YANG SHAOBIN’S SOFT VIOLENCE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
STATE OF UNRELENTING REVOLUTION

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Bob, our little bun Roslyn, and our wonderful family and circle of friends who have, with their never-ending love and devotion, kept me going through this journey. Thank you for all you have done for me, it has meant more than words can say.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Rights</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Introduction to the Cultural Events Leading to Modern China:</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelenting Revolutions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Yang Shaobin’s Soft Violence: The Physical Manifestation of Psychological Torment</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Conclusion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

YANG SHAOBIN’S SOFT VIOLENCE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF UNRELENTING REVOLUTION

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Having been closed off to the majority of the world for almost a century, China experienced multiple revolutions in an attempt at modernization. The culmination of these revolutions was the well known Cultural Revolution lead by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end, leaving the country in a state of suspended animation. Deng Xiaoping assumed control of the CCP in 1978, opening up China to the rest of the world, which came to an end in 1989 with the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Each revolution was intent on redefining the political and cultural landscape of China. Within this ever changing cultural landscape, remnants of the past remained. Artists who were creating work that promoted the Communist agenda found themselves able to work without boundaries and explore both old and new artistic traditions.

Working within this conundrum, contemporary Chinese artists find
themselves in a rather precarious situation, one that stirs up questions for the artists themselves and their audience. Yang Shaobin is one such artist. His figurative paintings bridge the gap between the psyche and the body creating questions about individuality in post Mao China.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The events that occurred on October 10, 1911 would forever change the course of history in China. This was the day the Qing dynasty fell to democratic nationalist factions who wanted to create a more democratic political machine in which the people’s representatives would rise to power and bring peace and unity to the country. Unfortunately, the overthrow of the Qing dynasty led to a multitude of problems which the new government was unprepared to tackle, leaving the country in a state of chaos. The most pressing concern was how to integrate western ideologies with traditional Chinese ideologies. The new government was quickly ousted in 1919 by the New Culture Movement, who decided it was time to wipe the slate clean; all but destroying the old ways, and implement a new government in which youth was king and revolution was the solution.

The New Culture Movement inspired change within the Nationalist Party, laying the foundation for the formation of the Chinese Communist Party or CCP. Basing their political ideology on the Soviet communist model, which empowered the masses from the rural agricultural worker to the urban industrial worker, the CCP was able to inspire the people and incite revolution once again. Desiring to create a communist utopia, Mao began incorporating Marx’s concept of permanent revolution into his doctrine. Despite efforts made by the CCP to create a communist utopia, the Great Leap
Forward failed, leaving the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in economic ruin causing widespread famine. Trying to remedy the disastrous outcome of the Great Leap Forward, Mao sought ways to continue the momentum for revolution. Believing that a new bourgeoisie was coming to life, Mao wanted to design a new political system that would ensure the fall of this new upper class and make it impossible for one to manifest itself again.

On May 16, 1966, the CCP published the May Sixteenth Circular, which coincided with the beginning of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The circular outlined the purpose of the new revolution; the purpose of the revolution was to destroy old, omnipresent ways once and for all; to create a culture for and of the people. Within ten years the revolution ended with the death of Mao, again leaving the country in great distress. This time, the chaos left in the wake of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was incapacitating. After years of systematically destroying the traditional Chinese way of life and cutting off communication with the west, the people of the PRC were left in a cultural and social void. Not only did Mao strip bare the cultural base of the PRC, but he also erased the people’s concept of individuality through education and propaganda promoting a strong work ethic and group mentality. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping assumed control over the CCP. While wanting to carry on the goals of the CCP, Deng also sought economic reform and implemented the open-door policy. By parting the iron curtain, Deng allowed western influences to once again seep into the PRC, causing the seeds of rebellion to take root, this time in favor of a more democratic government. In the spring of 1989, university students, in response to the penetration of western thought, staged numerous demonstrations in protest to the CCP’s unbending
position on individual rights. During the night of June 3, 1989, in response to the demonstrations, military forces were mobilized and took action against the demonstrators centered in Tiananmen Square. While student demonstrations were happening throughout China, the protests at Tiananmen Square became the most memorable because of the government’s action. After Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government ended all communication with the west, again, reverting to a strict communist country.

In ten short years, the free flow of information between the west and China had a lasting effect on the people of the PRC. The exposure to western standards of living inspired the next generation to seek out and explore alternate modes of existence which did not rely on the group mentality promoted by the dogma of the CCP. Soon after Deng closed the borders between China and the west, he reopened the lines of communication in an effort to stimulate the Chinese economy, with the understanding that China was, and still is, a socialist country. By maintaining this political stance, every person within the hybrid socialist-capitalist system can justify the exploitation of laborers. It is an interesting system because under socialism, the government is supposed to look after the welfare of the people, which has been abandoned by the new system. The capitalist ventures of China have changed the social strata once again. Under the communist regime, the eradication of the bourgeoisie was paramount to the creation and vitality of the CCP. Now, with doors wide open, China is rapidly becoming a capitalist society creating a multitude of classes within the once classless society.

Artists, who once created work that promoted the Communist agenda, found themselves able to explore different modes of expression that captured both the old and new traditions of China. Working within this riddle, contemporary Chinese artists find
themselves in a rather precarious situation. Left not knowing who they are and where they stand within a vast new world, China’s population is determined to recreate itself with the new-found freedoms within their new economic system. While economic freedom is a reality for many people in China today, there are still lingering problems associated with the mind-numbing doctrine of the CCP. After multiple revolutions intent on reshaping China’s cultural heritage, the CCP destroyed any sense of self in the population by attempting to erase all that defined China as a nation with a strong cultural base, and any remnants were expected to be ignored. Left in this void, the attempt to define individual identity in a sea of sameness was, for many, an agonizing venture.

Many of the artists working and living in China today were children at the end of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which would have had a profound effect on their psyche, especially in light of the new socio-economic structure of today. To have initially been taught that individuality was akin to crime under the old communist regime and to then realize the potential for personal expression was experienced as a type of psychological violence that created psychological discord. Artist Yang Shaobin addresses the Cultural Revolution and its lingering effect on him in paintings created during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Tackling the internal violence left in the wake of the failing communist regime and the new Chinese political machine, Yang’s canvasses speak of the struggle to find and define oneself in a culturally empty landscape. In comparison to friend and artist Fang Lijun’s paintings, which explore the psychological edge of sanity in the search for individuality, Yang tells a personal story in his nameless, faceless, portraits.
Methodology

As the art historian dives into a study of any specific artist, work, or period of art, she must choose a particular theoretical/methodological approach. With a multitude of options, the art historian must determine the appropriate methodological approach, as the methodology chosen will shape how the artist, work, or period will be discussed in detail during the course of the study.

For this project the methodology used is the social history of art. When approaching the study of art with a socio-historical emphasis, the art historian takes into consideration a multitude of social issues surrounding the artist at the time he or she was working and asserts that social and political circumstances are interlaced with art production because the artist is a part of the social fabric. Within this broad definition, the art historian must fine tune her approach so as not to try and encompass all that was occurring during a specific time and place, implying that influence on the artist and the cause of his expression. Instead, the art historian must focus on the work and find connections between the contemporary culture and the work, to eke out how each was part of the other, and how the work manifests of the artist’s internalization and understanding of the culture in which he lived. It is also imperative for the art historian to delve ever further into contemporary cultural and social issues by reassessing and exploring previous historical phenomena as being precursors to current cultural and political trends. As T.J. Clark states, “the point is this: the encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to

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discover the general nature of the structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also
wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting.”

