She Swims in Silence: Spatial Narrative, Women's labor in Contemporary Art

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the collective lives of Chinese women sent to Xinjiang in state-led migration after 1949 and the erasure of their gendered narratives. Drawing on a unique family history and archival evidence, the thesis reveals how the personal identities of these female “Aid to Xinjiang” participants were stripped away and subsumed under the grand socialist nation-building myth. Through practice-based artistic research, the project attempts to restore their lost voices and unacknowledged suffering and labor, framing the exhibition as a form of praxis. By analyzing the exhibition alongside case studies and critical analysis, the thesis, inspired by Bernard Stiegler’s theory of the “history of representational forms” and interwoven with ideas from philosophers like Judith Butler and Nicholas Mirzoeff, interrogates the gendered silences in official history and highlights the tension between state mythologies and personal memories. In doing so, the exhibition as an interdisciplinary form of research not only restores agency to a silenced group of women, but also demonstrates how artistic practice can serve as an alternative historiography to challenge dominant narratives and recover marginalized voices.

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Special thanks to my family and my partner Zairan Yu for their constant support and for sharing the personal stories that sparked this research. In particular, I thank my grandmother, whose experiences inspired this thesis; her courage and resilience are the heartbeat of this work.

I also extend my appreciation to my peers and friends in the Art, Culture, and Technology program. Our many discussions, collaborations, and their willingness to assist in the exhibition setup have been an integral part of this journey.Finally, I acknowledge the women who lived the history this thesis explores. Though most remain nameless in official records.

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“Time is the decisive factor of power.” This statement, echoing through the exhibition that forms the core of this thesis, encapsulates the tension between official history and personal memory that the research seeks to explore. In the decades following 1949, under the banner of socialist nation-building, thousands of young women were mobilized from provinces like Shandong and Hunan to support the development of China’s northwestern frontier. They joined the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a paramilitary labor organization known as the bingtuan, and toiled in collective farms and the region’s first industrial enterprises. The author’s own grandmother was among these women, assigned along with many compatriots to the new Bayi (August 1st) Textile Factory – Xinjiang’s first modern cotton mill In the communal life of the factory and Corps, these women often shed their gendered identities, performing the same arduous labor as their male counterparts in service of the state’s grand mission.

Figure 1.Female volunteers from Hunan pose for a group photo in 1951 before departing to join the PLA Xinjiang contingent.
Reproduced from“The Story of the Production and Construction Corps,” Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia (blog), July 6, 2014, https://livingotherwise.com/2014/07/06/the-story-of-the-production-and-construction-corps/.

Yet behind the propaganda of “iron girls” and socialist heroines lay untold personal sacrifices. Many of these women endured harsh conditions and lifetime injuries. In the case of the author’s grandmother and others in the cotton mill, the deafening noise of machines became an inescapable flood, imposing silence as the baseline of existence. Their voices were literally drowned out – a generation’s stories smothered by the roar of progress. The official narrative celebrated their productivity and patriotism, but it ignored the loss of identity and the silence imposed upon them as individuals. This thesis contends that the history of these Aid to Xinjiang women has been largely silenced in mainstream accounts,

subsumed under the mythos of national development. It seeks to recover fragments of those lost voices and re-examine that history through the lens of gender and representation.

To do so, the author has undertaken a practice-based artistic research project culminating in an exhibition. The exhibition serves as both subject and method of this inquiry. It leverages multimedia installation, moving images, and virtual reality to weave a narrative that bridges personal memory and collective history. By mixing fictionalized archival materials with real family memorabilia and sound recordings, the exhibition creates an immersive space where myth and history, reality and fiction intertwine. The aim is to construct an alternative "archive" of the women's experiences – one that engages viewers not as passive observers but as witnesses who must actively piece together the story from sensory clues and imaginative participation.

This written thesis accompanies and examines that artistic project in a threefold structure. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the historical context and outlines the research questions driving the project. It establishes the tension between the grand narrative of nation-building and the individual experiences of the women who lived through it, and it introduces the exhibition as a form of inquiry that responds to this tension. Chapter 2 presents case studies, beginning with an in-depth analysis of the author's own exhibition (titled "She Swims in Silence") and then expanding outward to discuss three artists whose works resonate with the project's themes: Ho Tzu Nyen, Cao Fei, and Christine Sun Kim. Through comparative analysis, these case studies situate the exhibition within a broader discourse on myth, labor, voice, and representation in contemporary art. Chapter 3 offers a literature review and theoretical framework, drawing on visual culture studies and critical theory – particularly Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the bodyscape, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, and Bernard Stiegler's philosophy of technics and memory – to reflect on the cultural and representational dimensions of the long silence surrounding these women's stories. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes by summarizing how the practice of exhibition-as-research can challenge dominant historiography, and by reflecting on the implications of this work for understanding the interplay of gender, memory, and media in history.

Before delving into the case studies and analysis, it is important to understand the historical background of the Aid to Xinjiang movement and the personal narrative at the heart of this project. In the 1950s and 1960s, as part of China's drive to consolidate and develop its frontiers, the government launched campaigns to encourage migration to Xinjiang. Slogans like "八千湘女上天山"[1] ("Eight Thousand Hunanese Girls Go to Tianshan") symbolized the mobilization of young women to the far northwest. By 1967, over a million youth – including numerous women – had been relocated to Xinjiang under such programs. Many were organized under the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), which functioned as a state-within-a-state in the region, tasked with both economic development and frontier

[1] Archive for the "Report Literature | Tracing the truth of 'eight thousand Hunan women' - Xiangjiang depth - New Hunan." Accessed April 21, 2025. https://www.hunantoday.cn/news/xhn/202410/20850352.html.

defense. Life in the XPCC was militarized and arduous; recruits transitioned from villages or cities into a regimented existence of farm work, factory shifts, and political study, all in an alien landscape far from home.

Figure 2.The first modernized cotton spinning mill in Xinjiang (Bayi Cotton Mill)
Reproduced from"Unforgettable, Shihezi Bayi Cotton Spinning Mill - Daily Headlines," accessed May 9, 2025, https://kknews.cc/zh-cn/history/kkjyjpb.html.

The author's grandmothers, were two of these recruits. Leaving her hometown in Shandong at the age of 17, she answered the call to "support Xinjiang." She was assigned to work in a textile factory in Ürümqi – at a time when Xinjiang, despite producing cotton, had virtually no industrial infrastructure for processing it. In oral history interviews conducted by the author, her grandmother described the early years at the Bayi Cotton Mill: "We worked from before sunrise until late into the night. The machines were so loud that even shouting, you couldn't hear the person next to you." Basic protective gear was absent; the women worked with bare ears and thin clothing amid roaring looms and flying cotton fluff. Over time, that constant mechanical thunder exacted a physical toll – the grandmother and many of her colleagues suffered hearing loss that worsened year by year. "Silence" thus became a defining feature of her life, both as a literal condition (deafness) and as a metaphor for how her individual voice and feminine identity were suppressed by the demands of an austere collective life.

This personal story is emblematic of a broader phenomenon: the gendered silencing within official histories of modern China. The state's narrative of socialist triumph in Xinjiang celebrates agricultural abundance, industrial growth, and ethnic integration, often embodied by model workers like the "Iron Girl" brigades. However, it rarely acknowledges the gender-specific struggles – the loss of traditional family ties, the pressure to embody a de-sexed "productive force," the health consequences of intense labor – that these women

experienced. In effect, the bingtuan women's identities were flattened into the single dimension of "builders of the new frontier," their womanhood officially equal to men's, and thus their unique stories rendered superfluous or even inconvenient in a patriarchal revolutionary history.

