Surviving to Oneself after Tiananmen: Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Frozen* (1996)

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Abstract

In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben develops a subtle analysis of the irreducible ambiguity inherent to the verb “to survive.” “From the beginning,” writes Agamben, “the verb also has a reflexive form when referred to human beings, which designates the striking idea of survival with respect to oneself and one’s own life. In this form, the one who survives and the person to whom something survives thus coincide” (132). Strangely enough, it is exactly what is at stake in the performance around which Wang Xiaoshuai’s movie *Frozen* (1996) revolves. Qi Lei puts into work his own suicide, letting everybody believe that he is actually dead; everybody but the curator of the exhibit, who will take care of the artist’s secret “survival,” and Qi Lei’s sister, who, as a doctor, signs a false death certificate. Therefore, technically, the movie displays an artist who has survived performatively to himself. How to interpret the remnants of this performance? What has happened, what has “passed,” what has been lost in this passage between life and death? What does this movie tell us about life-that-continues after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and China’s entrance into the global economy? Showing the precarious condition of a small Beijing performance art community, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Frozen* offers a convincing and well-informed allegory of the aftermaths of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, as well as an interesting glance at what has become one of the most dynamic sectors of Chinese underground culture of the end of the 20th century and beyond.

**Keywords**

Tiananmen, Chinese cinema, performance arts, Giorgio Agamben, bare life
Born in 1966, Wang Xiaoshuai is one of the most important filmmakers of the so-called 6th generation or urban generation, a general appellation for the filmmakers who have started making films in the 90s. In contrast with the precedent (5th) generation of Chinese filmmakers who have started their career in the 80s and have been acclaimed for their historical drama and their national allegories (think of Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* [1984] or Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* [1991]), the new urban Chinese cinema has been mainly concerned with bearing witness of a fast-paced transforming China and producing a localized critique of globalization. Among the films directed by Wang Xiaoshuai are *The Days* (1993), *So Close to Paradise* (1998), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), *Drifters* (2003), *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), *In Love We Trust* (2007) and most recently, *Chongqing Blues* (2010) and *11 Flowers* (2011). Like many filmmakers of his generation, he has suffered a great deal from censorship. Requiring considerable editing, the release of his film *So Close to Paradise* was delayed for nearly three years which seriously jeopardized its release in theatres, since no one was willing to promote it after such a long delay.

*Frozen* (1996) was shot around the same time as *So Close to Paradise*. To avoid compromising its production, Wang Xiaoshuai decided to direct the film under the pseudonym of *wu ming*, meaning “anonymous” in Chinese. *Frozen* congeals on film a moment of extreme disillusion. It constitutes a provocative and direct expression of post-Tiananmen despair. In this sense, it remains close to *The Days*, the director’s first feature film also concerned with the growing malaise of the Chinese youth following the 1989 events.

*Frozen* tells the story of an artist who decides to perform a suicide through four rituals relating to the four seasons. Originally, the film was to be called *The Grand Game* in order to reflect the dimension of active indeterminacy implicated in the staging of a suicide in a performance context. In an interview with Michael Berry, Wang Xiaoshuai explains how he became interested in the world of performance art and how he came to make a film on this topic:

Performance art was quite popular in China in 1994; however, there was only a small circle of artists working in that field. Their situation was not so good either; they were not allowed to participate in most exhibitions, and the few they did take part in were often closed down. . . . There was a performance art exhibition around the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Incident. I had heard that some performance artists were arrested after the show because of the sensitive timing. The incident left me very depressed, a feeling that
was only enhanced by my own experience making films. I felt that the entire atmosphere was terribly disheartening—it was an atmosphere in which art was being suffocated. It was during this time that people started talking about a young artist who had committed suicide. Was this real? Or was it part of a staged performance? (168)

In this essay, I would like to explore through a close-reading of Frozen how the practice of performance art in China constitutes one of the most revealing and cogent means of expression of the socio-political phenomenon of post-Tiananmen despair, as it has been reflected in different artistic forms in the years following the tragic event. Drawing on Frozen’s insightful perspective on the performance art milieu and its semi-documentary quality, I will argue that Chinese performance art produced in the aftermath of the Tiananmen events can be advantageously envisaged as a critical display of the biopolitical production of what Giorgio Agamben has defined, in a rather dramatic way (in the Nietzschean, characterizing sense of the term), as bare life.

In Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive, Giorgio Agamben develops a subtle analysis of the irreducible ambiguity inherent to the verb “to survive.” “From the beginning,” writes Agamben, “the verb also has a reflexive form when referred to human beings, which designates the striking idea of survival with respect to oneself and one’s own life. In this form, the one who survives and the person to whom something survives thus coincide” (132). Strangely enough, it is exactly what is at stake in the performance around which Wang Xiaoshuai’s movie Frozen (1996) revolves. Qi Lei, the film’s main protagonist, stages his own suicide, letting everybody believe that he is actually dead; everybody but the curator of the exhibit, who will take care of the artist’s secret “survival,” and Qi Lei’s sister, who, as a doctor, signs a false death certificate. Therefore, metaphorically, the film displays the life of an artist who has survived himself via his piece of performance art. How should we conceive of the living remnants of this performance? What has happened, what has passed, what has been lost and what has been gained in this passage between life and a staged death, which will eventually lead to the artist’s actual death? And finally, what does this film tell us about life—that-continues after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and China’s entrance into the global economy? Depicting the precarious condition of a small Beijing performance art community, Wang Xiaoshuai’s Frozen

1 Later in the interview, Wang Xiaoshuai mentions that “the person who did this in real life died, but not from the ice burial or any other performance; he drove himself crazy and committed suicide” (170).
offers, I will argue, a provocative allegory of the aftermaths of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, as well as an insightful glance at what has become one of the most dynamic sector of Chinese underground culture of the end of the 20th century and beyond.

In the first part of the paper, after outlining all too briefly the intellectual context of the time, I will show how Frozen’s depiction of the Tiananmen events as a life-changing passage to which one painfully survives shares numerous and essential traits with two other films concerned with post-Tiananmen malaise, Summer Palace (2006) by Lou Ye and Conjugation (2001) by Emily Tang. The rapprochement of these three films based on their structure of political-existential passage forms an exemplary constellation, operating according to what Agamben has defined as a paradigmatic logic. In The Signature of All Things, Agamben explains how the paradigmatic relation commands a form of knowledge that is immanent and analogical. It preserves the disjunctive singularity of each example, bringing them into a new ensemble that works as a field of tension. As Agamben explains, “a paradigm entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity, transform[ing] every single case into an exemplar of a general rule that can never be stated a priori” (22). Thus, the paradigm doesn’t pre-exist to the assembling movement of “placing alongside” that is suggested by the very word paradigm.

In the second part of the paper, I will once again proceed through a paradigmatic logic in which the elements brought together mutually reflect and define each other, this time situating Frozen among other extreme performance art practices of the same period. I will bring special attention to the particular sociopolitical relevance of performance art in a Chinese context, focusing on the transgressive power of its disruptive corporeal immediacy and its biopolitical contemporaneity. These first two sections set the stage for the detailed reading of Frozen that will unfold in the last two sections of the article.

Post-Tiananmen Square Malaise in Films: Summer Palace (2006) and Conjugation (2001)

The Tiananmen Square events have marked a turning point in China’s evolution toward a Western style market economy and the establishment of Chinese-style socialism, a euphemism for the authoritarian capitalist regime prevailing nowadays. Following the Tiananmen events, the intensification of economic reform has been followed up with a thorough change in mindset. After the political idealism of the 1980s, China’s population massively converted to a worldview oriented essentially
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toward economic growth. He Baogang comments on this radical turnabout in the outlook of the Chinese regime:

After the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, some intellectuals and dissidents talked about “yishang yangzheng,” promoting political activities through wealth or engagement in business. Increasingly a different trend has taken over: “jinshang qizheng,” business interests eclipsing political interests. (270)

For the film industry, the intensification of economic reforms and the subsequent eclipse of the political has had significant consequences. The State has progressively abandoned the subsidized production system and strengthened censorship. In addition to encountering much less favorable production conditions than those prevailing in the 80s, filmmakers who emerged after Tiananmen also had to mourn the loss of the period’s particular climate of intellectual openness. The “cultural fever” (wenhua re) was replaced by what some called, not without nostalgia, the “consumerist cultural fever” (wenhua xiaofei re).

It is difficult to measure the depth of the trauma caused by the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. More than 25 years later, the task is made even more difficult by the silence the Chinese government continues to impose with regards to speaking about these events, therefore considerably limiting the possibilities for a collective appropriation of this political tragedy. Most young Chinese seem to have little if any knowledge of what happened and foreign websites mentioning the events are either still being censored or blocked. Notably, the discussion of Tiananmen on these media was quoted as one of the reasons for China blocking access to Wikipedia. Nowadays, a simple mention of this subject matter on websites or blogs can still cause them to be shut down in China.

