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The Lifted Shadow

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B. F.A. Thesis

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

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Abstract

The Chinese shadow puppet tradition is one of negotiation: where the local (folktales and traditions) meets the national (“culture”?), and the national (??) meets the international (???). It is a cultural practice in which the "masses" create "entertainment," which is then intellectualized and "refined" by social (and cultural) “elites.”

In a nation that has rejected "feudalism" in the past, the shadow puppet tradition is one of many at risk of being commercialized and exported as national commodity. It offers potential cultural “heritage,” soft power to go hand-in-hand with China's economic and industrial might. When a nation has produced everything and exported everywhere, where must it look to mark or brand itself in a world of monotonic goods and services, of homogenizing capitalistic globalization? More importantly, where can its people look? Who are its “people”?

Through the foil of the Chinese shadow puppet tradition, I ask questions of identity and culture in a world that is migrating beyond the physical (towards virtual sociocultural landscapes).

I dissect the various façades of my puppet theatre through an exploration of Peter Schumann’s 1999 article, “What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?” In the process, I discover myself as puppeteer and subject-at-hand. Thus, the study of my artist practice as a whole is an ongoing enquiry into self-identity and issues of "inheriting” a culture in our current technological landscape, as complicated by globalization and internationalism (both economic and socio-cultural).

The Lifted Shadow

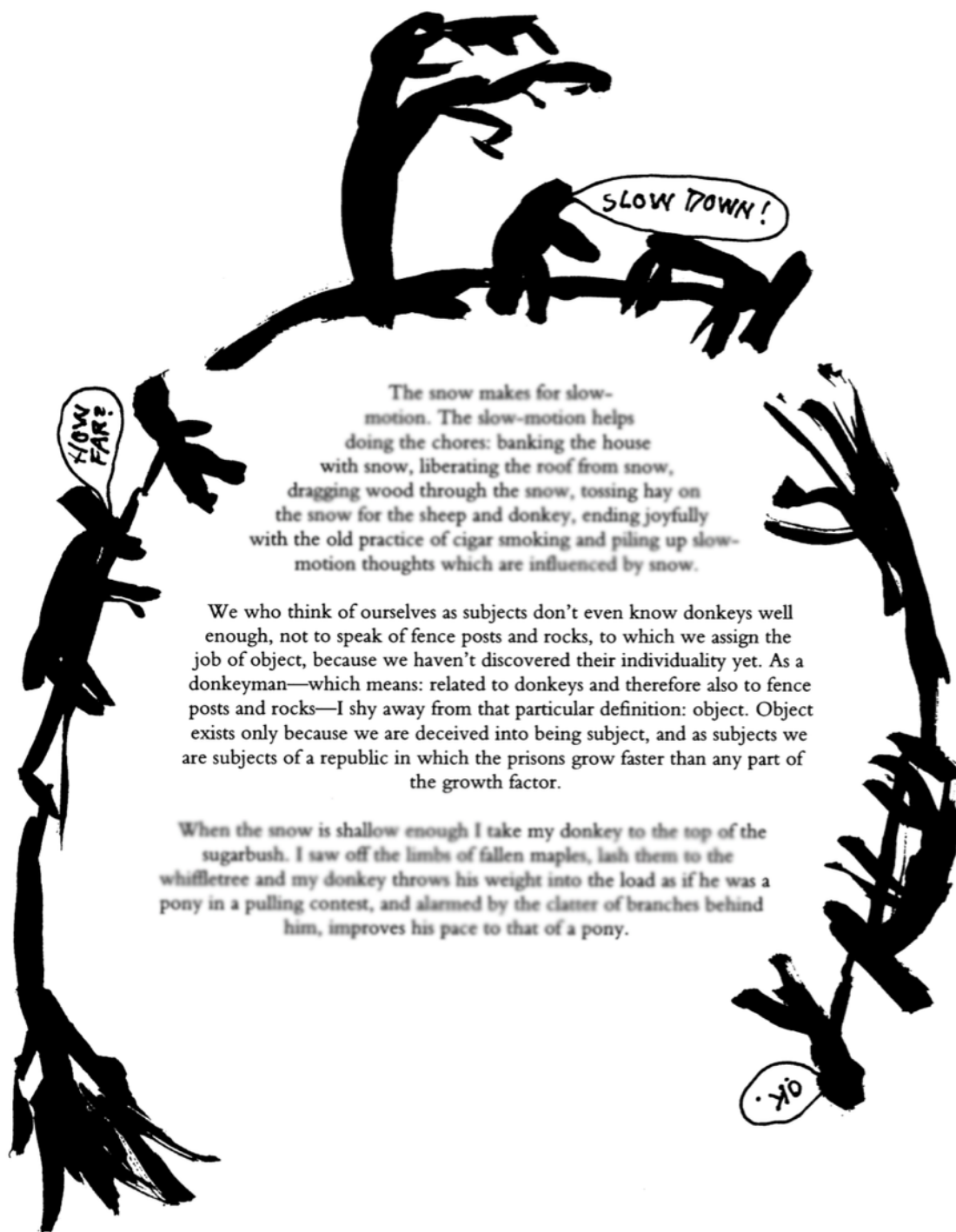


Fig. 1: Peter Schumann, *What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?*, 1999

In my work, I am the donkey(wo)man. And as such I investigate my relationship with donkeys (and fence posts and rocks).

