

**CAPITALIST REALISM**  
**Making Art for Sale in Shanghai, 1999**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

The artist-instigated exhibition *Art for Sale* (1999), which partially operated as a fully functioning ‘art supermarket’ inside a large shopping mall, was one of the most important exhibitions that took place during the development of Shanghai’s experimental art-scene in the 1990s, a time when the influx of consumer capitalism was becoming a key mechanism of life in the city. Organized by the artist-curators Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong and Alexander Brandt, the exhibition was divided into two sections, a supermarket and an exhibition space, and included 33 artists who were prompted to create a pair of works, one for each section. The supermarket section consisted of works that were at once art objects and commercial goods, many of them bizarre amalgamations of familiar household items, and visitors were able to self-select “merchandise” to purchase; therefore, becoming “art consumers” for the first time in post-revolutionary China.

Post-1989 China was a uniquely volatile social and political environment; the failure of the 1989 democracy movement incentivized the rise of state-directed capitalism, and Deng Xiaoping was championing a new official ideology of the Communist Party of China- “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”, which doubled as a strategy to thwart the democratic movement of the time. Necessarily, the Shanghai art scene of the 1990s must be seen in the context of these pro-consumerist state policies, as almost overnight, the state attempted to turn a nation of workers into a nation of consumers. This transition was rife with tension. An *emerging ideology* of consumerism had to be cleverly negotiated with *and* against a strong *residual ideology* of Mao-era policies and values. It was a historical moment of incredible flux and ideological hybridity in which the necessary contradiction of “socialist capitalism” could take root.

The *Art for Sale* exhibition was deftly self-reflexive about these permutable conditions of the late 1990s, and this thesis argues that it functioned as a way to worry the question of consumerism in China through making consumption into an aesthetic act; considering, challenging and often subverting the contingent future of capitalism that the state was trying to enact. Through the introduction of Capitalist Realism, an art historical movement begun by East German artists in 1960s West Germany, this thesis links *Art for Sale* with previous examples of artists using consumerism as an aesthetic strategy, arguing that Capitalist Realism can be used as an interpretive heuristic for understanding how conceptual art practices emerged in 1990s China as a critique of Western consumerism.

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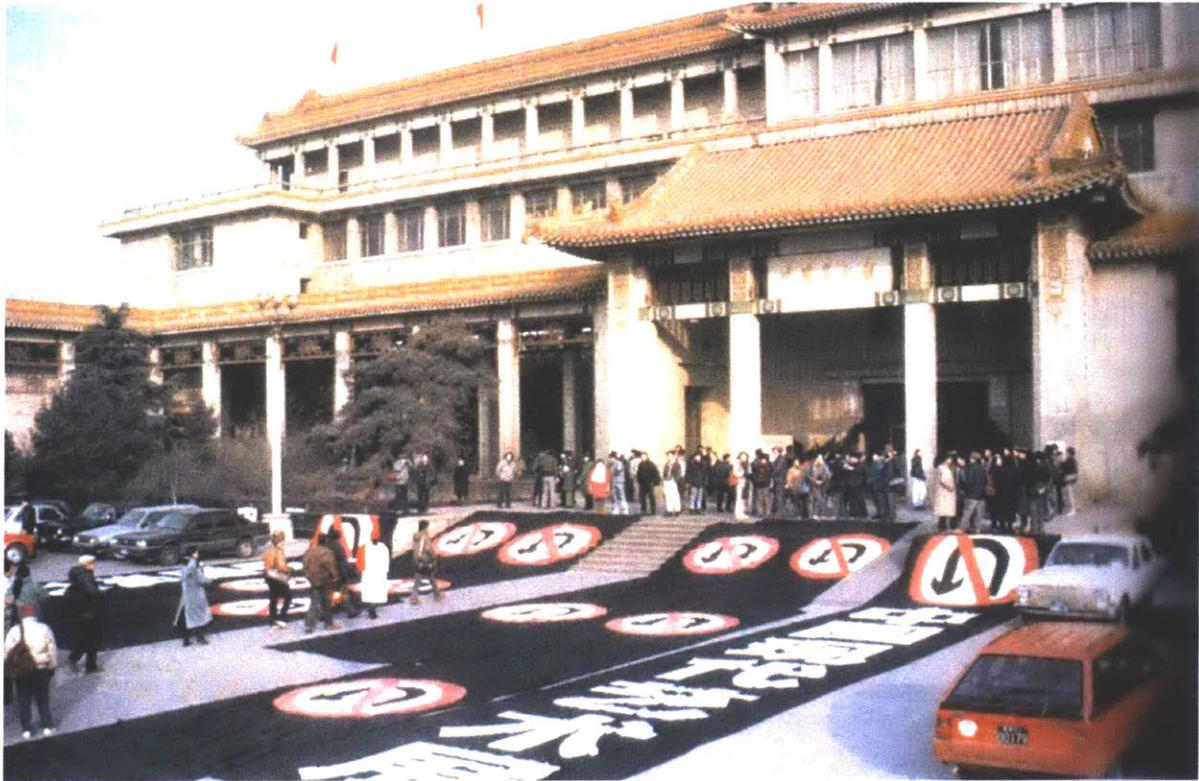


Fig. 1. Outside of the National Art Gallery during the opening of the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition, Beijing, Feb 5, 1989.



Fig.2. Wu Shanzhuan, *Big Business*, 1989. Performance, National Art Gallery, Beijing, February 5, 1989



Fig. 3. Crowd purchasing blocks of frozen shrimp from Wu Shanzhuan. Performance view: National Art Gallery, Beijing, February, 5, 1989



Fig. 4. Wu Shanzhuan, *Big Business*, 1989; Wu and six other artists were removed from the gallery by museum authorities for exhibiting unauthorized performances at the opening. Hours later, when Wu returned to the National Art Gallery, he adjusted the sign for *Big Business* to read “Temporarily closed for inventory.”

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

### *Big Business, 1989*

On February 5, 1989, the opening day of the monumental exhibition *China Avant/Garde* (中国现代艺术展) at the National Art Gallery in Beijing, the artist Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960, Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province) brought roughly thirty kilograms of raw frozen shrimp from his hometown of Zhoushan, a small fishing island off the coast of Shanghai in Hangzhou Bay (fig. 1). He set up a stall in the National Art Gallery in Shanghai, where he sold them to eager visitors at “market price.” He called this performance *Big Business*. Next to the stall, Wu placed a signboard with a handwritten message promoting his “business” that read:

Dear Customers:

As our entire nation celebrates the Year of the Snake, in order to enrich the spiritual and material life of the people of our nation’s capital, I have brought from my hometown of Zhoushan the highest quality export shrimp (to be sold to the domestic market). Venue of display and sale: National Gallery of Art. Price: 9.5 yuan per catty [600 grams]. Hurry while supplies last.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as he began setting up shop, curious onlookers were buzzing around, and a sizable crowd quickly formed of ‘customers’ eager to buy the frozen blocks of shrimp from the artist (fig. 2). Wu’s makeshift fish stall was installed at the east wing of the first floor at the National Art Gallery, China’s most prestigious state-run museum, where the growing swarm of people trying to get to the artist was nearly impossible to miss. While one might assume that this performance would have been controversial—even today, an artist selling blocks of frozen shrimp unannounced in the middle of a renowned cultural institution would at least raise a few eyebrows—the visitors to the exhibition were unfazed. Instead of being suspicious of Wu’s performance, they were excited to participate in this shopping activity.

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis utilizes many Chinese language materials. Chinese terms will be given in Chinese characters and pinyin, followed by a service translation in parenthesis when terms first appear. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Wu Shanzhuan, “Artists’ Writing 13” in *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International, in Collaboration with Inga Svava Thórsdóttir/Wu Shanzhuan: Guoji hongse youmo*, edited by Acret, Susan, and Lau Kinwah Jasper. Hong Kong: Asian Art Archive, 2005, n.p. I provided corrections to the translation in the brackets.

Were these Chinese citizens unaware of art decorum or savvy adepts at avant-garde performance art? This thesis approaches such questions by interrogating specific works of art that occupied the uneasy gap between art and China's emerging reform-era project of "socialist capitalism."<sup>3</sup>

At the time Wu set up his "big business" in the National Art Gallery, fishmonger stalls were becoming a common sight in China, particularly on the streets of major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Part of their growing popularity in the late 1980s was due to the fact that they were one of the few 个体户 *Getihu*, or individually owned and operated businesses, permitted by the state. Wu carried the aesthetics of how these small businesses operated into the museum, imparting a realism of Chinese consumer culture into the prestigious site of state culture. Just like the fishmongers making deals in night markets and on the street, Wu wrapped his frozen blocks of shrimp with used newspaper and other bits of scrap plastic baggies, and had them at the ready, stacked haphazardly on the floor. When customers wanted to buy some shrimp, they would shout and waive money in the air, trying to get the vendor/artist's attention from among the crowd (fig. 3).

After roughly 30 minutes of booming business, *Big Business* was shut down by authorities from the museum, not because Wu was selling things in a museum without an official license, but rather because performance art at the *China Avant/Garde* exhibition was strictly prohibited (fig. 4).<sup>4</sup> Organized by the art historian Gao Minglu along with a small curatorial team, *China Avant/Garde* was a massive undertaking, not just as an organizational feat (it presented approximately 300 artworks by 186 artists who were selected through an open call system), but also because of its mission: to mark the climax and culmination of the artistic

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<sup>3</sup> Socialist Capitalism is a term that I use to describe the social market economy, which reflects the preferred terminology of the Chinese Communist Party. I'll explain more about the significance of this term in chapter two.

<sup>4</sup> Other notable 'illicit' performances were Xiao Lu's *Dialogue*, Zhang Nian's *Hatching Eggs* and Li Shan's *Washing Feet*.

experiments of the 1980s, the so-called '85 New Wave movement in China. The exhibition faced many operational challenges along the way, including tense interpersonal dynamics among organizers and the high regard in which many of its participants held it. The fact that the organizers were allowed to mount the show in “this hallowed temple of socialist aesthetics” points to the relatively open cultural climate of the times, but this feat was also a result of the curators’ acceptance of one key censure from the state: no performance art was allowed in the exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

In total, there were seven expressly forbidden performances that took place on that opening day of *China Avant/Garde*. Of all of these, the most richly documented and debated has been Wu Shanzhuan’s *Big Business*. Soon after the performance, Wu elaborated on his illicit intervention and the reasoning behind it in the magazine *Fine Arts in China*,

Everyone can become famous through business; everyone can become *wanyuanhu* (millionaires) through business.

...  
Selling shrimps is also a protest against art critics, as their dominance of the critique of art will end in the tragedy of turning art from nothing into everything, and turning artists into salesmen who peddle the “goods” they produce, resulting in a waste of good money [referring to the commission fees paid to these theorists].<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, Wu’s reflection on his work in the National Art Gallery was an acute harbinger—if not something of a prophecy—of the pro-consumerist state policies that were soon to come. In just a few short years after the “realistic” performance *Big Business*, China’s economy would undergo massive reforms, and at breakneck speed consumer capitalism would become a key mechanism of life in China.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Tinari, “China Avant/Garde” in *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, New York: Guggenheim museum, forthcoming. In my conversation with curator Hou Hanru, who worked as the curatorial assistant for the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, he recalled that all the artists well understood that the chief curator, Gao Minglu, was against them doing performances for the exhibition. However, precisely because they knew performance was prohibited, this prompted some artists to want to do them even more.

<sup>6</sup> Wu Shanzhuan. “Guanyu ‘Da Shengyi’” [On Big Business]. *Zhongguo meishubao (Fine Arts in China)*, no. 11 (1989): 2.

The coming Reform Era would be a historical moment of incredible flux and ideological hybridity where necessary contradictions such “socialist capitalism” would take root. Of course, Wu could not have known that soon after his performance, the late 1980s social movement would come to a horrific end on June Fourth Incident with the Tianenmen Square confrontation, or that this failure would incentivize the rise of state-directed capitalism. But his performance uncannily captured the capitalist realism that was brewing in the aesthetic sphere.

Wu further developed his understanding of art and business in his 1989 essay “A Disaster Starting at the End of the Month: Business Art.” Echoing Andy Warhol in his title, Wu took a darker view of the conflation of art with business, writing,

Business is about buying and selling . . . The only principle of business is to squeeze profit from the market . . . with the advent of consumerism . . . the general public engages in a daily life structured by new consumer products and new ways of consumption . . . once the concept of money worship spreads from the realm of the businessman to the general public, all of society becomes driven by desire and madly engages in business.

. . .  
Business in China...has evolved from a commercial activity into a highfalutin art-world behavior...Business, art, academic groups and new power symbols are all linked up together . . . “Business art” lowers art to the level of publicly recognized “business” icons.<sup>7</sup>

In a very short amount of time (at least since the mid 2000s), Wu’s somewhat hyperbolic premonitions, warning us of “turning artists into salesman,” would become the natural order of things. At the time of *Big Business*, there were already inklings of capitalist culture that Wu was able to grasp, reading the tea leaves of Chinese enthusiasm about consumerism, so to speak. The term 生意 *Shenyi* (business) started to proliferate in the Chinese lexicon around the late ’80s, as individual merchants were permitted, in limited cases, to run their own businesses. This development was in sharp contrast to the earlier political era, in which everyone belonged to a work unit. The unit system was implemented during the years of the Maoist

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<sup>7</sup> Wu Shanzhuan, “Artists’ Writing 15” in *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International, in Collaboration with Inga Svala Thórsdóttir/Wu Shanzhuan: Guoji hongse youmo*, edited by Acret, Susan, and Lau Kinwah Jasper. Hong Kong: Asian Art Archive, 2005, n.p.

command economy during the 1950s through '70s. During this Mao Era, China adopted a Soviet-modeled economic platform and initiated the first Five-Year Plan in 1953 (1953–1957). The Five-Year Plan emphasized state-owned heavy industry over consumer goods and enacted a Planned Economy policy, in which all official acts of consumer consumption were mediated and planned by the central government.

I open my introduction with Wu Shanzhuan's *Big Business* because it hints at the cultural and ideological tensions that were yet to come with the implementation of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” under the Dengist reforms of the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> The crowds of patrons waiting to buy the remarkably unglamorous blocks of frozen shrimp from Wu revealed an enduring psychology of anxiety for a people who had lived through the economic scarcity of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). In tragicomic irony, many of these very same people would, by the late '90s, have an overwhelming abundance of novelty products and plastic nick-knacks available to them as consumers—a further illustration of the incredible flux of this cultural moment and the strangeness of what the state would propel into being.

Wu's performative *Big Business* was the first attempt in China during the Reform Era to situate consumption as an aesthetic act, positing the notion that art and consumerism could be linked at such an obvious level. To explore in detail how this trajectory would play out in China, this thesis follows the germination of those seeds planted by Wu Shanzhuan in 1989, focusing on an exhibition that would use consumerism in a similar, realist strategy 10 years later, *Art for Sale* (1999).

*Art for Sale* is one of the most important exhibitions that took place during the development of Shanghai's experimental art-scene in the 1990s, a time when the influx of Western-influenced consumer capitalism was becoming a defining feature of everyday life (fig. 5). This

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<sup>8</sup> “Socialism” was the official phrase used by the Chinese Communist Party and “capitalism” was the operative interpretation.

artist-instigated exhibition operated in part as a fully functioning “art supermarket” inside a large shopping mall. Organized by the artist-curators Xu Zhen (b. 1977, Shanghai), Yang Zhenzhong (b. 1968, Hangzhou), and Alexander Brandt (b. 1971, München, often known by his Chinese name Fei Pingguo, translated as Flying Apple), the exhibition was divided into two sections, a supermarket and an exhibition space, and included 33 artists who had been prompted to create a pair of works, one for each section. The exhibition space in the back held installations and provocative video art works. The supermarket section in the front consisted of works that were at once art objects and commercial goods, many of them bizarre amalgamations of familiar household items, and visitors were able to self-select “merchandise” to purchase; therefore, becoming “art consumers” for the first time in post-revolutionary China.

The *Art for Sale* exhibition was deftly self-reflexive about the permutable social conditions of the late 1990s, and this thesis argues that it functioned as a way to worry the question of consumerism in China through making consumption into an aesthetic act; considering, challenging, and often subverting the contingent future of capitalism that the state was trying to enact.

This aesthetic realist gesture, however, is not without precedent. In Germany in 1963, an art historical movement was initiated by artists Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Konrad Lueg, which they called “Capitalist Realism,” and which also employed consumerism as an aesthetic strategy to tackle questions about life in a developing capitalist culture. Additionally, there was a nearly simultaneous announcement of Capitalist Realism in Japan, initiated by the Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei in a 1964 manifesto entitled “Thesis on Capitalist Realism.” This thesis links *Art for Sale* and the introduction of Capitalist Realism in China with previous examples of artists’s strategic engagement with capitalism, arguing that Capitalist Realism can be used as an interpretive heuristic for understanding how conceptual art

practices emerged in 1990s China as a critique of Western consumerism.



Fig. 5. Crowd entering *Art for Sale*, 1999. April 10, 1999

## CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter one, CONSUMPTION, offers a critical analysis of consumer culture during the implementation of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” in China. It sets out to reveal how, during the early reform period, 自选商店 *Zixuan shangdian* (self-service stores) were “imported” to signify, as well as test out, the introduction of capitalist consumer culture in China. Functioning as heterotopic sites, these early stores, this chapter argues, were both an illusory and exclusionary site of consumerism in China, acting as both a façade for the capitalist aspirations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and something more real: a representation of the actual implementation of economic reforms to come. Of particular interest here is the introduction of the CCP economist Yu Guangyuan’s “Four Types of Commodities and Three Principles of Consumption,” which defined categories created to help Chinese citizens understand consumerism and to stimulate their confidence about shopping. The four types of commodities are: 进身货 *Jinshenhuo* (products that go into the body); 包身货 *Baoshenhuo* (products that surround the body); 显身货 *Xianshenhuo* (products that manifest and show off the body); and lastly 发身货 *Fashenhuo* (products that elevate the body). The chapter argues that the establishment of capitalism, and with it consumerism, in China was neither a consequence of economic necessity nor one of gradual and “organic” historical transition. Similar to other post-socialist countries, the rise of consumerist culture was not merely an economic event, it would have also political and aesthetic dimensions as the effects of this policy penetrated into the culture of people’s daily lives.

