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YISHU: JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

JULY / AUGUST 2017

VOL. 16 NO. 4

PLACE UNDER THE LINE

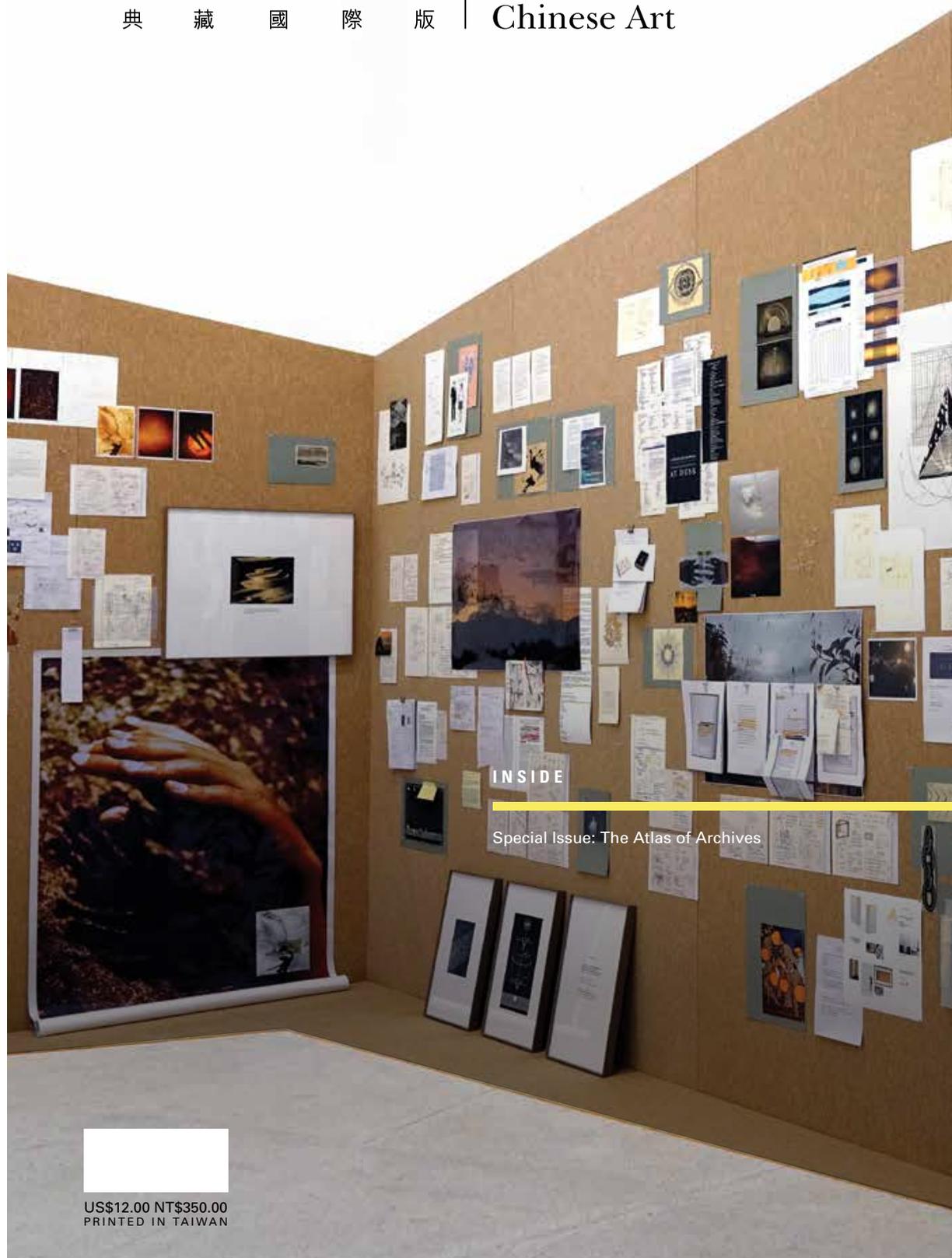
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VOLUME 16, NUMBER 4

# Yishu

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Journal of  
Contemporary  
Chinese Art



INSIDE

Special Issue: The Atlas of Archives

US\$12.00 NT\$350.00  
PRINTED IN TAIWAN

Li Jia

## The Lexicon of Amnesia: An Interview with Wang Tuo

Wang Tuo, *A Little Violence of Organized Forgetting*, 2016, exhibition view, Taikang Space. Courtesy of the Artist and Taikang Space, Beijing.