Recent Chinese cinema has obviously not been spared from this harsh censorship. In fact, there are very few films that directly deal with the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, although interestingly enough, they tend to focus on the representation of the subsequent despair. One can think of Lou Ye’s Summer Palace (2006), a film bold enough to reconstruct historical scenes of clashes with the police figures most prominently. As a consequence of the realization of this film, Lou Ye was banned from filming for five years.

Summer Palace is loaded with passion and idealism, just like the era it depicts. The first part of the movie takes place during the 1988-1989 academic year. The beautiful and lively Yu Hong, played by Hao Lei, leaves both her hometown and her
fiancé to go study in Beijing. In the midst of a politically heated-up student life, she madly falls in love with Zhou Wei (Guo Xiaodong). Their relation becomes a dangerous and consuming passion that coincides with the intensification of the student protest movement for freedom and democracy. As Lou Ye explains:

When we follow Yu Hong and Zhou Wei’s destiny, we realize that their love goes out of control . . . In 1989, young people were indeed possessed by a certain idea of romanticism. It was the first time that China was opening up to the world, after a long period of confinement. Young people got in contact with a whole set of new ideas. It was the beginning of reforms in the country: students had the impression of being freer than their predecessors, that they could do anything. Today we know it was all but an illusion.²

The 1980s in China were a period of great intellectual effervescence favored by a politics of opening implemented by Deng Xiaoping. This cultural fever culminated in the second part of the 80s with a revolutionary spirit and political will breaking with the Maoist ideological monopoly and reclaiming the heritage of the 1919 May 4th movement. The new movement was characterized by a great interest in Western culture, in particular science and democracy. It doubled with a ruthless critique of Chinese traditional culture and the “people’s character” (guominxing) held responsible for China’s backwardness. The Tiananmen Square protests are a crucial expression of this collective fervor. It is this peculiar national project that Lou Ye tries to represent via his passionate heroine, whose name incidentally means “accumulation.”

This great movement of cultural opening that accumulated throughout the 1980s was brutally repressed with the massacre of Tiananmen Square. In the film, this historical rupture coincides with the dramatic break-up between Yu Hong and Zhou Wei. In the middle of great political turmoil inflaming the campus, he cheats on her with her best friend, only to be caught in the act by a campus security agent. In fact, it is prohibited to have sexual relationships in the dormitories. Adding up adultery and institutional condemnation, the student who informs Yu Hong about the scandalous event suggests that she should not to see him again, as it is matter of public decency. The great hopes harboured about social change have been violently brought to an end, and the couple’s love as well.

The remainder of the film offers nothing but the story of an unending exile bearing the indelible marks of the past. Zhou Wei and some friends take shelter in Berlin; as for Yu Hong, she will err through China, the idealism of youth progressively giving way to the imperatives of survival. Lou Ye underlines the significance of the geography of her wandering:

Yu Hong is from Tumen, a city from North East of China. It is during our search for locations that we determined the origins of Yu Hong. We went in this region to find a place near the frontier with North Korea, the point where, Russia, North Korea and China encounter. We felt that the geographical provenance could have an impact on the character. Initially, we wanted to start the story in the north and progress on a north-south axis, following China’s general development.³

In synchrony with these topological identifications, the film ends up in an isolated hotel on the highway that connects Beijing and Beidaihe, not far from where Yu Hong and her husband have settled. Zhou Wei and the heroine meet there for the first time since they broke up. Their encounter seals the impossibility of reconnecting with the passion of their past love. The modern highway, a symbol of the immense economic progress that has transformed China during the decade in which they were separated, is ultimately a non-place that reflects the cold impersonality that has replaced their passion.

The figure of survival as exile in a world henceforth reduced to economic imperatives is also the central dominant theme of Emily Tang’s first feature film, Conjugation (2001), a poignant elegy set during the winter following the Tiananmen events. The film describes the difficult relationship of a young unmarried couple, seeking to build a home away from the turmoil of the times, despite their illegal status. Telling the story of their precarious active life, the sorrow about giving up their ideals, and the memory of fallen friends and comrades, Conjugation marks a temps mort, a dead time such as found in a verb lacking conjugation. It suggests with rare efficiency how the historical divide creeps into existence’s intimate grammar, between subjects and verbs (the “movement-words,” as they are called in Chinese), paralyzing all actuation. Conjugation aptly makes the viewer feel how it is the simple fact of living that became problematic after the crackdown. A world was torn down, and with it,

the aspirations of a whole generation. “Winter, 1989—The bullets spared them / but life did not,” reads the cover of the VCD.4