Peter Schumann's fence posts and rocks are literal 'objects' – puppets and performing objects of theatre. And while mine also inhabit a sphere of spectacle, the material and spatial boundaries between theatre and what it reflects (projects?) become...

BLURRY-ER

Act I. The Theatre

Is it she?

Is it not?

I stand gazing from afar:

Timid steps, soft and slow,

How long she is in coming! (Chen 22)

The history of the Chinese shadow puppet tradition is popularly misunderstood. It is possible to say that it has been misconstrued, romanticized, and co-opted by scholars across a range of disciplines.¹ The most prolific origin story is thus recounted:²

Wudi, an emperor of the Han dynasty, lost one of his favorite wives, and was obsessed by a great desire to see her again. One day a magician appeared at court who was able to throw her shadow on a transparent screen. (Chen 23-24)

¹ See Fan Pen Li Chen's *Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion, and Women Warriors*, pages 21 to 35.

² By Berthold Laufer, an early 20th century anthropologist (who widely led subsequent western scholars to pursue this particular myth):

I chose Berthold Laufer's rendition despite the "original" source of Ban Gu's second century *Hanshu*, a dynastic history of the Han Dynasty.³ Among other reasons, I choose it for the prose.

"... to throw her shadow on a transparent screen"

Scene I. Shadows and the 'Real'

My theatre moves against Plato's Cave, and prompts looking at shadows – or rather, representations given tangibility in the medium of light. As opposed to dragging prisoners past the low wall, past the fire, past the puppeteers and out into the sunlight, my work attempts to lure those "free" citizens of the Exterior World to enter the cave, and examine the(ir) shadows inside.

Layers of light constitute both the puppets and their backdrops – digital and analog projections are overlapped so as to give the impression of simultaneity and coherence in time-space. I aim to question and problematize this refractions of the "Image" – where it might be placed in relation to time, history, "truth," identity, or Culture. Such a collapse (or perhaps superimposition) is grounded in and bounces off of the tradition of Chinese shadow puppetry, both aesthetically and in its historical legacy as a cultural practice.

Scene II. The Play in Rebellion

The narratives of the Chinese shadow puppet tradition vary regionally, but being an oral tradition "[it] provides a rare window on the mentality of the largest but least studied group of

³ Also known as the *Book of Han*.

the Chinese population.” (Chen 3). It elides elite cultures⁴ and certain barriers of literacy, allowing a glimpse of everyday, social and cultural landscapes across imperial China. It is a popular tradition, though I concur with Peter Brook⁵ that “popular” does not mean “the country fair... in a jolly harmless way” (Brook 68). Instead, it is quite often “bearbaiting, ferocious satire and grotesque caricature” (Brook 68). It is dirty. However, “it is most of all dirt that gives the roughness its edge; filth and vulgarity are natural, obscenity is joyous: with these the spectacle takes on its socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretence” (Brook 68). Chinese shadow plays are by and large “dirty,”⁶ a sharpness that has led the tradition to be banned repeatedly throughout history, most recently by the Communist Party in the mid-twentieth century.

My shadow theatre continues in this tradition of commentary and satire. The stories are derived from a collection called *Ancient Chinese Fables*.⁷ Though the fables source from as far back as the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, they nonetheless capture wit and spirit easily found in contemporary Chinese society. For “the strongest comedy is rooted in archetypes, in mythology, in basic recurrent situations; and inevitably it is deeply embedded in the social tradition” (Brook 70). I am not claiming for a linear, uninterrupted “Chinese social tradition,” but rather am highlighting those tales with a certain sense of “human” immediacy. In drawing upon ancient parables, my theatre attempts to frame glimpses of Chinese society today by reaching backwards (with a searching hand) towards its supposed cultural heritage.

⁴ Elite censorship, as well.

⁵ Despite his overall offensiveness and misogyny as a blundering British man, orientalizing cultural artifacts like the Mahabharata for personal “universalizing” messages. This personal capitulation to western scholarship is a recurring and inherent component of my practice.

⁶ Violence and vulgarity abound in almost every script I have read, to varying degrees.

