

Article

The Corpse and Humanist Discourse: Dead Bodies in Contemporary Chinese Art

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Abstract: In the 1990s, a notable trend in contemporary Chinese art was the use of human corpses as material for installation art. These works were called derivative and societally harmful by critics and have been dismissed as anomalous in more recent scholarship. This paper will demonstrate that the use of corpses was the continuation of a decade-long attempt to free art from a perceived unhealthy relationship with society through ridding the human body of ideological meaning. I argue that the use of dead bodies marks a metaphorical end to this preoccupation within the contemporary Chinese art world and paved the way for a fundamental shift in the way artists approached society as a whole.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art; postsocialist art; Chinese performance art; Chinese installation art; Chinese conceptual art; humanism; body art; performance art

1. Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, a small but marked trend in contemporary Chinese art, especially centering around Beijing, involved the incorporation of human cadavers and dead or living animals as part of installation art. Although the artists who participated in this trend were never bound together in any official capacity, they have been retrospectively nicknamed “the cadaver group”.¹

These cadavers were generally obtained at hospitals through friends of the artists who worked at morgues. It was common during this time for students at art academies to practice drawing cadavers at morgues to learn to more accurately depict the human body. The artists became friends with morgue workers, who allowed them to borrow cadavers, or parts of cadavers, for their art installations, as long as they were returned.²

The trend of using corpses in Chinese installation art gained momentum in the first of a series of exhibitions curated by Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun titled *Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion*, held in the basement of an apartment complex in Beijing’s Chaoyang district in 1999. Although it was a relatively small-scale, underground affair, it is of historical importance because it was one of the first exhibitions in which multiple artists used recognizable portions of human corpses and living and dead animals as artistic material. Peng Yu and Sun Yuan contributed a work called *Honey*, consisting of a bed frame covered with dry ice out of which the head of an old man appears to emerge next to a curled-up fetus (Figure 1). Also included in the exhibition were Zhu Yu’s *Pocket Theology*, a severed human arm hanging from the ceiling, clutching in its hand a long rope which wound around itself on the floor below the arm, eventually extending to the entrance of the room; and Xiao Yu’s *Ruan*, an installation featuring the heads of human fetuses grafted onto the bodies of birds, with rabbit’s eyes, displayed in large clear specimen jars.

Although it was underground, the exhibition seemed to have initiated a trend. Later exhibitions that featured the use of human corpses around the same time include *Infatuated with Injury* in January of 2000, *Man and Animal: Aestheticism and Ambiguity* in May of 2000, and *Fuck Off* in November of 2000.



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Figure 1. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Honey*, installation, 1999. Photograph courtesy of the artists.

The trend became so apparent that the government responded by issuing a document titled “The Ministry of Culture’s Notice on Its Resolution to Cease All Performances and Bloody, Brutal Displays of Obscenity in the Name of Art” the following year. This document outlined six restrictions, the first of which states “It is prohibited to perform or display bloody, brutal, or obscene spectacles in public places, and it is likewise prohibited to display the human body or engage in any other pornographic acts that may harm social decency”.³ This proclamation officially declared works like those of the cadaver group, as well as performance art, to be illegal and punishable by law. This would not have been much of a surprise as performance art had already been considered illegal throughout most of the 1990s anyway, and all of these exhibitions featuring cadavers were “underground” so as to avoid censorship.⁴

The use of fetuses and living animals was not only shocking to the central government, but also elicited a strong reaction from both domestic and international art audiences. Many of the most vociferous detractors of the first *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibition, like Karen Smith in her article “Contagious Desire: The Other in Contemporary Chinese Art”, criticized the artists for copying YBA artists like Damien Hirst, who also used animal and human corpses in order to elicit shock (Smith 2001). Art historian Charles Merewether argued that these works were a response to the alienation brought about by the rapid introduction of a capitalist economy (Merewether 2003). Silvia Fok interprets them as ruminations on the relationship between life and death in Chinese society (Fok 2013). Thomas J. Berghuis interprets the use of cadavers in this art as conceptualizing the body “not as a piece of meat—a material object— but rather as the *mediated subject of the acting body in art*” (Berghuis 2006, p. 122).

Chinese critic Gu Zhenqing referred to the works as “somasochistic installations”, arguing that art should have a beneficial impact on society: “Actually, in every person’s soul”, he wrote, “they have the contradiction between indulging and inhibiting violence. The most important thing is how we balance it”. He said that artists must “...enlighten people’s knowledge, thoughtfulness, and criticize absurd and cruel behaviors in society” in order to reach this balance (Gu 2000). Chen Lüsheng shared similar criticisms, expressing fear over the trend of art imitating the negative aspects of life as a scare tactic. He argued that “...such a logical relationship will extend to frightening consequences: murdering to counsel us on murder, committing disturbances to advise against disturbances. Artists are using the name of art to do as they please” (Chen 2002). This version was translated by Lee Ambrozy and published in (Ambrozy 2010, p. 274). Karen Smith, a foreign critic discussed above, also engaged with these questions when she credited the work with an absence of

moral compass in China due to a lack of religion.⁵ In most cases, these works were understood as either reflecting or instigating negative aspects of society, or just copying British sculpture of the time. While they drew some attention around the turn of the century, their relationship to previous trends in contemporary Chinese art has been overlooked.

