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*Liu Dahong—Stranded Objects and Shame in Chinese
Contemporary Post-socialist Art*

The Shanghai-based artist, Liu Dahong, was born in 1962, in the former German colony of Qingdao, in China's eastern seaboard province of Shandong. Liu is a versatile and ideologically ambitious painter who has been active during the period of economic and social upheaval that began in 1978: Deng Xiaoping's "Reform China." In this article, I focus primarily on a pair of oil paintings Liu made a decade into the Reform era that make knowing reference to the grotesque cruelties and perversions of Hieronymus Bosch: *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month (Childhood)* (1987) (Figure 1) and *The Awakening of Insects (Chaos)* (1988) (Figure 2). Both exemplify the characteristic feature of his work that I want to highlight: his ability to stage, in his paintings and installations, a provocative and often satirical conversation between one phase of China's revolutionary past and its post-socialist present—to whittle the Cultural Revolution and Reform China, respectively. In doing so, Liu exposes a contradiction at the very heart of contemporary Chinese society and culture: the way that the past is consistently treated as a fixed determinant narrative, at the same time as the present is officially depicted as being unscarred by the traumatic nature of that past. In *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month* and *The Awakening of Insects* Liu incorporates the convulsions of the Communist Party State's scopic regime in the late Maoist period, by throwing together, in carnivalesque mayhem, bizarre revolutionary episodes and the equally strange manifestations of China's turn to capitalist tendencies through economic "opening up." In more recent years, since 2007, Liu has produced lithographs of these two paintings and reflected publicly on the significance of the times and events they depict in a series of published *Notebooks* and *Textbooks*. In these commentaries, he explores the exegetical continuity and hyperbole that highlight the persistence of Maoist structures of rhetorical occlusion masking the dark side of late Chinese modernity.¹

¹ Liu Dahong, *Liu Dahong: A Teacher's Thoughts* (Chengdu: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing, 2007); *Textbook*, Beginners' Level Lesson No. 1-No. 27 (*liu dahong keben*, di

Liu Dahong also explores these themes around past and present, and around memory and affect, in his practice as a teacher. One educational project in 2008, which he called “Old Friends” (*liang pengyou*), was designed to awaken historical consciousness among his final year students, whose education to date had failed to provide any serious assessment of the events of the 1960s and 1970s. Liu’s idea was to emphasise the work of history, whilst avoiding explicit political investigation. (This caution is explained by the fact that, a few years previously, students in his class had been denied graduation because of a studio he had run on Cultural Revolution violence. In the sensitive run-up to the Beijing Olympics, he did not want this year group to suffer the same fate.) Each student was required to select an old friend to paint. Some opted to paint boyfriends or girlfriends nude, as a way of interpreting the closeness and honesty of the relationship. Others attempted to get to know an old acquaintance, or relative, in more emotional depth. One young woman chose her Mother, a seamstress, towards whom she had ambivalent feelings. As part of a research project of our own, a Chinese colleague and I interviewed both students and subjects, including this woman, who opened up to us in a way that she never had to her daughter. She revealed how hurt and sad she still felt about the way that her grandfather had been treated in the 1960s and during the Cultural Revolution and how, as a result, she regarded that period as a “scar on history.” She had remained silent about the experience because, although she felt that “that period of history was an insult for our family,” she recognized that the reforms which had since “opened up” China had enhanced her daughter’s life chances: “now she has the opportunity to go to university to become a senior student” and she did not want to make her daughter “unhappy with society in the future.” Having made that acknowledgement, this woman then haltingly and inadvertently articulated the socio-political contradictions she herself embodied: “So I just think ... I don’t want to think about our family history, the past and when I was young....”² Liu’s

yi zhi ershiqi ken chu ji keceng) (Shanghai: Education People Publishing House, 2008); “Atlas” in *Textbook*, Advanced Level Lessons No. 52–No. 62 (*liu dahong keben*, di wushier zhi liushier ke, gao ji keceng) (Shanghai: Educational People Publishing House, 2008), no pagination; *Notebooks* (Shanghai: Educational People’s Publishing House, 2010).

² Interview with the author, Shanghai, 2008. See Stephanie H. Donald, “Old Friends,” in *Liang you: The Young Companion*, ed. Liu Dahong (Shanghai: Shuangbai Company, 2009).



Figure 1. Liu Dahong, *Fairytals of the Twelfth Month (Childhood)*
(oil 1987/lithograph 2007), courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Liu Dahong, *The Awakening of Insects (Chaos)*
(oil 1988/lithograph 2007), courtesy of the artist.

painting, I argue, is both motivated and informed by such disavowals of a painful past, and the associated sense of shame.

Childhood

As early as 1945, in a speech to the Communist Party Congress four years before the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong evoked a folk tale about a Foolish Old Man who, against commonsense advice of a Wise Old Man, set out to remove two mountains that blocked his way to the south. Mao's moral was his Marxist-Leninist conception of revolutionary modernisation, or of transcending the past. In the modern world, said Mao, two big mountains lay "like a dead weight on the Chinese people." One was imperialism, the other feudalism. In the fable, God is moved by the Foolish Old Man's determination, and sends two angels to carry away the mountains on their backs. Like the Foolish Old Man, the Chinese Communist Party was determined to change the landscape of the times, however apparently impossible the odds. Hence Mao's assertion that the Party was determined to dig up the mountains of imperialism and feudalism, rather than trying to go round them. To carry through that project during the war efforts leading up to the Revolution of 1949 required a collective emotional energy. "We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?"³

In his 2010 *Notebooks*, Liu Dahong refers back to Mao's speech in order to cast an ironic light on the Party's subsequent manipulation of historical events. "Let's carry forward the spirit of Mao's story 'Yugong yishan'," he wrote, "digging and digging, generation after generation."⁴ His implication is that, in the PRC, history has repeated itself at least three times: first as the heroic anti-Japanese, and subsequently anti-Nationalist, struggles of 1937-1945 and 1945-1949, the second time as anti-history, during the ideological battles and violence of 1966-

³ Mao Zedong, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains; Mao Zedong address to the Seventh Congress of the CCP, June 11th 1945," in Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Section 5: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/index.htm> (accessed May 2012).

