these disadvantaged groups inspire me.<sup>77</sup>

He sought to demonstrate the tenacity of disempowered communities in their efforts to assert their will against destitute circumstances, instead of revealing the absurdity of these attempts. By unyieldingly struggling to accomplish unattainable objectives, *Appointment with Tomorrow* and *Golden Sunshine* visualized the insurmountable adversities confronting disenfranchised individuals, thereby accentuating the value and rigor of their endurance. As art historian Gao Minglu commented: "what the contrast of forces reveals is the will of the weak."<sup>78</sup>

He exerted this will once again in a more ambitious project in which he attempted to move a mountain. In *Moving a Mountain* (1999, Figure 25), He tied wooden stakes and ropes to a mountain, then pulled on them strenuously for thirty minutes. According to He, this

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<sup>76</sup> Yunchang He, "Fairytale for Adults," Ink Studio, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/39-fairytales-for-adults/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Minglu Gao, University at Buffalo Art Galleries, and Millennium Art Museum, *The Wall : Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo, NY: Albright Knox Art Gallery, 2005), 2.

performance was inspired by the famous fable in Chinese mythology titled “The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains.” In this story, a ninety-year-old man was unhappy that the Taihang and Wangu mountains blocked the passageway outside his door, and he decided to move them by manually digging and transporting the dirt and stones with buckets. When faced with mockery, the man replied that while he might not be able to finish this task in his lifetime, the countless generations of his offspring will continue his undertaking. Eventually, the gods were moved by his determination and separated the mountains to clear his path.

In modern China, this story was appropriated by Mao to propagate Communist ideologies. During a famous speech he gave during his visit to Yan’an in 1945, Mao declared:

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God’s heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can’t these two mountains be cleared away?<sup>79</sup>

Instead of a philosophical contemplation on the relationships among man, nature, and God, Mao’s interpretation saturated this story with political undertones. This reappropriation overthrew the Confucian ideals of man’s coexistence with nature and declared the Communist Party’s ideological stance. Once again, the Chinese government imbued man’s battle against nature with ideological significance. Placed within this context, He’s Moving a Mountain acquires political meanings that undermine the legitimacy of Mao’s promise of a Communist utopia. Standing on the mountain, He’s body appears frail and microscopic, accentuating the physical impossibility of his efforts. In opposition to the hypothetical circumstance Mao

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<sup>79</sup> Alan Lawrance, *China Since 1919 - Revolution and Reform : A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2008), 103-104.

proposed in his speech in 1945, He materialized a reality in which the Foolish Man's efforts were ultimately futile against the immutable mountain.

The contrast between the visions propagated by the Communist Party and the lived realities of Chinese citizens reflects on the mass disillusionment during the 1980s that prompted the Tiananmen pro-democracy protests. After the Cultural Revolution, reforms championed by Deng Xiaoping opened up unprecedented economic opportunities across China and promised political liberalization.<sup>80</sup> Though citizens at this time were invigorated by the "socialist new order"<sup>81</sup> assured by the political reformers, major problems within the society remained. As corruption within the ruling regime became increasingly rampant, common citizens working for state-owned enterprises began to suffer financially.<sup>82</sup> Intellectuals working as teachers and professors were grossly underpaid, causing growing resentment against the government within the class of educated elites.<sup>83</sup> Yet, concerned voices from reformers inside the Party and academics outside the government fell on deaf ears as the majority of officials continued placating its citizens to minimize unrest.<sup>84</sup> In April 1989, the death of Hu Yaobang, the last liberal idealist in the CCP, was a final catalyst for the indignant dissidents, prompting them to take to the streets, which eventually led to the massive military crackdown on June 4.<sup>85</sup>

Capitalizing on the futility of his exertion, He's *Moving a Mountain* alluded to the powerlessness of Chinese citizens when faced with the government's indifference to societal crises. The work's subtle reference to the hypocrisy of governmental agendas reflected on the

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<sup>80</sup> Chen and Deng, *China since the Cultural Revolution*. 68.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 72.

public's loss of faith in the Communist party at the time, evoking the ever-deepening anxiety of Chinese citizens under the Communist regime. By invalidating Mao's appropriation of the fable, He substantiated the doubt and disillusionment that perpetuated the public psyche, thereby disrupting the government's attempt to silence dissenting voices.