This study provides a new perspective with which to view the work of the Cadaver School, arguing that, although made under very different circumstances, it continues, and acts as a bookend to, a trend in contemporary art featuring human bodies begun in the 1980s. I argue that from the 1980s until the turn of the century, the artists identified in this paper drew ever-more attention to the materiality of the body as a way of understanding its value outside of society at large. I explore the ways in which artworks that feature the human body align with or push against articulations of “humanism” that had particular cultural valence in postsocialist China during this period. Further, I argue that, ironic as it may seem, the reasoning behind the use of cadavers in these artworks had idealistic undertones in that they paved the way for new articulations of the value and meaning of the human, and by extension, art, in postsocialist China.

2. Art and the ‘Humanism’ Debate in the 1970s and 1980s

During the Mao period, but especially during the Cultural Revolution, art production was under the control of the state and very much reflected the orthodox party line. Drawing on the writings of Karl Marx, Mao believed that human nature was determined by the process of changing the natural world to meet human needs, as well as labor relations, mostly focusing on workers, peasants, and soldiers, whom Mao anointed as the “heroes” of the revolution. The most common subjects of propaganda paintings and posters were these “heroes” laboring, studying, and rallying for the communist cause, their bodies rippling with muscles, cheeks rosy, and smiles huge (Figure 2). In such depictions, their value as humans was intrinsically tied to their relations with production and class identity. Such depictions fulfill Marx’s concept of a “total man” because the subjects are not alienated under capitalism. For Marx, labor under capitalism “alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his *human* life” (Marx 1992, p. 120). In paintings such as these, the relationship between the human body and his/her surroundings provide a microcosm for what Mao envisioned as the relationship between art and society. Both the laboring body and art served as tools to achieve the goals of the Communist Party.



Figure 2. Zhong Zhaolin, *Spring Rain*, poster, 1975. Photo courtesy of UC San Diego Library Digital Collections.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong and throughout the 1980s, artists began experimenting with new forms of realism in order to explore the true impact of the Mao era upon the heroes of the revolution, revealing a much harder existence than the story told in the propaganda posters. The human figure remained a dominant subject, but this time artists experimented with new ways of imagining the value of the human, outside of their labor value or labor relations. Art historian and curator Gao Minglu cites Scar Art and Rustic Realism as two styles in the late 1970s that attempted this in different ways. Scar Art was a form of realist painting that depicted violent and brutal moments from the Cultural Revolution to reveal the falsehoods intrinsic to the highly idealized propaganda from the period. Rustic Realism was another type of realist painting that depicted ordinary rural and minority people as the victims of Maoist policies of the previous decades. Gao cites Luo Zhongli's oil painting, *Father* (1980), a photo-realist depiction of a weathered old man, as an example of this style, stating, "In this case, what the rustic painter attempts to reveal is not a particular 'father', rather the state of humanity in general, in the form of a good and beautiful natural ideal. It is very abstract and transcends the subject's class identity" (Gao 2011). Gao connects these two styles with a larger debate taking place among China's governmental elite surrounding the questions of "humanism" and "alienation" in the post-Mao period.

In the 1980s, some party philosophers such as Wang Ruoshui, deputy editor-in-chief of the party sponsored journal *The People's Daily*, looked to early Marx to theorize a specifically *socialist* humanism, using this concept to denounce the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution and try to imagine a better relationship between the people and the state during the reform era. Arguing that the horrors of the Cultural Revolution demonstrated that alienation was possible under the conditions of socialism, he considered the possibilities of democracy and freedom in a socialist context, as a way to transcend socialist alienation. In 1983, Zhou Yang, the vice president of the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, also supported the concept of Marxist humanism by saying: "In Marxism, man occupies an important place. Marxism cares about and values people, and advocates the liberation of all mankind. Of course, the people that Marxism talks about are social, realistic, and practical people; the liberation of all mankind that Marxism talks about is through the liberation of the proletariat" (Zhou 1983). This type of humanism, for Zhou, is different from the "bourgeois" humanism of the West, that Marx theorized as envisioning man as autonomous and isolated, "squatting outside the world" (Marx and Engels 1975). This argument had significant political ramifications within the Chinese Communist Party. In 1984, the orthodox Communist Party official Hu Qiaomu made a speech that provided a rebuttal to Zhou Yang's words, arguing the impossibility of integrating humanism and Marxism in any way, saying that humans are "the personification of social relations" (Hu 1993). While this speech has been historicized as putting an end to debates surrounding socialist humanism in the 1980s, Beijing Film Academy Professor and social critic Cui Weiping has argued that this speech "...is not only a 'summary' opinion to end the discussion, but also plays a leading and programmatic role in the subsequent communist party's ideology" and provided "the basic vision and framework of the country's ideology after the 1980s" (Cui 2007). The stakes of the debate are made clear by Cui when she writes "...when Hu insists that 'everything begins with social relations,' he means everything begins with *existing* social relations; Hu Qiaomu's insistence on clinging to 'social relations' reveals his unwillingness to set aside *existing* social relations ... Therefore, 'social relations' become a reason for suppressing 'man' and a powerful defense of the status quo". (Ibid.). The de-politicization evident in Scar Art and Rustic Realism, therefore, can be seen as a humanist rethinking of the value of the individual under new political and socio-economic circumstances. Gao writes:

The new interest in humanism [in the 1980s], or *rendaozhuyi*, reveals a pursuit of a kind of modern identity transcending class, such as those exemplified by workers, peasants, revolutionary inheritors, or the proletariat in general. Therefore, humanism in the particularly Chinese context after the Cultural Revolution

means declassification (*qujiejihua*). The “individual” not only refers to a particular individual, but more importantly can be abstractly defined as any ordinary, nonpoliticized Chinese person. And furthermore, this ideal nonpolitical Chinese person can be representative of truth, goodness, and beauty, i.e., what is conceived of as the true human nature uncorrupted by any political propaganda.⁶

Gao sees a continued interest in humanism in the idealist art projects of the '85 Movement. Consisting of dozens of groups of young artists throughout the country, the '85 Movement was fueled by an enlightenment desire to use art to usher China into a modern age. Gao points out that many of these artists continued to use realism with humanist aims. He characterizes the humanism (which he calls “*rendaozhuyi*”) of the Scar artists and Rustic Realists as responding to the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, with the aim of questioning the usefulness of class categories for understanding humanity. The '85 Movement's humanism (which he calls “*renwenzhuyi*”) aimed to surpass these categories all together, envisioning a universal human. “Of the two”, Gao argues, “*renwen* is broader and goes beyond political Marxist narratives. If *renwen* mostly refers to the idealism, liberty, and freedom of an individual intellectual, the rationalist quality indicates a desire to awake from a black ideological midnight”.⁷ *Renwen* artists of the '85 Movement took a different approach to the human subject, though still using realism. Instead of looking to the rural or minority “other” like the *rendao* artists of the 1970s, these artists depicted themselves and close friends in urban, domestic settings. Lacking emotion, they paint, read, and think, serving as models for a universal humanism. Although they are sometimes shown in groups, each individual is lost in thought. Their inner world is prioritized over bodily movement or social interaction. An example of a rationalist painting of the '85 Movement is Li Guijun's *Studio* (1985), which features a young man painting, a young woman standing in front of a white wall adorned with an artwork featuring waves, and a bespectacled man reading. The humanism evident in this painting appears to derive from the emancipation of thought, signaled by engagement in scholarly and artistic activities.

In his description of the '85 Movement, Gao distinguishes the *renwen* trend of rationalist painters from a new tradition of Chinese conceptual (or idea) art (*guannian yishu*), which was characterized by the use of new media like installation and performance art, the focus on process over object, the relationship between art and life, and, according to Gao, was uninterested in the questions of morality and representation that so interested the *renwen* artists.⁸ However, this paper identifies a continuation of this humanist (*renwen*) trend in conceptual art dealing with the subject of the human body throughout the 1990s, ending with the Cadaver School, which I argue, takes the aim of abstracting and universalizing the human body to such an extreme that it is conceptualized as separate from the human subject itself.

3. Wrapped Bodies in Performance Art of the 1980s

The 1980s saw the first examples of performance art in contemporary China. Two notable commonalities among many of the performances of this period were that they were performed in groups, and they involved the participants wrapping their bodies in cloth so that they could not be recognized as individuals. Gao Minglu notes the importance of the fact that these were performed in groups: “...the experience and process of an individual body language was demolished at the expense of the integration of the public space, the audience, and the artists. That is to say, when the artist engaged in performance art, he often turned his individual identity into a collective identity” (Gao 2007). The obscuring of the artists' individual traits with cloth also has this effect. One early example of performance art involving wrapping is a series titled *Cloth Sculpture*, performed in 1986 by Zhang Guoliang, Ding Yi, Qin Yifeng, and students from the Academy of Fine Art at Shanghai University. At various public locations throughout Shanghai, the artists statically posed, wrapped in a yellow cloth. When they posed together, the yellow cloth bound their bodies into one unit. “In doing so”, argues Gao, “the artists attempted to free art from studios and museums and insert it into the public space, bringing the audience into their art-making

process". (Ibid., p. 168). In one photograph of the performance, for instance, two figures sit at a table in a coffee shop. Their bodies and heads are completely covered in cloth and they face each other, enacting a tableau of two people eating together. Their placement in public is apparent by the crowd of people lined up behind them. In another, a wrapped figure stands in a bustling crowd on a street in Shanghai. He statically poses with his right arm extending forward and left resting on his hip. While some passersby ignore him, a few line up to face him, as if waiting for something to happen.⁹ In the photograph of the event, the wrapped figure stands in the center of the composition, the only moment of stillness within a swirl of activity (Figure 3). In both instances, there is a dissonance between the figures and their environment due to their indeterminate status.



Figure 3. Ding Yi, Qin Yifeng, Zhang Gulling, *Cloth Sculpture*, 1986. Courtesy of Ding Yi Studio.