⁴ Liu, *Notebooks*, no pagination.

1969, and thirdly, now, as irony. For Liu in 2010, the Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains was a reminder that, although history has not stopped, it has been reduced by the selectivity of those who rewrite it. One of the few critical responses to such cynicism is satire. In this spirit, Liu's paintings and commentaries invite us to acknowledge the recent past as an emotional field of action that remains effective in the present, at the same time as insisting that there are continuities across aesthetic and political trajectories. His aim is to convince us that history is not a set of discrete and unconnected events, but rather a cumulative condition that produces a strange hybrid of forgetful anxiety—such as the Mother's disavowal—that results in shame for those most wounded by the past.

The landscape of *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month (Childhood)* depicts the Cultural Revolution as a collage of childhood memories. The brightly coloured iconography of revolutionary posters—heroes, uniforms, and ecstatic socialist realistic workers and peasants—and the pageantry of the Red Ballets and Operas are juxtaposed against snow-covered roofs adding to a fairytale setting worthy of the Brothers Grimm, while errant opera styles hover on the margins of perception in the back streets.⁵ Although a large radish and a childish rabbit occupy the centre, there are also scenes of violence in the painting. Most significantly, the child's eye view includes the Great Helmsman. Mao looms like a godhead crowned with the sun's rays in the top right hand corner of the painting. But even this figure is overshadowed and undermined by Shanshan, the main character from an immensely violent children's film from 1974, *Shanshan de hong xing*, or *Sparkling Red Star*, in which Shanshan is a child soldier who epitomizes revolutionary courage and purity in the face of extreme violence against his family.⁶ Indeed he sets the tone. The more closely one looks into *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*, the more disturbing the fairytale elements appear. Depictions of denunciations and scenes of torture nestle in the squares of Qingdao, alongside the dancing Young Pioneers and the hallucinatory large radish.

⁵ ... of Qingdao. "The description depicting the streets where Hong lived as a child (Number 3 Park, Worker's Cultural Palace, Gaotang Road, Liaocheng Road and Shichang 3rd Road)" Liu Dahong, *Textbook, Elementary Levels 1st-20th lessons*, Educate the People Publishing House, 2008: 22.

⁶ *Shanshan de hong xing*. Directed by Ang Li and Jun Li. August 1st Film Studio, 1974.

This fantastic landscape draws on both biographical and historical memories. Liu, who was four years old in 1966, has said in interview that the image is drawn from a journey he made as a child from hospital to home after a serious illness. He was slightly delirious and the world around him matched that delirium. But Liu is also commemorating political events and satirizing a particular political imaginary. In China these days, the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976) is generally referred to as “ten years of chaos.” The phrase is descriptive but too narrow, in the sense that it emerges from the State’s strategy of curtailing discussion about the causes and consequences of the so-called “chaos” by containing it within the neat boundaries of a decade. The first phase of the “chaos” erupted in June 1966, in a bout of vicious upheavals, many of them inter-generational, that lasted until August 1968. This intense period was followed by a long and painful aftermath of political and social conflict, in which class politics, generational change and factional in-fighting were at the core of a struggle for the very form and nature of political power in a post-revolutionary State.⁷

The parable of the Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains resurfaced as part of Mao’s factionalism leading to the ideological ferment of 1966-1968, through its publication in the 1965 and 1967 editions of Mao’s *Selected Works*. It became one of the most widely read sections of his *Little Red Book*. Mao’s telling not only celebrates the perverse megalomania of the Old Man’s project and by association of the Cultural Revolution, but also, equally perversely, appears to justify in hindsight the insanity of many actual nation-building projects launched in the late 1950s. One such bizarre scheme was the Kill the Four Pests campaign (1958), when flies, sparrows, rats and mosquitos were targeted for elimination—through means such as exhorting people to climb onto the top of their buildings and bang pans together to force sparrows into the sky. As another Shanghai artist, Huang Qihou, a contemporary and colleague of Liu’s, has recalled: “This was an extension of Mao’s people’s ideological war,

⁷ Crucial accounts are available in Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Joseph W. Esherick, Paul.G. Pickowicz and Andrew.G. Walder, eds, *The Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Edward Friedman, “Raising Sheep on Wolf Milk: The Politics and Dangers of Misremembering the Past in China,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9.2-3 (2008): 389-409.

but it wasn't a war between people—it was a war between people and sparrows ... the sparrows were timid, the noise was terrifying... sparrows can't fly for long as they have no stamina, they were doomed.”⁸

