

Business as Usual and changes in contemporary Chinese lifestyles

In the past decade the world has witnessed the surge of China's economy, accompanied by a rising consumerism and shifting social values in what was once a bastion of doctrinaire communism. Political and cultural milestones such as China's accession into the World Trade Organization, the hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics, and even the launch of Kentucky Fried Chicken's 700th restaurant location, mark these surprising transformations.

A rapidly expanding middle class has been at the core of these changes, climbing up a newly available socioeconomic ladder. No social group feels the impact of this growth in the same way as the current generation of youth who are caught between strong family-focused traditions and their own desire to lead an autonomous life and indulge in the luxuries the new economy brings them. Whereas their parent's generation looked up to the founders of the People's Republic of China – Mao Zedong in particular - these young adults are as likely to admire non-political figures from the West like Giorgio Armani or Louis Vuitton. Members of this generation struggle to find a strong sense of self in the midst of clashing cultural values.

This identity crisis is a starting point for Yang Fudong's video *Honey* (2003). The work focuses on a group of older men and a young woman who spend their leisure time together playing cards, smoking cigarettes, and drinking tea. Their apparel is notable: the men wear muted green and beige suits that are reminiscent of the communist-era uniform of Chairman Mao. The woman wears a dress similar in style but offsets it with a lavish fur coat and high heels. Through the clothing and presentation of these characters, Yang Fudong explores the phenomenon of a Western lifestyle emerging from China's communist past. These characters personify older and younger generations. The elders are firmly grounded in political history and tradition while the youth are caught in transition. The two parties are seen playing a heated game of cards, suggesting that the old and new ways of life are able to coexist in the same environment — for now. Yet in all gambles there are winners and losers. The video's narrative remains ambiguous, it leaves the audience to ponder who might eventually be the victor.

The effects of globalized markets have radically changed the face of employment throughout China. Millions of people have moved from rural areas to urban factory regions where they work arduous hours each day of the week at menial labor. Many come hoping not just to make ends meet, but to actually gain a more desirable lifestyle. Unfortunately these tedious factory jobs do not provide workers with enough to actually improve their personal, social, and economic standing. Nonetheless many young people hold onto a false sense of hope, longing to live differently but willing to settle for present realities.

This sort of outlook is reflected in Cao Fei's aptly titled video, *Whose Utopia*. Cao Fei tries to understand what motivates people to abandon their rural homes to work in factories. She interviewed hundreds of Osram light bulb factory workers, asking probing questions such as, "What do you hope to achieve in the future?" and, "Why did you decide to leave your home and go to the river delta (factory region)?" Their answers are embodied in images of workers acting out their ambitions in the workplace. Between rows of focused workers, a ballerina gracefully dances on point, introducing a refreshing air of liveliness into the numbing routine. In another scene, an older man fluidly dances

alongside rigid machines, his movements controlled and flexible. Though these fantasies reflect the workers' aspirations, the underlying message is somber. Factory work may allow these people to improve their current quality of life but it will not provide them the means to fully live out their dreams. In the video's final scene, six young men confront viewers by standing side by side with Chinese characters emblazoned on their shirts that read, "My future is not a dream."

Whereas Cao Fei explores the idea that success cannot come without sacrifice, Yang Fudong maintains a different perspective on ambition. In an interview for the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Fall 2003), he bluntly states: "One wants to accomplish big things, but in the end it doesn't happen." This idea of overarching yet unattainable aspirations has become a common undercurrent in Yang's films and videos. His generation's desire for success is so strong that it often overshadows realistic expectations; Yang often conveys this contradiction by blurring the distinction between dream and reality. For instance, the video *City Lights* (2000) follows two characters throughout their day. The video suggests that young people are totally immersed in their own visions of the ideal, which disconnect them from reality and each other. Throughout the course of the video two men mirror each other's actions and follow one another like shadows. They hand off to each other everyday objects such as an umbrella, suggesting that they are perhaps two sides to the same person. One man may represent the real, the other, fantasy. The actors interchange roles so frequently that ultimately the two begin to blend into one.

At a glance these videos might seem to express optimism about the growth of China's economy and the opportunities that have come with this advancement. However these hopeful images also caution us all to remain realistic. The world has witnessed the changes and developments in China's booming economy, yet these advances come with tremendous growing pains that affect the working class and the young. Both are placed in the tenuous position of balancing years of engrained tradition with previously unimaginable economic and social transformations. As the current global economic crisis unfolds, even more unforeseen changes will soon be affecting this large part of Chinese society.

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