This situation offers a stark contrast to the Socialist Realist art and literature of the Mao period and post-Mao period. In her article "The Politicized Body", Ann Anagnost argues that Socialist Realism, as seen in the Mao and post-Mao period, served to propagate a hierarchy of those who were "accepted" and those who were "other" within the larger subjectivity of the state (Anagnost 1994). She differentiates the mechanics of power evident in socialist realism from the Foucaultian biopower defined by the "disciplinary technologies of Western capitalist society". The former, according to Anagnost,

...projects a utopian fiction onto the space of lived reality, and it does this not through the individuation of its characters, but through a different operation. It classifies its characters into coded positions, representations that are moral exemplars, clusters of signs that must be made visible in order to circulate throughout the social body and thereby produce the effects of power by making the party, in its turn, also supremely visible in a dazzling display of presence. (Ibid., pp. 149–50)

Socialist Realist propaganda posters of the Mao period function in much the same way. The strong bodies, beaming smiles, clothing, and environment (usually near a farm, industrial project, or infrastructure project), point not to the individual subjectivity of the figures themselves, but rather, to the power of the CCP to organize such large-scale modernization projects while simultaneously ensuring the happiness and health of the Chinese people. The concept of visibility can be taken further when considering the pervasiveness

with which these posters penetrated society, displayed as they were in both public buildings and private residences.

Returning to the *Cloth Sculptures* described above, the indeterminability of the artists' status, as a result of their invisibility and immobility, provide an alternative to the mechanics of power evident in Socialist Realism. While they are positioned within a public space, the public cannot interact with them, cannot position themselves in relation to them. Building on Anagnost's argument, this indeterminability circumvents the ability for the state to re-inscribe its power on the individual body as seen in Socialist Realism. Like the rationalist paintings discussed above, these works pose an alternative understanding of *the human* that seeks to move beyond social hierarchies promoted by the state and theorized by scholars of socialist humanism.

4. The New Measurement Group

Conceptual artist Wang Luyan once told a story about an encounter with artist Gu Dexin, with whom, along with Chen Shaoping, he formed The New Measurement Group "... at that time [early 1980s] Gu Dexin's friends all thought that a big problem was how to depict a human accurately. His friends always called into question the accuracy of the human figures that Gu painted. They thought that they weren't accurate enough".¹⁰ In response to these criticisms, Gu found a new way to depict the human body. According to Wang, he said: "I just measured a human body and recorded its dimensions. That should be accurate enough". (Ibid.). By presenting measurements of the human body, the artist was able to avoid any mistakes, exaggerations, idealizations, or deformities inevitable with painting or sculpting the same subject. The use of measurement represented an entirely new approach to portraying reality, one which contained the legitimacy of the hard sciences and avoided the manipulations of propaganda.

The New Measurement Group's first project together was called *Tactile Art* (1998) and responds to the same ideas that Gu Dexin addressed in the aforementioned story. This time, rather than pictorially representing the human body, they focused on the way the human body feels under various conditions. For this project, the artists made a series of measurements of a human body's experiences under certain circumstances, creating scientific diagrams of the outside temperature, the act of shaking hands, and the feeling of the surface of the ground under bare feet. For Wang, this method was the most direct and objective way to convey an individual bodily experience. Such a focus on objective experience over representation seeks to circumvent the ideological identification of the human body.

Although the somewhat complex diagrams may seem incomprehensible in comparison to the dominant trend of academic realism, an unpublished manifesto written by Wang Luyan about the project reveals an underlying democratic impulse:

They and others exist together in a tranquil and pure space of tactile art with no explanations, understanding, exploration, or communication. Those vulgar and meaningless phenomena, such as condescending artists making indiscreet remarks, creating a man-made gap, are gone. There is no incomprehensibility, no liking and disliking. What the artists and common people get is maximum freedom and relaxation, which can be easily obtained by relaxing yourself. Through the boundless space of tactile art, artists and people in general alike will own a free and new kingdom. (Wang 1988)¹¹

Wang's emphasis on comprehensibility and the removal of emotional response recalls the ideals of early 20th century Russian Constructivism. It assumes the possibility of a one-to-one relationship between art and reality (or "truth") as well as the assumption of a universal bodily experience. It is telling that instead of measuring elements of nature (like sound waves), or man-made objects, their subject remained the human body, which continued to act as barometer for capturing or revealing some sort of "truth", this time outside of the bounds of representational realism. Furthermore, the reference to "freedom" aligns the group with the idealist humanism of the '85 Movement.