Performance Art in China: An Overview of the Situation in the 1990s

It is in the second half of the 80s that performance art takes off in China, as Chinese artists enthusiastically open up to Western art movements. Among the most famous performances of this first period we find Xiao Lu and Tang Song’s historic Shooting Incident (qianji shijian), a performance that took place February 5, 1989 in Beijing, the first day of the China/Avant-garde Exhibition, leading to its immediate closure. On Tang’s command, the artist Xiao Lu shoots two bullets into his own installation entitled Dialogue (Duihua) and then flees the scene. Tang Song was immediately arrested in the gallery and Xiao Lu shortly thereafter turned himself in to the police. Both artists were released three days later. These shots are sometimes thought of as the first shot of June 4, in reference to the events that followed a few months later. In fact, many artists chose to join the protesters, carrying banners designed especially for the China/Avant-garde Exhibition, sporting a roadside no U-turn permitted symbol, making clear their determination not to go into reverse in regards to the political demands.5

After Tiananmen, performance art experienced hard times. As Wang Xiaoshuai noted in the previously quoted interview, organizing performances became very difficult and it was not uncommon for artists to be imprisoned for participating in them. Performance art was considered an immoral activity by the authorities. According to Colin Chinnery, in “1994 artists were still being thrown into prison for simply taking their clothes off in private exhibitions” (15). Given these restrictive conditions, many performance artists decided to emigrate. Those who remained consistently strove to express the profound and ubiquitous social malaise. By 1992-1993, many of the artists who were to revive performance art in China had gathered in a small village in the outskirts of Beijing (Beijing East Village). It was a period of profound economic transformations in which China was moving rapidly toward a

5 See Hung Wu, “Pushing the Limits: Chinese Experimental Art from 1979 to 1999,” Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, 1999), 11-26.
Western market economy and consumer lifestyle. This economic liberalization contrasted deeply with the strict control exerted over political and cultural life at that time, leading to deep social and existential tensions that were omnipresent in the art of this period. *Political Pop* and *Cynical Realism*, for example, reflect the pervasive social malaise in the realm of visual arts, although the political significance of these manifestations is more ambiguous than it may seem at first.\(^6\)

In 1994, in line with the growing predominance of economic concerns in post-Tiananmen China, Zhu Fadong made a performance that consisted in walking in the streets of Beijing with a poster pasted on his back with the following inscription: “This man is for sale—price to be negotiated on the spot.” Another famous performance of this time symbolized, in a more poetic way, the pervasive malaise of a post-political reduction of culture to the demands of economy: *Add a Meter to an Unknown Mountain* (1995), a performance realised by East Village artists. The work is of remarkable sobriety: about ten artists, naked, form a human pyramid on top of a randomly selected mountain. By voluntarily reducing their bodies to a single measuring unit, by treating the human body as a pure autonomous matter of expression, these artists of the East Village expressed with elegance and simplicity the reduction of human life to a pure form of post-political survival. Several of the artists who took part in this performance later became major players on the Chinese performance art scene, among them Ai Weiwei. *Add a Meter to an Unknown Mountain* is often credited to Zhang Huan, who two years later produced a similar work entitled *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997), a collective work involving about 40 migrant workers gathered naked in a fishpond in order to raise the level of water by one meter. The expressive power of this work lies in the fact that these bodies are reduced to be pure volumes in space, creating a sober and thoroughly moving display of bare/naked lives.

What is at stake in the performative display of humans and human conduct? This seemingly superfluous question must be asked in order to understand the significance of performative art in a Chinese context. In Mandarin, “performance art” is usually translated by 行為藝術 (*xingwei yishu*), which suggests that it is an art form primarily concerned with “behavior.” (Note that in Hong Kong, performance art is mostly translated as 行動藝術 (*xingdong yishu*), literally *action art*). The idea of behavior refers directly to the Confucian tradition, in which any individual comportment is endowed with a ritual dimension that expresses a certain position.
within a social order. Gao Minglu emphasizes the sociopolitical implications linked to the choice of translating performance art in this fashion:

This traditional concept imparted to the Chinese performance art scene has inherently (or congenitally) a social significance. This social content is always present regardless of whether or not an individual performance artist attempts to express certain social content or not in his/her specific performance work.7

By translating “performance” with “behavior” or more literally “way of behaving,” continental Chinese artists tend to insist on the socially transgressive dimension of performance art, affirming their intention to confront the code of conduct of bodies in the public space. Xingwei yishu declares out and loud the radical contingency of the individual, which does in fact trouble the idea of a “harmonious” social cohesion, especially in a Chinese context.