Chapter two, CAPITAL, considers Capitalist Realism as a heuristic for viewing artworks that were part of the *Art for Sale* exhibition. As demonstrated in the separate cases of its arrival in Germany and Japan in the 1960s, Capitalist Realism is generally employed as an artistic strategy, which aestheticizes consumerism in order to scrutinize, dislodge, or otherwise confront a historical moment in which capitalism is being negotiated against a

recent socialist past and/or a near capitalist future. Through revisiting the origin(s) of the term Capitalist Realism, this chapter retraces and reconsiders its relationship to consumer capitalism from a Western viewpoint. Looking at the concurrence of Capitalist Realism's aesthetic strategies with moments in history when capitalism has been forced to assert its dominance over some kind of residual ideology, this chapter argues that the concept's application to post-1989 China is all the more apt. The Reform Era was a peculiar ideological moment during which the concepts of socialism and capitalism were in flux, as they were constantly (re)negotiated from a number of different perspectives. The conclusion of this chapter will explore these various renegotiations, as well as address how the emerging ideology of consumerism had to be cleverly negotiated with and against a strong residual ideology of Mao-era policies and values.

Chapter three, ART, focuses on the exhibition *Art for Sale* itself. It brings back Yu Guangyuan's "Four Types of Commodities and Three Principles of Consumption" as a critical armature to theorize the artworks and art commodities that were exhibited and sold in *Art for Sale*. Analysis is thus divided into Yu's four categories of consumption: *Jinshenhuo*, *Baoshenhuo*, *Xianshenhuo*, and *Shenshenhuo*. Inevitably, many of the works in the exhibition are able to be sorted into more than one category; however, part of impetus in sorting them in the first place is to use the art in order to look at these aesthetic categories.

The *Art for Sale* exhibition was deftly self-reflexive about these permutable conditions of the late 1990s, and this thesis argues that it functioned as a way to worry the question of consumerism in China through making consumption into an aesthetic act. Through the introduction of Capitalist Realism as an historical strategy known (but not widely acknowledged) by the Chinese artists in this study, this thesis links *Art for Sale* with previous examples of artists using consumerism as an aesthetic strategy. However, Capitalist Realism is also an interpretive heuristic that helps us understand the specific differences that 1990s China

presents, particularly in its art, which served as a critique of the pell-mell consumerism then emerging.



Fig. 6. Shanghai Huangpu District Deputy Mayor Zhang Zhengkui acts as a clerk for a day at the Jinling East Road department store, July, 1982



Fig. 7. The "Original" Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store, Memphis, Tennessee, 1916



Fig. 8. China's first *Zixuan shangdian* in Guangzhou; Friendship Store, Guangzhou, 1981



Fig. 9. Foreign costumers checking out in Beijing's first *Zixuan shangdian*, 1982

## ONE: CONSUMPTION

### Learning How to Shop

In Guangzhou in 1981, the opening of a new 友谊商店 *Youyi shangdian* (Friendship Store), part of a chain of small stores with locations throughout China, caused quite a stir.<sup>9</sup> This particular version of the chain store would be a first for the state-owned company and for the country as the first *zixuan* (self-service) style store to open in China. Until that point, retail stores (all were state-owned) operated according to the same model: customers placed their order with a clerk, who would then gather and bag all their items and total up the cost. There were no aisles to graze nor products to inspect, because all goods were handled by the clerks.

Self-service shopping, which was first popularized in American supermarkets in the 1920s, allowed customers to browse shelves stocked with different brands of clearly labeled pre-packaged goods and to choose items themselves, notably, without the mediation of a clerk.<sup>10</sup> By doing away with clerks and letting customers select products themselves, *Zixuan shangdian* (the self-service store) was not just streamlining the consumer process with its self-service model, it was also importing a modern way of shopping, characterized by a new level of consumer autonomy, which the Chinese had been exposed to through Hong Kong (as well as Hollywood movies) and for which they had yearned for quite some time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Friendship Stores were only located in major cities, where foreigners and diplomats would typically be, and each city typically had only one location.

<sup>10</sup> On September 6, 1916, the American grocer Clarence Saunders launched the self-service revolution in the United States by opening the first self-service store, Piggly Wiggly, at 79 Jefferson Street in Memphis, Tennessee. At Saunders' new store, customers could select goods for themselves from the shelves and pay cash, not store credit, for their items. I will touch upon Piggly Wiggly and the arrival of the first self-service store in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Until the late 1980s, there were very few locations to shop in Guangzhou and the selection of products was also limited. Three department stores were open at that time: Yong'an Company department store; Zhongshan Fifth Rd Department Store; and New Dah Sing Company.

On opening day, excited new consumers came out to investigate the new Friendship Store; however, unfamiliar with the social niceties of self-service style shopping, Chinese customers were breaking almost every rule of shopping etiquette. They created a bit of a scene at the opening: people pushed their way through the aisles and rummaged through everything, opening boxes and tearing through packaging to inspect the validity of the product inside, ensuring that that every package was of equal quality. An employee working at the opening recalled that “everyone was opening packages. Opening packages of detergent to see what was inside, screwing open every bottle to smell what was inside, even the clear plastic bags that shirts came wrapped in were ripped open one by one.”<sup>12</sup>

The avidity on display at the opening of the first self-service store in Guangzhou was decades in the making. Throughout the 20th century, consumerism in China went through a few drastically different mindsets: In the 1940s and '50s, Chinese were encouraged to “build up the country through diligence and frugality”; in the '60s, the slogan was, “first is production, then living”; in the '80s they were taught to “be able to earn and know how to spend money”; and in the '90s, the message was to “consume with debt, for the promise of a bright future,” which coincided with the arrival of credit cards in China.

Arguably, the most significant development that impacted this historical timeline of consumerism in China was the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Immediately after the PRC was established in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party imposed its ideological agenda on its cities. The Three Anti Campaign (1951), directed at factory and business managers, and the Five Anti Campaign (1952), directed at the surviving capitalists and merchants, consolidated the CCP’s total control over industry. The new government at first permitted the existing private, family-run shops to continue to operate, but within a few years the party’s socialist reforms had begun to centralize retailing by creating a system

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<sup>12</sup> Huang Yanti, “On Supermarket Management,” *Commercial Research*, 04, (1984): 16.

of unified administration and monopoly supply—that is, a state-owned distribution system, which existed as the main distribution system in China until the late 1980s. The first Five-Year Plan (1953–57), together with the collectivization of agriculture through land reform campaigns initiated in 1950, began the transformation of the economy and urban planning along the Soviet model. Cities were reorganized around self-sufficient industrial neighborhoods and 单位 *danwei* (unit), urban commune “production units,” which governed every area of urban life, from work to leisure. After the breakdown in China’s relations with the Soviet Union in 1958, Mao turned his attention to the countryside and banished industries to remote mountain areas—ultimately succeeding in his attempt to remove the “urban” connotations of factories. He achieved his goal: “industrialization without urbanization.”<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of Mao’s death, in the late 1970s, the PRC embarked on a series of far-reaching economic reforms under Deng’s leadership. Beginning in the agricultural sector, these reforms were aimed at reigniting a stalled economy and were defined by the appearance of a “free market.” The identity of the party-state shifted from the countryside to metropolitan constructions—high-rises and freeways—denoting mobility and displacement. Massive infrastructure projects followed the increasing demand of mass production; factories, hotels, shopping malls, supermarkets, office buildings, and power plants were built at a breakneck speed in the cities and their fringes, particularly in the traditional trading ports along China’s coastline. Privatization became the most sought-after method to stimulate the economy. By 1992, there were over 120,000 companies registered by private owners.

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<sup>13</sup> Liu Yuyang, “Chronology – Pearl River Delta,” in *Great Leap Forward*, edited by Judy Chuihua Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, and Sze Tsung Leong, Cologne: Taschen; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Design School, 2001.

## The Four Types of Commodities and Three Principles of Consumption

The arrival of consumer culture in the mid-1980s, and the departure of the existing system, was carefully planned out and campaigned for by the government, who literally and figuratively “set the stage” for consumerism’s arrival. One of these ways was through public discourse. The CCP established and published state-run publications that were created for the sole purpose of debating and ultimately promoting, the merits of consumerism. In 1985, the most impactful of these publications, the 消费经济 *Xiaofei Jingji* (Consumer Economics) journal, was founded under the premise of discussing issues “related to consumption in China.” *Xiaofei Jingji*’s inaugural issue included many articles that were completely unsubtle about their positive positions toward consumerism. Articles like “Consumption Is a Positive Element for Economic Growth in a Socialist Economy” and “On Socialist Modes of Consumption with Chinese Character” were part of the general positivity surrounding consumption and consumerism; these authors had clearly been tasked with spreading the good news to the less polarized reading public.<sup>14</sup>

In subsequent issues of this journal, from 1985–88, many debates about the topic of 消费早熟 *Xiaofei Zaoshu* (precocious consumption) began to dominate the larger discussion about consumerism in China, with much energy spent mulling over the potential consequences of consumerism arriving “too early.” Yu Guangyuan, the leading party economist (ergo, Marxist economist) and “brain” behind Deng Xiaoping’s market reform in the late ’70s, disagreed with the concept of *Xiaofei Zaoshu*, considering it a baseless assumption. Instead, he posed a compelling argument for 不熟 *Bushu*, or “unfamiliar” consumption in China; treating consumerism more like an activity or skill with a particular learning curve—something to be acquired—rather than as a potentially combustible ideology.

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<sup>14</sup> Yang Zhengan, “消费是社会主义经济增长的积极因素” [Consumption Is a Positive Element for Economic Growth in a Socialist Economy], *Consumer Economics*, no.1, (1985):21-25.; Luo Jirong, “论中国式的社会主义消费模式” [On Socialist Modes of Consumption with Chinese Character], *Consumer Economics*, no.1, (1985): 6-12.

In Yu's 1992 article, "On Consumption Culture," the economist coined four types of consumption linked to four kinds of commodities, *Jinshenbuo*, *Baoshenbuo*, *Xianshenbuo*, and *Fashenbuo*, and argued that it was necessary to study the issue of consumption through three different principles: survival, enjoyment, and development and expression. These categories and principles were created to "help" Chinese citizens understand consumerism and to stimulate their confidence about shopping. The switch to consumerism carried specific cultural and ideological weight, which was not so easily lifted given the official government proscription against it in previous decades. Addressing this hurdle, Yu wrote, "In China for a long period of time, the word 'enjoy' was a taboo. 'Can revolutionaries enjoy?' This kind of questioning will make people afraid, and I would like to add a little courage to those who are unsure they should be allowed to enjoy."<sup>15</sup>

In the next chapter, I will address how this friction was debated by intellectuals outside the official state party and provide a more philosophical reflection about how an emerging ideology of consumerism had to be cleverly negotiated with and against a strong *residual ideology* of Mao-era policies and values.<sup>16</sup> However, within the discussions that the state was having about orchestrating the introduction of consumerism to a Maoist population, Yu's voice well reflected the pragmatic ambitions of the state, which had a more direct and immediate impact on the lives of millions of Chinese as soon-to-be consumers.

Yu's four types of consumption were created to organize consumer goods into more graspable categories in order to encourage people to shop. These categories were: *Jinshenbuo* (products that go into body), such as food and medicine; *Baoshenbuo* (products that surround the body), such as shoes, socks, hats, glasses, umbrellas, lighting, air conditioning, apartments, cars; *Xianshenbuo* (products that manifest and show off the body), such as jewelry and

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<sup>15</sup> Yu Guangyuan, "谈谈消费文化" [On Consumption Culture], *Consumer Economics*, no.1, (1992): 2.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 121 – 135. In chapter two, I further my discussion about what I argue are emerging and residual ideologies in China during the Reform Era.

luxury items; and lastly, *Fashenbuo* (products that elevate the body), such as books, education, and tourism. Yu also introduced three principles of consumption: survival, enjoyment, and development and expression. The first two types of consumption (*Jinshenbuo* and *Baoshenbuo*) fall under the category of “survival,” and *Xianshenbuo* and *Fashenbuo* products fall under Yu’s second and third principles of consumption, which were “enjoyment” and “development and expression.”

In addition to merely categorizing human consumption patterns, Yu was implicitly giving permission to his readers to go consume. Survival, enjoyment, and expression were now forgivably human impulses. His impetus to educate the Chinese about shopping in smaller, more easily digestible categories, was in large part motivated by the need to reconcile what was very recent history, against what could potentially be very slippery ideological terrain. Of particular importance to Yu were *Xianshenbuo* (luxury) products, because they most obviously championed the very bourgeois lifestyle that the Communist Party had fought so vehemently against for the past 40 years, ever since the revolution. Yu’s solution was to cleverly frame his pro-consumerist message within Marxist language; for instance, Yu wrote, “In *Das Kapital*, Marx wrote, ‘In the non-crisis period, part of ordinary workers’ consumer goods are luxury items.’ Consuming luxury, of course, can be considered a part of enjoyment. However, this kind of enjoyment for ordinary workers is very low.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, proliferating luxury goods were a kind of redress for the beleaguered Chinese worker, who had suffered during previous “crisis” years. In addition to essays such as Yu’s, educational shopping campaigns also coincided with other politically motivated campaigns in the early 1990s, such as public transportation reform and housing reform. Altogether, the message was becoming clear: money, and spending it, is not our enemy.

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<sup>17</sup> Yu Guangyuan, “谈谈消费文化” [On Consumption Culture], *Consumer Economics*, no.1, (1992): 2.

Indeed, the return to capitalism in China (now state-sanctioned) was neither a consequence of economic necessity nor one of gradual and “organic” historical transition. Similar to other post-socialist countries, as Boris Groys points out, “a political decision was made to switch from building up Communism to building up capitalism, and to that end to artificially produce a class of private property owners who would become the principal protagonists of this process. Private property itself is a product of state planning. Under the rule of the Communist Party every private psyche was subordinated to and nationalized by the official ideology.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Bureaucracy & Attitude**

As a result of the long history of centralized retailing and production systems in China, before the Reform Era the actual act of shopping became an arduous chore and was far from synonymous with the concept of leisure. Often, to buy a single basic item, like a shirt or a pair of shoelaces, one would have to stand for hours in line, perhaps to no avail. At stores, the options were few and far between—shoppers were limited to only what was available in stores and/or what the clerk working the counter would be willing to get for them. Clerks were indispensable middlemen in this shopping process, and thus, were a regular source of frustration for shoppers. Utterly dependent, customers had to exercise extreme patience in dealing with clerks, who were notorious for their bad attitudes and poor customer service. One of the most common phrases spoken by clerks was “meiyou,” which means “don’t have it.” Many times, even if there was inventory of certain product in the back, the clerk would often just tell the consumer “meiyou/don’t have it.”<sup>19</sup> To this effect, in order to buy particularly popular items, one would basically need to have a *guanxi*, an insider relationship with one of the clerks that provided an under-the-table “in” that ensured one could get the item

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<sup>18</sup> Boris Groys, “Privatizations or Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism,” in *Art Power*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Gerth, “Standardizing Abundance,” in *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

at all.

The sinologist and historian Karl Gerth described this process from the perspective of his first trip to China in the 1987. He recalled that these state-owned department stores were,

notorious for their lack of service, variety, innovation, and respect for local preferences. Packaging served only the functional purpose of separating and protecting products—and did even this poorly, as damage rates exceeded 10 percent. Clerks often applied labels haphazardly and even incorrectly before placing goods on shelves. Consumers, separated from the merchandise by a wall of salespeople and counters, had to request products from inattentive clerks, who rarely let buyers examine goods before purchasing them. Indeed, clerks often were responsible for maintaining their stocks and therefore had a disincentive to take items out of their protective cases and packaging for customers to inspect.<sup>20</sup>

Gerth's account of the shopping experience was by no means an anomaly. In the 1980s, there was a call from within China to rebuff the testy attitudes and irksome practices that became synonymous with dealing with clerks. In 1986 an article published in *Nanfang Jingji* (South China Journal of Economics), titled “Self-cultivating in Competition, Transformation and Self-Development: A Survey of the Zhongshan Fifth Road Department Store,” tried to remedy the problem of clerks. The author, Yang Weiwen, wrote,

The department store is focused on improving the sales services, and called for its clerks to be enthusiastic, offer fairness, remain thoughtful, and provide responsible service. They changed customer's attitude towards their store from the “four no's” (bad service, lack of choice of products, didn't come to buy; lack of service, don't care to buy; lack of honesty, afraid to buy; inconvenience, don't want to buy) to “three comes”: 1. improve service attitude, improve service quality (so when the customers come into the store, they feel like they come into their own home); 2. provide good customer service through increasing convenience initiatives within the store, maintenance, and improve business reputation, so that customers want to come; 3. strengthen market research, order products according to needs of the customer, keep customer satisfied, so they will visit again next time and will want to buy again.<sup>21</sup>

With the pressure and increasing competition from the privatization process starting in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Yang Weiwen, “在竞争中培养自我改造和自我发展能力—广州中山五路百货商店调查” [Self-cultivating in Competition, Transformation and Self-Development: A Survey of the Zhongshan Fifth Road Department Store], *South China Journal of Economics*, no.3, (1986): 49.

the mid-'80s, the state retail monopoly system began facing serious challenges, and many department stores had to find different ways to attract customers (fig. 6). Within the economics community, these new methods of retail were a topic of much debate in economic journals throughout the decade. In an article by the economists Xu Zhiwei and Zhu Xiangdong, they argued for a “Supermarket with Chinese Character.” In another of their articles, “Create Supermarkets with Chinese Character,” they surveyed the success of supermarkets outside of China with specific focus on France, Japan, West Germany, and U.S. They astutely acknowledged that China had different historical conditions relating to the history of consumerism compared to the countries they surveyed, and would need to plan accordingly.<sup>22</sup> According to Xu and Zhu, things that would need to be addressed first would be technical production ability, which was then still very low; the development of transportation, as very few Chinese owned private cars; technology development, most notably, surveillance systems and the checkout systems were still new to the Chinese; and lastly, packaging development, which was still in a nascent stage of development in China at that time.<sup>23</sup>

## **PIGGLYWIGGLY**

Frustration in dealing with clerks was by no means unique to China, and in many ways this universal aggravation was responsible for the creation and success of self-service shopping in America. The first self-service retail store was named King Piggly Wiggly and opened on September 11, 1916, in Memphis, Tennessee (fig. 7). Clarence Saunders, the charismatic man behind the vision, invented a shopping experience that streamlined the grocery industry. A major innovation of this new model was getting rid of the many clerks who served customers

in more traditional grocery stores. Before the self-service store, clerks dealt with each