Figure 3.The Red Detachment of Women. Soldiers of the Women's Detachment performing rifle drill in Act II, from the 1972 National Ballet of China production
(Reproduced from Red Detachment of Women (Ballet).April 5, 2025.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Red_Detachment_of_Women_(ballet)&oldid=1284090643)

By focusing on these issues, this thesis positions itself at the intersection of memory, gender, and media. It asks: How can an art practice retrieve and represent the suppressed voices of those women, when the conventional archives and histories have left so much unsaid? What narrative strategies and media techniques can be employed to express not only factual history but also the affective, sensory experiences of these individuals? And how can such an artistic narrative prompt viewers to reconsider the known history of nation-building through a more critical and empathetic lens?

In pursuing these questions, the author employs an approach that treats the exhibition as a research methodology – a living, sensory argument that complements the written analysis. The exhibition She Swims in Silence is introduced in the next chapter not merely as an art project, but as an experiential historiography: a means to bridge myth and reality and to materialize the ghostly presences of forgotten women. It uses the metaphor of a fish transforming into a woman – drawn from a Chinese folktale – to symbolize the painful metamorphosis these women underwent, shedding one identity for another amid the tumult of history. The following sections will describe the exhibition's components and link

them to the historical and theoretical context outlined above. Through this practice-led inquiry, the thesis ultimately aims to demonstrate the power of art to recover silenced narratives and to create space for what official history has omitted.This metaphor between women and fish can be traced back to the historical period of ancient China , the exhibition also frames The Tale of the Carp and the Girl (追鱼记) as a guiding mythic motif to illuminate hidden narratives.

Figure 4. Yue opera-The Tale of the Carp and the Girl
Reproduced from"瀚大黎众丨神话戏曲电影连环画《追鱼》1980 年出版 - 知乎," accessed May 9, 2025, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/511104504.

In its original form – dating back to a Ming-era play – the story centers on a carp spirit who assumes a woman's shape to seduce a scholar, a cautionary tale that equated female mystique with lust, jealousy, and deceit, ultimately quelled by divine intervention. After 1949, however, Communist-era adaptations (such as the Yue opera Chasing the Fish(Translations of different versions of Carp and the Girl) and Tian Han's 1957 rewrite The Story of Golden Fish Scales) recast the carp-maiden's journey as one of righteous suffering and sacrifice: shedding her scales and enduring trials in pursuit of love and selfhood, and finally earning recognition as wife rather than enchantress . This metamorphic saga is set against a broader cultural backdrop where fish have long served as veiled metaphors for women. In one famous legend, the beauty of Xi Shi – one of ancient China's "Four Beauties" – was said to be so sublime that fish seeing her reflection forgot how to swim and sank languidly to the depths, a poetic emblem of feminine allure that literally "drowns" aquatic life.Yet fish imagery in Chinese lore also carries a darker resonance in the context of female chastisement: historically, women punished for "transgressions" might be fitted with a "fish cangue" (鱼枷), a wooden yoke cut in the shape of a fish, used to publicly shame them. On the traditional opera stage this gendered instrument of restraint became a stylized prop – for example, in the Peking Opera Su San Under Escort (《苏三起解》), the wronged heroine Su San is paraded with a brightly painted fish-shaped cangue around her neck as a symbol of her fate under patriarchal captivity.

Figure 5. 1927. Shiao Chang-hua (left), Mei Lan-fang in Peking Opera Su San Under EscorT
Reproduced from“公案戏中的那些悬案_澎湃号·湃客_澎湃新闻-The Paper,” accessed May 9, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_8466868.

By invoking these layered references – the carp maiden’s transformative love, Xi Shi’s “sinking fish” beauty, and the fish-shaped cangue that once silenced women – the exhibition turns the fish into a powerful narrative vehicle. The female body here is deliberately obscured, replaced by nets, multichannel video, and glistening rainbow trout motifs, so that femininity is conveyed through myth and metaphor rather than direct representation. This strategy invites viewers to piece together an embodied history of women’s labor and desire from fragmentary symbols, much as one reconstructs a folktale – allowing the submerged truths of women’s experiences to surface through the language of legend and art.

2.Case Studies

In this chapter, the thesis examines specific case studies to ground the discussion in concrete artistic practices. First, it provides a detailed walkthrough of the author’s own thesis exhibition, She Swims in Silence, analyzing how its design, materials, and narrative structure address the research questions at hand. The exhibition itself is treated as the primary case study – a creative work that embodies the process of translating historical silence into visual and sensory experience.

Following the analysis of She Swims in Silence, the chapter broadens its scope to consider three external art projects that resonate with the exhibition's themes and strategies. These include Ho Tzu Nyen's mid-career survey exhibition Time & Tiger (2023), Cao Fei's video artwork Whose Utopia (2006), and Christine Sun Kim's sound art performances and installations (2010s). Each of these case studies is chosen for its exploration of key concepts relevant to this thesis: mythic historiography and immersive exhibition design in Ho Tzu Nyen's work; the interplay of labor, aspiration, and identity in Cao Fei's depiction of factory workers; and the articulation of voice and silence through unconventional media in Christine Sun Kim's practice. By comparing and contrasting these with She Swims in Silence, the thesis builds a dialogue between the author's project and a larger contemporary art context. This dialogue helps to situate the exhibition methodologically and conceptually, highlighting both common approaches and unique innovations.

2.1 "She Swims in Silence" – The Author's Exhibition

Upon entering the exhibition She Swims in Silence, the viewer is immersed in a subdued, otherworldly atmosphere. The space is arranged as a series of installations that the audience encounters sequentially, each corresponding to an aspect of the Aid to Xinjiang women's story. The title of the exhibition comes from an evocative image: a creature (like the mythical fish from the folktale The Tale of the Carp who sheds its scales and painfully transforms into a woman) navigating in silence. This metaphor underpins the exhibition's narrative – the idea of transformation, loss, and muted existence. The curatorial design deliberately blurs the line between myth and history, inviting visitors to piece together meaning from both factual references and symbolic cues.

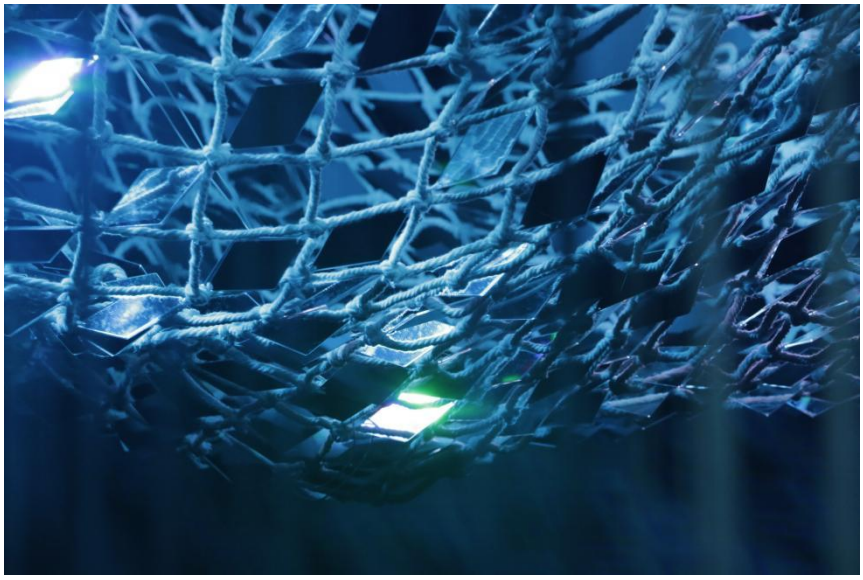

Figure 6. Caught by the Tides (2025) Copyright belongs to the artists

Caught by the Tides is the first installation and serves as a poetic prologue. In a dimly lit section, a large glass water tank is suspended at eye level. Shaped subtly like an abstracted fish's body, the tank contains water in which dozens of fine cotton threads are hung. The

threads dangle into the water, their other ends attached to a metal frame above. On either side of the tank, peculiar speaker units fashioned to resemble fish gills emit a low, muffled audio – these are actually recordings of oral histories and ambient sounds from 1960s textile workshops, collected from archives and the author's family recordings. The sound is indistinct, a murmur of women's voices, machine rhythms, and wind. As these sounds play, the water in the tank vibrates gently, and the tremors travel up the cotton threads.