The sparrows' doom and the mountains' disappearance are part of the same political imaginary that Liu Dahong renders as the delirious fantasy-land of *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*. As political fables, they capture something of the dislocating acceleration peculiar to Chinese modernization. At the same time, they suggest how Chinese modernity has required both strategic asynchrony and a genuine belief in the power of the future to improve memories of the past, whilst explaining the exhausting upheavals of the present day. The new modernity of post Liberation (1949) had a different cast list to that of the politically adventurous intelligentsia of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these post-Liberation stories, the progressive dreamers of the 1890s and 1900s and the modern young things of the 1920s and 1930s were replaced by peasant labour, but also subsumed under this mountainous posture of Mao as a kind of revived Ancient. Nonetheless this Ancient, this Foolish Old Man is recognizably Modern—hence Mao's looming presence in Liu's painting. The ambition of this mythicized Mao is miraculous in scope, but at the heart of it there is something quite familiar to a modernist and modern agenda. This Mao-figure fetishizes a will to curb Nature and to organize human capacity, putting himself and others to work, not for subsistence, but for an end that transcends the activity of digging. At the end, Mao is assisted by the intervention of heavenly agents, personified in the madness of the people; even as the world turns on its axis away from the gods of Nature (*tiandi*, heaven and earth), they are assimilated into modern labour. Mao's translation of the folktale into a motivational recipe for atheist, Marxist revolutionary success based on the efforts of the people is thus always inspired but already deceptive. The story epitomises Mao's understanding of his own role in historical change as rhetorician and as a replacement for the gods. He positions himself as both the Old Man and as the heavenly agent, whilst the masses are, like the Old Man's

⁸ Huang quotation taken from an interview in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Leicia Peterson, *No Escape from the Past*, 30-minute video documentary, 2010, extract online: www.chinaposters.com.au (accessed 9 May 2014).

sons in the original tale, willing to trust his erratic judgment in waging war on natural forces and human foes.

When he told the story of the Foolish Old Man in 1945, Mao was articulating what Claude Lefort has inferred as a logic of absolute power, or as Flynn puts it, “a fatal identification of the ruler with his own image,” whereby the place of the Leader is beyond the Symbolic, achieving simultaneous omnipresence and absence in the likeness of the divine.⁹ If China in 1945, a failing Nationalist republic exhausted from the second Sino-Japanese War and Japanese occupation, were to be transformed into a People’s Republic of continuing revolution, a source of absolute power akin to godliness would need to be identified and maintained. Mao took on the mantle of that power for the Chinese Communist Party under his leadership, and identified the people as its embodiment in pursuing constant uncertainty—“Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people.” The figure of Mao remained ever-present as the visual field of his personality cult continued to expand over the decades, but it was nonetheless occluded when his rhetorical status was conflated with the actions of the Chinese people, experienced as the people’s war and mass struggle.

It is this paradox of the simultaneous omnipresence and evanescence of Mao’s image which Liu picks up on, both in his sharply pointed and parodic observation in 2010 that the people are still “digging and digging” and earlier, in 1987, in his representation of Mao’s atemporal, inescapable and chaotic influence on Chinese political life in *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*. By combining the invocation of European pictorial traditions with the iconography of socialist realist propaganda and references to Chinese popular and children’s culture in the painting, Liu seems to be layering inauthenticity onto inauthenticity. He renders the Cultural Revolution, and events that preceded it, as what, in his critique of late capitalism, Fredric Jameson refers to as *pseudo-events*. Pseudo-events, for Jameson, occur in “a world transformed into sheer images of itself” and they have the effect (as Slavoj Žižek glosses Jameson) of

⁹ Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 34.

leaving people “distracted by an imaginary ideal unity where there isn’t one.”¹⁰ Insofar as they manifest the simulacrum of postmodern skirmishes with representation, it is no surprise that pseudo-events are the product of the flux of hyper-propaganda and eccentric historical representation that characterizes the Chinese Party-State’s relationship with its own past. The events that constitute the PRC’s revolutionary history, painstakingly organized but ineluctably chaotic, are flattened out into a Party narrative of accumulated authority. Acknowledged “mistakes,” such as the Cultural Revolution, are consigned to a footnote. Mao’s ghostly hubris is tolerated in return for his continuing rhetorical power as the founding father. There is a kind of agency after the fact in this process, in which the actual agents define their contribution through an ontological sleight of hand. I am everything and nothing. I move mountains by saying that someone else has already done so.

Just as Jameson insists that we must expect *chaos* to be the concomitant of late capitalism—“as throughout history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror”¹¹—so Liu, in his painting, his writing and his teaching, keeps on referring back to the Cultural Revolution because it was an event (or a pseudo-event) that made manifest the violent nature of post-revolutionary, revolutionary society.

It was an ultimate exposure of the structure of China. I think why North Korea is what it is today is because it didn’t have a Cultural Revolution. Only with a Cultural Revolution, all structural problems could be exposed. It turned the whole society upside down. I think it is the most direct and most effective way for us to understand every aspect of our society. It is a living textbook.¹²

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 66. Jameson borrowed the concept of the “pseudo-event” from Daniel J. Boorstin’s discussion of the modern image in advertising: Boorstin, *The Image, A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992/1961). Žižek quoted in Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson* (London: Routledge Critical Thinkers, 2000), 17.

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 14.

¹² Liu Dahong, *Textbook A2*, 2008, n.p.

Chaos

Following the first paroxysms of 1966-1968, the years 1968-1976 witnessed, in effect, a militarized, factionalised clampdown on the young people who had been mobilized in support of Mao Zedong Thought, as well on perceived and actual enemies of Mao's version of permanent revolution. These years of strife and reasserted control did nothing to curtail the progress of Party power. On the contrary, the threat of unmanaged and unmanageable chaos that was now associated with the Cultural Revolution became a mantra through which the Party State reinvented its mandate to rule after Mao's death. Public histories and private memories of the "ten years of chaos" have subsequently been strategically interrupted or forestalled by state censorship and, to a degree, superseded by structural changes in Chinese society. This absence of remembering has also been overlaid by invented memories of heroism and innocent enthusiasm on the part of those engaged in continuous revolution. Those who had participated in Mao's purges and internal campaigns, it has been argued, were gradually "re-imagined as people with high ideals, comrades who sacrificed themselves to make China a better place."¹³ Looking back from the late 1980s, those who had witnessed the subsequent emergence of the new Chinese economic model might have accepted the line that the Cultural Revolution doctrines of the "new" and of continuing revolution were aberrant. Equally, more perceptive voices might have made the case that the Cultural Revolution was an overblown and extraordinarily vicious but necessary precursor to Deng's economic revolution that followed in 1978. As Liu Dahong for one has noted in his *Textbook* series, the Cultural Revolution was a shock to the system that has had many unintended consequences—not least of which was Deng's headlong pursuit of marketisation, and de-collectivisation after 1978. The polemic in Lui's 1988 painting, *The Awakening of Insects (Chaos)*, is that, both publicly and privately, China remained at least as chaotic in the 1980s as it had been during the continuing revolution and Red clampdown of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴

Compared to the jarringly and deceptively sunny representation of the Cultural Revolution as a pseudo-event—a False Dawn—in *Fairytales of the Twelfth*

¹³ Friedman, "Raising Sheep on Wolf's Milk," 393.

¹⁴ Liu, *Textbook*, Beginners' Level, n.p.

Month, the landscape of Reform China in *The Awakening of Insects* evokes a Descent into Hell. Named after a traditional Spring festival in Shandong, here all is seething uncertainty and moral decay. Insects awaken over a single day, and are already dying by dusk. The skies reveal no dawning emperor, nor an immediate pseudo-successor like Shanshan. Rather, they are filled with demons, dragons and ghostly hordes of ancient armies, while fashionable women lounge and preen in the centre like elongated stick insects. The allusions to Bosch's grotesque canvases are more direct, and there are Goya-esque masks to be seen on the far right of the painting. The alien, European look of the deformed buildings reflects the influence of the German architects who played a decisive role in shaping modern Qingdao.¹⁵ Liu's textbook description: "Using a Christian church and a hall of Loyalty and Righteousness as the background, both representing sites of faith, a chaotic battlefield is presented, consisting of myriad demons and evil spirits from heaven and hell, from prehistoric time and the Red calendar era, together with insects, gods, birds and men."¹⁶ The naivety of Childhood in the Cultural Revolution is supplanted by the infernal Chaos of Reform: the frenetic awakening of individual greed in the rebirth of capitalist tendencies and accumulation of personal wealth. A Church is the most prominent building, and an emperor holds court in its courtyard. Thus, a jumble of old follies comes back to re-interpret China as a marketplace of insanity and furious short-term competition. Metaphorically, Liu sees this world in the brief awakening and morbidly energetic lives of spring insects.

Taken alongside *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*, *The Awakening of Insects* articulates a visual argument that the so-called chaos of the long ten years was supplanted by the new, rabid chaos of market reform. Furthermore, Liu suggests through the cross-referential but disjunctive stylistic formation of the two paintings that chaos is also located in the gaps caused by missing connections. Together, then, the two paintings present a singular vision of mental confusion,

¹⁵ Colonial influences in Shandong are discussed in Yixu Lu and David S. G. Goodman's work on the German wife of the architect Walter Frey, Elizabeth, "Writing Home and China; Elizabeth Frey in Tianjin, 1913-14," in Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, eds, *Twentieth Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 151-63.

¹⁶ Liu Dahong, *Textbook, Elementary Levels 1st-20th lessons*, Educate the People Publishing House, 2008, 26.



Figure 3. Liu Dahong, “Spring Commences—lichun,” Lesson 62 Red Calendar, *Textbook: advanced lessons 52-62* (printed paper), courtesy of the artist, 2008.



Figure 4. Liu Dahong, “Insects waken—Jingzhe,” Lesson 62 Red Calendar, *Textbook: advanced lessons 52-62* (printed paper), courtesy of the artist, 2008.

communal political performance, and intense human activity. They describe the dislocations and missing links between revolution and reform in visual fabrications of pseudo-events. The activities and stories busily depicted in their every corner render both periods in a series of oxymorons: collective individuality, organized chaos, stage-managed uncertainty.

In the final lesson of his *Advanced Textbook*, Liu reworks these themes backwards and forwards across forms of representation within a parodic game of rote learning, folk mythology, and Maoist iconography. In earlier “lessons” 4 and 5 he discusses and teaches the relationship between the two paintings by relocating both in relation to the poetry and politics of Mao prior to the Cultural Revolution. This strategy ironically refutes the exclusive periodization of State-sanctioned historiography. Instead, Liu slyly identifies the chaos of both the Cultural Revolution and of Reform as excrescences of Mao’s imagination and aesthetic influence.

Lesson 4: Childhood *Childhood or Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*: [题画诗]梅花欢喜漫天雪 (七律·冬云) Plum blossoms like whirling snow scattered in the sky (Mao, December 26, 1962), to be sung to the tune of Seven-Character Lu Shi.¹⁷

Lesson 5: Chaos *Chaos or The Awakening of Insects*: 五洲震荡风雷激 满江红·和郭沫若同志 Five continents rock, in the roaring of wind and thunder, “Reply to Comrade Guo Moruo” (Mao, January 9, 1963), to the tune of A Flowing Red River.¹⁸

In Lesson 4, Liu appropriates a poem by Mao Zedong and collected in the *Selected Works*, which in turn evokes the terse elegies of the Tang dynasty poet, Li Yu (937-978 AD). For Liu, these lines evoke the twelfth month of the revolution, the end of an era, when childhood went crazy—“whirling snow scattered in the sky.” In Lesson 5, Liu takes Mao’s poem about action and refers it forward to the Dengist Reform era. The red river flows forward, but it is

¹⁷ Liu, *Textbook, Elementary Levels*, 22.