<sup>22</sup> In the same article were other perspectives about implementing supermarkets in China. One in particular was very prescient, as it advocated to “skip” the brick and mortar “retail systems” altogether, arguing that the future of society would be an information society and that the methods of retail would become information in transition; such as, a telephone call, or telegram, someone will deliver the product. This argument proposed to skip building supermarkets altogether and jump ahead into the information era. Xu Zhiwei and Zhu Xiangdong, “创建具有我国特色的超级市场” [Create Supermarkets with Chinese Character], *Business Economics and Administration*, no.4, (1985): 49-52.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

customer on an individual basis, including extending credit and delivering orders placed by telephone. Buyers did not handle the grocery items, which were situated behind counters, similar to stores in China. Clerks filled orders on an item-by-item basis, often suggesting related products to customers as a way of boosting sales. Once a customer's order was made, a clerk then wrapped and packaged the groceries and totaled the bill, which the customer promptly settled or had recorded in a credit ledger.<sup>24</sup> Speed and customer turnover were nonconcerns for most grocery store owners, whose model prioritized individual service. Along with the clerk system, Saunders also overhauled another time-honored practice in the grocery industry. According to historian Edward J. Davies II, "Credit, which grocers had long made available to the majority of their customers, and delivery of orders had no place in a self-service system. Practices such as assisting customers in selecting goods also conflicted with Saunders's guidelines for the behavior of all employees. Individual attention to customers had been the rule in the traditional grocery store; Saunders's approach left customers alone and had them do much of the work that clerks performed in other stores."<sup>25</sup>

Saunders, a businessman and local Tennessee celebrity of sorts, when advertising the opening of his new Piggly Wiggly venture, publicly voiced his ire about the middleman configuration of clerks. In newspaper ads for Piggly Wiggly prelaunch, Saunders humorously made his case for devising the self-service model, and tried to appeal to the frustrations of shoppers regarding having to deal with clerks: "Piggly Wiggly knows its own business best and its business will be this: To have no store clerks gab and smirk while folks are standing around ten deep to get waited on. Every customer will be her own clerk, so if she wants to talk to a can of tomatoes and kill her time, all right and well—and it seems likely this might be a mighty lonesome chat."<sup>26</sup> The biggest waste Saunders saw in the grocery industry was labor costs. Funneling every order through the store clerks meant long wait times during busy

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<sup>24</sup> Davies, Edward J., II, "First Self-Service Grocery Store Opens," *Salem Press Encyclopedia Research Starters*, 2015, n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

hours. When the store wasn't busy, clerks were essentially paid to socialize with one another. Get rid of the counter clerks, Saunders thought, and you get more customers picking out more products at any given time, and without paying idle employees during slow hours. He insisted that no clerk handle merchandise or render assistance to a customer in choosing a grocery product, both long-standing traditions in the grocery trade. To reinforce customer confidence, all clerks in Saunders's stores were required to wear sanitary uniforms provided by the company whenever they were on duty. The manual that stated the rules of appropriate conduct for all Piggly Wiggly employees noted that each clerk had an assigned task and should work at that task exclusively. Even a decade after Piggly Wiggly opened its first location, Saunders continued making advertisements that highlighted how his new clerk-free system of self-shopping would make the entire experience of shopping better. In an advertisement from 1928, the appeal was made directly to women in an early example of commercialized feminism. The 1920s construct of the "new woman" was a woman who embraced the ideals of modernity over those of tradition, but most importantly was a consumer. Appealing to the "new woman," Piggly Wiggly penned ads with the headline, "SHE WANTS NO CLERKS . . . to tell her what to buy. . . ," with the advertisement going further to explain:

The woman of today wants to choose for herself when she buys foods. With no clerks to persuade her, she makes her own decisions at Piggly Wiggly . . . a great magazine has pictured the woman of today, self-reliant as never before, sweeping aside old barriers, winning new freedom. When she shops for foods, she wants to be free to choose for herself. Free to make her own knowledge count in giving her family more tempting food at lower cost. She needs no salesman to tell her what to buy.<sup>27</sup>

In 1980s China, would-be consumers might not need anyone to tell them *what* to buy, but they would need new kinds of employees to tell them *how* to buy.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## 自选商店 *Zixuan shangdian*

Unlike the advent of self-shopping in the United States, the introduction of self-service shopping in China was not a matter of providing convenience for Chinese consumers, minimizing loss, or boosting sales—it carried heavy ideological and political implications. As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, the location of the first *Zixuan shangdian* (self-service store) was in Guangzhou, *Youyi shangdian* (Friendship Stores), in 1981 (fig. 8). Dating from 1978, the Guangzhou *Youyi shangdian* originally catered exclusively to foreigners. Beginning in 1980, it opened its doors to Chinese customers, however, its primary customer base remained its original demographic of foreign tourists; overseas Chinese; people from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan; and upper- and upper-middle-class Chinese. Guangzhou *Youyi shangdian* was located at the east wing of Baiyun Hotel, and the new, 1981 *Zixuan shangdian* was opened on the first floor of the *Youyi shangdian*. Approximately 270 square meters, the store stocked items of food, clothing, household items, and imported goods, all together around three hundred different kinds of products.<sup>28</sup>

These *Zixuan shangdian* later spread to other sites popular with foreigner travelers, such as the Dongfang Hotel in Guangzhou, a state-run five-star hotel that hosted many domestic and international government officials including Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher. Although theoretically open to ordinary Chinese, the stores were initially protected as “exclusive” domains of consumption. As artist Lin Yilin recalls of his experience at Dongfang Hotel: “The guards knew who to let in. It’s all based of how and what one wears. For instance, if you wear a Nike brand sneaker, you most likely will be allowed to visit the hotel. Nike has not yet sold in China, which mean you must live outside of mainland China.”<sup>29</sup> In short, the store first took root in China in order to cater to the lifestyles of the foreign visitors (including those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau) and elite Chinese with experience living

<sup>28</sup> “超级市场在广州友谊商店正式开张” [Official Opening of the Supermarket at Guangzhou Youyi Shangdian], *Market Modernization*, no.8 (1981): 24.

<sup>29</sup> Lin Yilin in discussion with the author, at Dongfang Hotel, June 2016.

abroad. The government chose the name “Friendship” as a heavy-handed signpost to promote the idea of amicable relations between China and foreign countries, and also to make those traveling abroad feel more comfortable shopping for household items in the Mainland (fig. 9). It was advantageous to not have one’s “foreign friends” at the mercy of the shopping clerk’s notorious attitude, as well as to provide a place for people who didn’t speak Chinese, allowing them to select and buy necessities on their own. By 1983, nine self-service stores had opened in Guangzhou. Again, they were available to the general public, but by 1984, five of them had closed and one underwent reconfiguration, leaving only three open for business. However, the early failure of these stores was not due to a lack of interest on behalf of the Chinese, the problem was how to convert interest into sales. A 1984 survey of Chen Yihuan and Jin Yujie showed that only 4% of those surveyed had never been inside a self-service store. Within the 96% who had visited one, 75% admitted having entered the store just for the experience, 15% purchased something once, and only 6% had purchased goods more than twice.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Piggly Wiggly chain in the US, which quickly proliferated throughout the South, *Zixuan shangdian* failed to resonate with Chinese consumers on a practical, real-life basis, and concept’s initial growth was halted.

One explanation for the contrasting reception is the inventory. The majority of the products that were sold at US or Japanese self-service stores were everyday items and other necessities that were inexpensive, of uniformly decent quality, and provided convenience to their customers. They “made life easier,” so to speak, and fairly quickly, these spaces became culturally rooted due to their resonance with consumers’ everyday lives in the US or Japan. In the Guangzhou *Zixuan shangdian*, this was not the case. There were some necessities, but for the most part the store sold imported goods, export goods, and high-end domestic brand products. The most popular items were *Ma Ling* Spam and *Panda* condensed milk. *Zixuan shangdian* were providing income (and in some cases hard currency) to the state; they were

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<sup>30</sup> Chen Yihuan and Jin Yujie, “谈超级市场的未来发展” [On the Future Development of Supermarket], *Journal of Guangzhou Finance & Trade Management Institute*, no.1, (1988): 9-14.

never necessarily expected to integrate seamlessly with the existing cultural atmosphere; by comparison, providing a service of convenience to customers was more incidental. When the decision was made to open the stores to the general public, the self-service model essentially functioned as an advertisement for the political ambitions of a government on the precipice of switching to a capitalist mode of operating. The opening of self-service stores was thus a symbolic tool of post-Communism, providing a familiar lifestyle for foreign investors and diplomats, while at the same time outwardly signaling a “new” direction for China. Judging by the percentage of those who “came to look,” it also planted seeds of desire for an eager and soon-burgeoning bourgeois consumer class.

Even though *Zixuan shangdian* were intended to announce capitalist consumer culture’s arrival in China, as evidenced by the statistics of early store closings, this calculated representation was initially incompatible with reality. For the majority of Chinese, the image of an idealized self-service capitalist store functioning in China was both an illusion and an exclusion. The concept of heterotopic sites may be useful in unpacking this double nature of *Zixuan shangdian*. As defined by Foucault, a heterotopia is a place that is constructed to be a representation of society, but is distorted in its ambitions to represent particular idealized aspects of culture. It is both façade and representation of the real world, “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are incompatible.”<sup>31</sup> I argue that *Zixuan shangdian* were heterotopias of capitalism because they simulated a utopic image of consumerism in a contradictory socialist context, symbolized by the “freedom” of self-service. However, this idyllic image was at the same time counteracted by reality. In other words, the majority of the Chinese visitors to these stores could consume the image while refusing to be consumers; they could negotiate an identity not captured by the state’s representation. At the moment when capitalism was first being introduced and implemented by the Chinese government, there were gaps between the ideology and everyday reality, where

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5 (October 1984): 46–49; translated by Jay Miskowiec in *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 25.

consumerism was incompatible with Chinese society at large. Aware of this incompatibility, the government and prominent figures like Yu Guangyuan tried to lay the groundwork for the necessary transformation of the Chinese subject by monopolizing public discourse and rolling consumer ideologies out on a small scale.

One characteristic of all heterotopias is that they must always have a simultaneously open and closed system, which actively isolates the heterotopia from the outside but also allows entrance to it. The illusion of mobility is pivotal in the heterotopia; the space must appear open. People must believe that these are spaces of equal access, where they are allowed “freedom of choice” but will be rebuffed by the exclusionary measures of true access. At the same time, in these very gaps, agency can be deployed, refusal accessed. In the story in the beginning of this paper, I described the scene of Chinese citizens going into the self-service store for the first time in Guangzhou and essentially misbehaving by tearing open all the packages. However, it is this very lack of bourgeois manners, their behavioral incompatibility with the introduction of capitalist logic in self-service stores, that reveals the power of this heterotopia.

Foucault writes that “Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.”<sup>32</sup> A lack of “purification” isolated the everyday Chinese from an ideology that was being forced upon them by a new regime and stalled the growth of China’s early dalliances in self-service retail.

However, this irreconcilability of social behavior also pointed to a larger reality of postmodernity, in which mass displacement can occur through single sites: “we are in the epoch

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 26.

of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.”<sup>33</sup> If we accept that the *Zixuan shangdian* functioned perfectly well as representations, without yet being able to fully colonize reality, we can see the suggestion for what would subsequently emerge in the space of aesthetics and in the role of art. Without adopting and performing the purified rituals of shopping, for a brief period in time, Chinese were able to consume an image, while closing themselves off from what would soon become their reality. For a brief moment in time, the act of shopping could take place adjacent to, but not within, capitalist logic, which has by now fully immersed us all.

In order for self-service shopping to no longer function as a heterotopia in China, bourgeois shopping conduct would have to be normalized. Following Foucault’s logic of normalization in society, enforcing the adaptation of behavior is one of the most powerful ways to exert maximum social control. The chaos and “ill-manners” present at the opening of the first self-service store in China demonstrate an important fact: nothing about consumer culture is “natural” or inherently normal. In China, the establishment and normalization of bourgeois consumer behavior was slowly formed and shaped according to the logics of technopolitics, as mediated by those in power.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 22.



Fig. 10. Wu Shanzhuan, *Today No Water* (also known as *The Big Characters (Dazibao)*, *Red Humor Series*, and *Big Character*), 1986. Installation view: artist studio, Zhoushan

## TWO: CAPITAL

### Wu Shanzhuan and K. P. Brehmer

In 1986, Wu Shanzhuan was contacted by one of his former professors and invited to return to his alma mater, the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, to meet with the German artist and gallerist K. P. Brehmer. Brehmer, who was introduced as a “Capitalist Realist artist from Berlin” by the school, had been invited to give a lecture at the school the following year; his visit was preparatory to that event. As Wu described the meeting, “Professor Fan Xiaomei called me in Zhoushan and said, ‘We’ve got someone from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts who’s interested in your work.’ So I packed up some slides and traveled from Zhoushan to Hangzhou, where I met Brehmer. He said he could include my work in an exhibition, and he actually did.”<sup>34</sup>

Brehmer’s visit was the product of a foreign exchange program, International Institute for the Arts (IIA), at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou that was founded in 1987 by the American philanthropist Waldemar Nielsen together with scholar Zheng Shengtian. It mainly connected the academy with schools in Minnesota (US), but also on occasion with certain institutions in Europe, such as the Hamburg University of Fine Arts where Brehmer taught at the time. During the mid-’80s, such exchanges between China and Germany were newly possible, with the reestablishment of official communications following decades of silence.<sup>35</sup> The effects of this foreign policy position manifested in various partnerships and exchanges in the political and economic spheres, but also extended to a small flourishing of one-on-one relationships and projects between artists of both nations. For the inaugural seminar at the International Institute for the Arts, Hangzhou, Brehmer presented a lecture

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<sup>34</sup> Yu-Chieh Li and Wu Shanzhuan, “‘Everyone Has the Right to Refuse to be an Artist’: A Dialogue with Wu Shanzhuan,” *Post Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art around the Globe*. MoMA, 17 Mar. 2015. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <[https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/575-everyone-has-the-right-to-refuse-to-be-an-artist-a-dialogue-with-wu-shanzhuan](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/575-everyone-has-the-right-to-refuse-to-be-an-artist-a-dialogue-with-wu-shanzhuan)>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

on Hamburg International Art Fair, titled “Kunst Als Ware- Die Kunstmesse 1988 in Hamburg.”

It’s easy to recognize why Brehmer took a specific interest in Wu’s work, which began a working relationship outside of the relatively ensconced art academy in Hangzhou. The two artists were in many ways likeminded; they shared critical skepticism about sweeping political ideologies at large, as well as a general interest in propaganda techniques. Both also made work that sharply critiqued the reign of political art, and sought to expose its continued role in mediating culture and policy, which in both Germany and China dealt directly with the legacy of Socialist Realism in propaganda and various forms of advertising. They contested the mediating function of these representational systems by creating work that manipulated the very same prescriptive aesthetics they used as a polemical challenge against them.

For example, for Wu’s graduation project at Zhejiang Academy, he made a large-scale, immersive installation that appropriated the stylistic elements of language in propaganda posters familiar from the Cultural Revolution period of the 1960s and ’70s. He constructed this work, *Today No Water* (also known as *The Big Characters* (Dazibao), *Red Humor Series*, and *Big Character* (1986; fig. 10), by covering a medium-sized room from floor to ceiling with bright, bold 大字报 *dazibao* (big character posters)—posters featuring large Chinese characters that were abundant during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>36</sup> Fragmented phrases criticizing bourgeois capitalist culture were loudly blasted across the walls shouting words like: “阶级 jieji” (class), “价jia” (price), “五元 wu yuan” (five dollars), “最后的晚餐 *Zuibou de Wancan*” (last supper) and “今天停水jintian tingshui” (today no water). The room consisted of easily many dozens, perhaps over a hundred, of these signs, which ranged in size from a large living room carpet to a small letter envelope. He layered the posters on the wall, ceiling, and floor in a semi-organized and gridded manner, but the overall effect of the room was frenetic and vibrant. The

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<sup>36</sup> Presumably Brehmer would have seen documentation of this work during his visit to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

differently sized posters overlapped, which cropped the posters and obscured their formal elements. (This was a familiar technique that Brehmer had also used in his works that appropriated German advertising language.) The abstracting of these iconic “big character” posters was enhanced by large, sweeping brushstrokes of highly pigmented red and/or matte black paint that Wu used to scribble over certain words and phrases. The room was swimming in truncated Communist slogans and swaths of iconic red color.

After their initial meeting, Brehmer made good on his promise and curated a three-person show, *Gao Zicheng—Wu Shanzhuan—Schröder: 3 x China*, at the Galerie Vorsetzen in the red-light district of Hamburg, where he was one of the partners of the gallery. According to Wu, Brehmer chose to exhibit photo documentation of some of his previous work, but it remained relatively ambiguous to the artist as to what their final form and presentation was in the exhibition: “I don’t know how they were presented, but Brehmer selected five or six slides and took them back to Germany. I suppose that my works were presented in printed form.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Capitalist Realism**

I single out these early exchanges between Wu and Brehmer not only because they resulted in the first exhibitions of Wu’s work abroad (and for a predominantly Western audience), but more importantly because of Brehmer’s affiliation with Capitalist Realism, which was introduced to Wu for the first time during their meeting in Hangzhou. Even though the Capitalist Realist movement in Germany occurred two decades prior to this exchange, the meeting between Brehmer and Wu is significant because the idea of using an aesthetic frame to make consumption into an aesthetic act was introduced to Chinese artists in an academic

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<sup>37</sup> Yu-Chieh Li and Wu Shanzhuan, “‘Everyone Has the Right to Refuse to be an Artist’: A Dialogue with Wu Shanzhuan,” *Post Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art around the Globe*. MoMA, 17 Mar. 2015. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <[https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/575-everyone-has-the-right-to-refuse-to-be-an-artist-a-dialogue-with-wu-shanzhuan](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/575-everyone-has-the-right-to-refuse-to-be-an-artist-a-dialogue-with-wu-shanzhuan)>.

context at this time, which notably preceded the reform efforts in China that “opened” society up to consumerism. Clearly, Brehmer’s visit to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art resonated with Wu, whose *Big Business* of 1989 had been so prescient in imagining the economic reforms that were soon to come in China. This is not to imply that Wu and his fellow artists were self-associating with Capitalist Realism as a movement, or would call any of their actions Capitalist Realist per se; but clearly, the idea of turning consumerism into an aesthetic strategy was not only possible but endorsed by an international community of conceptualist artists.

With this in mind, I want to consider Capitalist Realism as a concept to view artworks made in China in the 1990s that used consumer strategies and/or consumerism itself as an aesthetic act. The next chapter will look closely at the exhibition *Art for Sale* as a case study—however, I think it is first fruitful to revisit the origin(s) of the term Capitalist Realism, in order to retrace and reconsider its relationship to consumer capitalism from a Western viewpoint. As demonstrated in the separate cases of its coinage in Germany and arrival in Japan in the 1960s, Capitalist Realism is generally employed as an artistic strategy that aestheticizes consumerism in order to scrutinize, dislodge, or otherwise confront capitalism that is being negotiated against a past of centralized state control over production (in the case of Japan) or nearby socialism (in the case of East and West Germany). The approaching capitalist future is the commonality that links all of these cases in which the tactic of a realism about capital proves salient. The fact that the aesthetic strategies relevant to Capitalist Realism have occurred at moments in history during which capitalism is forced to establish its ideological dominance against some kind of residual ideology, makes the concept even more applicable to the situation in post-1989 China.