The effect is mesmerizing: each thread quivers with the passing of invisible waves of sound. The threads catch light as they move, creating a faint shimmering curtain. Over time, patterns emerge in the ripples; at moments it almost appears as if a phantom image or figure is flickering on the vibrating threads. The installation "listens" not with ears, but in the way a fish might – through lateral lines sensing vibrations. By converting long-silenced voices into subtle vibrations, Caught by the Tides gives a tangible form to the idea of voices being present yet unheard. The women's voices, once drowned out by industrial noise, now reappear as gentle waves that animate the delicate network of threads. The viewer, leaning in to watch the trembling fibers, becomes aware of perceiving these stories in a new way – not through clear speech, but through touch and sight, as if feeling the voices. This piece embodies a "quiet yet radical sensory mode of listening": it attunes the audience to listen with their eyes and skin, to detect meaning in vibrations. It is an homage to the persistence of these women's voices, transformed but not entirely extinguished.

Figure 7. Caught by the Tides (2025) (ACTGallery Version) Copyright belongs to the artists

Conceptually, Caught by the Tides functions as an "artificial throat" or a prosthetic voice for the silent protagonists. The elements of the installation form an analog for a vocal system across time and space: the oral history recordings and factory noises are the "larynx," the speakers and water surface act as the "vocal cords," and the cotton threads are like nerve fibers carrying impulses. The question posed is: who is speaking here – the long-gone women workers, the artist, or the machine? By channeling authentic historical audio through an impersonal mechanism, the work highlights both the possibility and the

imperfection of reconstructing lost voices. It is reminiscent of a ventriloquist animating a dummy – the voice is real yet disembodied, echoing among water and threads, reminding us how the identities of these women were often effaced behind their labor. The piece doesn't claim to perfectly restore their voice; rather, it acknowledges the mediation involved and the fragmentation inherent in recalling the past. This self-awareness is key: the installation critiques how some voices are amplified in official narratives while others are dampened, and it positions art as a means to act as an "alternative vocal organ" responding to those injustices. By the end of Caught by the Tides, as the viewer steps away, they are left with a sense that something ethereal yet powerful has been witnessed – a collective murmur of women rising in visual form, "making the empty space echo with an existence that had long been muted".

Moving deeper into the exhibition, the second major work is Liquid Archive, a multi-channel video installation occupying the central area of the gallery. The title Liquid Archive suggests a fluid, non-linear collection of memories, aligning with curator and theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff's idea that history can be a "visual collage" of bodies and narratives rather than a fixed record The installation consists of three large screens arranged in a semi-enclosed circle. When the visitor stands at the center, they are surrounded by synchronised yet distinct video sequences playing on each screen, enveloped by a 360-degree soundscape.

On one screen, archival black-and-white footage from the 1950s shows young women in Mao-era uniforms operating looms and tractors. A particular clip pauses on a shot of a 1930s Shanghai factory girl – actually a still from a propaganda newsreel – who looks up from her work, frozen in time. On the second screen, there appears a graceful mermaid from a classic Chinese painting or an early color film (a nod to the myth of the fish-woman transformation from The Tale of the Carp). She blinks slowly, as if alive. The third screen features a famous image of Madam Zhang Di Yuan (one of the first female tractor drivers lauded as a national model in the 1950s) proudly steering a tractor. Suddenly, as the sequence progresses, these three figures start to morph. The factory girl's face subtly blends with the features of a Hong Kong actress who once portrayed a mermaid; the mermaid's visage in turn merges with that of the tractor heroine. Behind them, the background transitions to footage of rapidly urbanizing skylines and textile machinery in motion.

Figure 8. Groups of young women in aid of Xinjiang promoted as “Iron Maidens”（Zhang Di Yuan, China's first female tractor driver.)
Reproduced from“四位戎装‘女神’，把最美芳华献给西部边疆 - 知乎,” accessed May 9, 2025, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/477735322.

This flowing montage, approximately 10 minutes long and played on a loop, layers women’s faces, historical scenes, documentary clips, pop-culture snippets, and mythic imagery into a continuously evolving tapestry. Generations of women seem to appear and dissolve – from legendary goddesses to socialist icons to contemporary figures – all swimming in the same turbulent current of history. Overhead speakers emit a polyphonic audio: snatches of songs, propaganda narrations, and a whispered multilingual chorus of women’s voices. At times the screens align in unison, depicting a single coherent scene across the panorama; at other times they diverge into three separate storylines, offering parallel threads that the viewer must mentally stitch together.

Figure 9. Liquid Archive (2025) Multi-Channel Video Copyright belongs to the artists

Through Liquid Archive, the exhibition paints a visual poem about transformation and resilience. The official iconography of Communist China's women (e.g., "Iron Girls," model workers, soldiers) is interwoven with older cultural myths and the personal fantasies of ordinary workers. This reflects how women in the 1950s were urged to become new socialist subjects – shedding traditional "feminine" roles much like a fish shedding its scales – but at the cost of personal sacrifices that were seldom acknowledged. For instance, while propaganda celebrated a rural girl's rise to national fame as a tractor driver (granting her accolades and opportunities abroad), it remained silent on intimate struggles: the shame around women's biological needs, the strain of meeting male-oriented labor targets, and the neglect of their emotional lives. Liquid Archive does not narrate these facts explicitly; instead, it conveys the emotional truth behind them. The mesmerizing blend of images and voices seduces the viewer into a dream-like state, mirroring how the promises of liberation and utopia were interlaced with underlying pain and loss for these women.

By standing amidst the three screens, the viewer symbolically becomes a witness to time liquefied. Past and present flow together; identities melt and reform. The piece suggests that history is not a dry chronicle but a living, flowing entity – much like water – where memories of individuals merge into collective consciousness and then re-emerge in new forms. The viewer's own reflection may faintly appear on the screens when bright scenes flash, implying that we, today, are part of this continuity. The struggles and aspirations of that generation of women speak to current gender and equality issues. As the piece concludes, a final sequence shows the motto "My Future is Not a Dream" (the title of a popular 1980s Chinese song) scrawled in calligraphy, and the screens fade to black. The audience is left with overlapping echoes of songs and the murmur of the women's chorus, emphasizing a dialogue between past voices and present ears. In this manner, Liquid Archive fulfills a dual role: it is both an artwork and an alternative archive. Unlike an official archive, which might reduce lives to documents and statistics, this archive is liquid – dynamic, interpretive, inclusive of myth and emotion, insisting that understanding history requires imagination as much as information.

Arranged in a corner of the gallery, somewhat separate from the main video installation, is a sculptural assemblage titled Scales of Your Life (你生活的鳞片). This piece provides a tactile, contemplative counterpoint to the audio-visual intensity of Liquid Archive. In a dim alcove, visitors find what appears to be the remnants of a small stage performance: a large mirror, cracked into several pieces, leans against the wall; on the floor rests a weathered wooden prop painted to look like ocean waves; draped over a rack is a long silk costume dress adorned with iridescent sequins, reminiscent of a mermaid's tail.

The mirror's fractured surface catches fragments of the other installations' lights and images – one can see glints of the shimmering threads from *Caught by the Tides* and flashes from *Liquid Archive* reflected in it, along with the viewer's own face peering back.

Figure 10. Scales of Your Life (2025) Installation, 3m*1.5m Copyright belongs to the artists

The arrangement is carefully crafted to suggest a narrative absence. One can almost picture that an actress or performer inhabited this space moments ago, enacting the role of a fish-woman or a revolutionary heroine – but she is now gone, leaving only “scales” (the sequins, the mirror shards) of her presence behind. By putting the viewer in the position of both spectator and stand-in performer, Scales of Your Life creates an eerie sense of identification. The audience member looking into the broken mirror sees themselves fragmented and multiplied, surrounded by ghostly props. In that moment, they inhabit the void of the missing protagonist. This invites a personal reflection: How do we imagine the stories that were never recorded? Can we step into the shoes (or tail) of those absent women and envision their narratives?

