

What am I in this scenario?

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A Terminal Project Report

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As a witness to the last two decades of China's accelerating development and societal upheaval, I am specifically interested in the nation's changes and social phenomena. I doubt myself to be a true Chinese person because I vacillate between my traditional Chinese identity and the seductive Western world. What constitutes a Chinese person besides birthplace and nationality nowadays? Why do I suddenly find myself experiencing a cultural identity crisis? When and why did I realize that this crisis is an equivocal obstacle in my daily life? Being a spectator now, a graduate student in the United States, undoubtedly provides me with another lens to look backwards and contextualize what I'd already experienced in China and simultaneously look forwards to ascertain what I will present through my art. This perspective allows me to make work that utilizes a deeper connection to a wider range of the world. I attribute the multifarious grand narratives about the social symptoms of China, such as the influence of China's economic transformation, the reforming social ideology and the cultural resistance, to the fundamental basic needs of humans by focusing on my personal perspectives of daily life. My terminal work attempts to explore and unravel the questions above by displaying many domestic home-like sets. They include various objects, furniture and fictional narratives, which allow me to integrate my intrinsic knowledge of Chinese cultures while drawing abstractions from social clashes. What can I contribute to this age of cultural homogenization? What kind of future will I face? How can I convince myself to be in step with the tide of the times without being conservatively nostalgic or complacent about what I used to be?

I. Common sense: In the age of conflict/ The war of the cultures.

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way— in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."*¹

I cannot simply juxtapose our time with the age that Charles Dickens depicted in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I am, however, facing a time that, like a Dickensian setting, has many new inventions, advanced technologies and thoughts that endlessly emerge day after day. There is today a cruel war surrounding the vast changes of city landscapes and information exchange. The trends of world development provide a paradigm for China to utilize, which combines China's traditional Confucian ideas with Western ideas.

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Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Library, 1994.

The supreme principles of traditional Confucian thoughts and values are founded on a system of morality, which guided China for over 2000 years. The majority of Chinese people still seek answers from historical experiences and feudal moral standards when facing specific problems of their modern lives. Many inevitable conflicts arise when these different thoughts intersect. For instance, I was told that I would not be an obedient son if I didn't get married before the age of thirty. This means I only have a few months to find a girl to fall in love with and marry her as soon as possible so I can live up to my parents expectations. This marital demand follows a ridiculous and old-fashioned logic. Now I am studying overseas, but I am still struggling with these unreasonable thoughts, even if I know they are absurd. In many cases, the feudal and old philosophies teach people to divorce themselves from logical thinking. Many arbitrary decisions have been made relying on a social ideology that is ambiguous and outdated. In China this manifests as unconsidered plans of urban expansion that lead to improper progress, and urban sprawl caused by endless human desires. These desires penetrate every aspect of society: economical needs, environmental needs, contingently given wants, unnecessary longings, and the like. The more people want, the more their wants become inflamed. This obsession of desire and demand impassions my practice. Since the beginning of graduate school I have mainly focused on questioning the controversies and conflicts of social development in modern day China in order to unravel the dualistic relationships between the traditional East and the modern West.

When people speak about Chinese culture, they mean Chinese tradition. There is no current culture that can be located in postmodern China. For thousands of years Chinese people have passed down the same or very similar cultural system and conventional customs to guide the nation, to standardize public behaviors, and mentally enforce social order. The Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) forced China to realize its own limitations. The Self-Strengthening Movement was a social innovation that occurred after the war claiming that advanced technologies and thoughts from the Western world could be used in order to fight back and conquer. This movement was a groundbreaking moment that allowed intellectuals to explore and study exotic knowledge to deal with the national crisis. Now that there is no longer a war, China must face and accept what is more important than weapons, the pluralism of culture.

In modern societies, there is pluralism within the cultures; such pluralism tests the uncertainties of good, neutral or improper aspects of Chinese morality and judgments. Do the consequences of good, bad or neutral mandate that I must have a set criteria or rule or principle that I simply consult with every time I doubt Confucian morality? No, it doesn't. But having a single standard or rule is not the only method, and not the best solution for making assumptions about either good or bad. Aristotle suggests, "moving back and forth between the judgments about particulars, particular cases, events, stories, questions and more general principles that make sense of the reason for the positions we take on the particular cases." Utilizing this dialectical view, I will analyze my practice vis-à-vis particulars as they relate to China and Chinese identity.