¹⁸ Liu, *Textbook, Elementary Levels*, 26.

clogged with insects trying to swim. To underline that message, in the 2007 re-issue of the painting as a lithograph, Liu re-attributes the chaos to yet another reverberation, as “five continents rock” to the sound of Chinese patriotic energy now rampant in the preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The delineation of the 1960s as a sinister city of fairytales with battles as the narrative thread, and with poetry as its muse, and the 1980s as a chaotic but warlike realization of the Maoist mission to seize the day, underscores Liu’s ambivalence towards the official historical narrative of the Cultural Revolution and Reform as distinct eras that represented bad governance and good governance respectively.

Shame

In the People’s Republic of China, the art historian Jerome Silbergeld has argued, “what unites a history that ranges from the taboo subject of the manifest failures of Maoism (the tragedies of the anti-Rightist movement, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution) to the qualified success of post-Socialism (success in capital formation, bitter disappointment in human rights) is the fact that, for most people, the past is whatever the government says it is.”¹⁹ Liu’s paintings, I have argued, operate in the space that exists between the self-serving rewriting of history in State-Party narratives and the lingering individual shame of someone like the art student’s mother, the Seamstress who wanted to disavow the impact of those traumatic events: “So I just think ... I don’t want to think about our family history, the past and when I was young....” Although Silbergeld is absolutely correct in his observation in that “the politics of forgetting is simplified by the banning of alternative histories and the suppression of complaint,” Liu is one artist who has consistently offered a critique of the official histories that claim a ruptural break between the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and the new era of Reform. His imagery affirms the Seamstress’s intuition that there is at an affective continuity to post-Revolutionary modern Chinese history.

¹⁹ Jerome Silbergeld, “From Tragedy to Farce, Things Forgotten and Remembered in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *China and Revolution: History, Parody and Memory in Contemporary Chinese Art*, ed. Stephanie H. Donald (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2010), 18-21. Accessible at <http://www.chinaposters.com.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/USYD-china-and-revolution-EN.pdf>.

Liu's aesthetic practice thus addresses the defining modern interweaving of memory, trauma and the aesthetic. One of the most compelling attempts to address this problematic interaction is Eric Santner's book length essay on what he calls "stranded objects": that is, objects that had profound significance within one traumatic moment of history, or one universe of meaning, but which resurface as supposedly purely aesthetic objects once that context has been officially denied or prematurely forgotten. In the specific context of German memory and mourning in relation to the Holocaust, Santner is concerned with objects that are unmoored from "a cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned by an unspeakable horror."²⁰ The starting point of his book is a personal anecdote about seeing a young German man, not a Jew, wearing a Star of David pendant hanging on a necklace. Santner's reaction, both in the anecdote and in the argument of his book, is that this of all symbols cannot be worn as a mere decoration—or worse, as a postmodern flourish—without comment or explanation. After all, the man's parents or grandparents might have been perpetrators, or onlookers, in the mass murder of their Jewish compatriots. The object has both too much meaning and too little. It cannot fit easily into the present, unless the past with which it is freighted is acknowledged and regained, recovered and forgotten. Very possibly it is now impossible for a non-Jew to wear the Star of David in any circumstances. The young man's mother disagrees. She comes up with various partial explanations and justifications in the course of their argument, none of which Santner feels able to accept. For him, it is not only the Star in and of itself that is out of place. Rather, it is the fact of the Star being worn in a certain way, in a certain place with a certain amnesia, that paradoxically elicits the memory of unresolved and "unspeakable horror." Neither innocence, nor ignorance, nor aesthetic nostalgia can provide sufficient excuse for this use of the object. The stranded object acts as a dislocated material aide-memoire, like a corpse stubbornly bumping against a boat. Bare life floats to the surface of historical consciousness like a drowned man, and will not fall obediently back to the river's depths.

The relevance of Santner's concept of "stranded objects" to the Chinese case (however radically different from the German) is that it provides a framework

²⁰ Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), xiii.

for understanding a society that is saturated with revolutionary memory and yet is governed by a Party-State that remains adamant in denying the impact of that traumatic memory on Chinese modernity. More concretely, the phrase “stranded objects” inevitably comes to mind when, visiting China today, one finds Mao badges, Red songs, People’s Liberation Army caps and Little Red Books—all the icons and totems of revolutionary enthusiasm, promiscuously recycled as objects of kitsch and signs of “cool.” Artists who appropriate these objects in their paintings (and Liu Dahong is not the only one to do so) may be being deliberately ironic, but the young Chinese, born long after the start of the reform era, who buy them as fashion statements, will often have only the vaguest idea of their historical baggage or their psychological force. These badges and flags are in any case still in use by a Chinese Communist Party that has not entirely divested itself of street propaganda and populism. Indeed General Secretary Xi Jinping has marked his own era with the re-introduction of contemporary and high concept posters (distributed online and on television as animated graphics, as well as in traditional paper form on the street) promoting his “Chinese Dream,” an “integrative vision” for the nation.²¹

Perversely, then, these caps, bags and badges may not always bear the weight of the pendant that Santner recognized as a renewed, albeit symbolic, plunder of the past by the present. The objects do retain historical currency. For one thing, they do perhaps subliminally prepare the young to accept new versions of political communications, such as Xi’s latest campaign. For another, they still bear the trace of political revolution and of violence, and yet they are stranded between the memories of an ageing generation and a youthful blankness that is postmodern in the most troubling sense. Unmoored and ungrounded, the objects are disseminated without context or a sense of the shame they entail. Jameson may have reassured Benjaminian worriers that postmodernism is “fun” not “fascism,” but was he just teasing?²² Even if, in both Europe and China, stranded objects travel with apparent insouciance around the social sphere, their provenance lies in a shame that occludes the State’s refusal to accept its role in

²¹ “Background: Connotations of Chinese Dream,” *China Daily*, 5 March 2015: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014npcandcppcc/2014-03/05/content_17324203.htm (accessed 12 September 2015).

²² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

their creation and dissemination, a sleight of history that in turn glosses over the symbolic power of their role in everyone's immediate past.

Why *shame*? Shame has been characterized as a “powerful affect” that entails a double movement towards both “painful individuation” and “uncontrollable relationality.”²³ In this light, contemporary Chinese approaches to historical memory might be seen as a double movement, specifically at the level of the nation-State, that maps a topography of shame. The current political leadership of China is composed of men and some women who appear to feel deeply alienated from their collective pasts, and those of their immediate forbears in leadership. At the same time, they must surely be excruciatingly aware of how these pasts have formed their own authoritarian habits, their patriotic commitment to the idea of China, and their sense of deep unease at the possibility that sudden change will sweep away their legitimacy and legacy. This dysfunctional set of relations between the subject and object of power has had enormous ramifications on the generations born in and after the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps the most compelling instance of the resurfacing of shame were the nostalgic politics of the leftist powerbroker, Bo Xilai, from the western megacity Chongqing. Now discredited and imprisoned, Bo (whose own father was “struggled against” during the Cultural Revolution) instigated the most recent re-mobilisation of Red emotion, famously reinstating the singing of “Red” songs and using social media to send out slogans extolling the legacy of Chairman Mao. This was a form of memorialisation, but not one that encourages the intimacy of regret, or ambiguity. Rather, it was an excessive, over-compensating refusal of shame, and a reiteration of the political and emotional power of past objects without a searching evaluation of what they might mean in the present. The Red songs are analogous to Santner's Star of David insofar as these children of the Cultural Revolution deliberately eschew any historical reflection in order to use a symbol, or a song, in the present. The difference is that this generation, now that they are leaders of the nation, reach out for such objects because of their own *embodied* sense of being “stranded” in an inexplicable present. Xi's Chinese Dream is both his own version of his

²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 27.

erstwhile rival, Bo Xilai's more shameless return to Redness, and a cynical development of Bo's initiative.

"The world we perceive is a dream we learn to have from a script we have not written," wrote the psychologist Silvan Tomkins.²⁴ The Chinese Dream aside, the assertion might almost be a rubric for Liu Dahong's critical aesthetic, with its satirical exposé of the symbols and totems that the Party-State churns out to tell its subjects (and its leaders) what the past is. Tomkins's concept of the subjectively imagined but externally provided "script" also identifies the experiential dislocation—the perception of living in a world of pseudo-events and stranded objects—that is disconcertingly common to the Seamstress and to Bo Xilai. It comes as no surprise, then, that shame was a central theme in Tomkins's work. His hypothesis of the "nuclear script"—that is, each individual's template for imagining the world that defines the core (or nucleus) of their personality—provides a starting point for explaining how memory, shame, and the stranded object might interrelate, and why the dominance of nostalgia may pre-empt or undermine the progress of that dynamic. The nuclear script is not the originary moment, but it is one of a bundle of stories by which lives are lived both in defiance of catastrophe and in hope of a return to the ideal. The "script" is nostalgic, subversive, and repetitive. It is articulated in the Lacanian moment of seeing one's infant self in the mirror and both recognizing and puzzling over the character of that face. Should we look ourselves in the eye or not? Are we to be trusted?²⁵

Tomkins connects such scripts with affective loops and emotional paradigms, noting all the while that this is not about cause and effect—or not just about that. Rather, scripts are a means for negotiating ambiguity, the confusions of temporal and spatial disconnection, and the difficulties of recognizing even the most familiar scenarios when they return in disguise, or when the affect overwhelms the self so that there is no dialogue and no space for recognition left, and "affect

²⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness. Volume 1: The Positive Affects* (New York: Springer, 1962), 13.

²⁵ Lacan, as an early translator of Tomkins, is one of a number of psychoanalysts who have sought to add sophistication to his model.

and action are dissolved into unholy, mutually destructive fusion.”²⁶ From this perspective, Bo Xilai’s resurrection of the Red songs and the moral grandstanding of the Cultural Revolution in 2011 looked suspiciously like a subversive, nostalgic and retrogressive script. Unlike the work of Liu Dahong, the return of Bo’s insufficiently repressed betrayed no hint of irony. Although the deployment of these stranded objects by Bo and his contemporaries was about power, it was also about the demanding return of an infant self. The songs summoned up all those “selves” who had indeed lost childhood and kin to the violence of the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, both the exuberance and the violence of the late 1960s could be remembered in song. The music of the past provided an affective grounding for a shamed and stranded generation, while drowning out the conditions that defined their need for memory in the first place.

Shame prevents one from looking at what has been done in one’s name while being acutely aware of what is happening, or has happened. Shame is the companion to the psycho-pathological impudence of amnesia, avoidance, and violence that enables a State or a nation, as well as an individual, to carry on “shamelessly.”²⁷ Given how lethally a State like the PRC can act, it is worth underlining the courage of visual artists who refuse to be compliant in collective amnesia. Nonetheless, the attention of Liu Dahong and his peers to the source script of the Cultural Revolution is complex. It is not necessarily *just* an act of political courage, facing down the trenchant insolence of the State. It is also a bid for personal emotional survival. Without an accessible memory bank, a generation is stopped in its tracks, forced to the margins, or condemned to political naivety and confusion. The works of Liu Dahong suggest that these gaps of knowledge and self-esteem in turn prevent the emotional maturation of the nation. People keep on “digging and digging” to move those mountains they know to be immovable.

²⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 200.

²⁷ Michael Morgan and Elspeth Probyn take a different approach, arguing persuasively that shame may motivate ethical acts or ethical writing. Michael Morgan, *On Shame* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 82-83; Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: The Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 148.

Memory

Jerome Silbergeld's acerbic observation that an official "politics of forgetting" entails "the banning of alternative histories and the suppression of complaint" implies why memory, in the sense of strategic acts of remembering and commemoration, takes on political as well as psychological significance in China. In the 2008 *Textbook*, Liu Dahong offers a poker-faced summary of the "four unforgettables" that defined Maoist thought in the mid-late 1960s and early 1970: "never forget class struggle; never forget to emphasise politics; never forget to raise high the great red banner of Mao Zedong thinking; never forget the dictatorship of the proletariat."²⁸ These four core principles of "not-forgetting" were injunctions to action and attitude, rather than to remembrance or memory work. Although these particular expectations have changed significantly in the years since Mao's death, the irony of their sentiments (to which Liu would have been alert when citing them) is acute. However fervently people were exhorted to adhere to the four "unforgettables" of the Cultural Revolution, the trauma of that time would promptly be officially "forgotten," written out of history despite (or because of) the indelible marks those years left on two generations.

The "stranded" nature of post-Mao nostalgia becomes all the more striking when contrasted against the active politics of remembering that had been a feature of the pre-Liberation hardships prior to 1949. During the formative years of the Chinese Communist Party in Yan'an in late 1930s, and especially in the rectification campaigns (purges) of the 1940s, the practice of giving public voice to what had been suffered under the old regime, a practice known as *chi ku* or "speaking bitterness," provided people not only with a language for naming past oppressions but also a method of exegetical bonding that implied the vision of a future in New China.²⁹ The post-Cultural Revolution generations have no such discourse for remembering their youth or childhood, or, indeed, those of their parents.

Tomkins's description of the human feedback system suggests the possible consequences of such a cauterization of memory. Often, explains Tomkins, the

²⁸ Liu, *Textbook*, Advanced Level, 45.

²⁹ This is the argument made in David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

infant “does not know why he is crying, that it might be stopped, or how to stop it. Even many years later he will sometimes experience passively, without knowledge of why or thought of remedial action, deep and intense objectless despair.”³⁰ This formulation of the deferred action of trauma is close to Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which suggests how traumatic significance is ascribed to a memory rather than to the event that caused the pain. This sets up a complex inner temporality in which, as Adam Phillips puts it, “memory is reprinted, so to speak, in accordance with later experience.”³¹ Part of this “later experience” may well be a dissonance between an individual’s memories of an event and the accounts of the event given by others. Thus, even when grown adults may have more than an inkling of the traumatic origins of their tears, the contingent shame of others can stand stolidly in the way of coming to terms with the past. This vulnerability of memory is an important part of Liu Dahong’s polemic in *Fairytales of the Twelfth Month*. For his Cultural Revolution generation, the common despair of the beginnings and end of childhood was, in fantasy at least, intimately wrapped up in enduring memories of Mao and his shadow puppets—Shanshan, the waving hands and the dancing Pioneers. Liu’s career suggests that retrospective despair at the hold of such imagery can only be *rooted out through action*. Even though the action of painting, of teaching about the past and of going over and over familiar ground may not altogether nullify the ideological or psychological impact of Mao and his mythology, such actions do at least make it possible to understand (and challenge) Mao’s image-status as a “nuclear script.” The work of remembering and forgetting must thus be seen as a lifelong challenge, a process of turning backwards and forwards between memory and reinvention. In a recent article in this journal, on Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, Naomi Milthorpe shows how Waugh depicted a modern experience that is expunged of “all traces of feeling,” and used a contemptuous aside from Tweedledum (“I hope you don’t suppose those are real tears?”) to reveal “a modernist geography that is flattened—an affectless plain.”³² The more one tries to shed real tears, the more the scale of suffering retreats into memory and fear, and the more despair is occluded by shame. If the existential result for Waugh was an affectless plain, for Liu Dahong it is the nightmare of people dancing in

³⁰ Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame and its Sisters*, 37.

³¹ Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber, 1994), 33.

³² Naomi Milthorpe, “‘Too, too shaming’: Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*,” *Affirmations: of the Modern* 1.2 (Spring 2014): 78 (75-94).

the streets like insects, rabbits and parodies of other worlds and other aesthetic systems.

In his painting Liu leaps, contemptuously, from a satirical Childhood to a hellish Chaos but, as I explained in my introduction, he has developed a gentler pedagogy in his work with students. The nature of his hopes for his “Old Friends” project should now be clear and, in that context, I want to return in more depth to the student artist who chose to paint a portrait of the Mother for whom she had ambivalent feelings.³³ The student explained that her Mother, the Seamstress, had been generous with gifts when she was younger but remained emotionally distant, and that this had driven them apart. Even the gifts were strange to her as a child, for while the colour was attractive and predictable—bright red—the objects were frivolous and overly adult—nail polish, for example. Given that she felt her Mother was somewhat loose morally, the gifts seemed more in keeping with her own needs than with her daughter’s. The Mother was not present in this first interview but joined the discussion later at their home. As the Mother talked, it became clear that the gifts were very much about her love for her daughter, but they were also “stranded objects” that encapsulated her own deep ambivalence towards the State, the Reform era and the responsibilities of parenting. Red is of course the colour of new China post 1949, but nail polish, lipstick, high heels, are reactionary frivolities that were criticised in the Cultural Revolution, and are signs then of *new* new China, and forgetting.