5. Zhang Huan in the East Village, Mid-1990s

Although the debate on socialist humanism officially ended in the mid-1980s, the resonance of Hu Qiaomu's final words on the topic were evident in the violent 1989 governmental quashing of the democracy demonstrations throughout the country. As Cui's comments above indicate, the debate was more than a theoretical exploration of the possibility of combining humanism with Marxism in China, it was fundamentally about the orthodox Party's fear of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Governmental censorship was heightened in the following years and many intellectuals and artists moved to other parts of the world. Furthermore, the 1990s in China was a decade of unprecedented change, in which the economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s and 1980s reached a head. An important year for this development was 1992 and Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, in which he promoted the full embrace of market capitalism, which fundamentally changed the everyday life of the Chinese people. Xudong Zhang describes it like this: "...the Chinese 1990s witnessed a genuine schizophrenia in social reality and the collective mindset along with the radical disintegration of traditional (both agrarian and socialist) social fabric, the decentralization of power, the loss of moral and theoretical authority, and China's uneasy and often embattled relations with a reintegrated and expanded capitalist West after the Cold War" (Zhang 2008). Whereas throughout the 1980s, intellectuals and artists took up the May 4th mantle of cultural authorities in the movement toward modernization, in the 1990s, they lost this position. Wang Jing describes this transition for the intellectual from the 1980s to the 1990s as a movement from "socialist alienation" to "social alienation" (Wang 1996). In this new environment of mass consumerism, according to Wang, intellectuals were forced into their ivory towers, alienated from a vulgar, materialistic society.

In the early 1990s, intellectual debate around "humanism" made a brief comeback with discussions of the fate of the "humanist spirit" within consumer society. A panel discussion in 1994 was published in the Chinese literary magazine *Dushu* in which the intellectual Cai Xiang wrote "The ensuing market economy, instead of accommodating the utopian imaginations of intellectuals, subverts once again the discursive power of intellectuals by its inclination to commodification and consumption...the most primitive forms of money worship are reactivated or manufactured anew, selfish individualism is all but encouraged, *body and soul become separable*, the cruel law of competition is reinstated in social and personal relationships" (Xiang 1994).¹² Under such circumstances, the intellectual is still envisioned as separate from society, but no longer has the discursive cultural authority to change society.

The contemporary art of the period shed the idealism of the '85 Movement. Rather than retreating to ivory towers, many in the early 1990s retreated to artist villages or private apartments, where they made art outside the purview of government censorship. One such group moved to a village, also inhabited by migrant workers, that they renamed the "East Village". They were known for enacting performances in the nude that often involved the testing of physical and mental endurance. Zhang Huan was one of the performance artists whose works best fit within the focus of this paper. Between 1993 and 1997 he enacted a number of performances in which he sought to reduce the human subject to the objective materiality of his body. For example, in his *65 KG* (1994), he had his body tied to the rafters of an old courtyard house (Figure 4). Nurses connected the veins in his arms to intravenous tubes, which dripped his blood onto a hotplate positioned on a mattress on the floor below. The smell of blood filled the room, overwhelming some audience members. The meaning or significance of his body was reduced to his weight (65 KG) and the vapors of his blood. Zhang has said, "The title *65 KG* refers to my weight, or, more precisely, to the actions of a body with this weight conducted in specific environmental conditions" (Qian 1999).¹³ In 1995, he led a group of other performance artists to the peak of a nearby mountain. The group piled on top of one another, nude, according to their weight, in a pyramidal formation, to create the work *To Add one Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*. In 1997, he paid a group of shirtless workers to enter a pond with him, also shirtless, with a small boy on his shoulders, for a performance titled *To Raise the Water Level of a Fishpond*. In all of these

instances, the titles, as well as his nudity, reveal a desire to present himself as a universal and abstracted human body, rather than a specific or classed body. He has said:

What I am most interested in is people at their most ordinary, during typical daily moments when they are most prone to being overlooked, this is also what constitutes the original material for when I create. For instance, when we are sitting on the couch talking, smoking, in bed every day resting, going to work every day, eating, shitting, and so on. In these daily activities we find the nearest thing to what humanity is, the most essential human thing- the question of the human spirit, the quest to discover how we relate to the environment we exist in.¹⁴

It is notable that the locations of Zhang's performances, in addition to the quotation above, position him within the same mass society that post-Tiananmen intellectuals felt alienated from. His lack of clothes and performances in impoverished or natural settings, however, also separate him from the consumerism that intellectuals of the 1990s so deplored. The emphasis on private, everyday moments, on scientifically measurable elements of his body, and his body's impact on the surrounding environment draw attention to the objecthood, or materiality of his body. Despite this, he nevertheless draws attention to the "human spirit", which is found where the materiality of the body meets the environment. This provides a contrast to Cai Xiang's words quoted above in italics that "the body and soul become separable". Zhang, therefore, offers an alternative model to both the Enlightenment humanism of artists and intellectuals of the 1980s and the "vulgar" society of mass consumerism.



Figure 4. Zhang Huan, *65 KG*, 1994, performance, Beijing, China. ©Zhang Huan Studio.

It is also compelling to view these works in relation to Marx's understanding of the essence of man (or what he calls "species character") which, he argues, comes through actively humanizing nature to meet his needs. Through humanizing nature, nature is changed by humans, and humans are changed by nature. Furthermore, individuality is determined by the way the individual changes nature to meet his/her needs. In his focus on the meeting point of human and environment, Zhang provides an interesting counterpoint to Marx's vision. In Zhang's conception, the unmoving and passive human body impacts nature, but not to fulfill any specific human needs. In his works, the body (or bodies) is added to a mountain or a pond to change the mountain or the pond, but the body is not itself changed by nature. Individual needs are not taken into consideration. Rather, the body acts as an object that neither improves nor endangers its environment, just changes its dimensions. However, this change lies at the crux of Zhang's artworks. Without such change, they would be meaningless. In Zhang's conceptualization, the mass of the body as itself—not laboring, not thinking, but taking up space—constitutes what it means to be

human. In other words, human value is a given, independent of culturally and societally assigned value, such as productivity, wealth, or strength.