The mountain also appeared as a prominent motif in Zhang's oeuvre, such as in the collaborative project *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995, Figure 26) conducted by Zhang and other experimental artists. Similar to *Moving a Mountain*, the mountain in this performance underscored the frivolity of human will and acted as a setting for the artist's intervention in authoritarian power structures. In this performance, Zhang, Ma, and several other artists climbed to the peak of a nearby mountain, stripped naked, and lay on top of each other, creating an additional peak one meter high. For audiences familiar with traditional Chinese artistic practices, the visual traits of this event convey significant cultural meanings. The performers set their nude bodies against the vast landscape of verdant mountains and untamed weeds, evoking visual motifs common in traditional Chinese landscape paintings. However, this reference only worked to undermine the traditional values and philosophical premises landscape paintings entail, constituting a disruption of long-standing cultural and political authorities that deprive the individual body of its agency.<sup>86</sup>

Chinese landscape painting (literally "mountain and water paintings") is a form of traditional high art in China that often features mountains and rivers in monumental magnitudes, with microscopic human figures dwarfed by the immense landscape. The contrast between the trivial human will and the sublime cosmos represents traditional Chinese values regarding

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<sup>86</sup> Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 73.



humanity and the conception of self. In contrast to the Western Humanist ideals that value individuality and human agency, the individual in Chinese culture is subsumed by a larger principle, such as nature, societal network, or the nation state.<sup>87</sup> This philosophical opposition is also present in the treatment of the unclothed body in traditional Chinese high art, in contrast to Greco-Roman traditions. Instead of a signifier of beauty and confidence, the nude body in Chinese culture is understood as an embodiment of moral depravity and narcissistic self-absorption.

The modesty of the individual and its conformity to a greater whole were also emphasized by official ideologies in Communist China, as exemplified by the capitalization of collectivism. Proposed as the “moral foundation of Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” collectivism manifests in the unification of personal interest with societal and governmental benefits.<sup>88</sup> Under this principle, the disregard of individual economic and political demands became justified and vital to the survival of the ruling regime. This ideology has been permeating the lived experiences of Chinese citizens since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, rural peasants forfeited all their private land and property to the People’s Commune in order to achieve maximum productivity for the Party’s economic and political projects.

Positioning themselves within a scenery that resembles Chinese landscape paintings, artists in *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* evoked the fraught relationship between the individual being and the larger principle in premodern as well as Communist China. By

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<sup>87</sup> Wen Fong and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992). 71.

<sup>88</sup> “State Council Gazette Issue No. 31 Serial No. 1678” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, November 10, 2019).

replacing the miniscule human figure with nude bodies that prominently occupy the landscape, this performance resisted the long-standing legacy of philosophical and political suppression of individual autonomy. Rong Rong's photography of this performance later circulated extensively within and outside China, entering world-renowned gallery spaces such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The proliferation of this modified motif reimagines the individual body's relationship to nature, society, and state, displacing the doctrine of collectivism implemented by the Communist Party. Amid decades of the state's systematic deprivation of its citizens' rights and freedom, this performance symbolically and substantially challenged and subverted oppressive official ideologies.

Positioned in conjunction with the economic exploitation and deprivation of human rights originating from ruling ideologies in modern and contemporary China, Zhang Huan's and He Yunchang's performances constitute some of the most subversive voices in the realm of experimental art in the 1990s. Through their incorporation of culturally and politically loaded symbolism, the two artists created visual metaphors of myriad topics concerning governmental abuse and oppression, calling attention to issues and events official bodies attempt to erase from public memory. Applying performance art as a strategy of reshaping historical and ideological narratives, Zhang and He radically disrupted the government's normalization and perpetuation of authoritarian power.