In the case of this particular project, the use of social history as a means to
explore and expound upon contemporary Chinese art is extremely beneficial. Due to the
recent opening up of China to the western world, western scholars now have access to
numerous resources previously unavailable when studying contemporary Chinese culture.
The new resources made available by the deregulation of numerous modes of information
have shed a new light on the many cultural developments in China since the Cultural
Revolutions began in 1911. Evaluating these new resources and rethinking what was
previously known and thought about Chinese culture since the beginning of the twentieth
century enables the art historian to interact with contemporary Chinese art on a whole
new level. As Chinese artists come to terms with mainstream cultural and political trends,
as evidenced in their work, art historians have the unique opportunity to interact with
these artists and their work, seeking the binding ties between the work of art, artist and
contemporary culture. In an effort to better understand the art of Yang Shaobin, a brief
exploration of the historical events that shaped the Chinese culture into which he was
born is imperative to understanding his cultural and social base. This base provides a
solid point of reference when discussing his work.

Literature Review

One of the most challenging aspects of this project was finding relevant
literature pertaining to Contemporary Chinese art that was more than merely a survey of

2 T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-1851*
prominent artists and theorists. Relying on a few primary sources, I was able to combine material translated from Chinese into English with materials written in English to formulate my discussion on contemporary Chinese culture and art, Yang Shaobin and Fang Lijun. Due to the nature of this project and the use of social history as my chosen methodology, I will discuss my sources in the order in which they are presented in the main argument, first discussing the socio-historical literature, as it introduces the reader to the main social and historical phenomena leading up to the contemporary period and then moving into sources used to flesh out my discussion on both Yang Shaobin and Fang Lijun. I will follow up with a brief discussion of the literature used as a defense for my methodology.

Maurice Meisner’s, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic*, provides a coherent and concise account of China’s tumultuous modern history. Beginning his discussion with the breakdown of Confucianism and the introduction of Western religious and political ideologies, Meisner unfolds and lays bare a sequence of events that led to rapid social and political changes that would shape and mold China into a Communist country. *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 14, The People’s Republic, Part I, The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949-1965*, edited by Roderick Mac Farquhar, John K. Fairbank and Denis Crispin Twitchett was also a valuable resource in developing my discussion of the emergence of modern communist China. With a more in-depth introduction to the industrialization of the rural Chinese landscape, a more detailed picture of the changes within China during the revolution emerged enriching my over-all discussion of rapid modernization in China. To flesh out my discussions of the May Fourth Movement, and the Great Leap Forward, I relied on
Encyclopædia Britannica for its bare bones discussions of some of the most pivotal actions of the budding communist party in China.

In order to explore early Chinese communism more fully, it was imperative to examine literature discussing Soviet communism. In Lawrence Cahoon’s anthology, *From Modernism to Postmoderism*, I referenced Chapter 7, “Bourgeois and Proletarians,” which is an excerpt from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848)*, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that introduces the reader to the concept of Marxism. In this brief introduction, the reader is made aware of the necessity of capitalism, that it was the precursor to the more advanced concept and practice of communism in which classes are eliminated and individuals are encouraged to participate in society on a more selfless level in which all would benefit from each individual’s contribution. In *The Search for Modernity: Chinese Intellectuals and Cultural Discourse in the Post-Mao Era*, Min Lin and Maria Galikowski discuss the importance of individuals within a Communist society, for it is the individual that lubricates the wheels of Communism, making the machine work in tandem.

Jiang Jiehong’s anthology, *Burden or Legacy: From the Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art* presents several essays concerned with the effects of the Cultural Revolution on society and art. Recognizing the dramatic effect of the turbulent and violent series of revolutions, in which classic Chinese culture was all but destroyed in favor of new, modern forms of expression, each essay takes the reader deeper into the over-all effect on the Chinese creative psyche and how it was now geared towards promoting the revolution versus self-expression. In *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication*, Lu Xing also
addresses the over-all impact of the revolution on modern Chinese thought, society and culture. In Xing’s discussion, it is made clear that they were forever changed. In addition to addressing the social and cultural changes brought on by the Cultural Revolution, it is equally important to address the economic changes, especially in light of the more recent opening up of China to the Western world and China’s prominent economic standing in the world. In Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market, John Gittings reveals the dichotomy that modern China has become in the modern, global world. While China desires to participate in the capitalistic ventures of the world, it still holds on tightly to the socialist concept of society which does not allow China’s entire population to benefit from the recent expansion into the western market.

Moving from my discussion of the social history of Contemporary China and into my discussion of Yang Shaobin, I turned to Yang Shaobin Essence of Violence, a collection of essays and interviews compiled by Hebei Education Press in their Chinese Artists of Today series providing invaluable information in regards to Yang Shaobin’s artistic process and biography. One of the most intriguing aspects of the book is the inclusion of an interview with Yang Shaobin and Maurizio Giuffredi, Professor of Art History at the Venice Art Academy. In a book dominated by a Chinese dialog with the artist, the interview introduces a western approach and context to the discussion of Yang Shaobin’s work. Another resource used for background information on Yang Shaobin was his website, created in conjunction with the Long March Project, in which he discusses the influence of Communist propaganda on his conception of the world and how people behaved within this idealized Communist environment.
Britta Erickson’s article *Fang Lijun* in *Grove Art Online* and the exhibition catalog *Half-Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Logan Collection* introduce artist Fang Lijun and his involvement with Contemporary Chinese art and Cynical Realism, which both Fang Lijun and Yang Shaobin practiced. Each source provides the reader with a solid understanding of Fang Lijun’s intentions for his work as well as an in-depth discussion of the main tenets of Cynical Realism, which allows for further interpretation of both artists’ work. Looking for a more thorough analysis of Cynical Realism I turned to Wu Hung’s *Making History*, a book dedicated to the examination of contemporary Chinese artistic trends and history.

*Forsaken Females The Global Brutalization of Women* by Andrea Parrot and Nina Cummings provided a necessary component to my understanding of the “one child family” policy in China. The book describes the various kinds of violence committed against women throughout the world and illuminates the cultural conditions in which policies regarding women were created, executed and enforced.

Hanru Hou’s *On the Mid-Ground* provides the perspective of a Chinese curator and art critic on contemporary Chinese art. In a series of essays, the book reveals a multitude of art movements and their theoretical foundations. Hanru Hou gives the reader both positive and negative perspectives on various movements allowing the reader to formulate her own opinions.

While each of the sources mentioned above relate directly to the main portion of my project, I had difficulty finding any literature written by or about Chinese social history as a methodology, so I relied on well known western authors to develop my methodological defense. *Art History’s History* by Vernon Hyde Minor provides an easy
introduction to the various art historical methodologies used in research and writing, allowing the reader to gain a solid grasp on otherwise difficult material. *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-1851* by T. J. Clark is a book that is dedicated to the use of social history as a methodology and provided an excellent example of this type of inquiry. By examining current cultural and political happenings in relationship to artists and their work, the art historian can tease out connections and bind together art and politics of a specific period. Both Yang Shaobin’s and Fang Lijun’s work is interlaced with current political trends and seeks to illuminate their internalization and expression of contemporary Chinese culture. In order to grasp and understand each artist’s work, it was necessary to examine not only each work individually, but the entire circumstance in which they were created, which, in the end, illuminated and magnified the intention behind each piece, allowing the acumen of each artist to develop into a discussion that placed the artists and their work in a culturally, and politically, relevant space.