6. Zhu Yu's Basics of Total Knowledge No. 4 (1998–1999)

In 1998, artist Zhu Yu initiated a project called *Brains Manufacture* at the Capital University of Medicine in Beijing, in which he sliced up six human brains into pieces and then blended them into a slurry. He then spooned the brain paste into jars and added his own label with a picture of a brain, a warning not to eat it, and a barcode. The following year, these works were brought to Shanghai for the “Supermarket Exhibition” and used in a performance work called *Brains Sale*, in which the artist hired a salesperson to sell the jars for 98 yuan each. A video of the blending and jarring process was included in the exhibition. All elements of the work are collectively called *Basics of Total Knowledge No. 4*. Sylvia Fok has interpreted this work as questioning the limits of the definition of art, but also as inspiring questions related to life and death.¹⁵ Charles Merewether, in his article “The Spectre of Being Human” argues that artworks in China using corpses can be interpreted in terms of alienation under capitalism as a result of the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the repression of subjectivity as a result of the government’s over-policing of daily life.¹⁶ Although Merewether never mentions this work directly, this interpretation can easily be applied. By jarring human brains and selling them, Zhu creates a cogent metaphor for the commodification of labor, albeit cognitive labor. However, when brains are removed from the body, they no longer possess their original function as vessels for individual consciousness, that which sets humans apart from animals. This artwork, therefore, resonates with Marx’s statement (quoted above, but worth repeating) that alienated labor under capitalism “alienates man from his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life” (Marx 1992, p. 130). Zhu’s work was part of a larger trend in Chinese art of the 1990s that directly responded to the commodification of culture, which was particularly visible in the commercial center of Shanghai. In fact, the idea behind the Supermarket Exhibition was “Everything is for sale and consumption is the key mechanism of life in Shanghai”. The use of brains brings to mind the legacy of the governmental oppression of intellectuals in the 1990s and supports Merewether’s argument that this is a response to the paradox of a free market under extreme governmental censorship. While Zhu was a prominent member of the “Cadaver School”, I interpret works involving intact cadavers (or partial cadavers) in installation art somewhat differently.

7. Qiu Zhijie, All the Meat Here Is Clean (2001)

The second *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibition curated by Qiu Zhijie was titled *Spree*, held in 2001. While Qiu Zhijie himself never worked with cadavers, he contributed a work to the exhibition that addressed the human subject in much the same way as the “Cadaver School”. This work was the first that visitors encountered upon entrance into the exhibition. It consisted of a refreshment table covered with a variety of different meat products on plates, including ham, sausage, soy-sauce beef, and lamb.¹⁷ Among the plates of meat, three human heads had been pushed through holes in the table, also appearing to rest on plates. The heads were those of three living migrant workers whose bodies were crouched, hiding beneath the table. Behind the plates of meat and workers’ heads stood a statue of Buddha and a sign reading “All the Meat Here is Clean”, thereby equating the meat on the table with the “meat” of the living migrant workers. When asked about *All the Meat Here is Clean* and its explicit conflation of living migrant workers and meat, Qiu explained “On the table is all meat, it doesn’t have vegetables, and I added a Buddha. He didn’t eat meat, right? It has to do with our relationship with meat. If you think about it carefully, they [all the meat on the table] are all corpses ... In Buddhism they don’t view the body so extremely, it is a leather sack ... You are supposed to hate your body. Your body is not clean, it is a leather sack, holding your bones”.¹⁸ This notion eliminates the importance of the boundaries between our bodies and the outside world, which in turn eliminates the

importance of the body as a signifier for individuality. This view of the human body sees no qualitative difference between a living human, a piece of meat, and a drop of water.

What is similar about Qiu's conceptualization of the body to those that I have discussed so far is that he also attempts to separate the body from any societal signifiers. Qiu's view of the body, however, has moved so far in this direction that he not only rhetorically removed the possibility for the body to express individual subjectivity, but made a much greater leap than any of the previous artists discussed so far, by denying the importance of the body for what it means to be human. Drawing on Buddhist beliefs, the body becomes nothing more than an object, material that is no different from any other object. As will be seen in the next section, this is very similar to the way other curators and artists justified the use of the body in the works of the Cadaver School. In his 2003 article "The Important Thing is not the Meat", Qiu lambasts Chinese critics' negative appraisal of works using corpses, arguing that it reflects a Western-centric Christian worldview that is not appropriate in the Chinese context (Qiu 2003).

This nationalistic undertone demonstrates a trend noted by Xudong Zhang that corresponds with China's entry into the global capitalist market (Zhang 2008). By the late 1990s, more and more Chinese contemporary artists had been included in international biennials or traveling exhibitions in Europe and the United States. This confrontation of Chinese art with the Western-centric art world inspired criticism of a postcolonial nature among many domestic artists, who complained that the only way to be included in the global art market was to align with the expectations and values of Western cultures. Qiu's explanation of this artwork, with his reference to Buddhism, a philosophy that did not originate in the West, can be read along those lines. By completely divorcing the body from human subjectivity, Qiu presented an alternative of enlightenment (Western) humanism, in which the body is the vessel that houses one's subjectivity, and Marxist humanism, in which the body's interaction with nature forms subjectivity.