## Conclusion

The performance art of Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, and He Yunchang in the 1990s deployed effective strategies to interrogate pressing issues within the sociopolitical reality of China at that time. Featuring a transgressive and gender fluid identity, Ma's performances dismantled heteronormative constructs that the Chinese government weaponized to subjugate nonconforming individuals. By enacting physical pain and misery, Zhang's and He's works demonstrate the mechanisms of state domination and the suffering it induced, challenging the authority of the government. Through their radical treatment and contextualization of the body, Ma, Zhang, and He revealed the Chinese Communist regime's systematic control, legitimized violence, and deprivation of rights of its citizens, while actively disrupting these oppressive discourses.

Amid mass disillusionment with cultural and ideological liberation after the Tiananmen Crackdown, Ma, Zhang and He maintained oppositional perspectives that resonated with disempowered and disenchanting communities. In a time marked by fear and hopelessness, they productively gave voice to silenced artists and intellectuals, which allowed their dissident agency to persist in the Chinese experimental art scene beyond the 1990s. During the past two decades, countless Chinese artist-dissidents have emerged in both domestic and international spaces and continue to explore the body's potential of political intervention. The impact of Ma's, Zhang's, and He's assertions of dissent have been proven by time to be enduring and effective. The impact of their works continues to prevail in the Chinese intellectual and art historical discourse, cultivating a cultural and political plurality that constantly undermines the legitimacy and stability of China's authoritarian regime.

## Illustrations



Figure 1.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming*, Photograph of performance, gelatin silver print on paper, 610 × 508 mm, ©Tate, London, 1993.



Figure 2.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming II*, 1993, Photograph of performance, Courtesy of Artnet, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, [http://www.artnet.com/artists/ma-liuming/fen-maliuming-ii-iii-OcIMmWnbNq8Ab1oMTaR\\_4Q2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/ma-liuming/fen-maliuming-ii-iii-OcIMmWnbNq8Ab1oMTaR_4Q2)



Figure 3.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming III*, 1993, Photograph of performance, Image courtesy of Artnet, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, [http://www.artnet.com/artists/ma-liuming/fen-maliuming-ii-iii-OcIMmWnbNq8Ab1oMTaR\\_4Q2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/ma-liuming/fen-maliuming-ii-iii-OcIMmWnbNq8Ab1oMTaR_4Q2)



Figure 4.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch I*, 1994, Photograph of performance, gelatin silver print on paper, 610 × 508 mm, ©Tate, London.

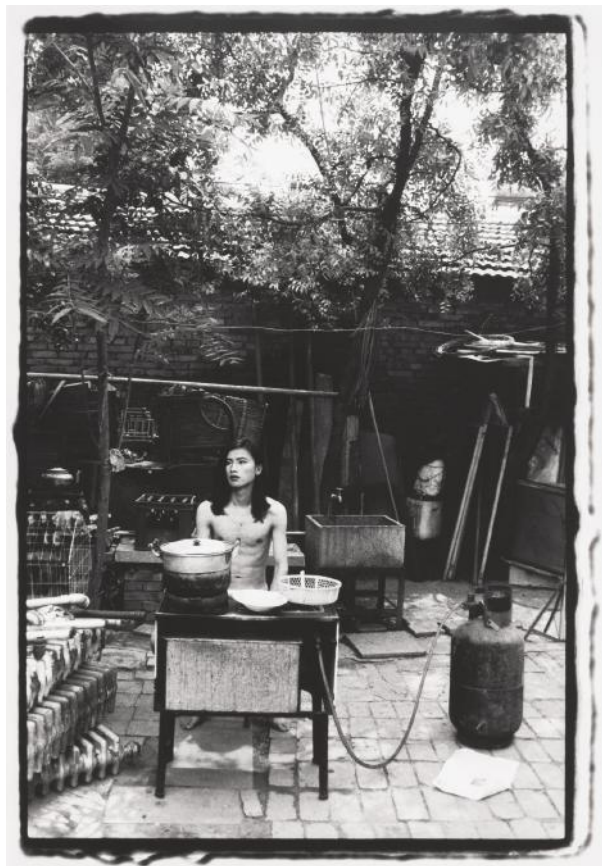


Figure 5.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II*, 1994,  
Photograph of performance, gelatin silver print on  
paper, 610 × 508 mm, ©Tate, London.



