

## **Aestheticization of Post-1989 Neoliberal Capitalism: From the Forms of Life to the Political Uses of Bodies**

Joyce C. H. Liu

Graduate Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies  
National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan

### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the question of bio-politics that regulates and shapes people into different forms of life in today's societies, particularly in the post-1989 neoliberal capitalist conditions that we can observe in China. I call it the aestheticization of neoliberal capitalism. My concern in this paper is with the aestheticization of the neoliberal capitalism that was manipulated and executed by the contemporary States. I shall discuss the double cycle of the use and consumption of bodies in the artistic labor through my reading of a contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing (徐冰 1955- ). The primary process of the uses of the bodies by the State, the *polis*, took us to the question of the forms of life under the dictate of the political economy as discussed by Giorgio Agamben, and the question as to how and why human life, through the uses of bodies, is shaped, measured, calculated, regulated and processed into various forms of life. In order to think the power of life or the potential of life that would not be always already administered and distributed according to the reason of the *polis*, I juxtapose François Jullien's formulation of the concept of *shi* (potential, inclination, tendency) that he derived from classical Chinese philosophy with the Western concept of *potential/potestas* as well as from the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi; and I discuss the possibility of a new critical and political use of body through the politics of aesthetics as this possibility presents itself in Xu's work.

### **Keywords**

Bio-politics, Neoliberalism, Agamben, François Jullien, *Shi*, Potential

To think . . . at once to be affected by one's own receptiveness and experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure power of thinking. . . . Only if I am not always already and solely enacted, but rather delivered to a possibility and a power, only if living and intending and apprehending themselves are at stake each time in what I live and intend and apprehend—only if, in other words, there is thought—only then can a form of life become, in its own factness and thingness, *form-of-life*, in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked life.

—Giorgio Agamben  
*Means without End: Notes on Politics*

. . . to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation. That is to say again: to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use.

Such a task will demand the elaboration of a theory of use—of which Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles—and, moving forward from that, a critique of the operative and governmental ontology that continues, under various disguises, to determine the destiny of the human species. This task remains reserved for the final volume of *Homo sacer*.

—Giorgio Agamben  
*The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*

This paper addresses the question of bio-politics that regulates and shapes people into different forms of life in today's societies, particularly in the post-1989 neoliberal capitalist conditions that we can observe in China. I call it the aestheticization of neoliberal capitalism. I shall discuss the double cycle of the use and consumption of bodies in the artistic labor through my reading of a contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing (徐冰). My concern in this paper is with the aestheticization of the neoliberal capitalism that was manipulated and executed by the contemporary States. The primary process of the uses of bodies reflected through the artist's works manifests the ways in which people's lives are shaped and formed according to the functional and utilitarian logic in their daily life; the secondary process of the uses of bodies, what I shall address as the critical aesthetics through the political uses of the bodies, disarticulates the functional logic and at the same time exposes and critiques the capitalist logic. The primary process of the uses of the bodies by the State, the *polis*, took us to the question of the forms of life under the dictate of the political economy as discussed by Giorgio Agamben, and the question as to how and why human life, through the uses of bodies, is shaped, measured, calculated, regulated and processed into various forms of life.

In *Means without End*, Agamben wrote, "Life—in its state of exception that has

now become the norm—is the naked life that in every context separates the forms of life from their cohering into a form-of-life” (“Form” 6). The Marxist scission between man and citizen, Agamben points out, had been superseded and substituted by the division between naked life and various forms of social-juridical identities, such as the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student, the HIV-positive, the transvestite, the porno star, the elderly, the parent, the woman, and so on (“Form” 6-7). Agamben suggests that we need to think the possibility of a life of power—a life that cannot be separated from its form, a life in which “the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power”? (“Form” 3; emphasis in original) I fully agree with Agamben’s proposal to think the power of life or the potential of life that would not be always already administered and distributed according to the reason of the *polis*. But, in order to highlight the controversial question related to the concept of potentiality, I will juxtapose François Jullien’s formulation of the concept of *shi* (potential, inclination, tendency) that he derived from classical Chinese philosophy with the Western concept of *potentia/potestas* as well as from the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi; and I will discuss the possibility of a new critical and political use of the bodies through the politics of aesthetics as this possibility presents itself in Xu’s work.

### **Aestheticization of Post-1989 Neoliberal Capitalism**

Xu is a world-renowned contemporary artist from China. Born in Chongqing in 1955 and raised in Beijing, he went through the Cultural Revolution and spent his teenage, as all his contemporaries did, in a peasant village located in a remote mountain valley. Xu entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the 1970s and acquired his artistic skills in woodblock printing. Moving away from the social realist artist trend of his time, Xu’s art was known as avant-gardist conceptual art and became famous in the late 1980s. After the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989, because of the tightened political pressure and artistic restrictions, Xu left China and moved to the United States in 1990. His artworks such as *Book from the Sky*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, *Square Word Calligraphy*, *Background Story*, *Tobacco Project* and *Phoenix Project* were exhibited all over the world. Besides numerous awards, *Art News* in the U.S. also considered Xu one of the 40 influential artists in the world in the twentieth century. Xu returned to China in 2007 and has been serving as the vice president of China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing till now. (Wang Chia-Chi 5-6; Gao 10-15)