8. Justifications for the Cadaver School at the Time

In their assessment of the significance of the Cadaver School (or lack thereof) in this period of contemporary Chinese art, critics seemed to have ignored a key element of what these artists and supporters said they were trying to achieve. In another section of Qiu's article discussed above, he derides some Chinese scholars for overly equating artworks using cadavers with "conceptual art": "Using the standards of traditional conceptual art to demarcate contemporary art", he writes, "is overbearing from my perspective, the trend of new art comes exactly from the need to wash clean traditional conceptual art's intellectual tendencies; let art return to the senses, the scene, the experience, it doesn't need to be within the realm of language". Further, he argues that art should be removed from the realm of politics, writing, "Confusing real political movements with art not only insults art, it also insults politics" (Qiu 2003). Qiu argues that unlike realism, which seeks to reflect reality, environments like those created in *Post-Sense Sensibility* with corpses move beyond realism and representation, and touch something that is more real or truthful because it is a physical experience directly felt by the audience.

Other cadaver group artists used different language that echoed Qiu's insistence on the ideological purity of a corpse. In an interview with Sun Yuan, in response to questions related to his and Peng Yu's use of the corpse in art, he explained that "...at the time almost all of the art symbolism was related to realism...it was sort of an excessive humanism", where artists were mostly concerned with the relationship between art and humanity, art and society, and art and reality. This meant the overuse of simplistic symbols, like that of Mao, to create works that were easily understandable for the public. This is perhaps referencing the works of Political Pop, which were some of the first contemporary Chinese artworks to sell on the international art market and often contained reference to socialist propaganda, like Mao or peasants. He wanted to get to the bottom of what art is, in and of itself, stripped of all these symbols. For Sun, the corpse proved to be the perfect solution to this problem. He said that when a person dies, their body "...turns into an object, a

material. Because when it no longer has life, it is no longer related to any symbols. It doesn't have a culture or a nationality. It is no longer related to reality. It is just a thing".¹⁹ In other words, he sought to make the body an empty signifier, setting it free from any historical, political, or cultural meaning. He argued that at the time people were so used to recognizable symbols (realism) that they would simply ignore abstract art. For Sun, the dead body functioned in a similar way to abstraction, but would not be ignored in the same way. "So how do we make an object, I mean something that doesn't have any symbols but at the same time that the audience cannot ignore?" Sun asked. "At that time, you needed a person, or something that had a really close relationship to a person. This thing could be a dead person. A person who has been cut off from all symbols. When this happens, after the audience looks at the work, they feel like they have to face this problem". Sun's comparison between corpses and abstraction is fascinating considering that within the history of Western Modernism, total abstraction was seen as the most pure way to express one's inner subjectivity. However, a corpse, even if it is not a human, as Sun suggests, is still shaped like a human, it still looks like a human. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine that a corpse could function in the same way as abstraction. Sun's idealism was evident when he said "I think that at that time in Chinese art we needed to do something that would remove all humanist symbols related to life. Then we could allow art to be rebuilt as itself".(Ibid.). Sun envisioned the use of corpses as a necessary step towards a new relationship between art and Chinese society. In this, the body sheds any reference to values associated with either socialist or enlightenment humanism.

Similar sentiments were also apparent in the written explanation for using corpses offered by artists involved in the *Infatuated with Injury* exhibition when they recalled, "Not long ago a well-known art critic asked a famous scientist (Director of the Institute of Chemistry, Chinese Academy of Sciences) whether a corpse can be regarded as human. The scientist answered that a dead person is merely carbohydrate, not a human being" (Wu 2000).²⁰ In a written explanation about the same exhibition, Li Xianting wrote "If a corpse is considered an object, its greatest benefit is that the cultural meaning accorded it by people is eliminated. In reality, it is just an object. Dead people aren't people anymore, they are just like other objects, they are just material". He goes on to say that the most important meaning of these works is an expansion of the materials available for contemporary artists, to break this last final taboo (Li 2005). In all of these explanations, the corpse seems to offer the artists an antidote to a problem of the relationship between art and society, which, over the previous two decades had been defined by either the socialist state or Western ideologies. In all of the works discussed throughout this paper, the human body served as a metonym for both art and humanity. Therefore, the relationship between the body and society/environment presented in these works can also be seen as an expression of the relationship between art and society. By attempting to break the chain of signification between the body and society through the use of corpses, the Cadaver School artists simultaneously attempted to separate art from society, thus creating a *tabula rasa* for a new relationship to emerge.

9. Art after the Cadaver School

It should be noted that after this period (around the turn of the century), Chinese artists (for the most part) stopped using cadavers in their art.²¹ In fact, a new approach to this question of humanism seems to have emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, one that neither reflects the socialist humanism theorized in the 1980s nor the radical approach taken by the Cadaver School artists. Rather, it takes individual subjectivity as shaped by society to be the subject of the art itself.