Emotionally, Scales of Your Life carries a tone of longing and possibility. There is a deliberate emptiness – an open-endedness that “invites you to envision new stories to fill the stage”. It poignantly alludes to all the unsung performances of bravery, love, and sorrow that those women lived through but which history did not formally stage. In a sense, the piece is a metaphor for the thesis project itself: the stage is set with fragments of myth and history, and it is up to us – through creativity and empathy – to animate it with the narratives of those who have been left out. The cracked mirror further symbolizes the shattered nature of personal history under the weight of national myth; yet, through the cracks, new visions can emerge (the viewer literally sees new composite images in the mirror). The “scales” in the title refer not only to fish scales but also to scales of time and memory, the layers of one’s life that accumulate and flake off. Here, the scattered sequins might be seen as individual memories or moments of glimmer – seemingly trivial, but collectively they can form a dazzling skin.

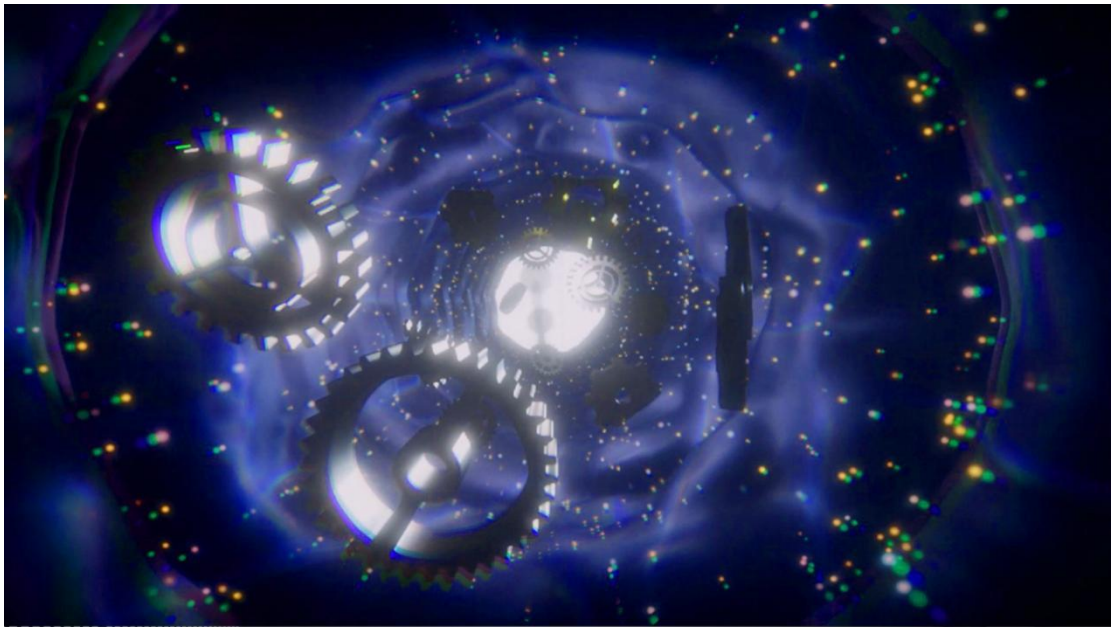

Figure 11. Rainbow Trout's Serendipity (2025)VR Interactive Film

Having guided the visitor through an introspective pause with Scales of Your Life, the exhibition culminates in a final piece that shifts tone towards dark humor and absurdity: Rainbow Trout's Amazing Journey (虹鳟鱼奇遇记), a short virtual reality (VR) film experienced via headset. This VR piece serves as an epilogue, tying together the fish metaphor, the historical narrative, and a critical commentary on technology and gender. The choice of VR – a contemporary medium – also bridges the past to the present and future, aligning with the thesis's interest in how modern media re-engages with history.

Figure 12. Kim Il Sung (right) and Zhou Enlai (left) in July 1961
Reproduced from"Conversations with Zhou Enlai: The Collection Continues to Grow | Wilson Center," accessed May 9, 2025,
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/conversations-zhou-enlai-the-collection-continues-to-grow.

In Rainbow Trout's Journey, the viewer dons the VR headset and finds themselves embodying an unlikely protagonist: a North Korean salmon egg. An introductory voiceover (delivered in a playful, storybook tone) informs the "player" that they will travel as this fertilized egg, which was gifted by North Korea to China in 1959 (an actual historical fact regarding the introduction of rainbow trout to China). What ensues is a fantastical first-person journey upstream: the viewer, as the egg (and later as a tiny fish), is swept from the churning currents of the Korean rivers into a surreal cross-country voyage. They experience a cacophony of motion – the rattling of a train to China's northeast, then the honking of a truck transporting them further west – as they metaphorically traverse over 3,000 kilometers from the Korean coast to the Ili River in Xinjiang. Throughout the trip, ghostly snippets of Chinese revolutionary songs and kitchen chatter of migrants play in the background, mixing absurdly with underwater gurgles and engine noises.

The visuals in the VR are a mixture of stylized animation and 360° video snippets. One moment, the user floats in clear blue waters seeing fellow fish; the next, they are in a rattling freight car peeking through slats at changing landscapes; later, they appear to swim through the air over desert dunes, guided by an invisible current of sound. Scattered through the journey are transient images: for instance, bubbles that float by containing within them brief scenes – a young woman working in a cotton field, or a montage of documents like train tickets and maps – hinting at the parallel journey of women traveling to Xinjiang. In a particularly whimsical scene, the user (still as a fish) swims through a cloud of floating ovaries (yes, human anatomical ovaries, rendered as pinkish bubble-like forms). This is an absurd but pointed metaphor: the female reproductive potential (the ovaries) and the fish eggs mingle, symbolizing the fates of the women and the trout eggs that were both transplanted far from their origin.

The use of a satirical, even absurdist narrative in Rainbow Trout's Amazing Journey serves to highlight the often overlooked link between human and non-human migration, and to comment on the artificiality of the circumstances that brought those women to Xinjiang. By paralleling the women's journey with the importation of a non-native fish species (a journey orchestrated by political forces in both cases), the piece invites reflection on themes of displacement and adaptation. Just as the rainbow trout had to traverse thousands of miles to a new ecosystem, carrying with it the legacy of a gift between socialist allies, so too did the young women travel vast distances under political directives, expected to spawn new lives in a strange land. The black humor becomes apparent when the viewer realizes the irony: they have been made to play as a female fish (implicitly, since the egg and ovaries are involved), thereby momentarily inhabiting a "unique female digital avatar" in a game-like simulation of historical migration. The VR medium emphasizes immersion – the viewer uses their own bodily motions to look around and move, enhancing empathy through embodiment. The piece leverages the "liquidity" of the digital experience (referencing sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, where mobility and change are constant) to let the audience flow through "cracks in history" and experience the absurd connectivity of disparate events.

In the final moments of the VR, the fish (the viewer) reaches Xinjiang's Ili River and morphs into a woman standing on the riverbank – presumably one of the migrant women, merging the identities fully. She looks up at a sky where constellations form the outline of a fish. The voiceover, now in the woman's voice, says: "I swam these streams of time and space to find my school." It's a poignant, if enigmatic, closure. The viewer removes the headset and finds themselves back in the gallery, perhaps with a new appreciation for the improbable journeys and identity shifts that history can encompass.

Taken together, the components of She Swims in Silence demonstrate the exhibition's role as a method of inquiry. The works deploy myth (the fish-woman), sensory immersion (sound vibrations, VR), archival media (historical footage, oral recordings), and interactivity to explore how narrative gaps can be filled and how silenced voices might resurface. The exhibition itself is a conversation between the material (threads, water, film, props) and the immaterial (memories, myths, emotions). By actively engaging the viewer's senses and participation, it transforms the audience into co-creators of meaning. This strategy reflects an ethnographic impulse – treating the gallery as a space where one can experience a reconstructed culture or history firsthand – aligning with the thesis's view of exhibition-as-research practice.