**Limitations and Future Study**

For the purpose of this project, I choose to work with the two artists who inspired my venture into the exploration of contemporary Chinese art, thus creating my own boundary for inquiry. They, by all means, are not the only Chinese artists exploring the lasting effects of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and will not be the last. The beautiful thing about all artists is their ability and desire to make manifest unspeakable things for the world to see and experience. Having completed this project, I have opened a multitude of avenues, and artists, ripe for exploration in the future. One
such avenue is to work with female artists of the same period and analyze their experiences and expression in comparison with Yang and Fang to garner an even better understanding of the lasting effects of the revolution. Again, this path can and will lead to an even more diverse place, full of possible research topics to tackle.
CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURAL EVENTS LEADING TO MODERN CHINA: UNRELENTING REVOLUTIONS

Today, China seems to be on the tip of everyone’s tongue. This relatively unknown country and its culture have captivated Americans since its recent reemergence on the global scene. While the press received is predominantly negative in nature, China is luring people into an open discourse on how this new world economic power is doing what it’s doing. Having been closed off to the majority of the world for almost a century, China experienced repeated revolutions in an attempt at modernization using the guiding principles of Marxist-Leninist ideology. In an effort to better understand the well known Cultural Revolution and its implications for China, a primer into the rapid succession of “cultural revolutions,” beginning with the October 10, 1911 overthrow of the Qing dynasty by nationalist democratic factions and ending in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, is necessary because they lay the
foundation for understanding one of the most dramatic, and horrific, incidents in modern China, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and the cultural legacy left in its wake.³

Desire, power, and revolution ushered China into the modern world during the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, a dramatic shift in political power, with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty by nationalist democratic factions, led to a rapid succession of revolutions. Intent on creating a more democratic political machine, power was transferred to the people’s representatives. From the start, the blossoming republic was fraught with internal struggles as the newly formed government tried to create a new national identity in a rapidly changing global political climate.

During the first decade of the new republic of China, many people found themselves in a state of chaos, not knowing what their roles would be in the new state. The teaching of Western ideologies next to traditional Chinese ideologies in schools perpetuated this uneasiness. Many did not know if the western world would continue to expand within China’s borders, ultimately changing the political and cultural make-up even more. If the expansion of western thought and lifestyle were to continue to grow, wouldn’t it behoove the general population to study these new ideologies? Or, would the new government begin to implement educational guidelines as previous governments had? Uncertainty about the aims and goals of the new democratic government created an air of anxiety, leaving the masses to wonder what type of education would best serve the new China.

Frustrated with the lack of ambition on the part of the new government, coupled with a desire to break free from the constraints of traditional Chinese culture, a group of students and intellectuals, called the New Culture Movement, began speaking and writing about cultural reform in the New Youth periodical during the years of 1915-1919. The beginnings of a cultural revolution began to blossom under the persuasive arguments presented by this group of individuals. Seeking to implement Western democratic and scientific values, the New Culture Movement desired to completely annihilate traditional Chinese culture. The group believed that the only way to truly revolutionize a political and cultural system was to start with a clean slate. Believing that the old ways were corrupt, thus causing a dysfunctional political system, further perpetuated the desire for complete reform. It is at this juncture in contemporary Chinese history that the belief in the power of youth became ingrained in the new Chinese cultural and political ideology. The youth were the only individuals capable of revolution because they were free from the constraints of the old ideologies of their parents and grandparents. Forming the basis for their arguments using ideologies gleaned from liberalism, pragmatism, nationalism, anarchism, and socialism, the New Youth systematically dismantled traditional Chinese culture in the eyes and minds of the newly liberated population, especially the youth and in particular, Mao Zedong.

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5 Ibid., 14.
On May 4, 1919, the New Culture Movement, in conjunction with the New Youth group, staged a demonstration in response to the decision of the Versailles Peace Conference to award Japan German concessions in the Shandong province, to which the current Chinese government did not object. Enraged by passivity of the Chinese government, the New Youth group began a string of demonstrations against the newly formed government and their pro-Japanese stance. Having been at odds with Japanese Imperialism and the implied threat fueled the demonstrations which eventually led the government to dismiss pro-Japanese cabinet members and the refusal to sign the treaty with Germany. The May Fourth Movement accelerated the spread of the concepts of the New Youth group which spurred political reform within the Nationalist party and laid the foundational platform for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

While the Nationalist Party was advancing politically, the CCP began growing and was officially founded in 1921. Basing the party’s platform on the Soviet communist model, which claimed revolution would rise up from the proletarian masses in an effort to equalize power within society, the CCP transformed the language of the Soviet model to include not only the poorest masses within China, but to include the industrial workers of the large cities as well as the miners and railroad workers in the more rural areas to create a working-class movement intent on redistributing political power throughout the state. The difference between the two ideologies lies within the

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9 Ibid., 20-23.
make-up of each of the countries’ populations. Because the Soviet Union was largely an industrial nation with vast urban populations, the focus of the Soviet socialists was to liberate the proletarian class (the workers) from the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production) who enslaved them with promises of material goods in return for their labor.\textsuperscript{10} Laborers, doctors, lawyers, priests, and intellectuals were all considered to be a part of the proletarian class because it was they who made the wheels of society turn and become prosperous by sacrificing themselves to the desires of the elite, thus losing themselves within the masses, becoming a part of the whole. By freeing the proletarians from the grips of the bourgeoisie, the poorest classes from the agricultural workers in the countryside to the industrial workers in the cities would be able to feel again and become individuals, contributing to society on a different, more human level. For within Marxism it is “individual existence and individual activities [that] are…taken as the starting point of human praxis and the formation of the universality of cognitive knowledge.”\textsuperscript{11} China, on the other hand, was not an industrialized nation with vast urban populations and mechanized factories; the majority of the population consisted of the peasant class, or rural agricultural workers, who were different from the proletariat of the Soviet Union in that they were predominantly uneducated and were still part of a feudal political system. For the CCP, the revolution lay within the ranks of the agricultural workers and the political rhetoric became centered on how to educate and incite a revolutionary fervor within their ranks.


As the CCP’s numbers grew, so did their desire to make the revolution a reality. Having adopted the Soviet model of urban industrialization, China attempted to implement strategies that would boost industrial output, which would fulfill one of the main tenets of communism: that the revolution would gain and continue its momentum through the sale of agricultural products, thus transforming them into viable industrial machinery that would produce the materials necessary to industrialize the nation.\textsuperscript{12}

Unfortunately for the CCP this model failed within China because the majority of the nation’s population lived in densely populated rural, agricultural communities where agricultural surplus did not exist. Without the agricultural surplus needed to create capital to perpetuate the communist agenda, the CCP needed to find an alternate method of obtaining the raw materials necessary to further the country’s growth. Due to failing attempts at urban industrialization the CCP, namely Mao Zedong, devised a plan that would attempt rural industrialization which he hoped would create the necessary surplus for complete industrialization of the country. Thus, the concept of the Great Leap Forward was born.

Wanting to create a communist utopia, Mao began incorporating Marx’s concept of permanent revolution into his doctrine. Marx believed that if the proletariat was able to rise to power over the bourgeoisie, while maintaining their integrity and not falling prey to the position of power, then they would be able to perpetuate constant

revolution. This concept seemed to engulf Mao and he sought ways to make this type of revolution a reality. In 1956, Mao and other CCP members took inventory of the mishaps of the communist revolution thus far and concluded that the current course was extremely ineffective and put into action the Great Leap Forward. It was the intention of the party to grow both agriculture and industry at the same time and it was decided that the only way to do this was to move the party’s efforts into the countryside. While it was not originally decided that communes would be the most viable method of rapid rural industrialization, it appeared to Mao at the time that organizing existing resources, primarily labor, within a rural setting, would stimulate the rapid growth desired, thus, the “people’s communes” emerged.

The commune’s function within the Great Leap Forward was to advance the CCP’s utopian venture by creating communities that would advance the country’s agriculture and technology advancement. It was at these communes that the people would work together, learning from each other, breaking down the distinctions between mental and manual labor, industry and agriculture, city and countryside, creating an environment ripe for communism to grow. Believing that the commune system would solve the industrial urbanization problem experienced in communism’s infancy, the CCP began planning for the future, relying on projected agricultural and industrial output.