In 2002, Qiu Zhijie and curator Lu Jie initiated the *Long March Project*, an art project that traced the route from Eastern to Central China that the Communists followed while being chased by the Nationalist army from 1934 to 1935 during the Chinese Civil War. Involving the participation of 250 domestic and international artists (arriving at different locations at different times), the project was a trip with 20 planned stops at important historical

markers along the way. At each stop, artists made and displayed artworks, and planned group readings and movie viewings to be discussed in relation to each location. But more importantly, the intention was to create a dialogue with the people living in these rural locations, particularly about China's socialist past and its relationship to its postsocialist present. This view of the human and society marks an extreme shift from that expressed in *All the Meat Here is Clean*, created just one year earlier.

In 2007, Qiu Zhijie initiated his project *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge*. This bridge was built as an infrastructure project during the Cultural Revolution and became an important symbol for Maoist ideology. However, it is also the site with the highest number of suicides in China. In this project, Qiu ended up researching the history of the bridge, but also teaming up with a suicide prevention hotline, and interviewing survivors of attempted suicides and families of the victims of suicide (Hearn 2013)²².

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, two of the most prolific Cadaver School artists, also initiated projects that approached the human subject in entirely new ways. In response to their observation that there was a trend of "peasant inventors" in China, creating all sorts of inventions such as helicopters and submarines, they invited farmer Du Wenda to test fly his homemade UFO as their contribution to the 2005 Venice Biennale.

In 2009, they initiated a project where they provided Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong with cameras and toy hand grenades and invited them to photograph the grenades in locations of their choice in the homes where they worked. It was displayed at the 2010 Biennale of Sydney. According to the catalog, this work "...addresses the emotions and issues underlying the relationships between Filipino workers and their Hong Kong employers, and examines the phenomena of migrant workers living outside of their home country, integrating themselves into the families and homes of others" (George B. Vargas Museum 2011).

These works demonstrate that after the first couple years of the 21st century, artists associated with the Cadaver School took an entirely new approach to the subject of the human and society. Taking the human as neither universal and abstracted, nor defined by class relations, these projects focus on individual subjectivity in response to lived experience. In these cases, the human is neither objectified to ideological ends nor reduced to a material object.

10. Conclusions

What I have tried to demonstrate here is that rather than seeing artworks involving the use of cadavers solely as an attention-seeking anomaly, a meditation on life and death, a mediated subject, a reflection of societal illness, or a copy of British art, they should also be viewed within this longer lineage of artists exploring the relationship between art and society via the body. This is a very specific situation that is unique to postsocialist China and a direct response to the politicization and globalization of Chinese art from the Mao period to the present. What is fascinating is the use of the human body, the building block of any society, as a canvas for this experimentation. In these cases, the body serves as a stand-in for art, revealing the high stakes with which many contemporary Chinese artists viewed this question of the relationship between art, life, representation, politics, and humanism.

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Notes

- ¹ The nickname "Cadaver Group" (尸体群) was initially coined by Fei Dawei in his article "Transgresser le principe celeste-Dialogue avec le groupe Cadavre" (Transcending Celestial Principles-Dialogue with the Cadaver Group) in *Artpress*, Special

issue on Representing the Horrific (Representer L'Horreur) (May 2001): 60–64. Translated from Chinese into French by Meng Tian. See (Berghuis 2006, p. 122).

According to artist Wang Jin in an interview with the author, Beijing, June 2015; verified by artist Sun Yuan in an interview with the author, Beijing, September 2015.

Originally published 3 April 2001 as “Wenhuabu guanyu jianjue zhizhi yi ‘yishu’ de mingyi biao’yan huo zhanshi xuexing canbao yinhui changmian de tongzhi”. This version was translated by Lee Ambrozy and published in Ambrozy (2010).

Infatuated with Injury was actually held at the Central Academy of Art, which would not appear to be underground at all. However, throughout the 1990s, university campuses sometimes served as the only “official” spaces in which it was safe to exhibit experimental contemporary art.

Smith, 53.

Gao, *Total Modernity*, 66.

Gao, *Total Modernity*, 170.

Gao, *Total Modernity*, 201.

In an email exchange with the author, Ding Yi explained that this was the first public performance in Shanghai, so the audience did not respond to them as if they were performing an artwork. Rather, it was like aliens entering the city (19 May 2023).

Interview between the author and Wang Luyan, Beijing, China, September, 2016.

See (Wang 1988), as quoted in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 236.

See (Xiang 1994). Translation by Xudong Zhang in *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 115. Italics added by author.

These are Zhang’s words in an interview conducted by Qian Zhijian of Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming titled “Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China”, (Qian 1999).

As quoted in Gao, *The Wall*, 175–176.

Fok, 146.

Merewether, 78.

“From the Perspective of an Eye Witness”, document given to me by Qiu Zhijie, pg. 1.

Interview with the author, Beijing, November 2015

Interview between Sun Yuan and the author, Beijing, September 2015.

As quoted in (Wu 2000).

An exception to this is Zhang Dali’s *Us* from 2009, consisting of five plastinated corpses striking athletic poses.

As described in (Hearn 2013).

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