Considering the disruptive corporeal immediacy that characterizes performance art and how badly art institutions have usually reacted to it,8 it is easy to understand why this art form has quickly become one of the favorite means for social critics of the avant-garde:

From Traditional Confucian ethics to the Cultural Revolution of the Maoist era to the current era of globalization, the behaviour of the individual has been continually seen as meaningless, albeit from different perspectives; thus the body may have been seen by the Chinese avant-garde as an active site of resistance to this constant obliteration of the self. (Gao, The Wall 163)

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8 In 2005, 41 students from the Chengdu University Art Academy sparked a lively debate across the country with the @41 project, a performance in which they assemble their naked bodies to form an @ shape human domino. Researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Shao Daosheng, expresses in an exemplary way how Chinese establishment tends to dismiss such art form: “I’ve always believed that whatever society it is, all games should abide by rules. Each society has its own culture at the end of the day. I am always concerned about China’s university students. If the body featuring nudity becomes an aesthetic ideal for contemporary university students, then becomes a way of life. I can only say that they are really degraded and hopeless” (qtd. in “Should naked human body be used as art symbol?” China Daily Online, 20 Jul. 2005. <http://english.people.com.cn/200507/20/eng20050720_197316.html>).
In accordance with its inherent power of disturbing the social code of conduct, performance art in the beginning of the 1990s in China has become more radical, in order to express the progressive disappearance of the possibility of acting as a symbolic subject in the public sphere. Many performances of this period involve individual bodies voluntarily subjected to extreme treatments, revealing the performer’s individual will power and his capacity for auto-determination in a context of relative political repression. As Lesley Sanderson suggests,

The performance is a symbolic enactment of pain and suffering. . . . The value of the artistic gesture is in the fact that the artist chooses to put himself through the pain. This signals the authenticity of his intention and the artist’s need to comment on humanity, its suffering, and the lack of agency within real life situations. We interpret the willingness of the artist to take on the burden of suffering within the symbolic act of the performance as a heroic and significant act. It claims the potential of the individual’s agency to stand apart from the collective and demonstrate one’s accountability. (83)

This frame of analysis fits perfectly with the fierceness of Yang Zhichao’s work, Zhang Yuan’s spiritual catharsis or the becoming-mythical of He Yunchang, to name only a few of the extreme performers that have emerged in China in recent years and whose practice resonate closely with Qi lei’s extreme performances in Frozen. In their work, the body is placed at risk in order to reveal the strength of individual will and its potential for heroic resistance. The ascetic relation to pain that each of them displays testifies to the power of human spirit and self-production over bodily matter.

Yang Zhichao has often been described as a revolutionary who attempts to reveal social and political issues through his performances. They are all characterized by a very harsh sense of the real. Hence suffering plays a crucial role in his work, and moreover, demonstrates the iron will that is needed to go through with it. As Yang Zhichao explains, “Only personal experience of pain allows me to access intuitions that can’t be reached by abstraction. Pain is for me a way to get to another feeling of existence. . . . this sense of realness makes me believe that performers must be early Marxist revolutionaries.”9 In Fort Jiayu (2000), Yang Zhichao is admitted to a

psychiatric hospital in a small city of Gansu, his home province. To be admitted, it only took the testimony of a relative (his sister) and the payment covering the costs of his stay, which lasted a month. Upon admission, Yang Zhichao immediately receives an electro-shock treatment for more than half an hour, followed by the administration of high doses of sedatives, eventually leading the artist to doubt his own mental condition. During his stay, Yang Zhichao kept a diary describing his experience and was secretly filmed and photographed by his brother in law.  

The same year, after his arrival in Beijing, Yang has his personal identification number ironed on his right shoulder by none other than Ai Weiwei (Iron, 2000). Some commentators have explained this gesture by invoking the violence of the shock between Yang’s rural background and his arrival in a big city. However, by reducing his body to a pure surface of inscription for the government’s main control, I would rather argue that this performance should be read as a radical attempt at re-appropriation of his own body. As such it can be seen as a kind of primal counter-effectuation of the biopolitical management of the population to which the artist voluntarily submitted himself during his traumatic stay in the psychiatric asylum. As he himself states, “In a senseless atmosphere where everyone is temporarily laughing and joking, this method of seeking extremes definitely has the effect of sobering people up. You certainly can’t let a whole nation of people go around grinning like idiots” (qtd. in Sanderson 80). There is thus something profoundly parrhesiastic in Yang’s approach to performance that leaves no doubt about its political relevance.