The Reform Era was a peculiar ideological moment in which the concepts of socialism and capitalism were in flux, as they were constantly being (re)negotiated from a number of

different perspectives. The conclusion of this chapter will look at how these ideologies were being renegotiated, as well as address how the emerging ideology of consumerism had to be cleverly managed with *and* against a strong residual ideology of Mao-era policies and values. This atmosphere of ideological friction that so birthed the rise of consumerist culture in China also presents a unique problem to the case of postmodernity as it is most commonly understood through a Jamesonian perspective. Fredric Jameson, who actually lectured and taught a course about his concept of postmodernity at Peking University before publishing his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, had a unique influence on shaping intellectual debates about consumerism and postmodern culture in China. Through looking at the intellectual history of the post-1989 era, I argue that the sheer bizarreness of this ideological atmosphere is in many ways incompatible with Jameson's conclusions about postmodern life, even though his theory of postmodernism was ultimately very influential to Chinese scholars of the period. However, even though many academics did not, at least at first, pick up on the friction between postmodernity at large and postmodernity in a Chinese context, through artistic endeavors that evoke Capitalist Realist aesthetics during this period we can see just how strange, negotiated, and non-totalizing the Reform Era in China was.



Fig. 11. *Living with Pop: A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism*, 1963. Performance view: Berges furniture store, Düsseldorf, October 11, 1963



Fig. 12. Exterior view of the Berges furniture store in Düsseldorf, 1963

Berges präsentiert:

# Leben mit Pop

eine Demonstration für den kapitalistischen Realismus

von Konrad Lueg und Gerd Richter

Eröffnung am Freitag, dem 11. 10. 63, 20 Uhr

Im Bergeshaus, Düsseldorf

Finger Straße 11, III. Etage (Aufzug)

Weitere Besichtigungen

täglich bis zum 25. 10. 63 von 14 - 18 Uhr

Getrocknet  
1. Aufblasen  
2. Polster



EINLADUNG

Fig. 13. Invitation for *Living with Pop: A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism*, October 1963

WIR ERLAUBEN UNS, SIE ZUR ERÖFFNUNG UNSERER AUSSTELLUNG AM SAMSTAG, 11. MAI 1963, 11 UHR, EINZULADEN. DÜSSELDORF, KAISERSTRASSE 31A VOM 11. MAI - 26. MAI 1963 GEÖFFNET TÄGLICH VON 11-13 UHR UND 15-18 UHR MALEREI UND GRAFIK SONDERAUSSTELLUNG DÜSSELDORF

IMPERIALISTISCHER REALISMUS? ANTIKUNST? KNOW-NOTHING-GENRE? KINETISCHE MALEREI? VEXIERBILD? IMPERIALISTISCHER REALISMUS? POP-ART? POP-ART? NATURALISMUS? POP-ART? VULGARISMUS? JUNK CULTURE? NEW VULGARISMUS? NOUVEAU-REALISME? POP-AROUND? NOUVEAU-GENRE? KUNST? NATURALISMUS? NEO DADA? KINETISCHE MALEREI? VEXIERBILD? IMPERIALISTISCHER REALISMUS? KUNST? VOLKSKUNST? OPTISCHE TÄUSCHUNG? ANTIKUNST? GEGENSTÄNDLICHKEIT? ANTIKUNST?

SIGMAR POLKE

MANFRED KUTTNER

GERD RICHTER

KONRAD LUEG

Fig. 14. Invitation for the exhibition at Kaiserstraße 31A, Düsseldorf, May 11, 1963



Fig. 15. Gerhard Richter, *Motorboat*, 1965



Fig. 16. Gerhard Richter, *Faltbarer Trockner*, 1962

## CAPITALIST REALISM IN GERMANY

A term with several different associations, “Capitalist Realism” most commonly refers to a group of artists working in East Berlin in the 1960s who were grouped underneath the umbrella of West German Pop. Among this cohort were the now-canonical figures Gerhart Richter and Sigmar Polke, whose early works are often regarded as the foundation of Capitalist Realism, a new phrase explicitly “demonstrated” by Richter and Lueg in October 1963. Artists associated with the Capitalist Realism group (including Polke, Richter, Konrad Lueg, K. P. Brehmer, K. H. Hödicke, Wolf Vostell, and others) focused on depictions of and performances based on Germany’s growing consumer culture and media-saturated society in order to question the ways and means in which capitalism in postwar Germany was promoted and enforced. As defined by Jaimey Hamilton Faris in the introduction to *Art Margin’s* special issue on Capitalist Realism, some of the major characteristics of Capitalist Realism were its conflation of socialist and capitalist aesthetics, appropriation of consumerist strategies, and ironic and satiric undertones:

[the] artists leveraged the term’s connotative association with Socialist Realism—the prescriptive aesthetic first introduced in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s—to make an implicit analogy between communist and capitalist representational systems. If Socialist Realist murals and statues feature joyful communal harvests and heroic factory workers, might a comparable Capitalist Realism show advertisements featuring new consumer products and satisfied consumers? To bring this question into focus, the artists placed exaggerated emphasis on certain aspects of commodification and consumerism in West Germany.<sup>38</sup>

Other hallmarks of these Capitalist Realist works relate to a specific iconography pulled from consumerist language that included appropriating imagery from consumer goods packaging and other forms of advertising, such as images of women, sites of middle-class longing, leisure activities, competitions, and sport as new means of German identification, and cars

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<sup>38</sup> Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Introduction to Special Issue,” *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no. 3 (October 2015): 3-16.

as symbols of progress and mobility.<sup>39</sup>

“Capitalist Realism” was first used by a group of four artists—Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, and Manfred Kuttner—before being applied more broadly to a group of about a dozen, which included K. P. Brehmer. Richter and Leug are credited with the invention of the term, first used to describe an event they staged at the Möbelhaus Berges furniture store on October 11, 1963, in Düsseldorf, an event they aptly titled *Living with Pop—A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism* (fig. 12 and 13). In this “demonstration,” the artists displayed themselves and selections of work in a furniture store alongside the store’s regular inventory, which included modernist style sofas, coffee tables, televisions, and carpets (fig. 11).<sup>40</sup> Earlier that same year, Richter and Lueg were joined by Polke and Kuttner in staging a lesser-known, but nonetheless quite popular, group show questioning what this new consumerist art would be called, held in a vacant butcher shop at Kaiserstraße 31A, Düsseldorf (fig. 14).

A predominant way that these artists made implicit analogies between communist and capitalist representational systems was through incorporating images that were symbolic of capitalism in paintings and collage. A quintessential example of this is Richter’s *Motorboat* (1965; fig. 15), in which he swapped the Socialist Realist murals that would feature joyful communal harvests or heroic factory workers and made a comparable Capitalist Realist version—

repainting what was essentially an advertisement—featuring capitalist lifestyle and consum-

<sup>39</sup> Due to its associations with the early career of Richter and Polke, specific post-war cultural attitudes in Germany, as well as American Pop art; Capitalist Realism is generally regarded as a “non-extant” movement—one that was “more or less discarded by the late 1960s”. However, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in things “capitalist realist”. Most notably, a major exhibition in 2013 at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf titled *Leben mit Pop: Eine Reproduktion des kapitalistischen Realismus* (*Living with Pop: A Reproduction of Capitalist Realism*), which traveled to Artists Space in New York City the following year, aimed to reposition or even resurrect the idea of capitalist realism from being a rather peripheral artistic movement, whose influence was often more widely cited than understood. Capitalist Realism has also been overviewed and approached as a “movement” in relation to West German Pop more generally in large scale exhibitions about Pop Art as a global phenomenon. This has manifested in several academic writings and other publications about the period, including a special issue devoted to capitalist realism in *ARTMargins* journal in October 2015, and large-scale exhibitions such *World Goes Pop* (2015) at Tate Modern and *International Pop* (2016) at Walker Art Center.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Stoffbilder: On Capitalist Realisms,” *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no.3 (October 2015): 81-102.

er products, and abstracting this image slightly, yet not enough to where the scene becomes unrecognizable. The ability to recognize these images and associate them as “lived” imagery germane to everyday life is important in the blurring of Socialist Realism and capitalist life. In other works, Richter would include fragments of texts, such as in *Faltbarer Trockner* (Folding Dryer) (1962; fig. 16), which incorporated language from advertisements, such as those found in newspaper clippings. The text in this piece, “nutzbare trockenlangen,” translates to “can also be used on long sleeves!” The juxtaposition of quotidian (and humorous) text, advertising imagery, and painterly abstraction was Richter’s intentional conflation of the traditional opposition between realism and avant-gardist modes of abstraction, which the capitalist realists also attributed to the Fluxus happenings going on at the same time. Richter’s efforts to slightly abstract capitalism’s methods of image construction, to stay in a middle ground per se, positioned itself between Communism and the capitalist mass-market.

On the one hand, these early Capitalist Realist events were conceived as critiques of capitalist consumer culture, which also included poking fun at the art world, including direct jabs at concurrent Euro-American artistic movements like Pop Art, Neo-Dada, and Fluxus that were finding success in commercial galleries at that time. On the other hand, these events also doubled as savvy publicity vehicles for the artists, who were relatively unknown at the time.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, the popularity of Capitalist Realism manifested into various forms of gallery representation and a series of exhibitions in West Germany in the years 1964–66 for many of the artists involved, especially Richter and Polke, who were essentially catapulted to worldwide fame. It was also during the mid- to late ’60s that the gallerist René Block began using the term, and he both commissioned multiples from and began showing the work of a group of Düsseldorf-based artists in West Berlin under the label *Kapitalischer Realismus*. Block’s vision of Capitalist Realism was more in direct conversation with American Pop and placed a particular emphasis on the burgeoning market for artist multiples that he was

<sup>41</sup> Self-promotion is another important part of Capitalist Realism, which we can see in the case of *Art for Sale*, which in many ways was so popular due to the fact the exhibition capitalized on the huge wave of interest in shopping at that time.

engaged in stoking.<sup>42</sup> Block exhibited newer artists who had not been associated with earlier events like the “Berges demonstration,” such as Brehmer, and expanded the Capitalist Realist circle to include figures such as Wolf Vostell, K. H. Hödicke, and Lothar Quint.



Fig. 17. Akasegawa Genpei, *One Thousand-Yen Note Trial: Catalogue of Seized Works*, 1967, poster, front and back

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Stoffbilder: On Capitalist Realisms,” *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no.3 (October 2015): 81-102.

## Capitalist Realism in Japan

It is also important to note that while Capitalist Realism is most commonly associated with German artists working in Cold War-era Germany, there was also a near-simultaneous yet independent movement that was initiated by the Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei, who introduced the term in a January 1964 manifesto entitled *Shihon-shugi riarizumu'ron* (Thesis on Capitalist Realism). As with his contemporaries in Germany, Genpei's notion of Capitalist Realism emerged in part as an artistic response to the capitalist expansion throughout the interwar years and into the postwar era in Japan. Genpei's coinage of Capitalist Realism also made a nod to Socialist Realism, which in addition to its Soviet purveyors had been a stock style for propaganda by the Axis powers during World War II. Genpei, as with the former East German Richter and his colleagues, deployed the term to make an implicit analogy between Communist and capitalist representational systems.<sup>43</sup> At that time in Japan (roughly a decade after the formal dissolution of the US military occupation of the country), Socialist Realist modes of expression were increasingly obsolete, first replaced by "informal" painting and performances and, by the 1960s, becoming superseded by the visual iconography used to bolster Japan's emerging consumer republic.

Many of Akasegawa's works from his Capitalist Realist period were installations that utilized commercially available domestic objects and other household furnishings—objects that were highly symbolic of Japan's return to modern capitalist society after the fascist "interruption." In his writing, he emphasized the performative aspects of these objects and used the term *model* to characterize his interventions with the objects and language of modern industrialization. (Note the resemblance in this rhetoric to the "demonstration" staged by Richter et al.) He also used *model* to refer to what might otherwise be considered the *habitus* of social behavior that constituted entry into modern life.<sup>44</sup> Akasegawa's most famous

<sup>43</sup> Jaimey Hamilton Faris, "Introduction to Special Issue," *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no. 3 (October 2015): 3-16.

<sup>44</sup> Here, I am referring to Bourdieu's influential concept of the "physical embodiment of cultural capital".

work of this period, which was also one of the most recognized works of postwar Japanese art, was *Thousand-Yen Notes Incident* (1963; fig. 17). For this work, he produced several counterfeit “model” 1,000 yen notes that he tried to circulate as currency as part of his proposal to unsettle capitalism’s “dictatorial system of coercion.”<sup>45</sup> He described his artistic ambitions for the work in his 1964 manifesto, which was published in a local newspaper, and was soon after arrested and found guilty by state authorities for “imitating currency.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Is There No Alternative?**

Outside of the original art context and subsequent art historical return to theorize and exhibit these artworks, there have also been theorists and academics in the UK and US who have revived the term in order to “repurpose *Capitalist Realism* as a critical concept for theorizing contemporary political ideology and cultural production” and “revive long-stalemated debates on postmodernism.”<sup>47</sup> Because I situate myself within this generation and share the use of “Capitalist Realism” as an interpretive heuristic, I will examine this contemporary theory to delineate its outlines and the difference in my own approach.

The most prominent figure of these revivalist intellectuals is the late music blogger and cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who appropriated the term from art history to describe what he observed as a post-1989, “post-postmodernist” ideological formation in which capitalism presents itself as the only viable political and economic system that “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.”<sup>48</sup> In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*,

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Stoffbilder: On Capitalist Realisms” *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no. 3 (October 2015): 83.

<sup>46</sup> “Imitating currency” was a softer charge than counterfeiting, which was distinguished under an obscure law that allowed the government to pursue its case against the artist. In the end, this argument did not affect the outcome of the trial, and Akasegawa was found guilty of imitating the 1,000-yen note. Reiko Tomii, “State v. Anti-Art: Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident by Akasegawa Genpei and Company,” *Positions* 10, no. 1 (2002): 141-72.

<sup>47</sup> Aside from Mark Fisher, other writers that have used his thinking about Capitalist Realism include Jodi Dean, Leigh Claire LeBerge, Alison Shonkweiler, among others.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, UK ; Washington [D.C.]: Zero Books, 2009.

Fisher explains his rationale for lifting the term Capitalist Realism from art history in a way that he acknowledges is quite a bit far removed from its original context: “what is new about my use of the term is the more expansive—even exorbitant—meaning that I ascribe to it.”<sup>49</sup> In the view of Fisher, Capitalist Realism designates the normative tendency to acknowledge neoliberalism as inevitable, solidifying Jameson’s famous claims about life in postmodernity. In order to support his refashioning of Capitalist Realism, Fisher makes frequent references to Jameson’s most charismatic musings about postmodernity, including the famous phrase “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” which was later amplified (or possibly created by) Slavoj Žižek.<sup>50</sup> According to Fisher, this aphorism “captures precisely what I mean by ‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>51</sup>

Fisher’s short book offers many creative insights and wry observations about life in late capitalism, which serve as compelling arguments for his understanding of Capitalist Realism. In turn, his writing has influenced writers such as Jodi Dean, and Leigh Claire La Berge and Alison Shonkweiler, who have applied Fisher’s definition of Capitalist Realism to comment on recent developments in activist politics and literature studies, respectively.<sup>52</sup> Fisher’s use of Capitalist Realism as a heuristic to approach the notoriously unwieldy subject of “the cultural logic of late capitalism” is a compelling strategy that I appreciate creatively. However, Fisher’s argument about the “inevitability” of Capitalist Realism hinges on a narrative of capitalism that faces no serious ideological pushback from other competing ideologies, which essentially exposes the limits of Fisher’s Anglo-European viewpoint. This pigeonholed

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49 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, UK ; Washington [D.C.]: Zero Books, 2009, 16.

50 Jameson’s exact quote cagily disguises its source: “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” Frederic Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21, (May-June 2003), pp. 65-79; quote from p 76.

51 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, UK ; Washington [D.C.]: Zero Books, 2009, 2.

52 Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge eds, *Reading Capitalist Realism*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014.; Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, Winchester, UK ; Washington [D.C.]: Zero Books, 2016.

perspective cannot accommodate the unwieldiness and bizarreness that was the arrival of consumerism in China during the Reform Era. During this time, not only was there a real and viable political alternative to capitalism that was vibrant and active, the very concepts of “socialism” and “capitalism” were in flux.

### **Competing Ideologies**

Both Jameson’s and Fisher’s understandings of the logic of late capitalism entail a narrative that paints the arrival of consumerism as something of a snowball effect. The snowball, capitalism, rolls down a mountain, without any real challenge or resistance that would prevent it from growing ever larger, until it gets so large that we arrive at the postmodern condition, with its nihilistic acceptance of defeat. However, the capitalist mode of production and the global capitalist system were phenomena born of Western historical specificity. Due to this specificity, it is not so easy to correlate the development of capitalism with concepts of modernity in places where one or both ideologies are not indigenous.

However, this tension does illustrate another of Jameson’s points in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, that of the establishment of the ideological dominant. He stresses that there is never a single ideological dominant in any period, and borrows Raymond Williams’s concept of three distinct ideological formations, which he groups as: dominant, residual, and emergent.<sup>53</sup> These categories provide a framework for understanding the complex and dynamic ways in which a culture operates as it continuously attempts to maintain stability and balance in the face of societal evolution. Jameson insists on the value of Williams’s model, warning, “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.”<sup>54</sup> I concur with his

<sup>53</sup> Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,” in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 121 – 135.

<sup>54</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

analysis here.

In Williams's system of organization there is one ruling ideological formation (dominant) that is the "hegemonic, though not totalizing, world-view that most of the culture agrees upon," which is supported and enforced by what Althusser called "ideological state apparatuses," such as schools, government, branches of law, and law enforcement, etc.<sup>55</sup> However, within this context there are also marginal ideologies that are at odds with and challenge the dominant ideology, contending for meaning (Foucault's heterotopias are theorized around such possibilities). Some of these ideologies are older and represent the past (residual), whereas some are newer (emergent).

Residual ideologies are those that are derived from an earlier stage of a society which, though mostly superseded, still circulate in various ways. Often, these beliefs and practices reflect a very different social formation than the present dominant (different political beliefs, religious beliefs, etc.) Within the dominant values of any culture exist many such residual elements, but these elements of the past are filtered—"reinterpreted, diluted, projected"—so that they can be absorbed into dominant culture.<sup>56</sup> If something residual is truly oppositional to the dominant, the dominant tries to forget it or marginalize it. At times the dominant is successful, at times not.