2.2 Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & Tiger – Mythical Histories in Exhibition Form

The themes of myth, history, and immersive storytelling found in She Swims in Silence have echoes in the works of Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen, whose mid-career survey exhibition Time & Tiger (first shown at the Singapore Art Museum in 2023) offers a rich comparative case. Ho Tzu Nyen's practice frequently delves into Southeast Asian histories, employing legends, allegories, and multi-sensory installations to address how history is constructed and perceived. In Time & Tiger, Ho uses the symbol of the tiger and the concept of time to weave together narratives of colonialism, myth, and identity in Asia. The exhibition's title itself suggests a play on words (invoking the idiom "Time and tide…" as well as the literal presence of the tiger in his works) and indicates a focus on temporal and mythical imagery.

One centerpiece of Ho's exhibition was a multi-room immersive environment. Visitors navigated through sections designed like theatrical sets – including, notably, four small tatami-floored rooms referencing Japanese culture, which housed Ho's video installation Hotel Aporia (2019) about kamikaze pilots and Kyoto philosophers. In the context of Time & Tiger, Ho often blends historical fact with fiction: he traces, for instance, the historical distribution of tigers across Southeast Asia and ties it to colonial narratives and local folklore. His video works layer computer-generated imagery of tigers with archival footage and dramatized scenes, much as the exhibition's design layers different times and places within one space. The effect is a "multi-temporal collage," where one can sense ghosts of the past roaming contemporary consciousness.

Figure 13. Time & Tiger (2022) Exhibition
Reproduced from"Ho Tzu Nyen Time and the Tiger Exhibition Mudam Luxembourg | Hypebeast," accessed May 9, 2025, https://hypebeast.com/2025/1/ho-tzu-nyen-time-tiger-exhibition-mudam-luxembourg.

Ho Tzu Nyen's approach parallels the author's exhibition in several ways. 2First, both employ a form of mythical metaphor to access history (fish in one, tiger in the other). The tiger in Ho's work symbolizes untamed nature, colonial fears, and suppressed regional narratives (for example, the Malay legend of the weretiger as a figure of resistance); similarly, the fish-woman in She Swims in Silence symbolizes the transformation and suffering of women under a grand narrative. Both artists use these symbols not for escapism but to open up questions about how history is remembered and told. Ho has said that modernity in Asia is too complex to be captured by Western linear narratives alone, hence his works like Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia algorithmically remix historical data to reveal hidden hybridity. This resonates with the thesis's stance that official history (often linear and state-centric) fails to capture the layered reality of the Aid to Xinjiang women, which the exhibition tries to address by mixing myth and archive.

Second, Ho's exhibition design and the author's show both emphasize immersive, spatial storytelling. In Time & Tiger, the exhibition itself was an artwork: each room, sound, and object contributed to the narrative. Likewise, She Swims in Silence considers the entire gallery a narrative space, where the viewer's journey from one piece to the next composes an experience. This is reflective of a trend in contemporary art where the exhibition as a whole conveys meaning beyond individual works. For Ho, placing the viewer on tatami mats watching screens embedded in a Japanese setting was crucial to evoke the mindset of his subjects and connect disparate eras. For the author, enveloping the viewer in water vibrations or VR not only presents content but also simulates conditions (e.g., sensory deprivation or disorientation) akin to the historical experiences being conveyed.

[2] Ho Tzu Nyen, Time & Tiger (mid-career survey exhibition, Singapore Art Museum, 2023).

Finally, both Ho and the author are engaged in what could be termed alternative historiography through art. Ho Tzu Nyen's integration of spectral presences – like the tiger spirits or ghostly historical figures – can be seen as giving form to those elements of history that official accounts marginalize or exclude. Time & Tiger was described as allowing visitors to "encounter echoes of imperialism and colonial legacies as spectral presences over contemporary society". This is analogous to how She Swims in Silence populates the gallery with the unseen voices and traces of the bingtuan women. In essence, both works challenge viewers to become active interpreters of history, rather than consumers of a predetermined story. Ho often provides pieces of a puzzle – e.g., alphabetized fragments in his Critical Dictionary – that the audience must assemble. Similarly, the author's exhibition offers fragments (visual, auditory, tactile) of the women's narrative that the audience must connect.

Figure 14. Time & Tiger (2022) Exhibition
Reproduced from"Ho Tzu Nyen Time and the Tiger Exhibition Mudam Luxembourg | Hypebeast," accessed May 9, 2025, https://hypebeast.com/2025/1/ho-tzu-nyen-time-tiger-exhibition-mudam-luxembourg.

Through Ho Tzu Nyen's case, this thesis situates the exhibition She Swims in Silence within a lineage of art practices that interrogate history via myth and immersive narrative. It underscores that the strategy of blending fiction and reality is a deliberate and potent tool: not to falsify history, but to reveal deeper truths about how history is experienced and remembered. Just as Ho's Time & Tiger uses the poetic image of the tiger to speak about time, power, and memory beyond straightforward documentary, the fish in She Swims in Silence speaks to a submerged history of women by transcending literal representation. The exhibition format, in both cases, becomes a container where multiple timelines and

perspectives coexist, provoking the audience to sense the “multiple modernities” that shape our world .

2.3 Cao Fei: Whose Utopia – Labor, Dreams, and Identity

Another illuminating case study is Chinese multimedia artist Cao Fei and her early video work Whose Utopia (2006). Cao Fei’s practice often explores the collision of reality and fantasy amidst China’s rapid modernization, with a particular attention to the lives and dreams of young people in factory or urban settings. Whose Utopia is especially pertinent to this thesis as it directly deals with factory workers – both men and women – and examines how individuals negotiate their identities and aspirations within the constraints of monotonous labor. This resonates strongly with the experiences of the Aid to Xinjiang women and the broader theme of personal narratives suppressed by collective obligations.

Figure 15. Whose Utopia (2006) video art
Reproduced from“Drop In with Artists | MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 9, 2025, https://www.moma.org/calendar/programs/191.

Whose Utopia[3] is a roughly 20-minute video filmed at the OSRAM lighting factory in the Pearl River Delta (south China), a region known for migrant labor. Cao Fei spent months embedded in the factory, observing and collaborating with workers . The video is structured in three parts – “Imagination of Product,” “Factory Fairytale,” and “My Future is Not a Dream” – each blending documentary footage with elements of surreal performance. In the first part, the camera presents the factory’s reality: the repetitive motions of assembly lines, close-ups of light bulbs, mechanical rhythms of production. In the second part, however, the film shifts into a dreamlike mode. Here, on the factory floor itself, several workers momentarily transform into dancers, musicians, and performers amid the machines. For instance, a young woman ballet dances gracefully in her work uniform between conveyor belts; another worker, clad in a sparkling costume, performs a pop song routine; a

[3] Cao Fei, Whose Utopia (video installation, 2006; exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2020–2021).

group forms a band playing rock music with their instruments among the industrial equipment. These performances are not random – they are expressions of the workers' own unrealized dreams and talents. The third part returns to a quieter, contemplative documentary style, as workers hold up handwritten messages about their personal aspirations under the melancholic song "My Future is Not a Dream."

Cao Fei's Whose Utopia poignantly contrasts the drudgery of labor with the inner lives of workers, highlighting a core issue: in the eyes of society and industry, these workers might appear as anonymous cogs in the machine, but each harbors individual creativity and hope. A similar duality exists in the story of the bingtuan women – officially they were lauded as model workers, but their personal voices and feminine identities were often negated. Whose Utopia thus provides a vital reference point for how an artist can render visible the "unseen desires, emotions, and dreams" of people within a suppressive environment.