Figure 6.  
Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming I*, 1993, Photograph of  
performance, gelatin silver print on paper, 607 × 507  
mm, Mutual Art, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020,  
[https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Fen-Ma-Liuming-  
Series/A1CB721D86506D28](https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Fen-Ma-Liuming-Series/A1CB721D86506D28).



Figure 7. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming and Fish*, 1995, Performance, Image courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/fen-ma-liuming-and-the-fish>.



Figure 8. Ma Liuming, *Fish Child*, 1996, Performance, Image courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/fish-child>





Figure 9. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall*, 1997, Performance, Image courtesy of IKON ltd., Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <http://ikonltd.com/past/enlarged/19/2/>

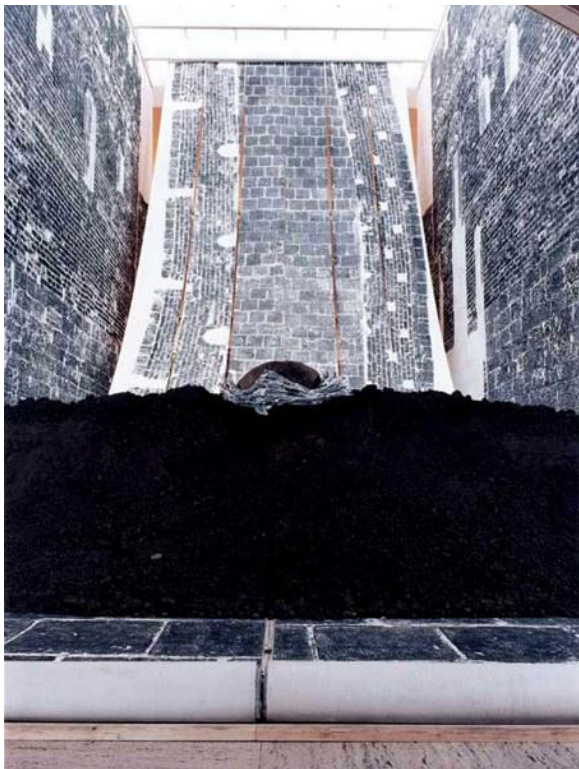


Figure 10.  
Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990, Mixed media installation, Image courtesy Xu Bing Studio.





Figure 11. Marina Abramović, *Lovers: Walk on the Great Wall of China*, 1988, Performance, © Marina Abramović, courtesy of the Artists Rights Society, 2020.