⁷ Interestingly, also a joint effort of Chinese and western scholars

Scene III. Puppets as Insurrectionists



People exist as citizens, and puppets are insurrectionists and therefore shunned by correct citizens—unless they pretend to be something other than what they are, like: fluffy, lovely, or digestible.¹

Fig. 2: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

I cannot pretend that my theatre is free of allegory, but its primary purpose is not pointedly allegorical (in the political sense). The skits may as well comment on a dozen news items, while targeting none in particular. The puppets do not mean to offend,⁸ they want to be

⁸ At least, not right off the bat.

laughed at, loved, accepted – to be given a chance to break your heart. And as such the figures also dodge specificity⁹ with one exception: they *look* distinctly Chinese.

The forms of the puppets are shapes I have derived directly from existing Chinese shadow puppets. Yet unlike their leather progenitors, my paper puppets are plastered with designs from current fashions. Their decorations aim to link the forms (inherited from and *stuck* in imperial China) to contemporary Chinese society in its particular celebration of colours, patterns, and recognisability (Western designer brands). Markers of “Chinese-ness” are thrown into the mix, featuring high and low-end fashions marketed as “oriental” or “Chinese” (chinoiserie). My core enquiry lies in the gap between the puppets’ appearances and who they really “are.”

⁹ See insurrectionist quote above; the puppets hide their identities so as to foster our love. Or rather, they shy away from modeling you or me so closely that one cannot simply enjoy the fiction for what it is.

Act II. The Spectacle

Scene I. Puppets, my Donkeys

Objects have been performing under the whip of subjects too long and are now disobedient and can't be counted on any longer. They avoid real contact and meaningful relationships and divorce themselves from the intentions of subjects. They used to be good and close to our hearts. They almost liked us and seemed to be grateful for our attention, but were deprived of their dignity by the throw-away philosophy, which resulted in the object's revenge: garbage.

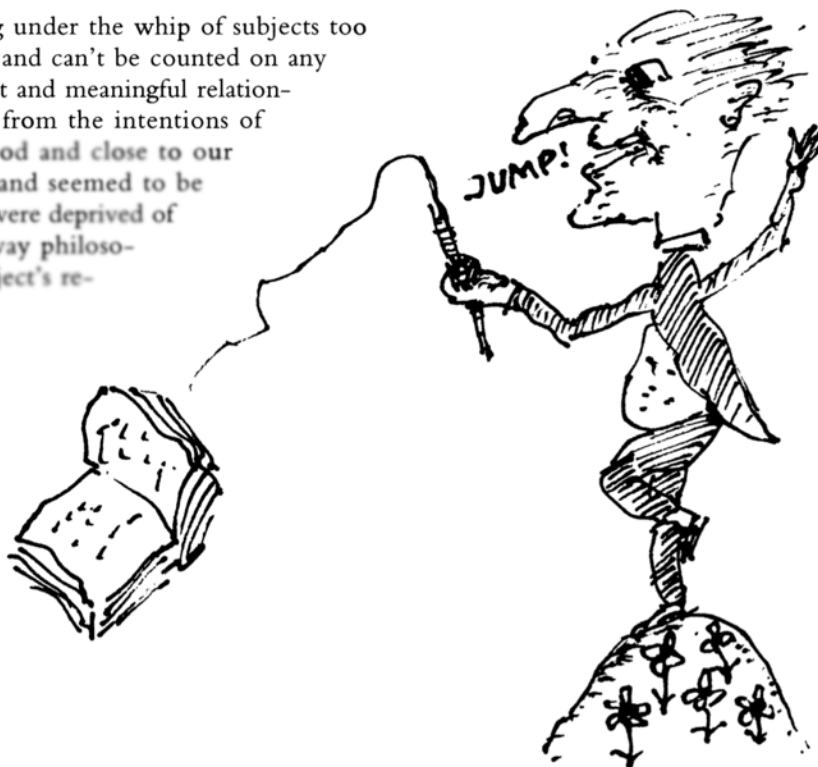


Fig. 3: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

Are my puppets “Chinese?” They have been produced and dressed in seemingly opposing manners: imperial versus contemporary, populist versus bourgeois, artisan versus mass-produced (lasercutting), physical objects translated to the digital realm. Under scrutiny, however, these incongruities start to cohere. The unifying subject? Likely the (wo)man behind the curtain, the puppeteer (me).

Again, I call upon Peter Schumann’s analogy of the donkeyman. Though I am the maker – *because* I am the maker – my puppets mock my own sense of subject-hood.¹⁰ They laugh, “Are we not extensions of you – are we not subjects as well?” And in looking at them, in examining the puppets as “subject,” I have placed myself as rather the object under scrutiny.



Fig. 4: Cherry Xie, Lucky Fitness Happy Dance, 2015

¹⁰ Refer to the first quote, Bell 48.