Unfortunately, China’s population increased rapidly during this period, eating into the

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surplus agricultural output and causing a huge deficit.\textsuperscript{16} Due to the unforeseen population expansion and the lack of foresight by party administrators, the resources allocated for the people and industrial growth were miscalculated causing a massive famine throughout the country and the eventual collapse of the Great Leap Forward.

Dissatisfied with the outcome of the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong and other CCP party leaders sought new ways to continue the perpetual revolution of the PRC. Believing that a new bourgeoisie was rising within the new urban centers that greatly contributed to the demise of the Great Leap Forward, Mao set out to design a political system that would ensure that a new bourgeoisie could never manifest itself again. Part of the plan to reorganize the PRC and destroy bourgeois tendencies was founded on new principles of education. Fearing that education for the sake of education was destructive to the communist agenda, the CCP began reorganizing the educational system so that it promoted a strong foundation in current politics, CCP leadership, and labor.\textsuperscript{17} Once the new educational ideology was set in motion, the CCP swept through colleges, universities, and normal schools to evaluate faculty and students to determine if they fit the new educational model for China. By turning education into an institution, the CCP was able to advance their cause by creating intellectuals well versed in the rhetoric of communism.

Once the Great Leap Forward and its disastrous outcome had been addressed, Mao began looking for a new way to take the advancement of communism to the next,


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 400.
and hopefully, final actualization. While it is difficult to determine the cause of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, many scholars believe it coincided with the publication of the May Sixteenth Circular from the Central Session of the Chinese Communist Party on May 16, 1966.\textsuperscript{18} Within the circular, guidelines were given as to the purpose of the revolution. It was the intent of the revolutionaries to destroy once and for all the old, pervasive ways with their elite, exploiting classes to make room for a new, more egalitarian societal structure; to create a culture for and of the people where everyone worked for the common good of the country. Part of this “renewal” process was to confiscate and/or destroy everything that was reminiscent of the past: art, temples, religious artifacts, and ancient texts. Family heirlooms were destroyed, elite classes were stripped of power and authority, and in some cases entire families or individuals were killed.

In 1976, Mao Zedong died and the Gang of Four was overthrown causing the Cultural Revolution to end.\textsuperscript{19} In its wake was left a culture in distress. Not knowing its place in the world or even understanding what was happening the world over, China was left to reinvent itself in an ever-shrinking world. Change and modernization did not happen overnight. After ten years of being under the rigid constraints of a totalitarian government, the people of China were still afraid to express themselves as individuals for fear of government reaction and retaliation.\textsuperscript{20} In 1978, Deng Xiaoping assumed control over the CCP. While wanting to carry on the goals of the former administration, Deng

\textsuperscript{18} Jiang Jiehong, ed. \textit{Burden or Legacy: From Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art}, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 2-10.
also sought economic reform that was reminiscent of the capitalist model.²¹ Part of his economic reform was the implementation of the open-door-policy, which encouraged private ownership of property with a move towards a market economy.²² On the surface it appeared that China was coming out from under the Chinese Iron Curtain, allowing seemingly open communication with non-communist countries, but under the surface, strict governmental controls were still in place. In reaction to the rigid, never bending government in China, the youth, desiring a more democratic government, spoke out against the new communist party; the most well known of these incidents happened at Tiananmen Square, Beijing in 1989. During the spring of 1989, university students all over China, in response to a decade of the influx of western thought and standards of living, as well as economic liberalization and growth, staged numerous non-violent demonstrations in protest to the CCP’s staunch position on limiting individual rights and freedoms, seeking to sway government officials opinions and policies in favor of a more democratic political practice.²³ In response to the demonstrations taking place at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, during the spring of 1989 (demonstrations occurred April 22 through June 4, 1989); the government initially issued stern warnings hoping to put an end to the demonstrations. Unfortunately, the government warnings did not disperse the protestors and the demonstrations continued, picking up momentum, until the situation


²² Ibid., 157.

came to a head on June 3-4, 1989. During the night, military forces were mobilized and took action against the supporters of the opposition and the protestors centered in Tiananmen Square. As the troops moved through the city streets on the way to the square, they opened fire on, and crushed those who stood in their way. By the time they had reached their destination, almost all of the protestors had fled and sporadic shooting occurred throughout the day. While student demonstrations were occurring throughout China’s urban centers, the protests at Tiananmen Square became the most memorable because of the government’s action taken against the students/protestors of Beijing. After Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government truncated all communication with the west, closing its borders again in an effort to quell further influence and uprisings.

In the early 1990s, Deng once again decided to stimulate the Chinese economy by reopening its borders and transforming it into a manufacturing base for the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{24} Clinging to the notion that China was, and still is a socialist country, both China and Western countries, namely the USA, have placed China somewhere not belonging to either. It seems that this categorization is convenient for all parties participating in the new Chinese economic system. By allowing themselves to maintain an understanding of China as a socialist country, every participant within the new system can justify the exploitation of laborers as a means to procure goods for consumers worldwide. It is an interesting system to examine because under the tenets of socialism, the government is supposed to look after the welfare of the people providing healthcare,

housing, and education, but this has been abandoned in the new Chinese social system.\textsuperscript{25} For many people, these new conditions have greatly enhanced their lives, while for some, things have not changed. The new, capitalist ventures of China have changed the social strata once again. Previously, under the communist regime, the eradication of the bourgeoisie was paramount to the creation and vitality of the CCP. Now, with doors wide open, China is rapidly becoming a capitalist society creating a multitude of classes within the once classless society.

It is no wonder that China is a hotly discussed topic. From the beginning of the twentieth century, China has been through numerous revolutions, each determined to redefine and reshape the political and cultural landscape. All but destroying centuries old traditions, China has become rather enigmatic. Not really having a strong cultural base, except for the prevalent discourse of the time, China is in a constant state of flux. But within this flux are remnants of the past that connect Chinese people to the old ways of life that were nearly destroyed, creating an alternate dialog within China, one that seeks to reclaim and restore centuries old traditions. Artists, once relegated to the creation of work that promoted the communist agenda, found themselves able to explore alternate modes of expression that captured both the old and new traditions of China. Working within this conundrum, contemporary Chinese artists find themselves in a rather precarious situation, one that stirs up all kinds of questions for the artists themselves and their audience. Left not knowing who they are and where they stand within a vast new world, China’s population is determined to recreate itself with the new-found freedoms.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 3
within their new economic system, provided they have the means and the ability to thrive and survive.
CHAPTER III

YANG SHAOBIN’S SOFT VIOLENCE:
THE PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION
OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TORMENT

Breaking into the Chinese art scene in the early 1990s, Yang Shaobin soon became recognized as one of China’s leading contemporary artists. Participating in exhibitions throughout the world, his work has become synonymous with the West’s impression of contemporary Chinese art. Beginning in 1992, Yang’s work could be found in contemporary Chinese art exhibitions in Beijing showcasing local professional artists. From this point on, Yang’s work began being exhibited widely throughout China and Asia, eventually making his way to Germany in 1996 for the China! Exhibition at the Kunstmuseum, Bonn. After his participation in China!, Yang’s work continually appeared in group exhibitions showing contemporary Chinese Art, all of which intended to educate the West on contemporary Chinese art practice. In conjunction with his frequent participation in group exhibitions, Yang also shows his work in solo exhibitions.