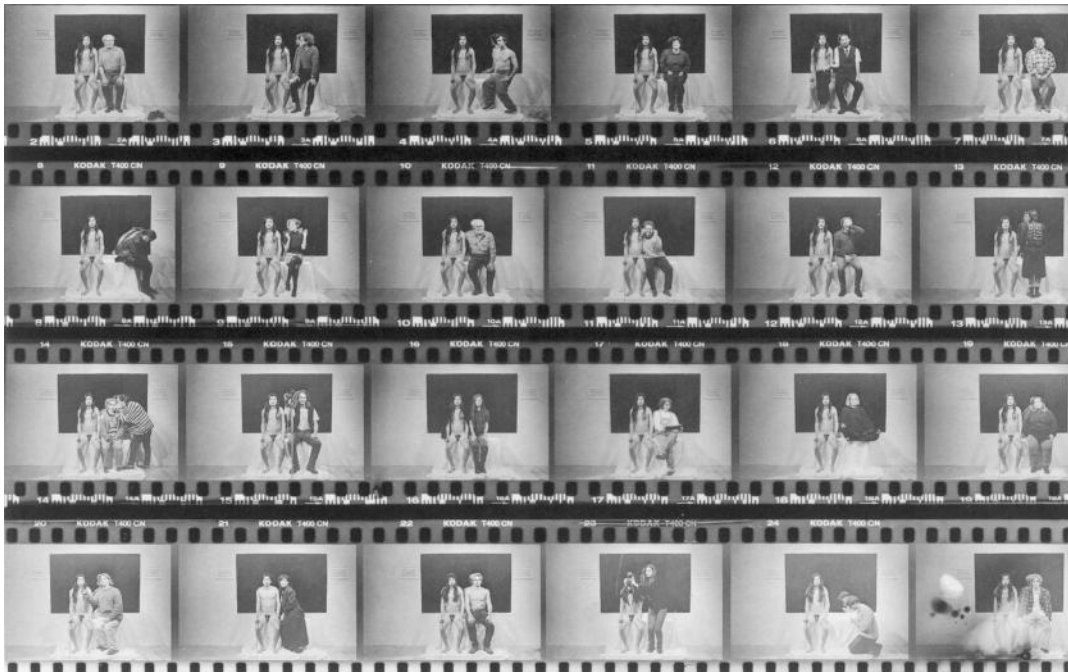


Figure 12. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec*, 1997, In "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," by Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Zhijian Qian. *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): page 73, figure 6.

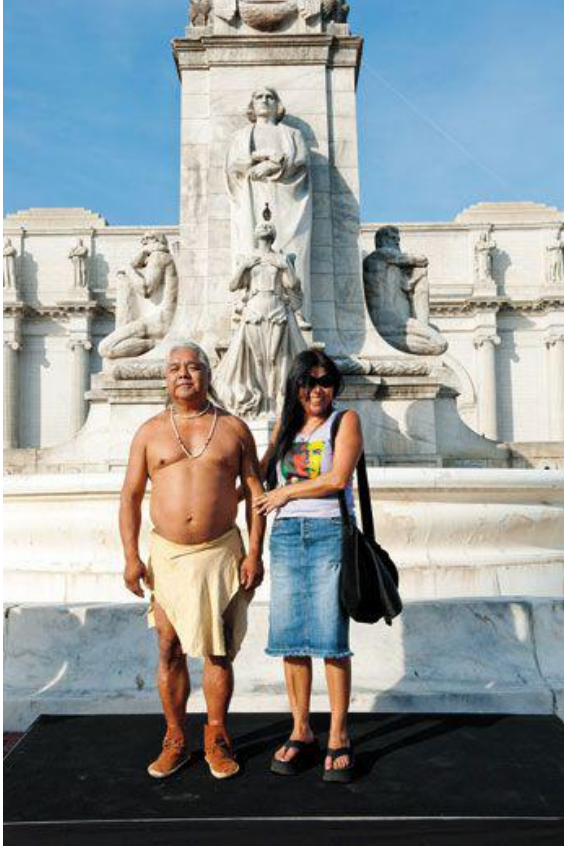


Figure 13. James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, 1991-93, Performance, Image courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).



Figure 14.  
Zhang Huan, *65 Kilograms*, 1994, Performance, Image courtesy of Zhang Huan.





Figure 15. He Yunchang, *One Meter Democracy*, 2010, Performance, Image courtesy of White Rabbit Gallery, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://artwrite54.wordpress.com/portfolio/democracy-for-all/>



Figure 16. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974, Performance, Photo: © Marina Abramović, courtesy of the Artists Rights Society, 2020.