As with my Lucky Fitness Happy Dance series, I cue an identity informed by various aesthetic, historical, and cultural conceptions of “Chinese-ness.” Just as Wangechi Mutu attempts to “express elements of female bravado and raise questions about ethnic identification” in constructing “mythological/futuristic character[s] that confront the lengthy history of these shared dilemmas,” my shadow puppets question “Chinese-ness” as codified in forms, aesthetics, and gestures (Wangechi Mutu et al. 85)



Fig. 5: Wangechi Mutu, Riding Death in My Sleep, 2002

Scene II. The Dynasty Lives On

The specific source of “Chinese-ness” for my puppets, their habituated “spaces”¹¹ (Chinese ink paintings), and the narratives of their world all come from a sweeping generalisation of “imperial China” – why?

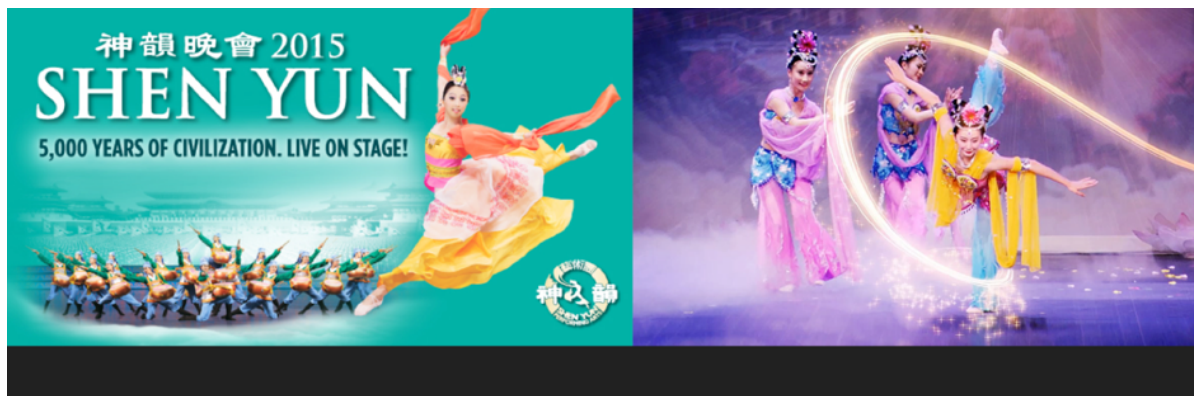
First, it is impossible to consider contemporary Chinese media or culture without addressing the pervasive presence of imperial fetishization in television, film, literature, pop culture or fashion.



Fig. 6 & 7: Hero (2004) movie poster and Rihanna at the Met’s China Through the Looking Glass exhibition opening (2016)

¹¹ Though really, they manifest only in flat surfaces.

This is perpetuated from both within and without as potent forms of cultural soft-power, in all its manifestations both aesthetically and in practice. From tea houses to foreign policy, the “Chinese¹² way” stands as lone tutelage in a world of increasing (commercialized) homogeneity. As hyperbolized in the case of the Shen Yun production, put on by the American branch of the Falun Dafa organization,¹³ the glorification of “ancient Chinese civilization” is easily packaged as into politicized entertainment.



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Fig. 8: Screenshots taken from Google Search and Shen Yun online publicity

¹² If I were to be blatantly non-discerning, perhaps “Confucian way” could capture the generality of this standard of “traditionality.”

¹³ For lack of a better descriptor. “Spiritual practice” doesn’t seem to fully encapsulate Falun Dafa as a body or its activities.