Born in 1963 to coal miners in the thriving industrial city of Tangshan, Hebei Province, Yang witnessed and was a part of the Cultural Revolution. When Yang was young, his family was forced to move to the countryside, a common practice during the Cultural Revolution, used as a means to foster and maintain the homogenization desired by the government; it was believed that by forcing city dwellers to move to the
countryside, an even disbursement of the educated upper classes and the uneducated lower classes mingled, creating a society in which each participant received mutual benefit, learning and teaching each other the skills necessary for survival in a socialist society. Fortunately for Yang, his family was able to obtain a certificate for him to stay in the city without them, and thus he avoided one of the last forced migrations into the country.\(^{26}\) The life of a child during this period would have been vastly different from that of an American or European child, in that individuality was not prized or fostered. Schools were designed to educate children for a specific trade that would benefit the country as a whole. While most children were placed in educational institutions depending on the needs of the community, some children who demonstrated aptitude for, or sufficiently liked, some other occupation, were able to choose what type of an education they would pursue. Yang decided that he wanted to be an artist and attended the local art academy, where he studied applied and traditional art.\(^{27}\) Despite an education in art, he returned home in 1983 and became a police officer, a decision and lifestyle that would influence his art later in life.

As a child Yang was exposed to the art produced in association with individual coal mining communities, which embodied the goal of contemporary artists of the time, the representation of the collective ideology. During the 1960s and 1970s the national arts association distributed supplies to artists residing in the coal mining communities to promote the documentation and lifestyles of the coal miners in the


Socialist Realist style. True to the political ideology of the time, the resulting paintings and drawings showed hard labor in a favorable light, while glossing over the exploitation of the workers. Like most political propaganda, these images were created with the intention of luring the minds of the people into a space where they would believe what was being presented to them as the truth. Beautiful, smiling people fill the images as they happily work in the mines, fields, and factories. Strong and glorious, the small images drew people to them, so they could get a closer, more intimate look. Although humble in size, the images were meant to captivate their audience, almost as if they were a religious relic to be adored, an illustration of what to aspire to in the new, modern, socialist China, giving the masses the strength, and desire, to carry on. Yang would have been exposed to these images throughout his home town, especially in exhibitions staged by “production” artists of the coal mining community. Falling in love with these images prompted Yang to pursue an education in fine art.

By the time Yang was a young man in the late 1970s, he had completed his studies to become a police officer, begun actively seeking an education in art, and the Cultural Revolution had come to an end. During this turbulent period, groups of intellectuals began forming, especially within the arts. One of the most prominent groups, the Xing Xing group, was actively creating and showing art in alternative and public spaces, furthering the gap between socialist realism and contemporary art. While the avant-garde was progressing in non-academic art circles, Socialist Realism was still being taught in the nation’s art academies and shown in the national art galleries. Not knowing

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
if he wanted to participate in the contemporary art scene in China at this time, Yang became a police officer and continued to paint in his spare time. In an interview with Li Xianting, Yang stated that painting in the social realist manner was “utterly useless, worse still than the art of the Cultural Revolution” because “in Tangshan and elsewhere, provincial artists did not understand what art meant…they were not paying any compliments, but neither were they making any critique about reality, they contented themselves by painting blindly without asking any questions.”

It was at this point in his life that he realized the damage done to his and the collective psyche of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. One imagines that spending the early part of one’s life trying to become a part of the homogenized whole, then having that ideology stripped bare would be traumatic. Everything one had been taught up to the collapse of the old regime would have become null and void. Lacking a collective identity, yet not having developed an individual identity, one would be left feeling invisible. Struggling to define and then come to terms with a newfound sense of self would surely have been painful.

Yang decided to become an artist when he became dissatisfied with his current position as a police officer. Always having been interested in art, he continually took art classes at a local industrial school where he studied ceramics, drawing, and painting. He received an excellent education in the technical aspects of making art, skills that would translate well into a teaching position at a similar institution, where the

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emphasis was on industrial applications of the arts. During the early nineties, as in previous decades under communist rule, this was the only way to become an artist. It was also during the early 1990s that Deng Xiaoping reopened China to the rest of the world. Soon after, the collapse of the socialist machine began to occur. The educational institutions that supported the socialist mechanism began to close as people sought their own fortunes.

In 1991 Yang moved to Beijing with the intention of becoming a professional artist. He settled close to his former classmate, Fang Lijun and began experimenting with a style that would become known as Cynical Realism, which he helped bring to prominence during the late 1980s. Cynical Realism is a movement born out of the disillusionment created by the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square Massacre which, for many, destroyed any latent feelings of idealism. The cynicism felt about the current political and cultural situation in China expressed in Cynical Realist works of art can be associated with the fact that the artists participating in the movement grew up during a time when cultural ideologies were in constant flux, especially during the Cultural Revolution.³² Not having a solid framework for understanding the multitude of cultural phenomena that create a society, this group of individuals began questioning their society’s search for the promised utopia of the communist regime. Responding to the prevalent political imagery found within the Chinese landscape that illustrated the collective whole as the ideal societal structure, Cynical Realist artists became interested in depicting separate individuals within this political and cultural framework. The main

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focus of the Cynical Realists was to represent people as individuals and to protest against any ideological and political commitment. Cynical Realists intended to de–politicize political symbols, not to reinvest them with new political meaning. The movement was intent on exposing genuine social and cultural criticism related to artists’ observations and representations of reality, not history. Instead, Cynical Realism set out to critique popular political culture and not manipulate recognizable popular political iconography, as found in Chinese Political Pop.33

In Fang’s Cynical Realist work, there is a repetitive use of absurd figures with varying facial expressions feigning feelings of happiness, surprise, melancholy and distrust. Found in fields of nothingness, figures wear drab, unremarkable clothing that makes their faces stand out. Focusing on the face of the figure is a loaded choice, particularly in relationship to those images created during the Revolution in which figures wearing smiling faces and industry-appropriate costumes promote the collective nature of Communism and the joy those living this lifestyle ostensibly harbored. Comparing the people in Fang’s work with popular images of the Revolution, in which scores of idealized Chinese people are juxtaposed with images of Communist leaders such as Mao, we can begin to see the breakdown of the common stereotype of happy Chinese people perpetuated by the art of the Revolution. Fang’s work is devoid of any manifestations of current political ideology, and the masses of idealized Chinese people have turned into parodic cookie cut-outs, making the regime’s concept of the perfect Chinese Communist absurd.

33 Wu Hung, Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art,” (Hong Kong, China: Timezone 8, 2008), 46.
The mock indifference illustrated by Fang’s figures can be seen in *Series 1, No. 3* (1990-1991) in which three male figures are standing on the edge of an ocean. Painted in black, white, and gray, the image is drastically different from the popular political and academic art of the Cultural Revolution. Shying away from the bright, cheerful colors used to heighten the psychological effects of political propaganda, Fang’s palette emphasizes the bland existence of Chinese people under the Communist regime. In the foreground of the piece there is a yawning man who doesn’t appear to be tired, but bored. Behind him and to the left there are two men with their arms around each other’s shoulders as if friends posing for a picture. They are an intriguing pair because they do not seem to be interacting, just going through the motions. The man on the far left is smiling a forced, artificial smile, like a school portrait, while his friend is smirking unwillingly as if making an effort to display some sort of emotion. Living in a society where individuality was frowned upon, every action, both private and public, became about the collective whole, and people viewed themselves in black and white with shades of gray as a way to define themselves. Fang’s paintings suggest that without the encouragement to be whomever and whatever they desired, melancholy infiltrated the masses creating a detachment from the emotional self.

Yang also adopted the tenets of Cynical Realism. Like Fang, he tackled questions of identity in post-revolutionary China. Comparing the representation of the figures in Fang and Yang, the most noticeable difference is in the smooth, controlled surfaces of Fang versus the expressive movement of Yang. The clarity and clairvoyance of the images presented by Fang place their ironic inhabitants in a dreamlike realm of supposedly perfect human understanding, whereas Yang’s floating, forceful images
suggest uncertainty and depict the human compulsion to openly question and seek answers.