Frozen was made around the same time as Add a Meter to an Unknown Mountain (which is often credited to Zhang Yuan) and Zhu Fadong’s performance, sharing with them similar aesthetic and political concerns. While the film undoubtedly constitutes a timely document to understand more in depth the epoch’s sociopolitical context, its relevance does not limit itself to the fact that it bears testimony to Beijing’s underground art scene, its vicissitudes and its disarray. Beyond the post-Tiananmen malaise itself, Frozen problematizes with uncommon acuteness the relationship between bare life, science as a normative practice and performance, thus offering a surprisingly effective analytical framework for understanding the evolution of performance art in China up to the present day. Partly structured by comings and goings between the art world and the medical science environment, the film converges upon a paradoxical identification of performance with the production of objective or scientific knowledge.

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10 For more details, see Thomas J. Berghuis, Performance Art in China (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006), 182-83.
Frozen indeed poses a rather unsettling question: is performance art not primarily concerned with the exhibition/extraction of bare life? Frozen appears as a film of extreme biopolitical contemporaneity: in a way, it seems to prefigure directly the later developments in the esoteric circles of extreme performative art in China at the turn of the century, which was characterized by some as “cadaver art” because of its fascination with animal and human flesh. In this regard, one can think for example of the work of Zhu Yu, a Chinese artist who became famous with performances pushing the boundaries of art and radically questioning our relationship to the living in a biopolitical era. His work is, without doubt, one of the most nihilistic and profane in the history of modern art. For Zhu Yu, humanity is nothing but a fiction, which he has decided to reduce to ruin through a primal biopolitical acting out, operating as an authentic “man without content” as Agamben would put it (Man without Content), to become a master in the extraction of bare life. Among his numerous shocking “artworks,” the one that has drawn most attention is perhaps “Eating People” (2000), a performance where he allegedly ate a human foetus.\textsuperscript{11} Based around a performance that involves the power of human will to surmount pain, Frozen’s insightful treatment of performance in relation with scientific normativity also offers a frame of understanding for the subsequent cadaver turn in Chinese extreme performance art.

**Public Hygiene and the Psychologization of Existential Malaise**

What is proper to the minority is to assert a power of the nondenumerable, even if that minority is composed of a single member.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

As suggested earlier, performance is typically an individual form of art, most often involving the body of the artist. The individual becomes the site of representation, her or his body turning into an autonomous form of expression. Towards the beginning of the film, Qi Lei, the main protagonist in Frozen, offers a similar definition of performance: “In performance, you express a concept through a human being.” This embodied and immediate dimension of performance, along with its strong individual component, establishes its radical nature and makes it a privileged form of expression of the socio-political malaise in the post-Tiananmen

era. In *Frozen*, for instance, we witness a performance entitled *Revulsion*, featuring two men who try to eat a bar of soap. The use of soap as an indigestible food mobilizes a series of images on the theme of hygiene, forming a radical critique of the government’s will to achieve a “clean slate,” erasing history and memory. Subjecting the body to extreme hardships is an effective way to express anger and disgust. Qi Lei’s staged suicide in four acts follows this same logic of an extreme testing of the body. In the fall season, he is buried alive underground (“earth burial”); in winter he plunges into a frozen lake (“water burial”); in spring he sits in the middle of flames (“fire burial”). Each time, he goes to the limits of what his body can endure. On the first day of summer, he then performs an “ice burial” (from which the film takes its title) that will lead to his simulated death.

Early in the film, his girlfriend suggests a political interpretation of his performance, as we see her wandering in the gallery serving as the funeral home. Discussing with Qi Lei’s curator about his death, she states: “He sacrificed his life to show that he lived amidst murderers.” We can find a further allusion to the events of June 4 1989 later in the film, this time in a much more subtle way. On the grounds that they are “hooligans threatening public security,” some artists are arrested during an outdoor performance. Their friends, among them Qi Lei,12 comment on the arrest. One of the artists remarks that they have chosen a “very delicate time” to enact their performance, to which another replies that they were only “expressing themselves.” A direct reference is made to the *Shooting Incident* performance, although the dating of the performance is slightly wrong, namely 1988, to protect the filmmaker, perhaps? Knowing that this sequence takes place in June, somewhere before the summer solstice, the moment when Qi Lei will undergo his “ice burial,” and knowing that even today any commemoration of the Tiananmen Square events are strictly prohibited, one can legitimately assume that the “very delicate time” refers to the Tiananmen Square incident.