II. Transmitting tension: I like everything being "fucked up" and subverting the unchangeable dominance.

A. Mistranslate/ Misunderstand

“In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a particular public or its representatives misleading, but also even the concept of an “ideal” receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his attentiveness. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience.”²

It is easy to understand that the translator’s task is not only to reproduce the original, but also to find a proper way to render a comprehensible understanding of the original beyond just the words. The same is needed from works of art or an art form. With regard to the condition of China that I described earlier, my task is to find a way to translate or even intentionally mistranslate cultural particulars by means of artistic language. There must be something more important and subtle than a simple juxtaposition or representation.

A simple example is that most Chinese people are willing to adapt Western traditional festivals for their own purposes. Take Thanksgiving; in China, it has become a holiday only for the intention of shopping, and the original meaning of the festival was misused by the public’s preference without concern or willingness to know what its original purpose. The holiday becomes a commercial ploy, bringing benefits for business. This is a single-track of appropriating a different culture as a gimmick.

Consider another case of bilateral misunderstanding between China and the West; in the past decade the contemporary art of China has produced many superstar artists whose work fetch extremely high prices at auction worldwide (e.g., Zeng Fan Zhi, Zhang Xiao Gang, Sui Jian Guo, etc.). What kinds of mechanisms produce these people who earn so-called grand achievements? Does their success require Western approval? Does the influence of Western art offer Chinese artists a formula to follow, but one disguised as Chinese iconography? Do Chinese artists cater to what the Western art world wants them to do? Do Chinese artists mistranslate Western ideas about art or does the Western art world misunderstand what the Chinese artists really want to express?

What I’ve been concerned with is how to examine this phenomenon critically yet avoid arbitrary judgments. John Rawls’s theory of Reflective Equilibrium³ provides me with a theoretical base to unravel the possibilities of representing China’s reality. If my judgments conflict, I will be able to balance my assumptions. This way such judgments might then be reasonable rather than a rigid binary. In other words, this approach of judgment doesn’t require a single judgment or a conclusion ascribed to one-way reasoning, but it conforms to a mutual supporting system with multiple observations and consequences. Moving back and forth between my considered judgments about particular observations and general knowledge I will attempt to make sense of those judgments.

² Benjamin, Walter, and Marcus Paul Bullock. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2004.

³ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

B. Misuse/ Mislead

Judith Butler wrote: "The main terms of modernity are subject to an innovative reuse—what some might call a “misuse”—precisely because they are spoken by those who are not authorized in advance to make use of them.”⁴ The results of this reuse or misuse are often quite useful and make sense to us yet some might be critical or radical compared to what they used to be. It is as if a macroscopical mutation process is occurring in which all of us are involved. Compared to society as a whole, an individual home or family can be considered as a mini model of society. It provides the privacy in which one can unrestrictedly unlock their desires or secrets forbidden within the public social sphere. The intimate dynamic of a home reveals much more about humanity and is much closer to representing an authentic human experience.



The transcode (2014) variable dimensions, typewriter, TV monitor, tripod, wire, plywood, tinfoil, black paint.

For a variety of reasons, there are a host of artists who influence my practice. Mona Hatoum is one of them because she expands the rational language of Minimalism into the individual contradiction of human beings and political symbols. Many of her works don't have a neutral language because of her identity, cultural backgrounds and even her miserable past. However, these biographical details are never the focus of her work. What she emphasizes is the condition of the human spirit and soul, not the subject matter of the physical world. The work, *Light Sentence*, is a narrow space with two rows of empty

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Butler, Judith, and Ernesto Laclau. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000. P40.

cages or lockers with a movable light bulb in between them. The shadows flood the walls and move back and forth. The shadow causes massive pressure and tension for those who experience it in person. Evidently, Hatoum left an open "sentence" for the viewers to be entangled with whether it is in a personal, common, heavy, sacred, or even political way. One of my works has similar structure. It is a steel Allentown laboratory cage that I made into a confessional. It projects audio of aviary sounds along with the clanging of hinges and slamming of cage doors. These sounds loop through the speakers that are hidden under the bottom panel. The laser cut logo of Louis Vuitton on a wood panel floats in the middle of the cage. A corner of the cage is painted sunshine yellow. Its distinct visual language separates it from the other sculptures that I made and this difference hints at what I mentioned earlier. People are willing to change their original values or uses for other purposes, but the cage still retains the basic appearance and characteristics. This manipulation blurs the relationships of the affiliation, and renders them neutral.



Unreachable (2015) 30"x 60"x 74", steel Allentown laboratory cage, plywood, sunshine yellow paint, laser cut panel.