In terms of technique, Cao Fei's use of magical realism and role-play in an actual factory space parallels the strategy in She Swims in Silence of injecting myth (fish maiden, mermaid costumes) into real historical settings. Both works create a space where ordinary individuals are briefly allowed to become extraordinary – to step outside the roles imposed on them. The factory women in Cao's film dress as cosplayers, dancers, singers; the Aid to Xinjiang women in the author's exhibition metaphorically become fish-women, voices that make water dance. In both, the act of performance or transformation is a means of reclaiming agency. It answers the question: "Whose utopia is it?" In other words, whose vision of the future are we working towards – the individual's or the system's? Cao Fei pointedly asks if the workers' own utopias have any place in the grand narrative of China's economic miracle. The thesis similarly asks if the XPCC women's personal utopias (their hopes for a good life, love, self-fulfillment) had any place in the narrative of socialist construction, and how art can recover those subjective truths.

Whose Utopia also demonstrates the power of montage and music to evoke what straightforward documentation might not. By using a lyrical structure and shifting aesthetic, Cao Fei allows viewers to emotionally connect with the workers as people rather than statistics. One particularly striking image is the ballerina dancing amid factory machinery – an image of fragile beauty in a harsh environment, which speaks volumes about grace under pressure and the incongruity of human aspiration in a mechanical world. This approach can be likened to Liquid Archive in She Swims in Silence, where images of women, mythical figures, and machines merge to show the humanity within an industrial-political context. Indeed, Cao Fei "used montage, music, and imagery to contrast the repetitive work of factory workers with their dreams and aspirations", exactly the method employed in Liquid Archive to juxtapose official history (repetitive propaganda images) with personal mythic narrative (women's faces and mermaid).

In a way, Whose Utopia asks "What do these workers live for beyond making light bulbs?" and She Swims in Silence asks "Who were these women beyond being soldiers of production and how did they feel?" Both challenge the viewer to see the subjects not as distant others in a propagandistic tableau, but as people with whom we can empathize. It is noteworthy

that in Cao's piece, some workers performed in costume and some in plain clothes, some acts were joyous, some melancholic – indicating a spectrum of personal realities. Similarly, the exhibition She Swims in Silence presents moments of beauty (Caught by the Tides' shimmering voices), sorrow (Scales of Your Life' emptiness), absurd humor (Rainbow Trout VR journey), and pride (the resilience shown in Liquid Archive).

By examining Whose Utopia, the thesis aligns itself with an existing artistic discourse on labor and identity in modern China, reinforcing that the use of art to document and imagine the lives of laboring women is a powerful tool of social critique and historical inquiry. It underscores that the bridging of art and ethnography – Cao Fei's quasi-documentary approach and the author's family-story-driven approach – can yield narratives that neither pure fiction nor academic history alone could achieve.

2.4 Christine Sun Kim: Voice and Silence – Expanding the Notion of Voice

The final case study in this chapter turns to the work of Christine Sun Kim, an American sound artist who is deaf. At first glance, Christine Sun Kim's art might seem removed from the historical and cultural specificities of the Aid to Xinjiang narrative. However, her exploration of sound, silence, and communication provides a vital conceptual parallel. Kim's work fundamentally challenges what it means to have a "voice" and who gets to be heard – themes central to this thesis's concern with silenced narratives.

Christine Sun Kim has developed an expansive artistic language involving drawings, performances, and installations that visualize sound and reimagine its social dimensions. Being deaf since birth, Kim approaches sound as something experienced viscerally and conceptually rather than audibly. One of her motivations, as she has expressed, is to assert a sense of ownership over sound as a deaf person. She has stated that through her art she "explores ways of transmuting sound and silence" into visual forms. In other words, she often takes elements of sonic communication (musical notation, volume dynamics, voice signals) and translates them into something visible or tactile, thereby making sound accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences in new ways.

Figure 16. Christine Sun Kim, All Day, All Night (2025) Exhibition
Reproduced from "Sonic Identity Politics with Christine Sun Kim," DIS Magazine (blog), January 20, 2016, https://dismagazine.com/blog/80643/sonic-identity-politics-with-christine-sun-kim/.

Translated to our context, the voices of the bingtuan women were not completely absent – they were very obscure sounds, drowned by louder narratives. Christine Sun Kim's insistence on the materiality and presence of silence resonates with the exhibition's attempt to materialize silent voices. The trembling threads in Caught by the Tides are essentially visualizing an almost inaudible vibration – akin to how Kim's drawings visualize quietness. Both suggest that silence has its own texture and can carry meaning if one learns to perceive it differently.

Kim's work also examines the social rules and politics of voice. As a deaf artist, she often highlights how society disciplines the use of sound – for instance, how she was taught not to make noise, or how loudness is perceived differently by hearing individuals. One might draw a parallel to how the Aid to Xinjiang women's expressions were socially regulated: they were expected to be stoic, not to complain (silence as discipline), and their voices were mediated through state media if ever represented. Kim's piece Face Opera II (2013), for example, had performers using only facial movements to convey a soundless opera, underscoring that communication can occur in the absence of voiced sound. In the thesis exhibition, Scales of Your Life similarly asks the viewer to imagine a story through visual cues without any direct narrative voice. These approaches validate the idea that voice is more than spoken words or audible sound – it can be conveyed through visuals, motions, vibrations.

Moreover, Christine Sun Kim often deals with ownership of voice and sound. By creating art that transforms sound into a visual domain, she inverts a historical dynamic in which deaf individuals were marginalized in sound culture. She humorously notes, "I often employ my own voice in my work… my motivation for creation is to have property over sound". This notion of claiming ownership is deeply relevant. The women in the bingtuan had their narratives effectively taken from them – their experiences got absorbed into the state's

property (the grand narrative). The thesis project, by reconstructing an expressive space (the exhibition) around their history, attempts to return a sense of ownership of that history to them (or at least to their memory/descendants). Just as Kim uses art to assert her agency in a realm she's been excluded from, the thesis uses art to reassert the agency of those women in the realm of history that excluded their perspectives.

By studying Christine Sun Kim's practice, the thesis gains insight into the aesthetics of silence and strategies for un-silencing. One key insight is that amplifying the marginalized voice might not always be about making it louder; it can be about changing the mode of perception. In the exhibition, rather than trying to literally amplify old recordings of women (which might not even exist), the approach was to encode their voices into new forms (vibrations, visual collages, metaphoric narratives). This finds precedent in Kim's creative translations of sound to sight. Another insight is that humor and play can be potent. Kim often uses wit (titles like The Sound of Obsessing or playful visuals) to invite people into a serious discussion about sound and power. Similarly, the VR piece uses absurd humor to talk about a very serious historical displacement, making the topic approachable and thought-provoking simultaneously.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The artistic explorations and case studies in the previous chapters are deeply informed by theoretical perspectives from visual culture, gender studies, and media theory. This chapter provides a literature review of key concepts and texts that underpin the thesis, establishing an intellectual framework for analyzing the silencing of narratives and the potential of art to disrupt that silence.

Visual Culture and the Bodyscape: Nicholas Mirzoeff

Art historian and visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff offers valuable insights into how bodies are represented and how visuality intersects with power. In Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure (1995), Mirzoeff examines the portrayal of the human body in art and visual media across history, arguing that the body is a primary site where social and political meanings are inscribed. A critical takeaway from Mirzoeff's work is that the body is not a neutral, purely biological entity; it is constructed and regulated by cultural forces. As Mirzoeff provocatively puts it, "Your body is not itself. Nor, I should add, is mine. It is under siege from the pharmaceutical, aerobic, dietetic, ... calorie-controlled forces" . This quote illustrates how modern institutions and norms bombard individuals with expectations of how their bodies should function or appear.

Applying this to the context of the thesis: the Aid to Xinjiang women's bodies were effectively commandeered by the state narrative. They were expected to be as strong as men, to labor without regard to gendered needs, essentially to become "ideal figures" of socialist modernity. Their femininity was to be visible only in terms of productivity and virtue (healthy, sturdy workers and loyal communists) rather than traditional or personal

expressions. The concept of the bodyscape—the panorama of bodily images shaped by art and ideology—helps explain how the image of the robust female worker was propagated as a visual icon in propaganda posters and news, while other aspects of these women's identities were erased from the picture.