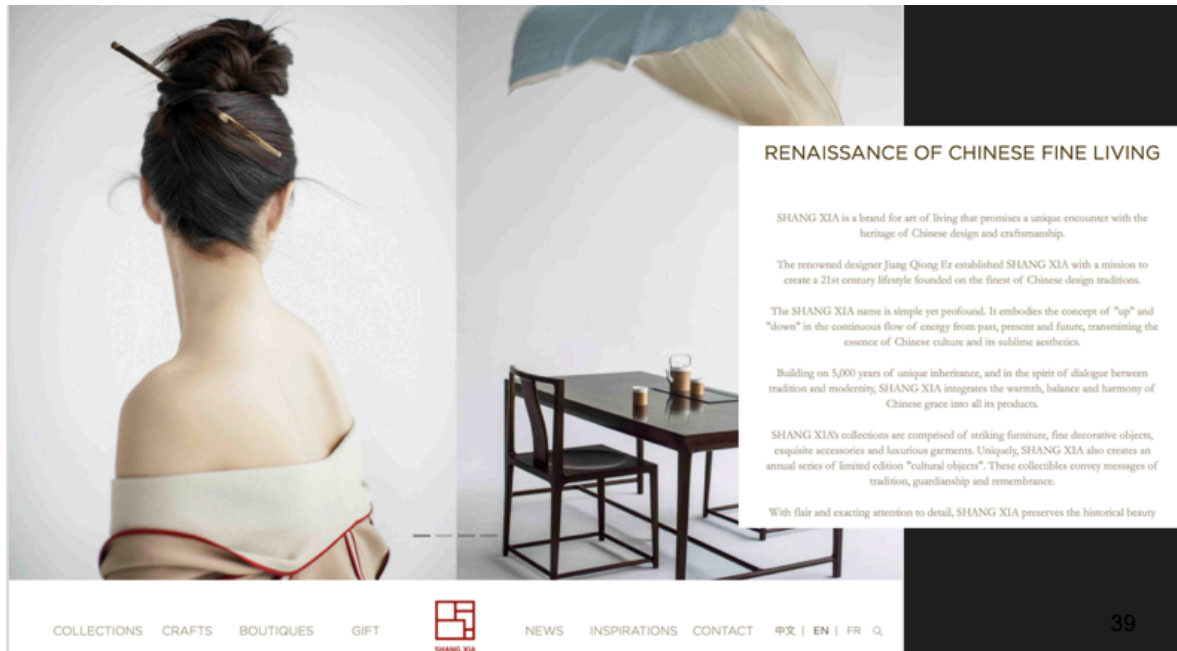


Fig. 9: Screenshots taken from the website of Hermes' new Chinese brand, Shang Xia

As someone raised partially in the mires of this Aesthetic¹⁴ glamorization, I find myself inevitably intoxicated by its associated ideals of ancestry, heritage, and belonging. This is furthermore complicated by a naïve fascination with “traditional Chinese” mores and ethics.

Is it “right” for me to subscribe to such a stylized fantasy, or to stake my roots into a culture and society that was, in practice, all but obliterated¹⁵ over the last hundred years? Or is my attraction to these aesthetics¹⁶ (materially, stylistically, *philosophically*) fueled by an underlying projection of borrowed pride, in having descended from “The Great Chinese Civilization?”¹⁷ Moreover, is there any legitimacy in my personal proclivity for traditions and

¹⁴ I use “aesthetic” in the larger sense of moving beyond form to cultural and political modes.

¹⁵ As ensured by the Communist Party, employing many erasure campaigns (though debatably unsuccessful in the longer-term, judging by the 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony).

¹⁶ For example, conjured up by the problematic term, “Eastern sensibilities.”

¹⁷ Thank you, dad. Those were truly some great moments of encouragement (“Your ancestors! They achieved this! And this!”)

cultures of past or present China, especially as sources of identity? And what of this identity nowadays – as shared by overseas Chinese (海外华人 *haiwai huaren*) spread across the globe?

My puppets are my donkeys – they are as much manifestations of my identity as well as fantasized identities outside of my control, outside my biological body or time. And in “discovering their individuality,”¹⁸ I have become the subject of my own investigation. Am I the donkey woman, or the donkey?

Scene III. The Puppet in Rebellion

Why are puppets subversive? Because the meaning of everything is so ordained and in collaboration with the general sense of everything, and they, being only puppets, are not obliged to this sense and instead take delight in the opposite sense, which is the sense of donkeys confronting the existing transportation system.



Fig. 10: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

¹⁸ See Schumann.

The puppets have begun to run away from me in their varying processes of formation, inserting themselves into every medium, leaping across narratives and scattering body parts everywhere. Of course, this subversion is helped by the fact that puppets can inhabit worlds of impossible physics, world orders, and body gestures. In this manner at least, they seem as unbound to “our” world as donkeys confronting the transportation system.