Within the dominant, there are also emergent ideological formations, new ideologies that are in the process of establishing their influence. These must be distinguished from other currents that are simply novel elements of the dominant. Emergent practices are those that are being developed, usually spontaneously, out of a new set of social interactions, as societ-

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1991.

<sup>55</sup> Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 121 - 135.; Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." 1970. In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, pp. 127-86. London: New Left Books, 1971.

<sup>56</sup> Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 121 - 135.

ies change. They often are very different from and actively challenge the dominant. Starting from the margins of society, they may themselves become dominant eventually, but that is not an inevitable process. All dominant practices were once emergent; not all emergent practices become dominant.

In the context of China during the Reform Era, Maoist communism can be understood as a residual ideology that had to be negotiated with and against the emerging ideology of consumerism. In order to establish consumerism's influence, which was the goal of the state in enacting economic reforms, it had to be carefully reconciled with and against Maoist values. In Chapter 1, I detailed some of the more prominent internal debates entertained by the Chinese Communist Party, under the influence of economists like Yu Guanyuan, as they were collectively trying to create strategies to establish consumerism as the ideological dominant within the short span of just a few years. Propelled by these debates, early experiments by the state introduced consumerism on a small scale (and as a largely representational regime in the self-service store). The implementation of these systems was intended to educate the public about consumerism; the government rightly anticipated that the introduction of consumerism in a society where socialism was the ideological dominant would set up two competing ideologies at odds with each other, creating an atmosphere of ideological friction. It was the herculean task of the state to recast consumerism so that it would not appear completely incompatible with the values of socialism. Deng's strategy here was to promote "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (interpreted by foreign policy analysts as "Capitalism with Chinese characteristics"), which, although ultimately successful, also serves in its oxymoronic quality as an apt slogan for the ideological chaos of the Reform Era. The necessary contradiction of "socialist capitalism" also reflects how the rise of consumerism in China was born from an ideological imperative marked by improvisation, negotiation, and acute friction. This history of the Reform Era conflicts with the Eurocentric narrative of capitalist progression, which posits that the entire world enters late capitalism, and provides

an alternative reality and temporality to the postmodern condition.

## **Jameson in China**

The atmosphere of ideological friction in which consumerist culture in China was rooted also presented a unique challenge to the case of postmodernity as it is most commonly understood through a Jamesonian perspective. This is particularly relevant and interesting to China because Jameson, a renowned Marxist academic in the US, was an important figure for Chinese academics trying to make sense of the country's reforms. A large part of his influence was due to the fact that Jameson taught a course about his concepts of postmodernity at Peking University in 1985, before publishing *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—and before the fulsome introduction of consumer culture into China. Jameson's proximity to Chinese intellectuals had a unique influence on the intellectual debates about consumerism and postmodern culture in China.

During the fall semester of 1985, Le Daiyun, a professor in the Comparative Literature Department at Peking University, invited Jameson to teach a course on Western cultural theory. Totalling about six hours every week, Jameson's course was open to students of comparative literature, Chinese, English, Spanish, and international politics. His lectures were delivered in English and transcriptions were later translated into Chinese and published as a book under the title 后现代主义与文化研究 *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (Postmodernism and Cultural Theory) in 1987 in China (and in Taiwan in 1989). The book -- notably earlier than Jameson's 1991 US volume on these ideas—is organized in five chapters following the structure of his lecture series and course. The first four chapters, titled “Culture – Production Mode,” “Culture – Religion,” “Culture – Ideology,” and “Culture Study – Narrative Analysis,” introduced some of the key theories of many leading Western intellectual figures of the 20th century, ranging from Marx to Foucault, Deleuze, Lukács,

Freud, and Althusser. However, it is commonly noted that the most influential chapter of *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* is the late chapter, which awkwardly back-translates to “Postmodernism Culture.”<sup>57</sup>

At the time the book was first published, China had already begun reforms in almost all aspects of its society, including the political, economic, and military spheres. However, the ideological and cultural exchange domains, much less consumerism, had yet to be fully developed. In the context of literary criticism and cultural theory, there were only a few series of translated publications of Western theories available that were widely influential for scholars. One of these influential series was Li Zehou’s 美学译丛 *Meixue yicong* (Aesthetics), which included the first translations of selected works by Rudolf Arnheim, Roland Barthes, Robert Charles Holub, Tomonobu Imamichi, Susanne K. Langer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heinrich Wölfflin, Wilhelm Worringer, and other theorists associated with continental philosophy, Gestalt psychology, and aesthetics. Li Zehou’s anthology was a massive undertaking—the complete project totaled 50 volumes to be published for the series, which was achieved through five different publishers in China.<sup>58</sup> The majority of the theorists in this anthology were from Germany, with a few from France, the US, and Japan. Another impactful book series during this period was Jin Guantao’s 走向未来 *Zouxiang weilai* (Toward the Future), which was published by the Sichuan People’s Publishing House from 1984 through 1988. This series covered many aspects of the social sciences and natural sciences, and included both translated writings and original works. Like Li Zehou, Jin Guantao was quite ambitious and planned on having 100 volumes in this series; however, in the end, 74 were published during the four years the books series was produced. The most notable work from this series was the first Chinese translation of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), which was translated by Huang Xiaojin and Peng Qiang. A third influential book series was initiated by the editorial board of 文化：艺术与中国 *Wenhua: Shijie yu Zhongguo/*

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<sup>57</sup> According to the translator Tang Xiaobin and Professor Le Daiyun.

<sup>58</sup> His ambitions were even bigger at the onset—the series was originally planned to consist of 100 volumes.

*Culture: China and the World*, who offered the most ambitious, yet also the most scholarly rigorous cultural studies at the time. Starting in 1986, the series 现代西方学术文库 *Xiandai xifang xueshu wenku* (Modern Western Academic Studies) was published, which consisted of translations of works by canonical 20th century thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Weber. Another series that was completed under the larger umbrella of this project was 新知文库 *Xinzhi wenku* (New Knowledge Studies), which was directed toward a broader audience with the intention of introducing current scientific inquiry and scholarship from the West and Japan. The third branch of this project was 人文研究丛书 *Renwen yanjiu congshu* (Studies in the Humanities series), which focused on publishing emerging scholars who were writing from within China. This publication featured many influential thinkers of this period including Du Xiaozhen, Chen Pingquan, and Wang Hui. Wang Hui's now famous doctoral study on Lu Xun was first published as part of this series.

Retrospectively, some scholars remark that the introduction of Jameson's *Postmodernism and Cultural Theory* in 1987 had only a minor impact on intellectuals within China, and that his ultimate influence in Chinese academia would develop in later years. In part, this was due to the fact that a large majority of Chinese intellectuals were still digesting, contemplating, and fantasizing about belated modernity for China, which ended up consuming much of the critical discourse of this period. However, the most dominant narrative surrounding Jameson's book states that it had an enormous amount of influence in China, and on Chinese academics (including teachers at the art academies). Chen Yongguo and Yi Jin explicitly mentioned the influence of Jameson in academic circles in their article "Jameson and the Origin of Chinese Postmodern Theory,"

Before Jameson came to China, there were few articles on postmodernism in China, the only notable ones being Dong Dingshan's essay "Suwei 'Houxiandaipai' xiaoshuo" [The So-called "Postmodernist" Novel] and Yuan Kejia's "*Guanyu 'Houxiandaizhuyi' sichao*" [On postmodernist thinking]. These writings both functioned as an introduction to the Western criticism on postmodernist literature. A critical yet profound theorization of postmodern cultural in terms of concepts, terms, and expres-

sions has yet to appear. In 1986, when Jameson's *Postmodernism and Cultural Theory* was published by the Peking University Press, young scholars such as Wang Ning, Wang Yichuan, Wang Yuechuan, Chen Xiaoming, and Zhang Yiwu saw the importance of postmodernism and other theories that accompanied it. They started to understand the profound ideological connotations of postmodernism, which, in turn, inspired their study of Western postmodern cultural theory. Soon after, through the extensive translations of postmodernist cultural theory, this critical discourse and thinking method has also been applied to Chinese culture and literature, and to explain the postmodern phenomenon in Chinese culture. This led to the "postmodern" upsurge of Chinese literature and cultural criticism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>59</sup>

I echo Chen Yongguo and Yi Jin's observation about Jameson's influence, particularly regarding his impact through the introduction of poststructuralist theories in China and their percolation into the world of artists. To elaborate about this particular influence in the years following the Jameson publication in China, I want to highlight some of the academic projects that soon followed that are directly related to postmodernism, in order to provide a greater scope of the intellectual culture at that time. It is worth noting, however, that many of these academic efforts attempted to use Jameson's construct of postmodernity to look inward at local, regional, or national political, social, and/or cultural dilemmas facing China and the greater Asia region. At this point, the applicability of Jameson's theories about postmodernity in regards to the specific conditions of China were not being challenged by scholars.

In 1992, the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Institute of Literature Research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a seminar on "Postmodernism: Taiwan and the Mainland's Literary Situation." Also in 1992, the China Postgraduate Institute of Comparative Literature, the Goethe-Institut Beijing, and Nanjing *Zhongshan* magazine jointly held an international seminar titled "Post-modern Culture and the Chinese Contemporary Literature." Together, these seminars ushered in a new wave of discourse on postmodernism that would continue into the 20th century with events in film, literature, and other humanities fields. In regards to academic literature, the most important

<sup>59</sup> Chen Yongguo and Yi Jin, "詹姆逊与中国后现代理论的缘起" [Jameson and the Origin of Chinese Postmodern Theory], *China Book Review*, no. 1 (2007): 81.

related works published during this period were Wang Yuechuan's *Postmodernist Cultural Studies* (1992), Chen Xiaoming's *Boundless Challenge* (1993), Wang Ning's *Era of Pluralism* (1993), Zhang Yiwu's *Recourse at the Edge* (1993), among others that, in one way or another, tackle issues related to China through the lens of Jamesonian postmodernity. It was during this time that Chinese scholars began to make the case that the ideology of postmodernity was not only for Western scholars, or the Western condition, nor was there only a single Western model—it could be anywhere in the world, even in developing nations like China. In the years following these initial publications, the introduction and research of Western postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism became even more frequently introduced and engrained in Chinese academia, as exemplified by the publication of a new onslaught of books such as Chen Xiaoming's *Deconstruction Trail* (1994), Guo Guichun's *Postmodernism* (1996), Lu Ben's *Derrida: Deconstruction of the Dimension* (1996), Xu Ben's *Toward the Postmodern and the Postcolonial* (1996), Zhao Yifan's *European and American New Appreciation* (1996), and so on.<sup>60</sup>

However, looking back at this academic history, I argue that one cannot isolate the “Jameson in China” phenomenon in a Chinese context so seamlessly. The very arrival of Jameson at Peking University would not have happened without the implementation of cultural and economic reforms, which were themselves turbulent and culturally abrasive. After the reforms, the Chinese Communist Party's focus shifted from “fighting class division first” to “economic development is our priority.” These “opening” policies that prioritized economic development entailed a loosening of government strictures on everyday life, which led to a more relaxed social environment where ideological and cultural exchanges could take place, allowing figures like Jameson to lecture at Peking University.

The rapid speed at which these loosening reforms occurred squares uneasily with Jameson's observations about the cultural logic of late capitalism. The “logic” of capitalism in China at

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the time of Jameson's visit was more of a wobbly farrago of ideological considerations and social changes, out of sync with the magisterial progression of capitalism in the Western historical context. Many of the quotidian characteristics, or systemic distractions, that Jameson described about life in postmodern culture had just been made available to the Chinese, seemingly overnight. It must be emphasized that it was less than a decade that the Chinese were able to consume things like aerobics, discos, social dances, karaoke, popular songs, popular fiction, recreational newspapers, best-selling books, entertainment movies, family soap operas, popular TV series, home decor, fashion branding and fashion shows, and other products and behaviors promoted by the global entertainment industry. All of these facets of consumer culture arrived at the same time the very ideology of consumerism was being introduced; the sheer bizarreness of this situation doesn't exactly fit Jameson's characterization of postmodernity.

Even though Jameson's ideas of postmodernity weren't entirely applicable to the Chinese situation, this did not stop scholars from trying to make it fit it into their theorizations anyway. From these efforts, a hybridized postmodernity emerged, which was often used as a tool to supplement urgent debates about the best pathway to modernization in China, jumbling things even further. As the New Leftist scholar Wang Hui observes, this (maybe subconscious) repurposing of postmodernism was undertaken for specific aims and, in some cases, diverted from the ideology in drastic ways: "It was used to attack other intellectuals and as a legitimization of market ideology and consumerism . . . ignoring the formative role of capitalist activity in modern life and neglecting consideration of the relationship between this capitalist activity and China's socialist reform."<sup>61</sup> Wang points out that one of the most distinctive features of Chinese postmodernism is its treatment of popular culture, which misrepresents the production and reproduction of desire as peoples' "needs." As a result, postmodernism often problematically presented the marketized social mode as a neutral

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<sup>61</sup> Wang Hui, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," Translated by Rebecca E. Karl, *Social Text* 55, (1998): 28.

concept: “postmodernism appears as the champion of the people and popular culture and as the defender of their neutral desires and their ‘unmediated state.’”<sup>62</sup> Specifically, the term “xin zhuang-tai,” which translates to “new mode,” was often circulated to portray the marketized social mode as ideology-free.<sup>63</sup> In this analysis of postmodernism, there is often no differentiation between levels and aspects of popular culture, nor any attempt to undertake a hermeneutic and critical appraisal of the ideology of consumerism and commercialism.<sup>64</sup>

### **Capitalism in China?**

As detailed in Chapter 1, in the early 1980s the Chinese state set out to devise strategies for introducing consumerism in such a way that would avoid an ideological clash with Mao-era policies and values—or, at the very least, would minimize such a clash enough to avoid the total collapse of socialism. Important political voices, like the party economist Yu Guanyuan, led the policy-making efforts. Their decisions, which directly impacted the lives of millions of people, were of great concern to artists working in a Capitalist Realist mode at that time. It is important to point out that the CCP adhered to a particular strand of Marxism, Reformist Marxism, which impacted their decision making process. Even though Reformist Marxism was the official ideological affiliation of the state (i.e., Deng Xiaoping) during the Reform Era, it was not the only strand of Marxism that intellectuals backed during the period. After the Cultural Revolution, three major factions of Marxism wrestled for ideological dominance among intellectuals in the 1980s and '90s: Maoist Marxism, Reformist Marxism, and Humanistic Marxism.<sup>65</sup>

Maoist Marxism or “Maoist Socialism” served as the ideological foundation of the Chinese Communist Party since 1949. After the death of Mao in 1976, there was a subset within the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

CCP that continued to follow Maoist ideologies, despite the fact that the majority of intellectuals had become either Reformist Marxists or Humanistic Marxists. According to Wang Hui, Maoist Marxism was as “a type of modern, anticapitalistic modernization theory,” and he argues that Maoist Socialism is both “an ideology of modernization and a critique of Euro-American capitalist modernization.”<sup>66</sup>

By contrast, the newly formed Reformist Marxists abandoned Mao’s idealistic modernization methods, and most notably, implemented the marketization of the economic arena and the convergence of the Chinese economy, society, and culture with the contemporary capitalist system. They believed that through economic development, China’s socialist reforms could bring the country one step further toward the unfinished nationalist project of the modern period (1920s–30s): modernization. Bolstered by the state’s new emphasis of the development of science and technology, the transition to a capitalist economy represented to the Reformist Marxists another “great leap” of historical progress. Since 1978, there have been many internal debates about exactly how to execute their reforms to reach their goals, which I have pointed to throughout this thesis. However, I also want to acknowledge that at the heart of these debates was not the question of whether or not to modernize, but rather, a question of how.

The third strand of Marxism prevalent in the years following the Cultural Revolution was Humanistic Marxism or “Utopian Socialism.” The closest to classical Marxism, this branch drew upon humanist ideals to reform Marxism. This ideological trend was part of the *sifang jiefang* {thought liberation movement} in China (1978–88), which was an influential force within the democratic movement, which was ultimately suppressed by the state. In large part, (Reformist Marxism became the dominant ideology due to the 1989 incident. As Wang Hui reports:

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 14.

[T]he 1989 Tiananmen incident did not change the fundamental reform path China has followed since the end of the 1970s; to the contrary, under state direction, the pace of the reforms has been faster than even the highest tide of reformism in the 1980s (by reforms, I refer primarily to the adaptation to marketization and to the process of economic and judicial structural reforms). Commercialization and its attendant consumption have thoroughly penetrated every aspect of social life. In this context, not only have the social role and the profession of intellectuals profoundly changed but so have the social and economic roles of the government at every level-by daily becoming more intimately related to capital.<sup>67</sup>

Humanistic Marxism is also notable for its influence on artists at the time, as many of the '85 New Wave artists were in some way affiliated with or sympathetic to this pro-democracy movement. This first generation of experimental artists, which included Wu Shanzhuan, had just completed their education around the time of the 1989 incident at Tiananmen Square. After the defeat of the democracy movement, they were subjected to the swift recoil of Dengist reforms (which enforced a Reformist Marxist agenda), and many of these artists left for Europe or America (Wu moved to Germany in 1990). Among these artists were many seminal figures like Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, Wenda Gu, Shen Yuan, Yang Jiechang, and Xu Bing. However, a younger generation of artists who were just coming of age and still getting their education stayed behind, and were left to negotiate the incredible cultural flux that resulted from the ideological and political turmoil of the post-1989 period. These artists would emerge as some of the most compelling and sensitive voices of this unprecedented historical period for China itself, engaging first-hand with the political realities that resulted from what the state was trying to do. The artistic response to the arrival of consumerism included the ambitious *Art for Sale* exhibition that was held in a Shanghai shopping mall in 1998. It was the first time artists in China used consumerism as an aesthetic strategy to confront the wave of consumerist culture that was crashing into their very lives.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 9.



Fig. 18. View of exhibition preparation, in the exhibition space of *Art for Sale*, Shanghai Square, April, 1999



Fig. 19. Exterior view of Shanghai Square, Shanghai, April, 1999



Fig. 20. View of the entrance of *Art for Sale*, 1999



Fig. 21. A selection of works that sold at *Art for Sale* from Alexander Brandt, *Art for Sale Documentary*, 1999. Color video, with sound, 30 mins., 50 sec.