Mirzoeff's analysis also shows that visual culture has the power to normalize certain bodies and marginalize others. In revolutionary China's visual culture, the bodies of bingtuan women were normalized as genderless laboring bodies. Absent were images of them as mothers, as lovers, or even as tired, hurting individuals; those aspects were invisible in the bodyscape of the era. The thesis exhibition attempts to counter this by creating images and experiences that reintroduce the missing aspects—such as vulnerability (the trembling threads conveying fragility) and mythical femininity (the mermaid figure, the ovaries in VR)—into the visual narrative.

Furthermore, Mirzoeff's work encourages a critical view of how history is presented visually. He notes that dominant visual representations often reinforce normative ideas about society. In the case studies, Ho Tzu Nyen and Cao Fei both disrupt normative representations (the heroic colonial narrative, the efficient factory worker image) by injecting alternative visuals (tiger spirits, dancing workers). Likewise, the thesis exhibition constructs a visual counter-narrative for the Aid to Xinjiang women, effectively attempting a new bodyscape: one where these women are not just components of a state machine, but complex beings with voices and stories.

Mirzoeff's influence also seeps into how we understand the act of witnessing. Visual culture theory posits that to see is an act of power; controlling the image is controlling the narrative. By creating an exhibition that immerses people in new images and sensory experiences, the thesis is reclaiming some visual power on behalf of the silenced women, offering viewers a chance to "see" history from a different angle.

In summary, Nicholas Mirzoeff's theoretical framework provides a language for understanding the visual erasure of the women's stories and the strategies an artist might use to make them visible again. It underscores the importance of questioning what is shown and not shown in historical narratives and supports the thesis's approach of using art to reveal the embodied dimension of history that traditional archives fail to capture.

Gender Performativity and Narrative Absence: Judith Butler

The work of feminist philosopher Judith Butler, especially her theory of gender performativity, offers another crucial lens. Butler famously argued that gender is not an innate quality but an identity continuously constituted through performance – through repeated acts, gestures, and behaviors. In her words, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act… a doing rather than a being.". This idea, from Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter (1993), revolutionized how we think about gender roles: they are not fixed, but rather enacted and reinforced by societal norms.

Relating Butler's theory to the thesis subject: the Aid to Xinjiang campaign essentially performed a certain idea of gender equality that masked an underlying inequality. Women were put in traditionally male roles (soldiers, farm laborers, factory workers) and the state proclaimed gender sameness in labor, which on the surface seemed progressive. However, this was a one-sided performance. The women were expected to adopt "male" roles (perform masculinity in strength and endurance), while their unique struggles (menstrual needs, pregnancy, emotional expression) were denied or stigmatized – essentially pushing them to perform as if they were not women at all in any traditional sense. This led to what the thesis describes as a gendered narrative absence: the official story had no space for femininity except as a trait of weakness to be overcome.

Butler's notion that gender is performative and that repeated norms can be subverted resonates with how these women navigated their lives. Many likely internalized the new norms and took pride in "working like men," yet there must have been moments of rupture where the performance faltered – for instance, health breakdowns or private spaces where they could express traditionally forbidden feelings. These moments are essentially absent in historical records because they contradict the performance. Butler's framework helps us understand that the silence around these aspects was not incidental but necessary to maintain the gender performance the state desired. In other words, acknowledging their specifically female suffering would undermine the claim that socialist development had solved "the woman question."

The exhibition's strategy can be interpreted in Butlerian terms as an attempt to expose and disrupt the performative norms of that historical narrative. By reintroducing elements like mythic femininity and literal biological references (the ovaries in VR), it's deliberately drawing attention to what was suppressed. It suggests that the women's true identities were more complex than the state's gender script allowed. If gender is an act, these women were forced into a role – and the art project symbolically breaks character, showing fragments of the persona behind the role. For example, Scales of Your Life invites imagining the missing actress (who could be seen as the "real" woman behind the heroic worker façade). This is akin to revealing the performativity – showing that the stage was there all along even if the performance (of the model worker) overshadowed the person.

In terms of narrative, Butler's ideas encourage us to see the official history as a regulatory narrative that needed to be performed consistently to hold power. It was a script that both men and women in that era had to follow. The literature review thus situates this historical silence in a larger pattern of how power constrains narratives of identity. To tie Butler back into the exhibition: The installation Caught by the Tides could be interpreted as illustrating a breakdown of performance. The voices in the water are murmuring, possibly in pain or longing – they are not the loud, confident slogans of state propaganda. They represent the backstage of history's play. Similarly, the VR piece's absurdity perhaps comments on how ridiculous the imposed roles can seem when viewed from an outside perspective (playing a fish underscores how dehumanizing the experience might have felt).

By leveraging Butler's theory, the thesis underscores the constructed nature of the "gender equality" narrative in Maoist China and highlights the real inequalities it hid. It also reinforces a methodological point: to recover silenced perspectives, one often has to break normative performances and allow for subversive acts of expression. The exhibition is one such subversive act – using art to say what official discourse wouldn't allow. In doing so, it aligns with Butler's vision of resistance: subtle repetitions with difference, small acts that reveal and undermine the established script.

Media, Memory, and the Archive: Bernard Stiegler's Technics of History

The thesis also draws on media theory, particularly the work of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, to frame how history is recorded and remembered. Stiegler's ideas about technology (technics) and memory are particularly relevant because they provide a way to think about the archive – not just as a physical repository, but as a dynamic process of externalizing memory via media.

Stiegler posits that history is first and foremost a history of its media and representational forms (a concept alluded to in the thesis via "the history of representation"). In other words, each epoch's understanding of history is deeply shaped by the predominant technologies of recording and disseminating information – from writing and print to photography and digital media. Our relationship to the past is always mediated. Stiegler argues that technics (tools and systems humans use) are like a "third memory," external supports that both augment and in some ways control human memory (for example, writing allowed memory to be stored outside the brain, photography allowed moments to be visually frozen, etc.).

In the context of the Aid to Xinjiang women, the lack of adequate media records of their personal lives (no diaries published, limited photos except staged ones, etc.) is a key reason their stories faded. Official archives preserved certain data (production output, propaganda images of model workers) but not the nuanced human details. This is an example of how the technologies of memory at the time – controlled by state media and bureaucratic record-keeping – created an incomplete historical memory. Stiegler's perspective would say that to truly revisit that history, one must consider how media could be used now to reactivate and re-present it.

The thesis exhibition can be seen as leveraging contemporary media (multichannel video, VR, sound art) to engage with a past that was mediated differently. By doing so, it participates in what Stiegler might call re-memory through new technical means. Stiegler often emphasizes the role of art and technology in creating new circuits of memory. For example, he suggests that cinema and digital media open possibilities to re-experience time differently, thus reshaping our memory of events (he calls cinema a kind of "time machine" for experience). In Liquid Archive, the use of video montage literally creates a new "archive" as a flowing experience rather than static documents, thus offering a new way to remember those women – not through reading a textbook, but through a sensorial journey. This aligns with Stiegler's idea that the evolution of media changes how we process history.

Additionally, Stiegler's views on authenticity and technics can be reflected upon. One might ask: is reconstructing voices through digital means (like the artificial voice in water) an authentic way of remembering, or is it a distortion? Stiegler would likely avoid a simple true/false binary and instead consider how each technical mediation opens some possibilities and closes others. The exhibition accepts the necessary artifice (the inherent mediation) as part of its method – it doesn't claim to directly channel the past but to evoke it through modern media. This reflexivity is even present in Caught by the Tides, which questions whose voice is it – human or machine. In doing so, it acknowledges what Stiegler might call the aporia of technics: we rely on external supports to remember, but those supports also transform what is remembered.