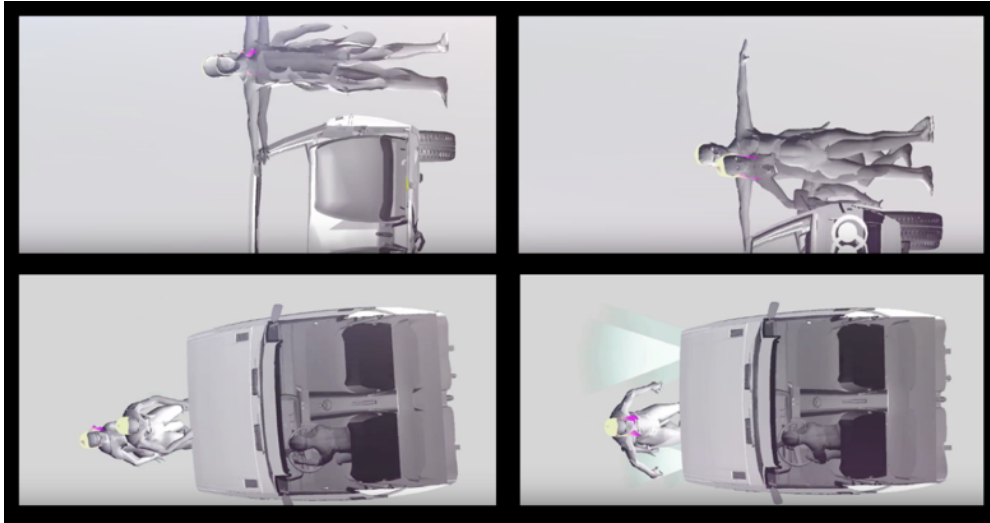


Fig. 11: Ian Cheng, This Papaya Tastes Perfect v1, 2011

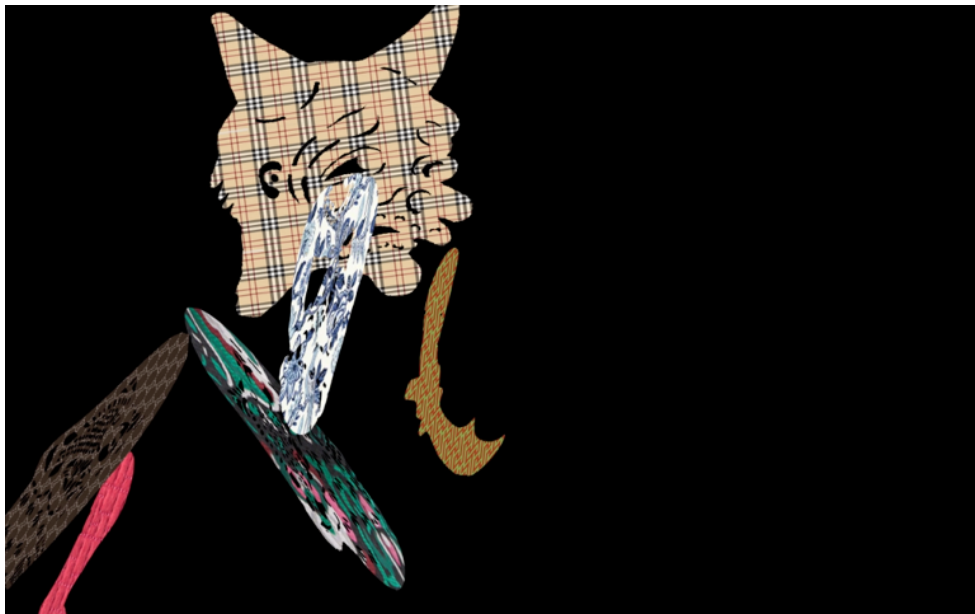


Fig. 12: Cherry Xie, still from “Suspicion,” 2016

Unrestrained by their actual “bodies” (as material, formal, or over time),¹⁹ the puppets are absolute brats, demanding attention in every way possible in an attempt to find a fitting “home” – a search that ultimately blurs the boundaries between “their” world and “ours.”²⁰

Like Calder’s circus, my puppets resist inertness. Unlike his creations, however, mine perform outside of mechanical control, escaping beyond my fingers into the techno-digital glitch-chasm. They splice themselves open, whether in Adobe After Effects or under the rays of the laser cutter. They’re confused about where they are going,²¹ and as such migrate to different texts, roles, and performances in an attempt to conquer every world, inhabit every possible surface.²²



Fig. 13: Cherry Xie, untitled scene, 2016

¹⁹ Their bodies may be composed of paper, vellum, or light (projection or LCD), in various modes of temporality (still, moving, stop-motion). Their appearances may change – instantly – whilst remaining of one “identity” or “selfhood.” And finally, they do not have to bow to the timeline of our human bodies (youth, maturity, aging).

²⁰ Even as donkeys before the transportation system, they still face the risk of being run over.

²¹ Reflecting their puppeteer’s own selfhood in-flux.

²² Always they are constrained by two-dimensionality – even whilst spinning in “3D” animation the puppets remain volume-less.



Fig. 14: Cherry Xie, studio shots, 2016

They embody what some scholars would pen “transfictional.” My cast of shadow puppets “expand fiction beyond the boundaries of the work,” allowing for “sequels and continuations, return of the protagonists... ‘shared universes,’ etc” (Marie-Laure Ryan 386).²³ The puppets are exceptionally freed of timelines (and corresponding space-continuums) to which the rest of us are bound, “cross[ing] historical periods as well as boundaries between national literatures or literary genres” (Marie-Laure Ryan 386).

For instance, though their gestures and movements may evoke the sharp vulgarity found in post-midnight plays (*houbanyexi*) like *Henpecked Zhang San*,²⁴ my puppets occupy *Ancient Chinese Fables* just as easily as their original plays – as in my video, *Suspicion* (Cherry Xie, 2016). In this aspect, my theatre crosses beyond acknowledging cultural time (as in postmodernist culture) towards abandoning all historical sense for the “apparently real” or

²³ This definition of transfictionality is taken from a conference pamphlet on the subject, organized in 2005 by Saint-Gelais, René Audet and Irène Langlet.

²⁴ Chen 25.

“textual present,” à la mode of Alan Kirby’s “digimodernism” (Kirby 143).²⁵ According to Kirby, digimodernism assumes that “people have always talked, moved, and acted pretty much as they do today,” such that digimodernist culture becomes “the state of being engulfed by the present real, so much so it has no room for anything beyond; what is, is all there is” (Kirby 143).