In October 2016, New York/Beijing-based artist Wang Tuo presented his solo exhibition *A Little Violence of Organized Forgetting* as the fifth installment of the Light Pavilion Project at Taikang Space, Beijing (October 27 to November 26, 2016). Known as one of the earliest non-profit art institutions in China, Taikang Space initiated the Light Pavilion project in 2013 to help the younger generation of artists (mostly born in the 1980s) to develop their individual programs. Presenting six to seven exhibitions each year, this project is dedicated to supporting Chinese artists who have not been fully recognized by the current art system yet who have demonstrated substantial potential. Wang Tuo is one of these artists. Since the beginning of his career, Wang Tuo has explored the intricate intertwining of myth, archive, and performativity by visualizing a narrative's negotiation through divergent media. In the exhibition *A Little Violence of Organized Forgetting*, Wang Tuo rearranged the gallery space into a living room haunted by the phantoms of the past. The artist elaborated on the mythology of family bonds, their traumatic ruptures, and also how family bonds are reflected through the historical mechanism of oblivion. Wang Tuo's works conjure up an otherwise opaque leftover of memory and require our imagination to respond to the debt of our histories.

**Li Jia:** In April 2016, we talked about this project for the first time. In October the same year, it finally met the public in the form of an exhibition titled *A Little Violence of Organized Forgetting*. It includes a video based on Pearl S. Buck's novel *Three Daughters of Madame Liang* and four paintings

inspired by iconic works in art history. “Historical narrative” and “archive” are key concepts in your practice. I wonder if you could tell us more about your approach by using this exhibition as an example.



**Wang Tuo:** Yes, this exhibition is derived from my research on American writer Pearl S. Buck. I was first interested in her novels dealing with Chinese farmers that have been adapted into Hollywood movies like *The Good Earth* and *Dragon Seed*. Then I came across

Wang Tuo, *A Little Violence of Organized Forgetting*, 2016, exhibition view, Taikang Space. Courtesy of the Artist and Taikang Space, Beijing.

Buck's lesser-known book *The Three Daughters of Madame Liang*, written in 1969. I searched the Chinese online database and found little information about it except a brief mention in her chronology. How is it that this book is absent from Chinese archives? Later, I found out that this novel was banned in China because it touched upon family tragedies during the Cultural Revolution. Even though the Cultural Revolution is no longer a taboo, it is still difficult to find any in-depth commentary on and analysis of this novel in China. So it is no surprise that it has left almost no trace. This void in the archive intrigues me and becomes the starting point of this project.

**Li Jia:** So, your research eventually leads to the video titled *Meditation on A Disappointing Reading* (2016).



Wang Tuo, *Meditation on Disappointing Reading*, 2016, single-channel video, 27 mins., 26 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

**Wang Tuo:** Yes, this video serves as a narrative clue that holds the entire project together. In the video, a female character performs a ritual of bringing back the spirit of the dead through a very Chinese approach: cooking. As she prepares the food, a ghost appears to tell a tragic story from a third-person perspective. The ghost is actually reading a chapter from Pearl S. Buck's novel *The Three Daughters of Madame Liang* with certain narratives removed. I deliberately put the English novel through online translation software. Lots of sentences sound confusing due to the awkward sentence order and grammatical errors. Nevertheless, the gist of the story is there. The lack of accurate comprehension as a result of the bad translation places the audience in a disoriented state. I see it as a parallel metaphor to the ambiguous connection between the reader and the inaccessible

Ilya Yefimovich Repin, *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581*, 1885, oil on canvas, 199.5 x 254 cm. Courtesy of State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



archive. The surrounding four paintings suggest another interpretation of “archive.” I chose two classic paintings, Ilya Repin’s *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* (1885) and Pompeo Batoni’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1773).

Their visual similarity allows an emotional exchange between them, and yet the juxtaposition also heightens a sense of ambiguity. I repainted these two paintings with their original historical and biblical contexts removed. I expected the viewers to experience a sense of disorientation as their existing framework of comprehension became disrupted—I see it as a new way to engage “archive.”

**Li Jia:** As you mentioned to me, the English title of this exhibition, *A Violence of Organized Forgetting*, came from a concept raised by American scholar Henry A. Giroux. Could you tell us how is it related to your work?

Pompeo Batoni, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1773, oil on canvas, 138 x 100.5 cm. Courtesy of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



**Wang Tuo:** Yes, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting*, the English title of this exhibition, is based on a highly political concept developed by Giroux. His concept criticized the current crisis in American democracy that came with neoliberalism and its ignorance of the violence of history.<sup>1</sup> As James Baldwin pointed out, “people who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget

court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence.”<sup>2</sup> People’s ignorance and the oblivion of history can be seen as an analogy to the relationship between people and the archive. Consciously or unconsciously, by choice or by force, we lose our memory of things and let them fade into the historical void. This is the case with Pearl S. Buck’s book. When you want to retrieve the past, what you likely find is just fragments. The rest can depend only upon our imagination. I find the dialectical relationship between our effort to record through the archive and the impossibility to access the past utterly intriguing.