Supporting this hypothesis, we find a cinematic element that otherwise would remain inexplicable. Just before the arrest occurs, we see Qi Lei in a park, surrounded by high-rise buildings. The camera slowly pans across the high-rise towers, reproducing Qi Lei’s point of view of the buildings. The sequence then continues with Qi Lei walking through the park, while the camera moves to a long shot framing precisely *four* towers, on which the sequence concludes. The progressive elimination of the other towers from the visual field by a carefully studied framing strongly suggests that the camera is literally enumerating them. Also note that the four towers

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12 In fact, Qi Lei arrives a little later, giving his friends enough time to believe he might be among those who had been arrested.
are in full sunlight, immediately distinguishable from the other towers remaining in the shade. Finally, they are shot so as to render an impression of strength and resolution, unlike the previous towers that were shot from below with a doubtful Qi Lei among them. This suggests to the viewer that Qi Lei has now decided on his destiny. Just before this scene, we see him with a fortune-teller, inquiring about his future. This transition sequence, trivial at first glance, is in fact crucial since it connects, on a cinematographic level, the Tiananmen events of June 4 with Qi Lei’s decision to perform his ritual suicide.

If the reference to Tiananmen in Frozen is inescapable, it remains mostly allusive. Moving away from the origin or the causes of Qi Lei’s existential malaise, Frozen rather represents the social conditions of that time through a binary opposition that structures the entire film. On the one hand, there is a marginal art community harboring some form of resistance towards the established order. On the other hand, there is social normality mainly embodied by the medical community. Qi Lei’s sister herself works in a hospital and it is during a conversation between her and a colleague that the nature of the gap separating these two worlds is made most tangible:

“I have always known my brother would one day become obsessed. I was afraid. But he’s grown up now. I have lost all contact with him.”

“I know. The youth of today are so different from how we were. I don’t know what goes on in their heads. They are young. They don’t know anything about society. There is no material or social basis for their depressions. That’s even more scary.”

“I don’t get it. What are they so depressed about? They’ve had such easy lives.”

“If it’s too easy and there’s no pressure, you might feel even more depressed.” (Frozen)

The two medical staffers do not envision at any time the possibility that the existential malaise afflicting so many young people could be politically motivated. Rather, the dialogue moves toward an expeditious psychologization that disqualifies their malaise on a materialistic basis. This reductivist point of view suggests that the idea of clinical depression becomes untenable if all material needs are met. However, the deep insatisfaction experienced by the artists and the young generation they are associated with in the film involves a collective and political dimension that cannot be reduced to mere personal caprice. The political and, eventually, ontological
difference between a satisfying form of life and an idea of governed life limited to the horizon of fulfilling one’s basic needs constitutes the backdrop for the extreme malaise affecting Qi Lei, driving him to put his own life at risk, by the means of an art form that mobilizes corporeal immediacy to challenge the very limits of the enduring body.

A second sequence reiterates the opposition between individual singularity and disciplinary power, again in relation to the medical institution. Qi Lei finds himself in a psychiatric hospital with his girlfriend and a close friend, for routine testing, seemingly. In fact, his friend insists on bringing him to the hospital, concerned about his decision to end his life in a staged performance. The friend explains to him that he is ill and that the “hygiene of the mind is more important than keeping Beijing’s streets clean.” The friend gradually lapses into an animated discourse, leading the doctors to believe that he is the one who is ill. The sequence then becomes frankly comical, as we see the friend sitting in the doctor’s office, facing forward, attempting just about anything to justify his identity: “I’m not Qi Lei!” he keeps exclaiming in front of a doctor who remains off-screen. This static camera shot efficiently creates the impression of an impersonal perspective examining the ravings of a disturbed individual. This sequence produces a savory irony, since the one who is upholding notions of public health and mental hygiene becomes ultimately the victim of the uncertainty of categories pertaining to mental sickness and health. The sequence mocks medical knowledge while ridiculing the friend who has invoked medical discourse to differentiate himself from the “unhealthy” Qi Lei, a situation that foreshadows Yang Zhichao’s performance set in a mental hospital mentioned earlier. In the film’s general economy, this sequence rules out any psychologizing explanation based on a normative idea of health, thus pointing to a subversive artistic expression of existential malaise breaking with the dominant social order. Following this sequence, Qi Lei will get counsel from a chiromancer, who tells him about the relative nature of terms concerning life and death. Shortly thereafter, he begins his training in anticipation of the deadly ice burial.