Roy McMakin's domestic furniture designs are also of significant influence. In his work, I notice that visual stimulation usually stems from our existing judgment when

recognizing an object or event. At once we begin to question the function of a piece of furniture based on its rational of existence but ignore the possibility of its being “absurd”. Absurdity is a way to reconcile the daily experience of social and cultural clash. Robert Gober’s work also has this feeling of absurdity and strangeness, which are often replicas of the domestic objects such as chairs, beds, hairy candles and a sink without a pipe, etc. What is different is that these recognizable objects produce a sense of alienation that estrange them from rational beings, meanwhile reality overlaps with the effects of illusion. The work generates another dimension, one of neutral chaos. This chaos comprises public, private, reality, fantasy, utilitarianism and even violence, which complicate the open-ended work. In my work, I slightly twist normal furniture so that this subtle way of morphing expands representation to assume the appearance of cultural desires. For example, my vitrine shelf with five-foot long legs becomes a seemingly ordinary cabinet but some parts are not rational. These changes allude to the possible ways that cultural clashes might influence China’s contemporary ideology. Also there must be a period of time for us to make judgments about what is inappropriate or advantageous.



Untitled (2015) variable dimensions, plywood, pill bottles, LED lights, frosted plastic film, table legs, black paint.

Another work that has influenced my thoughts about domestic space is Liam Gillick's works, *How are you going to behave? A kitchen cat speaks* that exhibited in the German Pavilion in the Venice Biennale, 2009. He made a replica of a kitchen space that he used to work at and transferred it into a public space, where an animatronic cat sits on top of the kitchen cabinets and keeps repeating the recorded sounds. The sound lingers within the neatly designed kitchen cabinets and provides different dialogs between the viewers and the work, the viewers and Gillick, and also the viewers themselves. For my show, I migrate morphed Chinese domestic objects into the gallery using a similar sensibility as Gillick. Sounds, lights, plywood, metal and plastic construct a scenario of misrepresentation, misunderstanding and misuse. Different depths of complication occur as the domestic enters the public/ inappropriate site of the gallery. Turning the rational into the absurd is a clever mode of subversion that I apply in my terminal project in order to enrich the sense of confusion and alienation.

III. Staying, Following & Adjusting.

Immanuel Kant states that “Skepticism is a resting-place for human reason, where it can reflect upon its dogmatic wanderings and make survey of the region in which it finds itself, so that for the future it may be able to choose its path with more certainty. But it is no dwelling-place for permanent settlement. Such can be obtained only through perfect certainty in our knowledge, alike of the objects themselves and of the limits within which all our knowledge of objects is enclosed.”⁵ Since I have been in the US for over two years, I've learned to not take seriously “How are you?” as a warm greeting. There are many cultural matters like this where I need to maintain what is proper to me, to negotiate with people; what is the good and the bad of each approach before I make a decision, to adjust and even to compromise if it is necessary. My work is therefore articulating neutral dialogue between China and the west. It transmits new values into alternative ways of reevaluating China's loss and gain in the contemporary world and providing choice and a sense of potential. The significance of the function of my work could be seen as a supposition. During times of great change in China, the social appearance becomes more evident than ever. My work through its role in cultural practice is not only to assume uncertainty but also to evoke people's desire to look though Chinese culture. My artistic practice provides a reference in which society can discern certain cultural benefits and disadvantages and adapt to adjust.

This new age of cultural clashes estranges one from the familiar by disturbing an established social system. Once the familiar becomes strange, and everything begins to reflect on its scenario, it is no longer the same. I experience at least a little of this uncertainty. It is the tension that vitalizes my work, unexpected dissonance, social improvement, and maybe even the moral life.

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Kant, Immanuel, and Mary J. Gregor. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Artist statement

The idea of Globalization and this clashing of cultural identities offered me a panoramic position to think expansively about cultural conflicts such as social identity both in China and overseas. The significance of my traditional values and where I choose to position myself in this contemporary art world were also questions I was dealing with. During the time when I make art, I notice the questions I often have about culture and the differences between east and west always require an explanation as to the specific origins of Chinese history, stories, or cultural conventions to the audience. These differences are too big to fully interpret and with my explanation, I often manage to mistranslate very important Chinese characteristics and details to the viewer. To avoid this confusion, I investigate a discussion about specific matters that I encounter in daily life. In my recent work I am interested in humor and ironic subject matter that may occur in my misunderstood conversations. Chinese connections that are linked by mysterious cultural objects and easily overlooked everyday behaviors of my culture emerge as small but significant matters that cannot simply be described as an exotic phenomenon. I don't fully understand them at first glance or by simple oral explanation. I can only experience them with my cultural background, which is a very recent transplant to the US from China. Also my work functions as both a purpose and a consequence. Most of my works hint at my cultural confusion being in the US. This confusion exists in a state of flux and mysterious communication, never reaching any authentic harmony. I want viewers to personally experience what I experience in this culture, by offering them a similar feeling of confusion when they experience the work.