In her interview, the Mother acknowledged that she seemed unable to spend time with her children, or to discuss emotional issues with them. In seeking to explain why this might be so, she told a personal story that the daughter had not heard before. The story was clearly upsetting for the Mother but it was also one that she wanted to articulate in the context of the Old Friends interview. It was as though in a mediated space—in front of a camera—something hidden could be brought to the surface, something that would otherwise have remained deeply buried. The story revealed that one aspect of the causes of the present disassociation within the family might lie in repressed family histories. In brief,

³³ For extended work on mothers and daughters, see Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

it turned out that the Mother was still in mourning for a beloved grandfather, who had not been properly interred. The family had been branded as bad elements because the eldest son (the Mother's uncle) had been a high-ranking Nationalist during the 1940s.

Then I remember that it was Thursday that my grandfather brought his four sons, because my eldest uncle had already gone to gaol in Jilin, he took his four sons to be criticised by those farmers, at that time it was called members of the people's commune. They were kneeling at that bench, then especially my grandfather ... at that time, those red guards, red guards, could point to him and abuse him behind his back at any place any time.

The grandfather's death followed a long sequence of further indignities, but it was the cruel constraints placed on the family's right to mourn their loss, that affected this child-become-mother most profoundly.

I remember when my grandfather died that was when I was in third grade at primary school, it was the 15th of January, that day my grandfather died, he passed away. At that time I remember, I remembered that when he passed away, we weren't allowed, because he was classified as one of the four types of people, we weren't allowed to hold any memorial service, we weren't allowed to put any white flowers on our heads, we weren't allowed to wear black armbands, they told us what to do, you weren't allowed to cry. It was just like a cat or dog had died, they wrapped him up. After wrapping him up they took him, it was raining heavily that day, I remember, they used a very thin blanket, on top of it they wrapped a layer of plastic, they put him in that work cart and my third uncle cycled him off to the Longhua Crematorium to cremate. At that time the production department had stipulated that nobody was allowed to shed a tear, if anyone was seen eating together to commemorate him, then that person would be criticised. So that was my memory of when I was young.

The Mother's childhood trauma was pitted against her pragmatic desire to protect her daughter from the bitterness that the past might engender. She remained stranded between the past and the present, bearing the impact of State

shame as her own, thus doubling the original shame that her family suffered when the violence and humiliations were originally inflicted.

Eric Santner has noted how the shame of the Holocaust has been re-visited by its perpetrators on its victims in order that the State(s) of Europe can *move on*.³⁴ In the case of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese State's foreclosure of grief's progress has reiterated the refusal to lift the shame of the lost self from the shoulders of the bereft. The active stifling of memory reveals both past and current wounds (for Mother and daughter) and positions their bearers (again both Mother and daughter) as agents of the State's modernity and of their own damaged relationship with each other and with other family members. As the Mother recalled a very thin blanket covering her grandfather, she fiddled with the materials of her trade, the cottons and threads that—at this moment at least—moored her.

Scripts

The work of Liu Dahong addresses historical questions that are particular to the mainland Chinese generations who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, but which also articulate modernist ambition in China over a much longer period. Liu's paintings of the ellipses between revolution and reform feed on the unrepresentable spaces between childhood and adulthood, while his juxtapositions of Mao's poems against those of the tenth-century poet Li Yu complicate the temporalities of the modernist voice in literature. Liu reminds us that Chinese modernism is a long journey from the scholar poet to the Marxist revolutionary, and from the violent exhilaration of continuing revolution to the anxieties that dog the state capitalism of the post-Mao era.

In 2014, I interviewed a mainland Chinese woman in her fifties about her childhood memories. She was under six years old when her mother and father were criticized and paraded in public for being too intellectual and too bourgeois. She told me that she did not understand what she had witnessed as a child, only that she witnessed it. She also remembered that the freedoms of childhood during the Cultural Revolution. In particular, the years between 1966 and 1968, when Chinese schools were closed down, had been exciting as well as

³⁴ Santner, *Stranded Objects*, 51-2.

distressing. Only now, almost fifty years later, was she beginning to find names for what she saw and the ways in which those events and those memories might have affected who she has become. It is that kind of belated self-knowledge that Liu inserts into his frenetic pageants of pseudo-events and stranded objects, as he seeks to capture and convey the omissions, eruptions and continuities in Chinese aesthetics and in China's history.

Modernism surfaces in Liu's work not so much as a break between past and present, or between an outdated era and a re-energised new moment of awareness and form. Rather, it might best be understood as the acceptance of a radical continuity through which individuals and collective personae are re-shaped, re-framed, and re-articulated. Modernism resides in socio-aesthetic formations that manifest both the strictures of power and the demonstrations of free thought. Thus, there are intimations of the past and the present that speak fluently across boundaries of disconnection, even as the modern erases the recent past. The shamed silence of one generation erupts into moments of expressive dilemma in the next. As a boy returning home from hospital, Liu witnesses a delirious feast of storytelling, dance and primary colour. As a man, he discovers his role as witness through a juxtaposition with the reforming chaos that followed the revolutionary chaos he could not see. He quotes Li Yu and he quotes Mao, the Ancient and the Modern, roles reversed.

In the critically ironic manner of Liu Dahong, let me end with Li Yu, the twentieth-century modernist. His "Midnight Song" evokes a very modern dilemma, which is how we persist through the scripts of memory and the unconscious while existing in forgetfulness.

Ren sheng chou hen he neng mian

...

Wang shi yi cheng kong

Huan ru yi meng zhong

[How do we ever escape regrets?

...

Past events lose their meaning

And hide themselves in the middle of our dreams.]