### THREE: ART

#### *Art for Sale, 1999*

In 1998, a trio of enterprising young Shanghai-based artists, Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt, started planning for an art exhibition in a supermarket. This project would be the second one curated by the trio, but by far their most ambitious. The year prior they had co-curated a relatively small exhibition entitled *Jin Yuan Road 310*, which was “the name of an ordinary street and a contemporary art-show exhibited in a just as ordinary living space.”<sup>68</sup> For their next venture the group set their sights on reaching a massive audience. Posing the question of just how to find this audience and how to bring contemporary art to the masses in the specific context of late '90s Shanghai, the artists came to the conclusion that “we could get a wider audience by getting them to come to a supermarket.”<sup>69</sup>

From this promotional brainstorm, a conceptual framework for an exhibition emerged: they would enlist a diverse group of artists to make “art for sale.” Functioning both as a satirical program and as collective promotion, the exhibition *Art for Sale* began to take shape. The nascent consumer culture of Shanghai proved to be fertile intellectual territory for the curator/artists, as many of them were already considering the cultural and ideological shifts happening in China in their individual projects and works. Unable to secure an exhibition space in a standalone supermarket, the group eventually found space in a newly developed shopping mall in the city center, which they were able to rent in order to “recreate” a supermarket for their exhibition purposes (fig. 18). On April 10, 1999, *Chaoshi Yishu Zhan* (Supermarket Art Exhibition), also known by the English title *Art for Sale*, opened on the

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<sup>68</sup> *Art for Sale exhibition Information for Sponsors*, page 4.; Due to the fact that Shanghai had few exhibition venues for young artists to exhibit new media works (such as video, installation and performance), the *Art for Sale* organizers wanted to create space and momentum for this kind of art in Shanghai by making at least one large scale exhibition per year. The idea of hosting an exhibition in a supermarket space came up in a debriefing session among a larger group of artists a year before *Art for Sale* opened. In May 1998, Yang Zhenzhong, Alexander Brandt and Xu Zhen, as well as other artists Gu Lei, Hu Jianping, Wu Jianxing, Ni Jun, Jiang Chongwu and Cai Wenyang participated in another site-specific exhibition in Shanghai, *310 Jin Yuan Rd*. This exhibition was also self-organized, and for many of them, was their first exhibiting opportunity. Held in empty apartment units, each artist was allotted a single room to activate as they wished.

<sup>69</sup> Yang Zhenzhong, interview with author, June 18, 2016.

fourth floor of the massive Shanghai Square Mall on Huaihai Middle Road (fig. 19).<sup>70</sup> Even though the mall's retail spaces were not fully occupied at the time, it was rapidly growing in popularity, as the area underwent major development efforts begun in the mid-'90s. In addition, the general excitement surrounding shopping in Shanghai was hitting a critical mass in the late '90s, where "the consumer culture seemed to take on a driven quality—perhaps an effect of being designated the powerhouse of China's economic reforms."<sup>71</sup> Enthusiasm for consumerism was quickly becoming "a way of life and almost a religion," much as it had been at an earlier period in Asian cities like Hong Kong and Singapore.<sup>72</sup>

In Shanghai Square, the artist-curators were able to rent a fairly large block of unoccupied retail space, which they divided into two sections, a supermarket space and an installation space. The front and entrance areas of the space made up the designated supermarket space, where the curators recreated the ambiance and architecture of a self-service store, which by this point in time had evolved far from the *Zixuan Shangdian's* early days, along with the "purified" consumer culture. Wide aisles were created by organizing display shelves in rows, and there were cash registers and scanners, baskets, push carts, promotional flyers, and even a guard posted by the entrance to complete the functionality and familiar feeling of a typical supermarket shopping experience (fig. 20). The back area, which was the larger of the two spaces by a sizable amount, was transformed into a gallery for art installations. Hewing to contemporary art exhibition conventions, this space had an open floor plan, with separate smaller rooms built for small-scale installations and video viewing, white walls, and track lighting. In order to enter the exhibition, visitors had to come in through one of the mall's main entrances and take an escalator (or elevator) to the fourth floor. Visitors would then first enter through the supermarket space before they could see the rest of the exhibition.

*Art for Sale* included 33 participating artists, each of whom was tasked to create a pair of works, one

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<sup>70</sup> The Shanghai Square mall is located on one of the most important major streets in Shanghai, 138 Huaihai Rd. Huaihai Road is considered as the "Champs-Élysées" of China. Originally built in 1901 as Rue Sijiang (part of French Concession), five years later it was renamed Paul Brunat, and renamed again in 1915 to Avenue Joffre. In 1943 it was renamed to Taishan Lu, then to Lin Sen Lu. In 1950, the communist government gave the street its current name: Huaihai Road.

<sup>71</sup> Lily Tung, "A Few Shocks in Store: For Some Weekend Shoppers, a Stroll in a Major Shanghai Mall Turned into a Surreal Art Experience," *Asia Week*, May 14, 1999. <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/99/0514/feat5.html>.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

for the exhibition space and another for the supermarket section. The curators requested that the latter works be “mass-produced,” given price tags, and made available for purchase. Depending on the project, the prices for these works ranged from free to a couple hundred yuan (one work, *Computer Sage*, stood out with a price of 1,000 yuan, but this was very much an outlier in relation to the other works). The back installation space allowed artists to make larger and more conceptual and environmental works, which included video installations, paintings, performances (including a guided tour), and a combination of these mediums. But the “front room” supermarket was no less conceptual. Even though the curators stocked the supermarket space with shelves, carts, checkout stations, and turnstiles, the products sold were often subversive, even ridiculous, takes on items typically found in supermarkets. There was an array of products sold here that ranged from “normal” to bizarre, including dolls, wallpapers, penis-shaped toiletries, bottled brains, undergarments, pillows, candies and other edibles, posters, books, and a wide assortment of other small items (fig. 21). Additionally, the majority of the works produced for the supermarket section were extensions of works in the exhibition space or related to them in conceptual ways.

The *Art for Sale* strategy proved successful in finding its audience, and was itself a good publicity vehicle. In the exhibition’s opening days it received a great deal of press coverage from local news media outlets, including a buzzworthy eposé from the *Xinmin Evening News*.<sup>73</sup> All the buzz about the exhibition from the state-run Chinese press was sharply negative, which of course piqued the interest among a curious general public. State-run newspapers had a particularly adverse reaction, fueling the state concerns that caused the exhibition to be shut down by police just three days after it opened.<sup>74</sup> Critiques in the media routinely included gripes about “obscene things” that should be censored in the exhibition, or how the ambitions of the curators were “almost purposely reckless and unwarranted.” One particularly ornery newspaper claimed that the exhibition demonstrated that “the spirit of these young people is meaningless and pitiful.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Shen Jialu, “Chaoshi Yishu, Ciji? Erxin?” [Art in Supermarket’ Exciting? Disgusting?], *Xinmin Evening News* (April, 1999), 34-37.

<sup>74</sup> Shen Jialu harshly criticized the exhibition’s sexually explicit content, but more notable was her writing about video, installation and performance works. This article marked the first time in the newspaper’s history that “experimental art” was mentioned, legitimizing it to the public.

<sup>75</sup> Shen Jialu, “Chaoshi Yishu, Ciji? Erxin?” [Art in Supermarket’ Exciting? Disgusting?], *Xinmin Evening News* (April, 1999), 34-37.

In these articles, it was also quickly brought to light that the curators failed to obtain the correct licenses, not only for showing the art, but for selling it too. This, of course, was a factor well considered by the artists, who were for all intents and purposes perfectly aware that if they had chosen to apply and wait for permission, they would almost certainly have not have been granted it. News about the exhibition in Western newspapers seemed to focus on this fact, emphasizing that the shuttering of the exhibition was done under the guise of censorship laws by Chinese authorities. In an interview with CNN/Asia Week after the close of the exhibition, Xu Zhen described how the bureaucratic obstacle of Chinese censorship was figured into the curatorial strategy from the beginning: “Every piece of art on public display in Shanghai has to be approved by the Cultural Bureau. Even home movies. We didn’t go through this process. If it were a private exhibition, it probably wouldn’t be a problem, but not in the middle of Huaihai Lu [the main shopping strip] . . . We can’t create material that is too extreme, so we censor ourselves. It’s either that or we don’t exhibit.”<sup>76</sup>

The lack of paperwork was not the only thing that shut down the exhibition by authorities; many of the works were considered (by legal standards) profane, pornographic, or otherwise socially unacceptable. Xu Zhen’s contribution to the exhibition, a video of two people smelling each other in various stages of undress on a sofa, was flagged by authorities for being pornographic.<sup>77</sup> Other “unacceptable” works included coffin-shaped chocolates, jars of human tissue obtained from medical samples, soaps in the shape of sex toys, a video that referenced male masturbation, doll shoes with cigarette butts stuffed inside them, references to prostitution, and public drunkenness. Even though the exhibition was forced to close abruptly, it was still so popular that the “supermarket” managed to collect more than 10,000 RMB and attract over a thousand visitors.<sup>78</sup>

The three principal organizers (Xu, Yang, and Brandt) self-funded most of the project, whose costs included the rental fee, publications, PR, and helping artists with production whenever possible.<sup>79</sup>

At that time, Yang Zhenzhong and Alexander Brandt were both working in advertising agencies, and

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<sup>76</sup> Lily Tung, “A Few Shocks in Store: For Some Weekend Shoppers, a Stroll in a Major Shanghai Mall Turned into a Surreal Art Experience,” *Asia Week*, May 14, 1999. <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/99/0514/feat5.html>.

<sup>77</sup> I thank Kan Xuan for sharing her documentary video of *Art for Sale* with me. Participating artist, Kan Xuan recorded the making of *Art for Sale* in 1999. This 48 mins video is in color with sound.

<sup>78</sup> Yang Zhenzhong, in discussion with the author, June 18, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> The participating artists self-funded their production and transportation costs.

Yang's office was the site of production for the promotional materials (posters, shopping bags, and invitations) and even many art objects. After work hours and over the weekends, artists would gather together in his office to produce their various projects for *Art for Sale*.

As expressed by the artists, Chinese people had become “absolutely fascinated” with shopping and with malls in particular by the time of *Art for Sale*. No longer were museums or other forms of cultural programming grabbing the interest of the public in such a rapturous way—the shopping mall was now king. The public's excitement about consumerism, combined with major development efforts backed by the government, created hundreds of millions of new shoppers who were, as Yang Zhenzhong recalls, “so caught up in the novelty of this new activity, shopping, that they didn't consider the widespread changes that were happening to the city and to everyday life, not to mention being able to be critical about any potential ramifications of adopting this capitalist way of life.”<sup>80</sup>

On the one hand, the artists-curators of *Art for Sale* jumped at this opportunity to capitalize on the public's avid interest in shopping in order to get a large audience to encounter their experimental works. As with the Capital Realist performances that happened in Germany in the 1960s in various stores, *Art for Sale's* own Capitalist Realist strategy turned out to be a promotional success.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the exhibition was a resistant force, devised as a way for the artists to express their unease with the juggernaut that was state-sponsored consumerism and produce a narrative of consumerism that was outside the state's control. The exhibition had no lack of strange, silly, messy, and otherwise ridiculous works in the exhibition, both for sale in the “supermarket” and mounted in the installation space. Nothing in the exhibition was sewn up or polished, everything was provisional and up for grabs; in the context of *Art for Sale*, consumerism was negotiable. This aesthetic strategy stood defiant against the proscriptive way consumerism was infiltrating public life. In the face of state-mandated consumerism, turning consumerism into an aesthetic strategy created the possibility for a contingent future that countered what the state had in mind. On a collective, psychological level, the frivolity and aesthetic dissent that characterized so much of the works in the exhibition reverberated as a much-needed catharsis from the demands of consumerism, which was showing no

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<sup>80</sup> Yang Zhenzhong, in discussion with the author, June 18, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> In Germany, however, it was unclear whether anyone was encouraged to actually buy the furniture on which Richter and Lueg sat. The “realism” in Shanghai was far more enactive.

signs of slowing down. Through the utilization of an unstated strategy of Capitalist Realism, *Art for Sale* was able to critique Western consumerism while also posturing an alternative to the ideology. The first two chapters of this thesis detailed the ideological and logistical friction of the arrival of consumerism in China in the 1980s, which created a unique historical condition that artists in the late 1990s were confronted with. In the major coastal cities like Shanghai, the government made forceful efforts to turn city-dwellers into conspicuous consumers, with the hope that they would pave the way for the rest of the country, leading by (involuntary) example. *Art for Sale* was conceived in large part as a means to counteract this presumed future that the state was trying to impose.

The conflation of art and consumerism was fundamentally changing the status and role of the arts from what it had been just a few years before when the entire country was Communist. Just as Wu Shanzhuan presciently warned, in 1989 the “tragedy of turning art from nothing into everything, and turning artists into salesman who peddle the ‘goods’ they produce” was, by 1999, already well under way.<sup>82</sup> In this regard, Capitalist Realism in China was wildly different from the cases of its emergence in Japan and Germany in the 1960s, where artists had already become accustomed to the conflation of art and consumerism within their own cultural frameworks. The critical issues that European and Japanese artists were worrying in relation to consumer culture were not about whether capitalism would be successful, but instead about making visible the mechanisms by which capitalism represents, and thus appears to create, its own reality.<sup>83</sup> The reality in 1980s China was ideological friction and flux, which placed art in a very capricious place where it was not yet unquestionably comprehensible as consumer product. Unlike in Germany and Japan, it was not at all certain how the experiment of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” would ultimately turn out, and the flexibility that came from the realist strategy employed in *Art for Sale* points to the uncertainty of this moment. While art was well on its way to becoming something that could be understood as “consumable,” it was not quite there yet.<sup>84</sup> The ridiculousness of *Art for Sale*, which was invoked through the appropriation of consumerism as aesthetic strategy, posed a threat to the viability of art’s existence within

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82 Wu Shanzhuan. “Guanyu ‘Da Shengyi’” [On Big Business]. *Zhongguo meishubao* (Fine Arts in China), no. 11 (1989):2.

83 Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Introduction to Special Issue,” *ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism* 4, no. 3 (October 2015): 4.

84 There was no “market” for contemporary art in China in the 1990s. There were only a few galleries in Shanghai and Beijing that represented contemporary artists. For further information, read Jane DeBevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*, Boston: Brill, 2014.

consumerist culture.

At the time of the exhibition, the curators of *Art for Sale* were fairly explicit in expressing their frustration about how the state's rapid enforcement of consumerist culture was making art and consumerism compatible. In particular, just like Wu Shanzhuan before them, they exhibited a particularly strong revulsion to the idea of artists being "sales people." They also maligned a general lack of skepticism among the majority of Shanghainese about embracing consumerism, which included the act of purchasing art as part of cultivating a bourgeois lifestyle, thus forcing artists into the position of becoming dreaded "sales people." An official statement in a promotional package prepared for the show by the artists-curators (for the purposes of fundraising) is worth quoting at length here, because it demonstrates this anxiety about the artist as salesman in explicit terms (emphases original):

**Commerce has become the most followed religion in Shanghai since the "opening."** Shopping centers are now erected everywhere and in fact become the city's new temples. Everything is for sale. Consumption has become the key mechanism of life in this city. **Everyone is relocated in this consumption society: "Feel free to choose whatever you want between being a sales person or a consumer!"**

**How are art and artists going to function within this system?** How is the making of art going to interact with this business minded era? Can a piece of art really be "owned" through a purchasing act?

There is only one way to find out: **To operate the way commerce operates.** To look into the act of consumption and at where it happens. To meet the public in their consumer role. And to consider us artists as sales people.

It is through the purchasing act that a piece of art becomes part of the real world. This principle now is pushed even further:

**"Art for Sale" is the aperture through which consumers and audience enter into the art space and become art consumers.**<sup>85</sup>

It is also worth pointing out the irony of this writing—it was a consumer-skeptical proposal included as part of a fundraising dossier that was sent to privately owned businesses. However, this contradiction was part of the curators' Capitalist Realist strategy. They specifically sought out funding from private enterprises, because sponsorship by private individuals and entities was not a part of art production in China at that time. Prior to the arrival of consumerism, there was no private sponsorship

<sup>85</sup> Emphasis in original, *Art for Sale Exhibition Information for Sponsors*, page 11.

of art in any way, and patronage was only provided through state sponsored exhibitions or organizations, which was only exhibited in official venues. Even though the curators were successful in finding a few corporate sponsors for their exhibition, the fiscal contribution these companies made was fairly insignificant. However, symbolically, their sponsorship played a much more visible role. In the supermarket section, banners, posters, and signs of varying sizes bearing the logos of the exhibition sponsors could be found in almost every nook and cranny of the space, hung in an unorganized manner. These advertisements were completely intermingled with other posters and signs that were splashed about the room, which consisted of ephemera promoting *Art for Sale* and certain individual artworks, which further infiltrated the aesthetic boundaries of consumerism the exhibition had adopted.<sup>86</sup>

The French bottled water company Evian had the largest visible presence of the sponsors in the exhibition. Other notable sponsors included the Bertelsmann Book Club, WestLB, BARCO, and the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany. Just off the entrance, there was an unavoidable Evian promotional display set up that could be seen from almost everywhere in the supermarket section. Anchoring this display was a massive banner that read in English *EVIAN: Natural Mineral Water from the Swiss Alps*, which was hung over dozens of crates of bottled water stacked on top of each other, which were also available for purchase. In addition, there was a large cutout sign of an Evian bottle positioned in front of a snowcapped mountain that was taped to the wall underneath the large banner, which was flanked by two other, medium-scale Evian poster advertisements. However, the *pièce de résistance* of this bottled water display was a miniature model of the Eiffel Tower, constructed out of Evian bottles, which was a cheeky nod to the ridiculous and heavy-handed aesthetics of many supermarket promotional displays.

### ***Parergon***

As noted earlier, to get to *Art for Sale*, one had to take a glass and marble elevator to the fourth floor of the Shanghai Square. The mall was massive in scale, with a large amount of unoccupied retail

space available, which was part of the reason that the curators of *Art for Sale* were able to secure  
86 In some cases, the posters that were taped to the wall of the supermarket exhibition were the works of art and not an advertisement for the artwork.

space for their exhibition without too much difficulty. Banners advertising their exhibition, in the style of advertisements for other stores in the mall, were hung in the rotunda and common areas of the mall.

The exhibition opening was modeled after a ceremonial “grand opening” of a store, with much fanfare, as one would see on commercials or in movies, heightening the aesthetic realism of the entire exhibition. Excited or simply curious, patrons huddled outside the automatic glass doors by the dozens, if not hundreds, waiting to get in. With a crowd of people this large, the excitement spread to strolling mall flâneurs who happened to pass by at the right time. When it was time to open the doors, on April 10, 1999, at 2:00 pm, a confetti gun was fired and Yang Zhenzhong made an announcement over a megaphone welcoming the public into the store/exhibition. As soon as the doors opened, the unorganized mass of people rushed through the doors.