**Li Jia:** What do you think of historical archives and their relationship to us today? Also, how did you manage to weave your critical reflection into the emotional texture of your work?

**Wang Tuo:** For me, this concept of the archive covers a fairly broad scope. It refers not only to texts, documents—all vehicles and carriers of knowledge—but, also, intangible collective awareness, inherited experience, and memory. If we compare “now” as a constantly flowing river, the archive is like the rocks standing in it. The relationship between people and the archive is the one between the river and the rocks. The archive in my work is never in an



Wang Tuo, *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan*, 2016, oil on canvas, each 108 x 145 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Wang Tuo, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 2016, oil on canvas, each 108 x 145 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

illustratable form. I neither appropriate a readymade archive nor display a physical archive. In other words, the visual representation of what people usually understand as “archive” does not appear in my work. Instead, one’s awkward state in experiencing my video is always intended to be a metaphor for our relationship with the archive. The archive is how it can be transformed to an act through bodily experience and performative process.

**Li Jia:** This exhibition associates “archive” with “violence,” as the title indicates. Could you share with us in detail how the violence of the archive is dealt with in your work?

**Wang Tuo:** The most violent aspect of the archive, in my view, is its didactic and authoritarian attributes and how the archive exercises its power onto our collective unconscious. In this exhibition, violent scenes are deliberately left out. The tragedy that Madame Liang and her daughter experienced during the Cultural Revolution is not presented. What meets our eye is only a puzzling narration retold in a peaceful tone. The narrative dimension of the paintings displaces violence and also blurs it. All the scenes are just residues of historical violence, with the act of violence itself being left to our imagination.

**Li Jia:** “Calling back the spirit of the dead” is another important aspect of the imagery in this exhibition. The woman in the video calls this spirit back through the ritual of cooking. People and spirits coexist in different times and spaces and conjure up a diachronic structure in the narrative.

**Wang Tuo:** As you noticed, “calling back the spirit of the dead” is the most significant, metaphoric image of the how archive can be perceived. For one thing, it evokes the connection between the living world and the realm of the dead, between the past and the current, and between memory and reality. In this respect, the practice of calling back the spirit coincides with our endeavour to read and to comprehend the archive. I try to emphasize the similarity between the difficult stage of “revisiting” the archive and the stage of limbo dividing the living and the dead. We, living in the present, resort to the magic of the archive to wake up the forgotten past. While “calling back the spirit of the dead” is an effort to redefine our relationship to the past, I deeply feel the difficulty of retrieving the past and the deep separation between the archive and us. The element of translation I use in this work is meant to convey such sentiment.

**Li Jia:** Could you also talk about how your engagement with the “archive” evolves in your new work, such as *Addicted* (2017), shown in your latest exhibition at White Space Beijing?

**Wang Tuo:** My solo exhibition at White Space Beijing, which opened in April 2017, includes my major projects from the last two years. The connection between the use of the archive and the performative process of creation is made more salient here. In the most recent video, *Addicted*, I invited twelve commercial actors and actresses to participate in a group gathering to imitate a photo shoot for *Vanity Fair* magazine. As the camera moves across the gathering, each character presents to the camera a short yet intimate monologue confessing his or her inner anxieties. The viewers gradually come to realize that these people are attending a group help session at a rehab centre in order to overcome their addictions. The actors’ monologues are juxtaposed with group portraits from the Dutch Golden Age of painting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The ways artificial concepts have been generated and formed in our society have always intrigued me. Notions such as “the middle class” have a long social and historical genealogy based on various archives. For me, the middle class does not exist as a fixed historical category, but merely as a kind of image that can be repeatedly described. The description of this image changes over time, and it is deeply



Wang Tuo, *Addicted*, 2017, single-channel video, 16 mins., 33 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



Wang Tuo, *Real and Natural*, 2014, 3-channel video installation, 13 mins., 49 secs. Courtesy of the artist and White Space, Beijing.



affected by mass media today. Another video in the exhibition, *Real and Natural* (2014), is based on my comparative study of realist and naturalist literature in the nineteenth century. I designed a

Wang Tuo, *Addicted*, 2017, single-channel video, 16 mins., 33 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

series of questions based on two novels, Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1896) and Émile Zola's *Therese Raquin* (1867). I used these questions to interview two people about their personal experiences. This video then becomes a performative interview. Through my manipulation of the questions as interviewer, the interviewees were unknowingly guided to reconstruct the classic stories using actual details from their own lives. In this exhibition, I continue to investigate and question whether we can truly see the archive in its totality. The "archive" is subject to constant manipulation, adaptation, and mutation. It is impossible to pass on cultural memory fully intact from generation to generation, and my entire project is like a testing mechanism of the void that exists between people and the archive—how the archive loses its original context and how people forget over time.

#### Notes

1. Henry A. Giroux, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2014).
2. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Dial Press, 1956), 36–37.