Yang’s expressive style creates a somewhat disturbing confrontation with a soldier holding a half naked male baby in *Plaything* (1992). The sideways glance of the soldier accompanied by an almost lascivious smirk on his face conjures up questions as to his intentions for the baby in his lap. While the image is not overtly sexual, the viewer may sense feelings of a sexual nature in the exposure of the infant’s genitals. Reflecting on what is known about the reproductive rights of Chinese people; this image could be exploring laws that prohibit families from having more than one child. In 1979 the “one child family” policy was put into effect in China in an attempt to maintain, and even reduce, the country’s population so that future generations would not face starvation; this policy, working in tandem with the cultural belief that boys were superior to girls, led to the infanticide and abandonment of female infants and children.34 Revisiting the image with the “one child family” policy in mind adds another dimension to understanding what is being addressed. While yes, the soldier is exposing the infant’s genitals to the world in a seemingly sexualized manner, he may be doing so as a means to show the importance of the male anatomical sex, not the physical act of sex. Moving back up to his gaze, the soldier is impishly looking outside the picture plane in a way that suggests he is winning the game. What game we do not know, but his uniform introduces and reinforces the political game being played out between the people and the government within China during and after the Cultural Revolution.

The story continues to unfold by moving away from the central figures in the image. In the upper left hand corner of the painting an extremely chubby, naked male baby sits staring out at the audience, almost in the pose of the Buddha. He is partially covered by the shoulder of the soldier, thereby making reference to the mass destruction and desecration of China’s cultural heritage during the revolution. Void of any facial expression, the Buddha-like baby captures the empty promises of meaningful fulfillment made by the new communist government. In the background, three predominant figures to the right of the soldier demand attention. In the upper right portion of the background there is a woman turning away from the audience with her left hand raised, as if she were dismissing the scene taking place in the foreground as being too antiquated. Directly below her there is a man-infant sitting in the same position as the Buddha-baby, exposing his genitals to the audience. He is an extremely intriguing figure in that he seems to be questioning how the government really views the people, as infants in need of guidance, who cannot survive without the ever-watchful, hands-on government. Continuing down the right side of the painting to the bottom of the background there is a man who appears to be winking and smiling at the audience, snapping his finger, or even pumping a fist alluding to a joke being played out, a little like an “I got you” gesture.

The culmination of the imagery in *Plaything* is very enthralling. The predominance of the soldier in the painting brings to mind how “hands-on” the Chinese government is. Tightly holding onto the baby, exposing his genitals to the world creates a dialog expressing how the political infrastructure views and treats the people. Treating them like malleable children, the government was able to expose and exploit the people for various means using coercion, similar to the tactics used by victimizers who convince
their victims that everything is the way it should be, this is life. Comparing the image of the soldier and infant to the figures in the background makes what is happening in the foreground a little comical. From the woman dismissing what she sees, to the man-infant, to the winking man, it appears as if the collective consciousness of the people sees the government for what it is, a lecherous machine intent on maintaining its power over the people. But treating people as mere “playthings” is not as easy as it once was as the figures in the background are showing in their defiant mannerisms.

As Yang continued working within the contextual boundaries of Cynical Realism, he began developing a new language for his exploration of the human psyche and concepts of individuality. His expressive mode of painting was morphing into a more fluid, transfer of paint to the canvas, thus creating an ephemeral softness. Yang’s *Expression* (1996) is a series of faces painted in a style similar to his earlier works but transitioning into a more mature, expressive style in which the paint adds its own narrative to the images with drips and splashes of color. All of the figures are wearing military caps, with the exception of a few, and they exhibit a variety of facial expressions. While each individual image explores the eloquent and multifaceted language of color, the surface of the canvas is not as textured by brush strokes, lending fluidity to the piece. Yang deals with surface in his work, raising questions about whether an individual’s character can be revealed by his or her facial expressions. In an answer to his own inquiry, Yang asserts that there is more there than meets the eye with his blotchy images that challenge the viewer to look beyond the surface, into the depths of the image, teasing out an inner essence found within. By wearing the military cap, each person represented is showing that, despite the efforts of the government, each person is an individual
beneath the surface. Intermingled with the pseudo military faces are faces with no distinguishing characteristics. Yang is starting to include everyday faces in his milieu in a departure from representing what is known, the sameness desired and propagated by the Communist regime, seeking what is unknown and undesirable, the individuality inherent in all people.

As Yang’s work began to evolve from recognizable critiques of modern China, Fang’s work evolved into deeper exploration of identity within an already defined paradigm. In Ostriches (1998) Fang illustrates the inanity of the proposition set forth by political propaganda created during the Revolution. Huddled together on the backs of ostriches in the middle of no-where land, a group of men wearing identical outfits and facial expressions seem to be conversing. With their eyes shut they are gesturing to each other in a familiar and friendly manner while laughing in an exaggerated manner. The blank landscape allows the viewer to focus on the figures and ponder what they could be laughing at as well as why all of this is happening while they sit on the backs of ostriches. After the absurdity of the image subsides, an internal dialog begins as the image begins to unveil its intentions. Mimicking the blissful, excited, knowing smiles of the Revolutionary figure, Lijun takes this imagery to another level. Blind, laughing figures ride into the unknown on the backs of ostriches. Not knowing the significance of the ostrich as a definite symbol, it can be assumed that because ostriches are thought of as dense, naïve animals they are a reference to the revolutionary political ideology and to
the people as children who could be led unknowingly into their future lobotomized by the endless Communist dogma that saturated daily life.\textsuperscript{35}

As Fang was delving more deeply into the psychological aspects of the conflict between cultural homogenization and individuality, Yang made a drastic departure from his earlier, expressionistic works of Cynical Realism. Feeling like Cynical Realism was overlooking and glossing over the internal struggles of individuals grappling with the new political ideologies of China, Yang turned away from cynicism into pure expressions of suffering. Yang was not the only person troubled by the superficial nature of Cynical Realism. Chinese curator and critic Hou Hanru questioned the validity of Cynical Realism as an art movement because it was reminiscent of the political propaganda it sought to discredit by depicting China’s struggles with modernization. Hanrou writes,

‘Political Pop’ and ‘Cynical Realism,’ instead of pursuing the freedom and innovation of art language (it is an essential way of avoiding the constraints of the official, dominant discourse), mix popular discontent in political and everyday life with market values in order to, with a bigger economical and political safety, achieve further exposure of their depression, while the official ideology is entering a transition towards a new discursive authority that combines market values with totalitarianism. Logically their languages are popularly understandable (like the hooligan slang in Wang Shuo’s stories) or mannerist extensions and transformations of academic conventions (like most of the paintings that we mentioned, which are actually variations of academic oil paintings). It is, no doubt, a cultural pragmatism. It is also because of this that these works are favoured in the eyes of the ‘international’ media and market, in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and in the West, and promoted as ‘representative’ of the ‘Chinese Avant-garde’.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{36} Hanru Hou, Hsiao-Hwei Yu, \textit{On the Mid-Ground}. (Hong Kong, China: Timezone 8, 2003), 25.
While Hanru’s criticism of Cynical Realism is harsh, it does touch on serious questions about the reception and reading of contemporary Chinese art. Capitalism offered a new way of looking at people as capable of thriving on their own, without the restraints of regulatory laws. Being thrust into the global capitalist system changed the dynamic between artists and their audience. It could be true that artists were catering to Western sensibilities in an effort to break into the international art scene with images criticizing a bygone era in China, but it could be just as true that contemporary Chinese artists were exploring these concepts without any impetus other than genuine criticism during an intense internalization of the rapid, sweeping changes around them, changes that have altered Chinese cities, towns, communities and the country’s economic structure in a short period of time, and that have transformed not only people’s lifestyles, but self-identities as well.37

Stemming from his explorations of portraiture in *Expression*, Yang began creating “portraits” of people devoid of contextual information. Nameless faces bleed through the canvas to reach the surface. Floating in a deep red sea, reminiscent of the official color of Communism, a series of *Untitled* works from 1998-1999 emerge from the depths of Cynical Realism. Pained, screaming, blind faces emerge and cause distress and at the same time evoke a sense of beauty. Moving away from the garish colors of his Cynical Realist palette, Yang offers a new, richer, softer exploration of color. The deep red, milky white, and petal soft pinks that create the nameless individuals in his canvases are reminiscent of love. It is an odd combination of feelings that are evoked when looking

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at one of these images. Angst, frustration, and anger leap out of the canvas, luring the viewer in for further contemplation. Holding faces fraught with tension, pain, fear and violence, his canvasses speak; even shout out overwhelming feelings, thoughts, and secrets held deep within the psyche of Yang.