The interior of the newly built mall at Huahai Road was a modernized version of arcade architecture. Popularized by the Parisian architects of the Haussmannian period of urbanism, this style preceded the late-modern aesthetic of consumer space. In this style of arcade, the goods are on display at the same time the flâneur is passing through the arcade—as an autonomous, enterprising, and choosing subject. The leisure-pleasure of window shopping, perusing goods, and consumption becomes an aesthetic experience. Here, space and consumption are merged in the spatial practice of producing spaces of consumption. The supermarket space of *Art for Sale* was the only part of the exhibition visible from the mall arcade; it was the Capitalist Realist lure to get audiences drawn into the exhibition. One could still window shop, as there were several shelves and products on display arranged to be viewed from the outside. Nothing appeared too ominous, provocative, or “out of place” as one strolled through the mall and peered in, leaving the realism of the space intact. The conventions of the mall arcade and window displays framed the goings on inside the “art supermarket” in their own likeness. Only upon closer inspection could one notice that the goods for sale in the window offered a twist on consumer expectations. As publicized in a fundraising document for the exhibition prior to its opening, “only after taking a second look will this familiar environment reveal its *double nature* . . . every product on sale is the *result of serious artistic research and transcends its*

*commercial appearance*.<sup>87</sup> Art, like consciousness, suggests Derrida, depends on framing, or what he refers to as the *parergon*. From the literal frame that surrounds a painted canvas to the proscenium arch of the theater, the *parergon* defines exactly what can be seen. The “painting,” whether explicitly framed or not, is never without a frame. By emphasizing the mediating relations between the frame and the framed, or *parergon* and *ergon*, Derrida rebuffs the Kantian idea of intrinsic beauty, in which “aesthetic judgment must concern intrinsic beauty and not the around and about.”<sup>88</sup>

In *Art for Sale*, the surrounding frame (*parergon*) becomes subverted in the process of creating an “art supermarket.” Instead of contextualizing the objects in the exhibition as works of art, the framework deliberately implemented in *Art for Sale* creates an alternate *parergon* by framing the exhibition as a consumer space. This switching of frames subverts the logic and reason behind cultural engagement, and demonstrates that the *parergon/ergon* relationship is always shifting and in flux, just as definitions and understandings of art are. This gesture folds the *parergon* in on itself, and the frame of *Art for Sale* functions in its own right as a work of art. The *Art for Sale parergon*, as a work of art, is deftly self-reflexive about the specific ideological conditions of Shanghai in the 1990s, and the changing culture and definition of art production, consumption, and value therein.

### **Four Types of Commodities**

In order to fully grasp the commercial appearance that was a primary support of the Capitalist Realist aesthetic throughout the exhibition, I want to return to Yu Guangyuan’s “Four Types of Commodities and Three Principles of Consumption” as a critical armature through which I will theorize and interpret artworks that were included in *Art for Sale*. The following subsections divide selected works from *Art for Sale* into Yu’s four categories of consumption: *Jinshenhuo*, *Baoshenhuo*, *Xianshenhuo*, and *Shenshenhuo*, categories that were meant to educate Chinese people “how” to shop, providing explicit instruction on how the Chinese body would experience various items to be consumed. Inevitably, many of the works in the exhibition could easily be sorted into more than one category; be that as it may, applying this categorization to the art, however imperfectly, provides a experimental and useful way to explore these aesthetic categories.

87 Emphasis in original, *Art for Sale Exhibition Information for Sponsors*, page 11.

88 Jacques Derrida and Craig Owens, “The Parergon,” *October* 9 (Summer, 1979): 3-41.



Fig. 22. Zhang Peili, *Meat Product*, 1999



Fig. 23. Zhu Yu, *Basics of Total Knowledge*, 1999

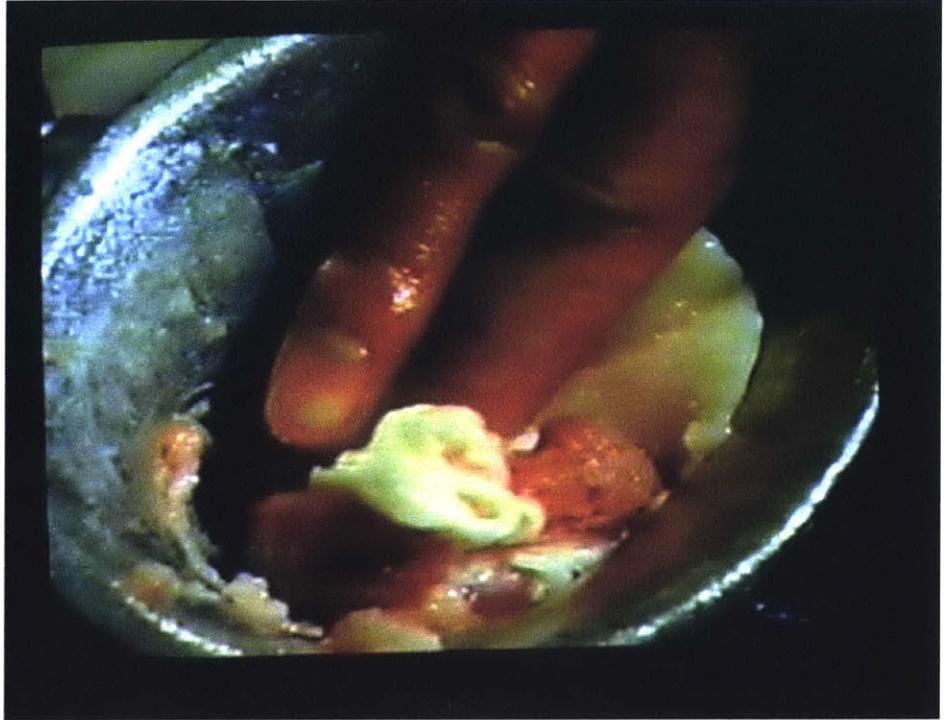


Fig. 25. Zhang Peili, *30% Fat, 70% Lean Meat*, 1998 (detail)



Fig. 24. Zhang Peili, *30% Fat, 70% Lean Meat*, 1998. Three-channel color and black-and-white video installation with three tv monitors, with sound, 32 mins. Installation view: *Art for Sale*, Shanghai Square, Shanghai, April 10 – 25, 1999

## *Jinshenbuo*

*Jinshenbuo* encompasses products that go into the body, such as food and medicine. These products fall under Yu Guangyuan's first principle of consumption: survival. From the 31 works that were sold at the supermarket section in total, I have sorted 5 of them into this category. These works are: Chen Lingyang's *Chocolate in the Shape of Coffins* (1999); Xiang Liqing's *A Sweet Mouth* (1999); Zhang Peili's *Meat Product* (1999; fig. 22); Zhu Yu's *Basics of Total Knowledge* (1999; fig. 23); and Wang Sanxiang's *Optimum Fish Water* (1999).

Two of these works, *Chocolate in the Shape of Coffins* and *A Sweet Mouth*, are candies that have been molded into novelty shapes that were meant to be relatively subversive in relation to how sweets are normally packaged, which is to say, kid-friendly and colorful. These candies, which were in the shape of coffins and body parts (a tongue protruding from a gaping open mouth), respectively, would be more likely found in a novelty store than for sale in a convenience store. Xiang Liqing's mouth-shaped sugar sweets, in particular, would fit in at an "adult" novelty store (which did not yet exist in China at the time). In relation to two other works in this category that make overt references to Chinese medicine, *Basics of Total Knowledge* and *Optimum Fish Water*, the lack of nutritional value in the candy works becomes a crucial part of the works' critical frivolity. Yu's grouping of food and medicine in *Jinshenbuo* products not only organizes products by means of how they enter the body, through digestion, but importantly also accommodates Chinese medicine, in which "food" and "medicine" are often one and the same. The fact that the majority of the *Jinshenbuo* works in this exhibition fall on polar opposite sides of the nutritional/non-nutritional spectrum (two works comment on candy and two works investigate Chinese medicine), points to how Yu's organizational strategy was culturally significant for Chinese consumers.

The fifth work in the *Jinshenbuo* grouping is Zhang Peili's *Meat Product*. While his work in-

corporated the most straightforward “product” of these works—store-bought, name-brand sausages in their original packaging—I argue that it also best exemplifies a Capitalist Realist strategy, which bears further in-depth analysis. If the supermarket space presented Zhang Peili’s “meat products” (as in Wu Shanzhuan’s shrimp) at “market price,” in the exhibition space in back, a different commentary unfurled. Zhang Peili’s *30% Fat, 70% Lean Meat* (1998, fig. 24) was a multimedia installation that consisted of three monitors stacked on top of each other, which played a looped video of meat being processed with a mincer shown from three different angles simultaneously. Additionally, there was a red-and-white commercial display rack placed to the right of the configuration of monitors that had piles of sausages on each shelf, mirroring what was on offer in the supermarket front. Each sausage was wrapped in a slick red chub, a type of container formed by a tube of flexible packaging material that gives the appearance of a sausage with the ends sealed by metal crimps. Importantly, the sausages were brand-name products; they were *Shuanghui* brand sausages, which were (and still remain) a well-known Chinese company that produces meat products. The cardboard shipping boxes that the sausages (presumably) came in were also visible in the installation, placed off to the side of the display, which had the company’s logo splashed across the boxes in the company’s distinctive red font.

The three-channel video component of the installation was 32 minutes long, with sound. The monitors on the top and bottom screened color videos, and the one in the middle was a black-and-white surveillance video. Each video captured a different perspective of meat being processed through a hand-powered grinder.<sup>89</sup>

The top-most video was a tight, point-of-view shot of the funnel on top of machine, into

<sup>89</sup> The filming process specifics include: Indoor lighting; three cameras shoot synchronously: video a (color): camera position above the top of the meat grinder, fixed camera position and focal length, close-up; video b (color): fixed camera position and focal length; close-up; camera focuses on the output of the grinder and the

which fingers gradually stuff and feed a “thick and thin” pork mix (fig. 25).<sup>90</sup> As the cold chunks of pale fat and deep red meat are fed into the machine, they slowly shift downward, bobbing up and down as they are fed into the belly of the mincer.<sup>91</sup> At times, the fingers in the video, oily from touching fat, reappear to add more meat mix to the funnel, or to firmly finger any stubborn chunks of meat down toward the conveyor. As the meat passes through the horn, glimpses of the metal auger or “worm”—a horizontal screw conveyor that ensures the meat is pushed through the knife and grinding plates—become partially visible. Seeing the mechanics of this horizontal screw heightens the sense of violence in the video overall.

The middle monitor (“c” in the process notes) played a video recorded by a black-and-white surveillance CCD (charge-coupled device) camera that had been attached to the wrist of a person who was turning the handle of the mincer, which gives a revolving motion to the entire video. Due to this disorienting effect, the only fully legible images are a single hand (fingers and nails), which grasps a small wooden handle that has a shiny small metal ferrule on the end. Characteristic of many CCD surveillance cameras, the black-and-white video is very cool-toned, appearing almost as shades of blue. This coloration contrasts the videos that flank it above and below, which show fleshy, bodily colors like pink, tan, brown, and red. The center video also acts as the pulse of all three in the installation, because the speed at which the hand turns the handle and operates the grinder sets the tempo for the entire work. It is also here where the synchronization of each of the video monitors becomes most apparent. Without the slow and steady, yet uneven and dizzying, turning of crank here, it would not be known to the viewer that each video was a different perspective of the same action, performed on the same machine. This video is also where the labor of mincing meat is the most abstracted. By showing only the hand that turns the crank, it is only alluded that in the mincer a conveyor is busy squishing and mixing the meat.

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plastic tray; video c (B&W): CCD camera is tied to the meat processor’s hand, and shoot with the action of hand, actual sound.

<sup>90</sup> “Thick and Thin” is the butchery term for a mix of lean and fat meat, such as the one referenced in the work’s title “70% 30% fat”.

<sup>91</sup> Sausage making requires the meat to be chilled, in order to go through the mincer.

The bottom monitor played the most static video, which was a centered close-up shot of the hole plate, which is where the minced meat comes out of the machine in cylindrical shreds to be collected below. The minced strands of meat enter the frame and fall onto a white tabletop at a very gradual pace, in rhythm with the turning of the handle above. The depiction of the meat in this video is the most abstract in terms of how its processing was depicted. Without the monitors above, it would not be clear that the product (piles of meat for sausage stuffing) was made by man or machine.

Altogether, the stack of three videos worked to distort (and compulsively reveal) the relatively uncomplicated action of putting pork through a mincer. With each monitor showing not only a different perspective of the work, but also a different camera shot and style, the overall effect turned a very concrete form of manual and machine labor into an abstracted image. By the same token, there is a clean “realism” to the action of showing viewers exactly what really goes into the glossy red package. These gestures became even more heightened with the display of the finished sausage products placed next to the videos. The sausages, in their shiny red *Shuanghui* brand casings, project and epitomize abstract labor, whose value is only realized in the market through sale, *and in consumption by putting the meat into one’s body*. This point is doubled down by the artist’s “market valuation” of the sausages, as they are the only product in *Art for Sale* that is for sale at “market price.” And yet, the message of the video emphasizes the “body” parts of this exchange. By making the “behind the scenes”-style video of a sausage making process both abstracted and visceral- in excess, in other words, of the tidy sausages on display for sale, Zhang Peili transforms concrete labor into abstract labor and abstract labor into something more tangible than the labor that produced it. All this jumbling of concrete and abstract labor stresses just how much conflict and violence is smoothed over in the determination of value. The sausages, artworks, and food products on sale for “market price,” create tension when attempts are made to realize their value. The anthropologist David Harvey stresses how the point at which value is realized is a point

of tension at large: “Value internalizes a duality of concrete and abstract labor, which conjoin in an act of exchange through which value gets expressed in the duality of relative and equivalent forms of value. From this, a money commodity emerges as the representative of the universality of value, but this disguises the inner meaning of value as a social reaction to produce the fetishism of commodities, understood as material relations between persons and social relations between things.”<sup>92</sup> Here he explains that value is produced in the labor process, but value is *realized* in the market through sale, which is an inherently complicated and political process.

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<sup>92</sup> David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, London and New York: Verso, 2010, 110.



Fig. 26. Xu Zhen, *From Inside the Body*, 1999. Three-channel color video installation with tv monitors and leather sofa, silent, 8 mins.

## ***Baoshenbuo***

*Baoshenbuo* are materials that surround the body and includes a wide range of products such as shoes, socks, hats, glasses, umbrellas, lighting, air conditioning, apartments, and cars.

Complicating this category further, these products also fall under Yu Guangyuan's first principles of consumption: survival, which is fairly ambiguous. (An argument can easily be made that food and medicine are products for survival, which are not included in this category.)

There are six works in the supermarket section that I deem best fall under this category: Liang Yue's *Day Dream: One Person Leaning on a Pillow*; Xu Xiaoyu's *USA-flag Towels*; Gu Lei's *T-shirt with the Prophecy of the LAST DAY, as predicted by Nostradamus*; Wei Hui's *Men's Underwear with Picture of Wei Hui's Head Printed on It*; Chen Xiaoyun's *Year 1999*, and Xu Zhen's *Balloon*. Five of these six works were items that could also double as souvenirs, T-shirts, towels, and home décor, which is why some of these works were the most commercially successful in the exhibition.

However, the sixth work in the category is less easy to negotiate, which is why I'm choosing to detail it at further length. In the exhibition section, Xu Zhen's three-channel video installation *From Inside the Body* (1999; fig. 26) could also be understood as *Baoshenbuo*, since something is coming "from inside" to "surround" the body. The installation was housed in a small room, built up by drywall painted white, that was just wide enough to fit the length of a well-worn camel-leather three-seat couch. Directly facing the couch were three video monitors built into the wall. The video screens were at close proximity to viewers sitting on the couch so that, reclining on the sofa, a person over 6' tall could easily touch the opposing wall with their feet. The slouchy couch, with its pillow-top arms and reclining function, distinctly reflected furniture fashions and mass-consumer sensibilities in the late 1990s. Its aesthetic and functional presence in the gallery space created tension with the more formal conventions of display in the relatively traditional "exhibition space" in the back section of

*Art for Sale.*

The video component of *From Inside the Body* begins with a central image of the same couch in the installation. The artist (Xu Zhen) appears on the left screen as an anonymous man, opposite a woman (the artist Liang Yue, who was also in the exhibition) on the right screen, while the center video remains showing an empty couch. As the man and woman enter the frame, they sit on the couch, then quickly begin sniffing around, seemingly in search of an odor. At first, it is easy to presume and project that the scent they are searching for is a malodor, as the video begins with each person smelling the inside of their shoes and then armpits, but as the video progresses it becomes less clear whether the scent they are searching for is noxious at all. They begin hunting for the scent by removing their shoes, coats, and jackets and smelling underneath, then sniff the inside of their shirts. As their search continues their behavior becomes more frantic, and they eventually disrobe down to their underwear in search of the (perhaps odious, but nonetheless clearly “attractive”) smell. When the characters have stripped down to their undergarments, they then stand up and “walk” from the outer monitors to the center, where both characters meet in the “center” couch and sit next to each other. This illusion is achieved by synchronizing the cameras in the installation, so it appears as if each character is “walking” toward the center at the same time.

In the central frame, Xu Zhen and Liang Yue continue searching for the odor, and begin sniffing themselves, then each other. Their sniffing of one another is gentle at first but grows more and more intense as the hunt for the odor continues. At the end of the video, the couple’s bodies are entwined as they vigorously sniff each other, but ultimately they fail to locate the elusive odor on which their very “survival” seems to depend.



Fig. 28. Liu Wei, *You Are Beautiful*, 1999 (detail)



Fig. 27. Liu Wei, *You Are Beautiful*, 1999



Fig. 29. Kan Xuan, *Kan Xuan! Ai!*, 1999. Three-channel color video installation with two tv monitors and mirror, with sound, 1 min. 22 sec.

## ***Xianshenbuo***

*Xianshenbuo* are products that manifest and show off the body such as jewelry and luxury items. *Xianshenbuo* products fall under Yu's second principle of consumption: enjoyment. This category encompasses the largest number of works that were included in the supermarket section of *Art for Sale*. I have designated almost half of the art products for sale, 15 to be exact, as *Xianshenbuo*. The works are: Liu Wei's *Pig's Trotters and Jewelry*; Yin Xiuzhen's *Small Plastic Shoes*; Shi Yong's *Made in China—Welcome to Shanghai*; Ni Jun's *Wind-Door Bell*; Xu Zhen's *Double Mouth Piece Balloon*; Zhu Jia's *Altered Alarm Clock*; Alexander Brandt's *Passion Pets*; Yang Zhenzhong's *Shanghai Faces Mahjong*; Zhao Bandi's *Zhao Bandi and Panda*; Wu Eershan's *532 Element*; Kan Xuan's *Kan Xuan! Ai! Doll*; David Quadrio's *Interior Design*; Luo Zidan's *Computer Sage*; Hu Jieming's *Perfect Soap*; and Matthew Zakland's *Photo Booth*. As evidenced by the sheer number of *Xianshenbuo* works in the exhibition, the question of luxury is particularly relevant to the Chinese at this time. This makes sense because, as detailed in Chapter one, the first self-service stores, *Zixuan Shangdian*, were full of luxury and imported items. Many Chinese were first exposed to consumerism through these stores, which created a connection between shopping and luxury that remains a major part of consumer culture in China today.