My puppets are as actors – they adopt roles originally entrenched in social and cultural pasts, but aside from following the scripts²⁶ communicate no interiority or awareness of precisely how those figures may once have “lived” in negotiating their social and cultural contexts. My shadow theatre thus enacts digimodernism’s circular portrayal of humanity, but in overtly hyperbolizing the aesthetic it serves to contest whether culture or historical baggages of society can ever be so cleanly excised.

²⁵ Though there is limited capacity to delve into Alan Kirby’s theory of “Digimodernism,” I find it a highly useful framework critically analyzing my puppet theatre as part of the bigger cultural landscape. Briefly summarised, Kirby considers the “death” of post-modernism (or rather, emergence of “Digimodernism” and how textuality itself has evolved with technological developments of the last few decades.

²⁶ As in “appropriated” literature or via plays of the shadow puppet tradition itself.

Scene IV. The Blurry Image

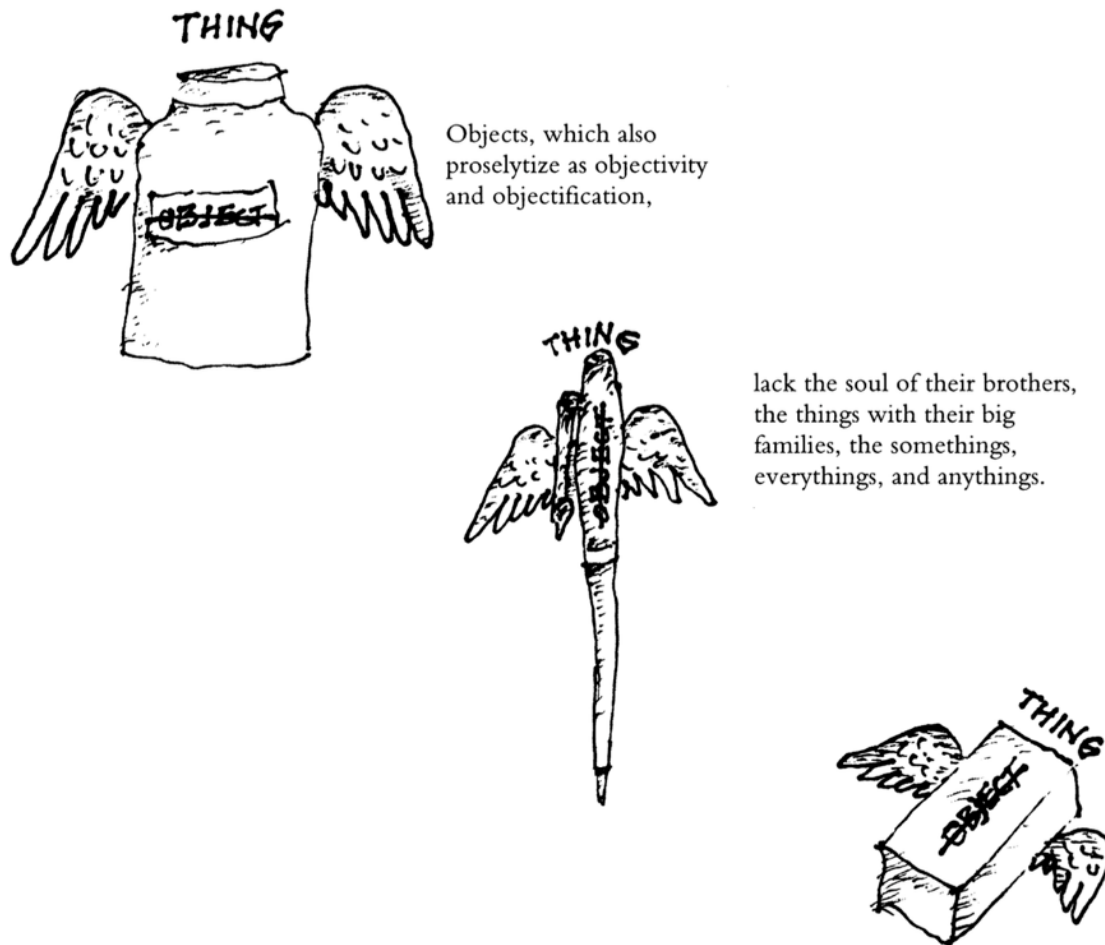


Fig. 15: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

My theatre is transfictional in traversing “literature as well as other media (film, television, comics, etc.)... [penetrating] mainstream or experimental literature as well as popular culture” (Marie-Laure Ryan 386). From printer paper to chine collée to digital animation, the

shadow puppets continue an existence (and textuality) that is potentially infinite. In the process, they embody the digimodernist aesthetic of the “endless narrative” (Kirby 155).