Dubbed “The Essence of Violence” by Zhang Qunsheng, Yang’s work from this period illustrates the psychological aspect of violence. Yang states in an interview with Maurizio Giuffridi that

The crux of the matter is the artist’s psychological reaction to what lies behind these images, and if he’s able to convert the material into a meaningful product. If he has the capability to handle this information – not just the main points but what’s closely bound up in the environment you exist in – this is a sort of intensity and apprehension. Everyone’s used to powerful confrontation in any sort of violence, but there’s actually a kind of violence that is more frightening one than we see, which I call “soft violence.” In this power system, the harm inflicted on people by this sort of soft violence is far more cruel than that inflicted on the flesh. In reality, when the audience looks at my work it often overlooks this soft component within; this is also a reaction under the pressure of the power system.\(^{38}\)

Having one’s individuality systematically taken away by the political machine of communism and then realizing you have the right to become an individual is a type of psychological violence that creates discord within oneself. Struggling to come to terms with this type of “awakening” would be confusing and painful, especially for those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution.

These “psychological self-portraits”\(^{39}\) spring from a deep red abyss that carries many connotations. Red is a color laden with meaning to both the east and the west; it is a color that can represent fear and oppression. Red is a color with a language

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 83
all its own, and when mentioned in conjunction with Chinese socialism, thoughts of injustice can seep into an otherwise benign conversation causing feelings of discrimination as well as the creation of a language of distrust and negativity towards China and Chinese culture. Yang states that he was never able to escape this language and it became embedded into his psyche. “Eventually this memory became engaged in my artwork and I began using red. So I think it can’t be separated from my background. When you feel that you’ve been pressurized by the color red longer and longer, it becomes an unshakable lingering.”

Anguished, disfigured forms representing psychological struggle are being born from this deep red sea, gasping for air, searching for answers.

Confronting us with blinded, imploring eyes, the face emerging from Untitled No. 5 (1998-1999) is heartbreakingly disturbing. Facial features blend into each other creating a blurry softness, as if the figure is a ghost floating in another world, out of view from human eyes. The slightly opened mouth suggests speech or sound emanating from the figure, but it doesn’t seem like he would be capable of either. Thoughts of birth and the violence of that event spring to mind when looking at this image. When children are born into this world their skin is discolored, their heads are distorted, they are blind, cold and unknowing, dependent on others for their livelihood. But the figure in the image is not an infant; it is a grown man experiencing the trauma of birth into a new world of capitalistic desires, vastly different from the world and culture in which he had grown up. Yang’s painting suggests that the experience of this world was akin to that of an infant.

40 Yang Shaobin, “Interview with Yang Shaobin; Maurizio Giuffredi,” from Yang Shaobin Essence of Violence, 83
Blind and speechless, going through the motions of discovery, failure, and fear, many
men, women and children would have felt a sense of loss and vulnerability, causing
damage to the psyche that is difficult to acknowledge.

In *Untitled No. 15* (1998-1999) the viewer is confronted with an almost
blinding flash of shocking white against the deep red background. A single drip of white
paint pulls the eye towards a mouth which is open in a painful scream. The figure in this
image is more distorted than *No. 5* with its only real defining features being the mouth
open in a silent scream and the furrowed brow created by squeezing the eyes shut,
creating and maintaining a sense of blindness. The blurry, horizontally elongated head
creates a strong sense of motion in this image as if the figure is whipping his head from
side to side in denial or trying to escape from some unknown force. Again the viewer is
confronted with an open mouth that wants to speak but is unable to because of the
suspended state of the psyche. The stifling, oppressive history lurking in the background
still has its hold on the figure who is trying desperately to escape.

As the series progresses the faces become even more unrecognizable. *Untitled
No. 23* gives the impression of a face but it is extremely difficult to make out specific
features. Similar to *No. 15*, there is a sense of motion, but this time it is more urgent. The
motion of whipping the head side to side has created a blur of the facial features and the
viewer is left only with an impression of a streak of white light. It is somewhat
reminiscent of the action seen in a science fiction movie when people are placed in an
apparatus that will supposedly change the constitution of their minds, or person, or some
other part of their being, and in the process of transformation, their head moves at the
speed of light, from side to side, making their eyes seem like one line across the upper
portion of the face and the nose and mouth become a blur. Once the process is complete
the body and face remain the same, but the thoughts and ideas present within that shell
have been changed to conform to the new order. If only the process were that simple. It is
impossible to erase the past from memory. It will always define and inform the present.

The expectation that people and entire cultures will erase or ignore their past
is an ugly and violent practice. Yang explores the internal violence created by both the
failing Communist regime and the new Chinese political machine in their attempt to
overpower and recreate an entire culture. Not being able to voice a resistance creates
distressing internal dialogs which manifest themselves in outward displays of violence.
Physical violence is a method of coping with internal distress that allows it to be located
in the severity of a physical pain that will eventually vanish. The “soft violence”
expressed by Yang is an entirely different beast. It is inescapable. It lingers, creating
anxious states and unavoidable sickness of the mind and heart, creating situations in
which bodies and spirits become the victims. In comparison to Yang’s painful renditions
of nameless and faceless people, Fang represents an alternate psychological state in
which his figures hang on the edge of sanity.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In this project, I have shown that the significant cultural and political changes that occurred within China since the beginning of the twentieth century have greatly altered how Chinese people view themselves. Beginning in 1911, with the fall of the Qing dynasty, a revolution began to democratize China and free it from the grips of imperial rule. The main focus of the nationalist democratic faction was to remove political power from the monarchy and instill power in the people’s representatives. This is the first time in Chinese history that political power was in the hands of the people, and with rising uncertainty about how to manage this power, the revolutionary fervor began to wane as the people tried to redefine themselves within the new social structure.

As chaos set in, the people realized that they needed a guiding faction to manage the new Chinese state. The New Culture Movement, a group of like minded intellectuals and students, began speaking about cultural reform in their publication the New Youth which outlined the necessary steps to the creation of a solid Chinese political state. Believing that the only way to reshape and redefine China as a modern country was to completely erase the corrupt, traditional ways, the New Culture Movement placed the power it in the hands of the youth, as they were the only ones capable of inciting revolution. Basing their political platform on concepts gleaned from liberalism, pragmatism, nationalism, anarchism, and socialism, the New Youth systematically
dismantled traditional Chinese culture in the eyes and minds of the newly liberated population, especially the youth. As the politics of the New Culture Movement matured into the Nationalist Party, a splinter group, the CCP, began laying its roots.

Taking the Soviet model of communism, which claimed that revolution would rise up from the proletarian masses, the CCP transformed the language to include not only the poorest among the population, but industrial workers, miners and railroad workers to create a truly working-class revolution within China. Liberating the proletarians/workers from the grip of the bourgeoisie, the poorest classes from the countryside and the industrial workers in the cities would be able to become individuals, contributing to society on a more human level. For the CCP, revolution lay within the hands of the working class and the goal of the CCP was to incite a revolutionary fervor within their ranks.