Finally, Stiegler's concern with memory and loss (he writes about "la mémoire, l'oubli" – memory and forgetting) resonates here. He might argue that the marginalization of the women's voices was a kind of organized forgetting – part of what he terms symbolic misery, when a society's cultural memory excludes certain experiences leading to a sense of loss and disorientation. The project to reinsert these experiences through art is, in a small way, an antidote to symbolic misery – it tries to heal a cultural memory by acknowledging a wound. Stiegler believed that new media art could be key in such therapeutic memory work, because it offers fresh symbols and narratives for collective reflection.

Thus, the literature review positions Stiegler's theory as a justification for the exhibition's experimental format. The contemporary digital and installation art medium is not just aesthetic choice; it's theoretically grounded as a necessary means to engage with a history whose traces are sparse. By reconstructing fragments and creating a space for "reunion" with a past not personally lived, the project aligns with Stiegler's vision of using technology to extend our understanding of ourselves across time. The viewers, through a kind of prosthetic memory (the exhibition), can witness a historical experience second-hand and thereby become, as the thesis puts it, "witnesses of history, rather than silent bystanders" – a phrase that echoes the Stieglerian hope that new media can turn passive consumers into active participants in cultural memory.

Myth, Media, and Modernity: Additional Theoretical Touchstones

Beyond the three primary theorists above, the thesis also tangentially engages with other concepts. The idea of myth in modern context, as touched on by anthropologists or scholars like Roland Barthes, underlies the use of the fish-woman tale. Myth can be seen as a form of collective memory or narrative that carries cultural values subconsciously. By repurposing a myth (the carp turning into a woman) in an art project about history, the thesis follows the trajectory of many modern artists who use myth to critique reality – showing, for example, how myths can both illuminate truths and mask them. The carp's story is one of transformation through suffering, which becomes an allegory for the women's transformation; yet it's also a myth historically used perhaps to enforce moral lessons about patience and virtue. The exhibition flips the script, using it to question rather than to affirm societal norms.

Additionally, the sociological concept introduced by Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" (as referenced in the VR piece) provides a frame for interpreting the fluid approach to history. Bauman's notion that in our era, change is constant and solid structures are melting, helps in understanding why an installation like Liquid Archive is a fitting form: history itself is not solid in memory but fluid, especially a marginalized history that was never concretely documented in the first place. The VR's emphasis on liquidity and absurd journey also speaks to the unpredictability and dislocation of modern identities – be it a fish out of water or a person out of their homeland.

The concept of "home(land) phantom pains" (mentioned as "乡土幻痛" in the Chinese text) suggests an emotional theory, likely drawn from diaspora studies or psychology, referring to the lingering pain of separation from one's home. This illuminates the emotional heart of the thesis: those women probably felt phantom pains for homes and lives left behind, even as they built new ones in Xinjiang. It's a concept that humanizes them beyond the collectivist persona. Recognizing such phantom pain is part of a contemporary understanding of trauma and memory, enriched by theorists like Svetlana Boym on nostalgia or Marianne Hirsch on postmemory, though they aren't explicitly cited.

By bringing together these theoretical strands – visual culture, gender performativity, media philosophy, myth analysis – the literature review establishes an interdisciplinary foundation. It demonstrates that the thesis isn't just an art project or a historical essay, but a synthesis of both, drawing tools from critical theory to navigate between them. Each theory helps answer a facet of the central problem: Mirzoeff helps explain how to visualize the invisible; Butler explains why the voices were silenced and how identity played out; Stiegler explains the importance of media in recuperating memory. Together, they provide a scaffolding to ensure that the interpretations and methods of the thesis are not only personally meaningful but also situated in broader scholarly conversations.

In concluding this literature review, we see that the act of giving voice to the silenced is as much about how we see, how we narrate, and how we remember, as it is about the content of the stories themselves. The following chapter will conclude the thesis by summarizing what has been achieved through this approach and what it suggests for future work at the intersection of art and history.

4. Conclusion

This thesis set out to recover and illuminate the lost gendered narratives of the women who participated in state-led migration to Xinjiang after 1949. Through a combination of practice-based artistic research and theoretical analysis, it has sought to address the silences in official history and demonstrate how an exhibition can function as a form of alternative historiography. In this concluding chapter, the findings and contributions of the thesis are summarized, and reflections are offered on the broader implications for art, history, and cultural memory.

One of the central achievements of this work is the restoration of agency and voice to a marginalized group through creative means. The exhibition She Swims in Silence became a space where the women of the bingtuan could symbolically "speak" – in vibrations, images, and metaphors – after decades of silence. Together, these works functioned as what we might call a counter-archive: not an archive of documents, but of sensations and images that fill in historical gaps. In doing so, the project demonstrated that art can recover nuances that conventional historiography might miss – the sound of resilience, the visual poetry of survival, the humor amidst hardship.

The comparative analysis with other artists underscored that this project is part of a larger contemporary effort to challenge dominant narratives. Ho Tzu Nyen's reimagining of historical myth, Cao Fei's highlighting of individual dreams against industrial life, and Christine Sun Kim's redefinition of voice and silence all find echoes in this thesis. The case studies confirmed that using multimedia installations and storytelling is an effective strategy to engage viewers in historical and social critique. By situating *She Swims in Silence* in dialogue with these artists, the thesis also validated its methods – showing that immersive design, layering of fact and fiction, and sensory engagement are recognized tools in addressing complex histories and identities.

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis contributes to our understanding of gender and memory in a Chinese historical context. It sheds light on how Communist China's push for gender equality in labor paradoxically resulted in a form of gender erasure, replacing one kind of patriarchy with another subtle form of control. The women were celebrated as "women can hold up half the sky," yet to hold it up they had to become indistinguishable from men in practice, which meant their specific voices and needs vanished from view. This adds a case study to feminist discussions: even well-intentioned equality campaigns can silence the very subjects they aim to elevate if they don't allow for diversity of experience. Judith Butler's theory helped articulate this by showing how the performative norms allowed little deviation. Thus, historically, we see that progress narratives can carry internal silences—something future policymakers and historians should remain conscious of.

The project also underscores the role of media and art as tools for historical inquiry. Following Bernard Stiegler's insights, the thesis effectively used new media to bridge a temporal gap. It suggests that historians and artists might collaborate more in the future: where archives fail, artistic reconstruction (carefully done and transparently presented) can offer insight. This is not to replace archive-based history, but to complement it – especially for emotive understanding. For instance, a purely text-based history might note that many women suffered hearing loss in the textile mills; the installation let the audience feel a hint of what that silence and droning noise meant for a human being. Such embodied understanding can foster empathy and a deeper grasp of historical realities, which is valuable for education and collective remembrance.

There are, of course, limitations to what this approach can accomplish. An exhibition is ephemeral (in time and space), reaching a limited audience directly. This thesis, by documenting it in writing and analysis, attempts to extend its reach. However, translating the richness of the multi-sensory experience into text is challenging – an inherent issue when practice and research converge. The process underlines a need for more hybrid forms of thesis in academia, where possible – acknowledging creative work as a form of knowledge. The success of this project in an academic context demonstrates MIT's openness to such interdisciplinary work, and it sets a precedent for future students who might propose to "write history with art."

In concluding, the thesis demonstrates that the convergence of art practice and scholarly research can generate a more holistic understanding of historical subjects. It provides a model for how to tackle "silent" histories – those of people who were not given platforms to record their own stories. The combination of archival fragments, family oral history, creative extrapolation, and theoretical framing allowed the thesis to piece together a narrative that is both intellectually and emotionally resonant.

By pulling that thread, the thesis hopes to have unraveled some of the silence and re-woven a story that honors these women. In doing so, it also showcases the ability of art to act as historical witness. The final takeaway is that exhibition can be a form of research – one that not only communicates knowledge but creates it in the interaction between artwork and audience. This project's interdisciplinary nature is its strength, suggesting a path forward for others who wish to use creative practice to engage with history's shadows.

The women who "swam in silence" are silent no more – if we are willing to listen with more than just our ears.

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