I argue that Liu Wei's two contributions to *Art for Sale*, *You Are Beautiful* (1999; fig. 27) and *Pig Trotters and Jewelry* (1999), are the most confrontational *Xianshenbuo* works in the exhibition, and take the concept of adorning the body with luxury items to the most outrageous extremes. Both of these works centered around the same iconography and action: the artist dressed piglets up in gold jewelry, rings, necklaces, and bracelets; shaved their entire bodies; and painted their trotters with bright pink nail polish. (The item for sale in the supermarket section was just the hoof of the piglets, shaved and adorned with polish and rings, not the live animal that was exhibited in the installation.)

The installation *You Are Beautiful* consisted of a sparsely configured set constructed by the artist, where three small piglets, dressed to the nines, leisurely sauntered around the room, doing as they pleased. The juxtaposition of the barnyard animals and all the twinkling gold rings, necklaces, bracelets against their pink skin, and nail polish on their hooves, was one of the more captivating visual images in the entire exhibition. In order to view the animals, audiences would stand behind a glass partition, viewing the room through this parergon—more like a theater set than an immersive installation. The room was also further marked by wood parquet flooring, the kind that is synonymous with mid-century homes in the US, adding to the bourgeois illusion. Also anchoring the set was a camel leather couch in the back of the room, positioned in the center, which also referenced mid-century modernist design elements such as a streamlined silhouette and short, tapered legs that characteristically made the couch hover above the ground. These two sparse elements were enough reference to give the room a nod to how current Chinese middle-class interiors might be furnished, providing the dolled-up pigs an appropriate setting in which to roam.

The three little piglets that walked and napped around the set were the main characters in this Brechtian set design. (Liu Wei crafted a very sparse set, using only a few carefully selected items.) Representative of China's nuclear family unit under the "one child policy," the piglets could be read as the family unit of three: mom, dad, and only child. The piglets were the costumed players in the scene. One pig had multiple gold and silver chains hung around its neck, with ears pierced and sporting hoop earrings (fig. 28). The piglets had rings around their ankles and small tails, and their hooves were painted in red lacquer. Each animal was painstakingly shaved by the artists, so that almost all of their body hair and pale pink skin glistened from their skin's oils underneath the lights. Each pig was tethered via a leash to a steel stake in the floor, but no pig looked particularly interested in leaving their room. For most of the time, the piglets sniffed around, as a group or alone, and slept next to each other

underneath the sofa.

*Kan Xuan! Ai!* (1999; fig. 29) was on display in the back gallery space, surrounded by ample space. The work was a video installation that consisted of two 36” synchronized video monitors with internal speakers, which both played a loop of the same short video that was synchronized via an external transmitter and receiver. The monitors were placed directly on the floor facing each other, nearly touching, with only about three inches between them. In the middle of the gap between the monitors there were two unornamented, floor-length mirrors that were hung side by side. The mirrors were suspended from the ceiling and hovered a few inches above the ground, but still completely covered the video screen. As well, the width of the mirrors was slightly wider than the width of the monitors. Since the videos on each monitor were synchronized and completely reflected by the mirrors, an optical illusion was produced that made it difficult to discern if the glass hung in between the monitors was mirrored or transparent. Additionally, there was not enough distance to get a full view of the video being played on either monitor without getting up very close to the screen. Even then, the best way to watch the video was the reflection in the mirror.

The video shows footage of the artist (Kan Xuan) navigating her way through a crowded Beijing subway underpass. Headed in the opposite direction as the general flow of commuters, she hurriedly pushes through the mass of commuters as though urgently looking for someone. At odd intervals, she frantically waves her arms—as if trying to get the attention of someone in front of her—and shouts out, “KAN XUAN!,” then, quickly, responds to her own call, “AI!” Roughly translated, “Ai!” means “here!” or “yo!” If someone calls out to you, particularly if that person is an authority figure, one would answer back promptly with a loud “Ai!” The sound of Kan Xuan’s voice answering her own call can be heard throughout the video, which occurs around every five seconds or so.

The carrying quality of her high pitched voice is exploited in the work. Not only does the timbre of her voice carry over the traffic in the subway underpass, it also penetrated the acoustic environment of the entire exhibition. Her cries were even easily heard over the large crowds during the exhibition's opening event. Her vocal "techniques," which include shouting at a high pitch, clear projection, dramatic inflection, and percussive repetition, achieve a high level of audibility. This overall obfuscation of images in the video reshuffled the traditional epistemological hierarchy of the senses, so that the sound (of Kan Xuan's voice) that was emitted from the monitor's speakers became the most graspable thing in the work. Throughout the entirety of the piece and the greater exhibition, one could always hear the sound of the artist, answering her own call.

Kan Xuan's call-and-response lends itself as an almost perfect praxis to the famous example that Althusser uses when he introduces his theory of interpellation. In his example, a policeman on the street calls out, "Hey, you there!" in public. Upon hearing this exclamation, an individual turns around, and "by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*."<sup>93</sup> At that moment, the respondent recognizes that "the hail was 'really' addressed to him."<sup>94</sup> In the act of acknowledging that it is indeed he who is addressed, the individual thus confirmed his subjecthood *as a subject of ideology*. The very fact that we do not recognize this interaction as ideological speaks to the power of ideology.<sup>95</sup> By acting as both the authoritative voice and the responding subject, Kan Xuan's gesture is a self-interpellating one. Instead of subconsciously submitting to an authoritarian voice, her shouting, even among the crowd of nameless commuters, affirms her subjecthood on her own terms.

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<sup>93</sup> Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." 1970. In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, pp. 174. London: New Left Books, 1971.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 30. Left: Song Dong, *Supermarket – Artguide / Art-Salesman* as part of the series *SONGDONG Art Travel Agency*, 1999. Right: Chen Shaoxiang, *Commodity (Instruction Manual) Art Explanation*, 1999. Performance and installation view: *Art for Sale*, Shanghai Square, Shanghai, April 10, 1999



Fig. 31. Shopping guide explaining products to customers at a supermarket, 1991



Fig. 32. Chen Shaoxiong, *Commodity (Instruction Manual) Art Explanation*, 1999 (detail)



Fig. 33. Chen Shaoxiong, *Commodity (Instruction Manual) Art Explanation*, 1999

## ***Fashenbuo***

The last category, *Fashenbuo*, includes products that elevate the body such as books, education, and tourism. *Fashenbuo* products fall under Yu's third principle of consumption: development and expression. Six works follow under this category: Yang Fudong's *I Love My Motherland*; Geng Jianyi's *Psyche*; Zheng Guogu and Hu Fang's *Self-Expression Training Manual: Psychology, Practice and History of Sex, Biography of One's Feelings*; Cai Wenyang's *Style Magazine*; K. D. Yao's *Explanation of the Text*; and Song Dong's *Supermarket – Artguide / Art-Salesman*.

For Song Dong's performance, *Supermarket – Artguide / Art-Salesman* (1999; fig. 30), the artist dressed in a shiny yellow and black sports outfit with a matching yellow hat and, holding a megaphone, loudly directed the audience through both sections of *Art for Sale*. In addition to providing descriptions of each work and other pertinent information like a dutiful tour guide, he also provided instructions on how exactly one should interact with the artworks and other items for sale in the supermarket section. In some cases, Song Dong also instructed the audience in how to shop.

While it may be easy in a Western history context to associate this performance as some kind of institutional critique, I argue that Song Dong's work directly relates to the history of a "shopping guide." In China, and presumably elsewhere, during the switch from a command economy to a self-service shopping style, there was a demand to instruct people how to shop; hence, the creation of the very much needed "shopping guide." This role transformed the surly Chinese clerk from the state-run store into a friendly actualizer of self-shopping, a history little known in the West (fig. 31). As Fisher mentioned, one of the largest universal complaints about life in a command economy was the dependence on "clerks," or bureaucratic middlemen who were in charge of distributing consumer goods and various services. Additionally, a part of the charisma of capitalism, the server-less store provides the

*appearance* that bureaucracy is gone, even though it is merely dispersed. This obfuscation of bureaucracy is part of capitalism's projection of a "natural order." Song Dong's *Supermarket – Artguide / Art-Salesman* exposes the underlying bureaucratic structure of capitalism (we need to be trained to shop), and emphasizes how these cultural ideologies are very much *not inherent*. They are unnatural and imposed; this is what I identify as the power of Capitalist Realism.

Another work that explicitly dealt with teaching the audience how to shop was Chen Shaoxiong's *Commodity (Instruction Manual) Art Explanation* (fig. 32), a "how-to" guide that demonstrated how to use common products in ridiculous ways. This work echoes one of the great successes of the Capitalist Realism strategy in *Art for Sale*, which was how realism could put the very act of consumerism (shopping) into question by the artists. There was no precedent for the role of art in an increasingly commercial world, therefore, there was still potential to intervene in how people behaved as consumers.

As well, a large impetus for many artists in the exhibition was their frustration with the indifference of the general populace in regards to the commercialization of Shanghai, which some works directly criticized. Chen's *Commodity (Instruction Manual) Art Explanation* overtly problematized the lack of skepticism the Shanghainese had about consumerism by creating a work that was a bizarre "instruction manual." The actual installation in the exhibition space was a grocery store display shelf, the same type used in the supermarket space, with about ten different items on it ranging in size from single coke cans to packages of diapers. In front of each cluster of items was a Polaroid image of the artist "demonstrating" how to use each item in the way he devised. At the bottom of each Polaroid was scribbled the instructions of how to use each product in Chinese. The absurdness of these "how-to" explanations ranged from witty and self-effacing to quite a bit dark. Some explanations of products include: "Toilet paper rolls can be used to paint long pen and ink scrolls"; "Sugar cubes

can be used by young lovers to increase their success in finding the right lover”; “Drinking alcohol out of a milk bottle can effectively eliminate the pain of heart-broken men”; “Taking Viagra with Coke can increase the effectiveness of the drug (fig. 33)”; and “Babies’ diapers can be used to stuff the mouths of kidnapped women.”

As biting sarcasm as Chen’s “instruction manual” installation was, it also sensitively reflected the psychological anxiety of consumerism that many Chinese were facing due to its rapid implementation. Many of the items found in convenience stores were still foreign and strange, and commercial media and films played a large role in educating people about the “correct” way to use products and inspiring confidence among potential consumers. As examined in Chapter one, it had only been a few years since the first *Zixuan shangdian* (self-service stores) were introduced in China, and although consumerist culture was becoming part of daily life for most Shanghainese, it was far from being second nature to citizens.

In the *Art for Sale* catalogue, Chen included a short text, “Art Explanation,” that accompanied documentation of his work. Here, he poetically expanded his wild instructions, as well as made some sharp observations about the craziness of life in the beginning stages of “socialism”/capitalist takeover. He also adroitly reflected about the wavering consumer confidence at that time, which his work and a few others capitalized on: “We are only willing to become consumers of a product once we know its use; no one would want to buy a product that he doesn’t know how to use.” His strategy to intervene in the education of potential consumers was a gesture that took the control and power of how consumerism was being implemented out of the hands of the state. Instead, Chen’s odd and somewhat perverse guide for consumers presented an alternate future of consumerism, one that the state would most certainly not approve of.



Fig. 34. Xu Zhen, *ShanghART Supermarket*, 2007. Installation view: Art Basel, Miami Beach, December 6-9, 2007



Fig. 35. Xu Zhen, *ShanghART Supermarket*, 2007 (detail)

## CONCLUSION

Less than ten years after the *Art for Sale* exhibition, around 2007-8, China had established its place in the capitalist world as a “rising new power.” Not only had the country continued its aggressive promotion of radical marketization, but under the guidance of state policy, the nation was becoming one of the most enthusiastic participants in the global economy, as marked by seminal events such as China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2003, Beijing winning the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics Games, and Shanghai winning the bid to host EXPO in 2010. Similar in strategy and ambition as the previous century’s Great Leap Forward, the advancement of capitalism in the 21st century continues on under the guise of “progress”, like a symbolic race to the future with no signs of slowing down.

These developments have also deeply affected the production of art, and the commercial art system has become firmly entrenched in China. At a similar speed to the spread of consumerism throughout the country, contemporary art galleries too have spread like wildfire in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, cities that have become firmly established as China’s major art capitals. In less than a decade, some of the very same artists that had sold the many strange and mostly ephemeral commodities in the *Art for Sale* supermarket were now being represented by major galleries, selling their work to an international clientele at behemoth art fair franchises like Art Basel.

A few years after *Art for Sale*, for example, the ShanghART gallery, a prominent Shanghai-based for-profit art space, began representing some artists who had been in the exhibition, such as Yang Fudong, Geng Jianyi, Yang Zhenzhong, Kai Xuan, Zhu Jia, and Xu Zhen. It was also around 2007 that “Chinese Contemporary Art” skyrocketed in the auction market. Works by painters such as Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong, and Zeng Fanzhi be-

gan selling for record-breaking millions of dollars on the auction block. Special *yishuqu* (art zones) created by the state, such as the famous 798 district in Beijing and the M50 district in Shanghai, became headquarters for artists, art-enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, and enterprising social media mavens.

Chinese galleries have also become a fixture at international art fairs. At the 2007 Art Basel Miami Beach, the ShanghART gallery devoted its entire booth to reproducing a work by Xu Zhen, titled *ShanghART Supermarket* (2007; fig. 34). This work was a site-specific installation that was a 1:1 replica of a Shanghainese self-service convenience store. Familiar convenience store products like bottled soft drinks, instant noodles, energy drinks, Ziplock bags, candy, chips, milk, cigarettes, lighters, and liquor filled the shelves of the market. A majority of these items were well-known brand-name products of global capitalism, with logos that would be immediately recognizable for Chinese, if not for everyone else. (Most of the packaging was in Chinese, English, or a hybrid of Chinese and English.) Each product was dutifully labeled with a price sticker, and the prices set were accordant to the market price that one would pay for a similar item in typical Shanghai convenience store (fig. 35). For example, one could purchase a can of coke for just 2 RMB (30 cents). Cash registers were placed intuitively near the exit of the space, where visitors would pay with cash and get a receipt along with their purchase, similar to how one would shop at a convenience store practically anywhere in the world.

However, the twist in Xu Zhen's installation was that all of the products in the *ShanghART Supermarket* in Miami were empty. Every item was hollowed out, left with nothing inside but empty air. There was an odd, disorienting virtuosity in this subversion. The presentation of the brand-name products was staged so convincingly that unless one picked up a product, it would be impossible to recognize anything was amiss. In order to make this work, Xu Zhen's studio purchased all the items for sale from a local convenience store and emptied all

the contents from them before arranging them in the installation. In Xu Zhen's *ShanghART Supermarket*, the proverbial "can of coke" was merely a hollowed out, weightless, 3-D façade of familiar consumer products.

Xu Zhen's installation notably reflects the artist's long-term interest in consumerism, which publicly began with that co-curated 1999 exhibition at the Shanghai Square Mall. However, I argue that *ShanghART Supermarket* is no longer a manifestation of Capitalist Realism. Xu Zhen's newer engagements with consumerism are aesthetically non-negotiable and present a very different kind of realism from the "anything goes" wildness of *Art for Sale*. The *ShanghART Supermarket* is exponentially more controlled and sewn up, lacking the strangeness, negotiability, frivolity, and open-endedness that was the atmosphere in *Art for Sale*. In the *Art for Sale* supermarket, everything was basically up for grabs, even the prices for the products were ambiguously labeled, which contrasts sharply with the aesthetic of Xu Zhen's newer work. In addition, the conceptual mechanics of *ShanghART Supermarket* were almost entirely dependent on its ability to seamlessly mimic the slick aesthetics of late capitalism, which characterizes so much of contemporary consumerist aesthetics.

Another stark contrast between both supermarkets was the audience. The customers at the art fair had an inflexible knowledge of consumer behavior unlike those in the late 1990s, who, in many ways, were still learning to shop. There was no longer any room to subvert the public's knowledge of how to consume, because the cultural understanding had become so engrained that customers in 2007 left with a receipt, a proof of purchase that shows exactly how non-negotiable consumerism had become.

Xu Zhen's *ShanghART Supermarket*, as well as some of his other major projects that intervene in consumerism like the online art forum *Art-Ba-Ba*—a play on the famous Chinese e-commerce site Ali-ba-ba—demonstrate his interest in coming up with new realist strategies rele-

vant to the spectacle and traffic of this new, globalizing stage of consumer culture (as well as his willingness to mock the contemporary art market). In 2009, he also founded and became the creative director for the infamous MadeIn Company, a conceptual project and “contemporary art creation company” that makes extravagant and large-scale, labor-intensive artwork for wealthy collectors. While these compelling and complex projects demonstrate Xu Zhen’s provocateur attitude and longstanding engagement with the Shanghai art scene, they also project somewhat of a defeatist tone in regards to the relationship between art and commerce in China and the greater capitalist world. These works critically operate from a position that lies fully within capitalist modes of production, and due to this, they can never fully escape the very same system they might be critiquing. Even though these works are important and poignant interlocutors in which to examine contemporary capitalism, they cannot ultimately transcend their dependence on capitalism in order to function, and thus do not produce alternatives to it. In place of Capitalist Realism, we might say 2007 yields capitalism as the only reality.

In this regard, the later works of Xu Zhen might fulfill Jameson’s, and by extension Mark Fisher’s, observations about postmodernity, in which “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” From the position of the new millennium, it may often appear that there is no alternative to capitalism. It is all too easy and even seductive to accept this version of the future, since there are few alternatives to grasp onto.

However, if we look back at artistic interventions like *Art for Sale*, which occurred simultaneously with the arrival of consumerism in China, there is clearly another imaginative possibility. As this thesis has sought to emphasize, during the Reform Era in China there was a very real alternative to capitalism. The state was trying to enforce consumer culture rapidly, while still having to negotiate a strong residual ideology of Mao-era values, which resulted in a complex ideological mash-up of Communist and consumerist intentions. Consumerism

was in a state of incredible flux and misunderstanding, and many works in *Art for Sale* pointed to how partial, awkward, creatively misread and even bumpy this arrival of consumerism was in China. In the face of advanced global capitalism, the Capitalist Realist actions of artists during the Reform Era are all the more important to reflect upon. Not only because this historical moment was one of incredible ideological flux, which poses real complications to dogmatic Western understandings of late capitalism and postmodernism, but because they might also offer the possibility of a different future—detours for products, and subjects, outside of a totalizing capitalist ideology.

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