In an attempt to implement strategies based on the Soviet model of urban industrialization that would boost industrial output, the CCP realized that the model could not work within China because the majority of the nation’s population lived in densely populated rural agricultural communities lacking in agricultural surplus. The CCP needed to find an alternate method of obtaining the raw materials necessary to further the country’s growth. Due to failed attempts at industrialization, the CCP, namely Mao Zedong, devised a plan that would attempt rural industrialization giving birth to the Great Leap Forward which gave rise to Mao’s concept of a communist utopia: rural communes.

The communes were meant to advance the CCP’s vision of utopia by creating communities that were self-sufficient and would advance the country’s agricultural and technological progress. Believing that the commune system would solve the industrial
urbanization problem, the CCP began planning for the future, relying on projected agricultural and industrial output. Due to the unforeseen population growth, the resources allocated for the people and industrial growth were miscalculated causing a massive famine causing the collapse of the Great Leap Forward.

Realizing that the Great Leap Forward was a disaster, Mao began searching for a new way to advance communism to its final actualization. Not knowing the exact cause of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, many scholars believe it was related to the publication of the May Sixteenth Circular. The circular set down guidelines as to the purpose of the new revolution. Revolutionaries were determined to destroy the old ways once and for all to create a culture for and of the people where everyone worked towards a common goal, the welfare of the country and her people. Part of the revolution was to destroy everything that was reminiscent of the past, including killing individuals and entire families.

In 1976, Mao Zedong died causing the Cultural Revolution to end. The chaos left in the aftermath of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was devastating. After years of systematically debunking the traditional Chinese way of life, and cutting off communication with the west, the people of the PRC were left in a cultural void. Mao not only destroyed China’s cultural base, but he also erased the people’s concept of individuality through education and propaganda promoting a strong work ethic and group mentality. Deng Xiaoping assumed control over the CCP in 1978 seeking to further the goals of the CCP in conjunction with economic reform and implemented the open-door-policy. With the implementation of the open-door-policy, Deng allowed western influences to once again seep into the PRC, causing the seeds of
rebellion to take root. In the spring of 1989, university students staged numerous demonstrations in protest of the CCP’s unbending position on individual rights. On June 3-4, 1989, in response to the demonstrations, military forces were mobilized and took action against the demonstrators centered in Tiananmen Square. While student demonstrations were occurring throughout China, the protests at Tiananmen Square became the most memorable because of the government’s action. After Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government ended all communication with the west, lapsing back to a strict communist rule.

In the early 1990s, Deng once again decided to reopen China’s borders and transform the country into a manufacturing base for the rest of the world. By maintaining China’s communist status, every participant within the new, open market system can justify the exploitation of laborers as a means to procure goods for consumers worldwide. The system is very interesting to examine because under the tenets of socialism, the government is designed to look after the welfare of the people, which has been abandoned in the new Chinese social system. The new, capitalist ventures of China have changed the social strata once again. Previously, the eradication of the bourgeoisie was paramount to the creation and vitality of the CCP. Now, with an open door, China is rapidly becoming a capitalist society creating classes within the once class-less society.

China is in a constant state of flux. Within this flux are remnants of the past that create an alternate dialog within China that seeks to reclaim old traditions. Artists, previously designated to create pieces that glorified the Communist agenda, found themselves free of restrictions and able to explore alternate modes of expression. Contemporary Chinese artists find themselves in a unique position, which allows them to
ask myriad questions in an attempt to understand current Chinese culture for not only themselves, but their audience and the world.

Artist Yang Shaobin was born during the end of the Cultural Revolution in the thriving industrial city of Tangshan. At a young age, his family was forced to move to the countryside to help further the goals of the CCP. Fortunately, through family connections, Yang was able to stay in the city, avoiding one of the last forced migrations to the rural countryside. Deciding that he wanted to be an artist, Yang was enrolled in the local art academy. Despite being a trained artist, Yang became a police officer, a decision that would influence his art later in life.

By the time Yang was a young man in the late 1970s, having finished his studies to become a police officer, he began seeking an education in art, and the Cultural Revolution had come to an end. During this time, groups of intellectuals began forming, especially within the arts. One of the most well known groups, the Xing Xing group, was actively creating and showing art in alternative and public spaces, creating an irreparable gap between socialist realism and contemporary art. Not wanting to participate in the contemporary art scene at this time, Yang worked as a police officer and painted in his spare time. It was during this time in his life that he realized the damage done to his and the collective psyche of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. Imagine spending the early part of one’s life trying to become a part of the homogenized whole, then having that ideology stripped bare would be a life changing realization. Lacking a collective identity, yet not having developed an individual identity, one would be left feeling invisible in struggle intent on defining a newfound sense of self.
In 1991 Yang moved to Beijing wanting to be a professional artist. Settling close to his former classmate, Fang Lijun, Yang began experimenting with a style that would later become known as Cynical Realism. Cynical Realism is a movement born out of the disillusionment created by the end of the Cultural Revolution which destroyed any latent feelings of idealism. The cynicism felt about the current political and cultural situation in China expressed in Cynical Realist works of art can be associated with the fact that the artists participating in the movement grew up during a time when cultural ideologies were changing constantly. This group of artists began questioning their society’s search for the promised utopia of Mao’s communist regime. Artists working within the framework of Cynical Realism became interested in depicting individuals within this political and cultural framework. The main focus of the Cynical Realism was to depict people as individuals and to protest against any ideological and political commitment.

In Fang’s Cynical Realist work, there is a repetitive use of absurd figures with varying facial expressions. Focusing on the face of the figure is a loaded choice. Comparing the people in Fang’s work with images of the Revolution, a breakdown of the common stereotype of happy Chinese people perpetuated by the art of the Revolution is seen. Fang’s work is devoid of any manifestations of current political ideology, and the masses of idealized Chinese people have turned into parodic cookie cut-outs, making the regime’s concept of the perfect Chinese Communist absurd. Yang also adopted the tenets of Cynical Realism. Like Fang, he tackled questions of identity in post-revolutionary China. Comparing the representation of the figures in Fang and Yang, the most
noticeable difference is in the smooth, controlled surfaces of Fang versus the expressive movement of Yang.

As Yang continued working within the contextual boundaries of Cynical Realism, he began to develop a new language for his exploration of the human psyche and concepts of individuality. His expressive mode of painting was giving way to a more fluid, transfer of paint creating an ephemeral softness. Yang deals with surface in his work, raising questions about whether an individual’s character can be revealed by facial expressions alone. In an answer to his own inquiry, Yang asserts that there is more than meets the eye with his blotchy images that challenge the viewer to look beyond the surface, into the depths of the image, teasing out an inner essence found within.

As Yang’s work began to evolve from recognizable critiques of modern China, Fang’s work evolved into deeper exploration of identity. Fang was delving more deeply into the psychological aspects of the conflict between cultural homogenization and individuality. At the same time, Yang made a drastic departure from his earlier, expressionistic works of Cynical Realism. Feeling like Cynical Realism was glossing over the internal struggles of individuals, Yang turned away from cynicism into pure expressions of suffering. Zhang Qunsheng coined the term “The Essence of Violence” to describe Yang’s work from this period as it illustrates the psychological aspect of violence.

Working with social consciousness and awareness, Yang’s work vividly illustrates the painful struggles of becoming something other than a homogenized part of the whole. The “soft violence” expressed by Yang cannot be escaped. It lingers, creating anxious states and situations in which bodies and spirits become the victims of never
ending revolution. In comparison to Yang’s painful renditions, Fang represents an alternate psychological state in which his figures hang on the edge of sanity. Not being fully aware or able to accept all that modernization has in store is a scary, but an unavoidable venture. Exploring the social and cultural phenomenon that was the Cultural Revolution is a doorway to reading, understanding and giving context to the work of Yang Shaobin and Fang Lijun.


Wu Hung, Making History, Hong Kong, China: Timezone 8, 2008.