**To Live — To Survive (to Oneself)**

Whether what survives is the human or the inhuman, the animal or the organic, it seems that life bears within itself the dream—or the nightmare—of survival.

—Giorgio Agamben

*Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*
After his supremely individual performance, Qi Lei is seemingly dead to the world. He wonders how his family reacts to his death and also spies on his girlfriend, who somehow seems to intuitively feel his presence and can’t quite believe he has actually decided to kill himself in the name of art. For a brief moment the film leads us to suspect that Qi Lei is really dead and that he now resides in an Eden-like setting of paradise. In a post-mortem dialogue with the curator, held in a softly illuminated idyllic garden, Qi Lei addresses the sense of strangeness that haunts him. The curator replies: “It’s like a scientific experiment. Your feelings are now part of the results of this experiment.” The performance thus emerges as a process of experimental isolation, designed explicitly in terms of a production of objective truth in agreement with a fascination for the apparent intransigence of scientific methodologies found in broad segments of contemporary art as well as social sciences. The performance acts as a vector of “event-proofing,” its rigor depending precisely on its ability to isolate and extract a purely enduring biological life, or in other words, to extract a bare life absolutely separated from the world to which it participates.

The concept of bare life is often wrongly equated to a kind of pre-social state of nature or mere biological life, in which case the concept of bare life would become completely unnecessary. On the contrary, it always involves a sampling out or an extraction, going along with the idea that purity can never be found in an origin. Bare life, Agamben tells us, “dwells in the biological body of every living being” (Homo Sacer 151). As Agamben further clarifies, “there are not first life as a natural biological given and then their implication in law through the state of exception. . . . Bare life is a product of the [biopolitical] machine and not something that pre-exists it” (State of Exception 88). Thus the concept of bare life can be understood only in the context of a bio-power that Agamben defines, along the lines of Michel Foucault, as the takeover of life by techno-scientific power. Bare life is reduced life, amputated life: a survival. The concept, which first appears in Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (277-300), involves a qualitative distinction referring to the idea of a fuller life, a more humane life. In Agamben’s thinking, that is a form-of-life, a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as bare life (Means without End 3-4). Wang Xiaoshuai introduces a similar distinction when he comments on the state of experimental isolation in which Qi Lei finds himself after his performative suicide: “I feel that apart from being alive in the physiological sense, apart from breathing and eating, there is a social life for everyone. I think that it is only when you are living in society among people that you can call yourself really alive” (qtd. in Berry 170). Wang Xiaoshuai indicates a qualitative distinction between the mere fact of living (in the physiological sense) and
the common life or associative life. In Frozen, this reflection on bare life translates into an attempt to stage the possibility of a paradoxical survival to oneself, with an individual becoming an objective witness to the pure and simple continuation of his own de-socialized life. This experience of a radical loss of social subjectivity, staged in performative terms, powerfully echoes also that of the Tiananmen survivors, those whose lives did not come to an end, as did the world to which they belonged. The paradox of survival is confronted by a performance art’s own paradox: performance art is “live art,” 現場藝術 (xianchang yishu), that is, “art of the here and now.” If performance seems to grant us access to a pure historical matter at the point of contact between reality and fiction, its radicalism is inversely based on the individual and his/her isolated body, that is, on bare life, understood as pure surface of inscription.

Consequently, the particular power of performance art can be defined by its ability to make a break, as radical as possible, within the social and cultural lifeworld in order to make explicit its structures and workings. The violence exerted by performance appears as an emancipatory dis-play of the “great game” of life that draws its evocative power from its tendency to isolate the merely enduring or bare life from its “form,” that is, from a life inextricably en jeu/at play. It is in this sense that Qi Lei’s performance becomes truly intelligible only when looked at in the perspective of Agamben’s concept of bare life.

Frozen is a probing cinematographic representation of the post-Tiananmen disillusion. The questions raised in the context of performative art situated at the crossroads of bare life and its extraction go well beyond its reference to a particular historical and political period. They imply the much broader question of bio-politics which, as we have argued, constitute the intrinsic horizon of understanding for the concept of bare life. In a rather disturbing way, contemporary China performance art scene is a leading laboratory in the emergence of humanity’s new biopolitical body, as Frozen powerfully prefigured it.

Work Cited
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