That is, specific narratives of my theatre are “ostensibly complete in itself” but open to “endless additions, extensions, reorderings, reassemblies, all of which yield a new sense of the “whole” while the “whole is never definitively established” (Kirby 155-56). Although characters (and caricatures) are recycled, they “act on a restricted amount of their past,” if at all (Kirby 160). Each “moment” or as embodied in my drawings and collages act as “deleted scenes” or “outtakes,” but their connection to the “original film” is tenuous at best – more like overlaps of a shared world than related episodes.

In flitting from surface to surface (in print, projection, or on-screen) and “national literatures,” the puppets fight against the “separateness” of their world. That is, the existing state of my theatre as a cultural Frankenstein – as pastiched notions – of “Chinese-ness” (contemporary or imperial) relies upon histories and cultural timelines in which we currently live.

This is exceptionally exaggerated in *Suspicion*, in which the puppets are superimposed with a rotation of 35mm slides of ancient Chinese paintings (as curated by western scholars). The digitally-projected puppets intersect with carousel-slide “backdrops,” yet their flattened conflation exists as a singular “Image” upon the sheet of paper. Though the puppets are not three-dimensional, they travel across “our” world by manifesting across (and colliding with) a range of mediums (and media) – all under the auspices of “things that are Chinese.” In the case of *Suspicion*, my shadow theatre also occupies a literal spatiality in being projections (light moving through space).



Fig. 16: Cherry Xie, “Suspicion” installation at the Des Lee Gallery, 2016

When tangibly materialized in “our” world (as collage, as animation, as projection), the puppets escape containment in both the literal and metaphorical sense. They pull away from the screen, becoming subjects who tease at – shadows who reflect – our own blurry identities: who we are, what we inherit, and who we are to others.

As this Image – my puppets and the “theatre” trailing behind them – bounces to and from physical to cyber realms, it ponders at the frontier of post-physical identities, cultures, and societies in an age of increasing virtuality.

Act III. The Curtain Rises



Fig. 17: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

The story of the shadow puppet is likely not singular. A traditional handicraft that is thrown under the wheels of mass-technological and virtual frontiers – lasercutters, digital spheres, exportable (and historicized) culture presented for fresh, international eyes by fresh, international hands.

I have turned a delicate, labor-intensive handicraft, into a delicate, labor-intensive product of the machine (the lasercutter). I have appropriated and claimed an intensely rich, social and cultural tradition for a personal endeavor of the Fine Arts (in its western establishment). I

have collapsed imperial and contemporary pastiches of “Chinese-ness” in an attempt to displace them from our sense of the historical timeline, an “ahistorical” “Chinese-ness.”²⁷

The resulting world is a hyperinflation of some kind of imperial fetish, decorated (shallowly) in the economic and (pop)cultural realities of the new, hip China. This world was achieved through a process of production paralleling states of (re)production for (and sometimes survival of) many cultural artifacts or traditions around the world.²⁸

In travelling between analog and digital technologies and in conflating historical and contemporary cultural references, my practice asks – what is truly “Chinese?” And must it rely upon aesthetizations of “cultural heritage?”

As the puppeteer, what does it mean when I am discovering “Chinese-ness” through translations – learning via a western mode of scholarship and sourcing my knowledge of current news from China through English media outlets?

The shadow puppets are reflections of us – their social and cultural contexts built upon ours; they cannot survive as subjects on their own. Reflexively, they cannot remain “objects” if we are to consider ourselves “subjects.” So as the Image moves towards the World Wide Web, I must consequently ask: can we read anything “out” of culture, “out” of history?

Are we doomed to fetishizing historical modes and aesthetics in order to perform identities? Can we avoid branding ourselves in navigating this global (hyper) fluidity – or must we always reach for History and Culture and Old-World-Orders in an attempt to find something with which to ground ourselves?

²⁷ Similarly, my Lucky Fitness Happy Dance series escaped specific historicity, “periodized” without a solid period.

²⁸ Easily susceptible to infinite derivations and “customizations” in being mass-reproduced. Worked not by the hand, but rather governed by principles of balancing an approximation of forms with its time and cost-efficiency.

What happens, when the shadow is

lifTed~~*

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Fig. 6: Hero (2004) movie poster

Fig. 7: Rihanna at the Met's China Through the Looking Glass exhibition opening (2016)

Fig. 8: Screenshots taken from Google Search Shen Yun publicity

Fig. 9: Screenshots taken from the website of Hermes' new Chinese brand, Shang Xia

Fig. 10: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

Fig. 11: Ian Cheng, This Papaya Tastes Perfect v1, 2011

Fig. 12: Cherry Xie, still from "Suspicion," 2016

Fig. 13: Cherry Xie, untitled scene, 2016

Fig. 14: Cherry Xie, studio shots, 2016

Fig. 15: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999

Fig. 16: Cherry Xie, "Suspicion" installation at the Des Lee Gallery, 2016

Fig. 17: Peter Schumann, What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?, 1999