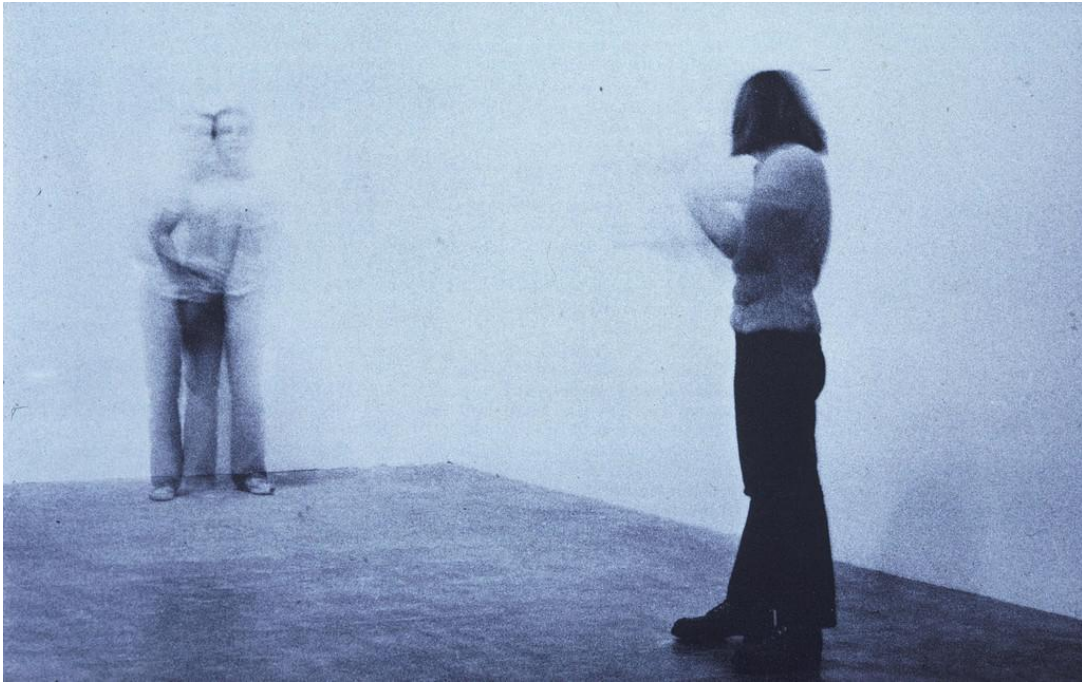


Figure 17. Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971, Performance, Photo: © Chris Burden, courtesy of the Artists Rights Society, 2020.



Figure 18. Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*, 1994, Performance, Image courtesy of Zhang Huan.





Figure 19. Zhang Huan, *25mm Threading Steel*, 1995, Performance, Image courtesy of Zhang Huan.



Figure 20. Zhang Huan, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond*, 1997, Performance, Image courtesy of Zhang Huan.



Figure 21. He Yunchang, *Dialogue with Water*, 1999, Performance, Image courtesy of Ink Studio, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/78-he-yunchang/works/1163-he-yunchang-dialogue-with-water-1999/>



Figure 22. He Yunchang, *River Document in Shanghai*, 2000, Performance, in *The Primitive and Unproductive Body: He Yunchang and His Performance Art*,” By Wang Meiqin, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 4 (2014): page 16, figure 7.





Figure 23. He Yunchang, *Appointment with Tomorrow*, 1998, Performance, Image courtesy of Ink Studio, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/39-fairytales-for-adults/>

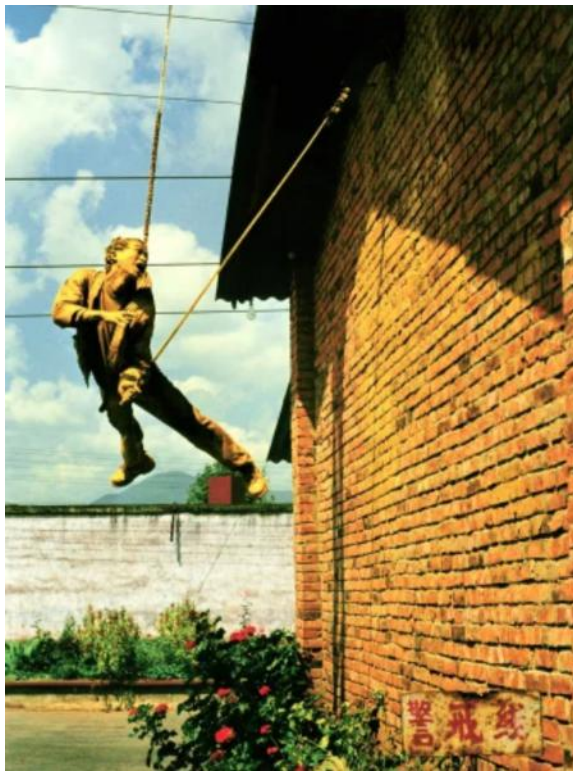


Figure 24. He Yunchang, *Golden Sunshine*, 1998, Performance, Image courtesy of Ink Studio, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/39-fairytales-for-adults/>



Figure 25. He Yunchang, *Moving a Mountain*, 1999, Performance, Image courtesy of Ink Studio, Accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/39-fairytales-for-adults/>



Figure 26. *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995, Performance, Image courtesy of Zhang Huan.



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