I want to begin by looking at Xu’s *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered*

*Ridges* (*Beihoude gushih: Yanjiangdiezhangtu* 背後的故事：煙江疊嶂圖), an installation that was exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2014 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges*

In this installation, Xu took the scroll painting *Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* (ca. 1604) by the late Ming great master Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555-1636) of the seventeenth century, a classic collection from the National Palace Museum in Taipei, as the blueprint for his adaptation. Dong's *Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* itself was an imitation of the painting of the same title by a Northern Song painter Wang Shen (王誥 1036-ca. 1093) of the eleventh century. The structural compositions of the landscape of the two pieces by Wang and Dong are roughly the same, while the lines and the brushes are entirely different. Likewise, in Xu's *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges*, we see a similar composition to that specific work of the same title by Dong. The entire installation was arranged with three large light boxes, size 520 x 2185 cm. The viewers saw on the surface of the frosted-glass-panels an echo of Dong's painting, with scattered houses and trees here and there, rolling hills and strips of water, and mist extended in the middle and stretched to the background. When walking behind the large glass boxes, however, the viewers would—perhaps to their surprise—see an assemblage of waste objects glued onto the glass, such as fishing lines, cotton balls, scraps of local newspapers, wooden sticks, dry grass, and twigs of various trees picked up from nearby areas, pieces of brick from

neighborhood constructions, and so on. The local artists who collaborated with Xu said that, in order to collect these objects, they walked around Taipei city streets and campuses to pick up these discarded objects from various corners of the city. Even though the viewers of this assemblage work saw a constellation of hills, trees and houses that resembled the painting by Dong, the result of this collection process was that Xu's three-dimensional installation in fact presented the physical labor and temporal movement behind the scenes or the "forms of life." Xu achieved similar results in his exhibitions in various other cities, through the projection of light onto the two-dimensional flat space.



**Figure 2. The scene behind the work** *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges*

Xu has constructed the installation of *Background Story* Projects, starting from 2004, for 15 exhibitions, respectively in Berlin, London, Gwangju, Suzhou, New York, Massachusetts and other places. It appears to me that Xu presented his meta-aesthetics through his project of *Background Story*. On the one hand, the forms of people's life were depicted on the surface of the artwork and the primary process of the consumption of the objects and goods is concealed through the styled aestheticization, while on the other hand, in the background of the panel, the consumed and used-up objects, the remnants of people's life and the forms of death, the used-up objects, are assembled in an entangled way through the artists' body movements and linked to different forms of past lives in the cities. These re-

assembled and re-configured forms of death told us different stories of the forms of life that had been experienced. The meta-aesthetics presented through Xu's work offers viewers a distancing perspective from which to observe the utilitarian logic hidden behind the stylized forms of life. This perspective could also further lead us in our reading of his other artworks.



**Figure 3.** *Tobacco Project: 1st Class*

Xu's *Tobacco Project* (菸草計畫 *Yancao jihua*) (Figure 3), for example, provided excellent illustrations of the relation between the functional uses of the bodies and the utilitarian logic behind the uses of the objects. *Tobacco Project 1999-2011* originated from Xu's visit to the tobacco factory in Durham, North Carolina, during his trip to Duke University in 1999. The Duke family in fact established the British-American Tobacco Company in Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century and was the first company to introduce tobacco-rolling technology to China. Over the past years, Xu has explored different aspects of the uses of tobacco and its complicated relations with Chinese societies and histories in different exhibitions, such as *Tobacco Project: Shanghai, Pipe, Little Redbook, Chinese Spirit, Tobacco Book, Backbone* and *1st Class* (Figure 3).



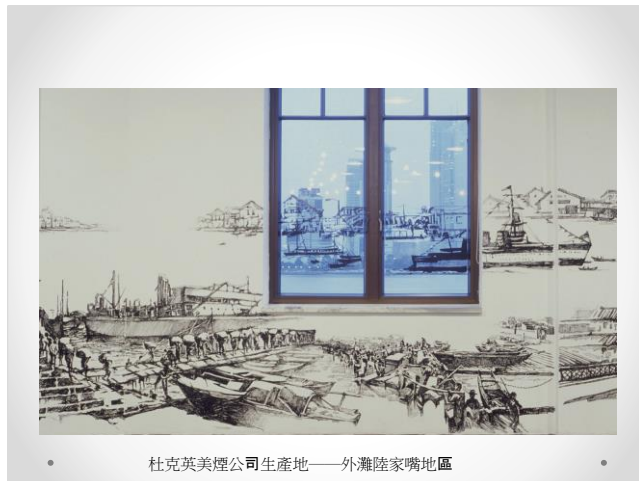
**Figure 4.** *Tobacco Project: Pipe*



**Figure 5.** *Tobacco Project: Little Redbook*



**Figure 6.** *Tobacco Project: Tobacco Book*



杜克英美煙公司生產地——外灘陸家嘴地區

**Figure 7.** *Tobacco Project: Shanghai*

In *Tobacco Project: Shanghai* exhibited in 2004, the juxtaposition of the skyscrapers at the Bund (外灘 *Waitan*) (Figure 7) with the photos of the old tobacco factory at the harbor a century ago was a striking example of Xu's stylized and complex representation of historical and "behind the scenes" processes. The Bund was the waterfront area in central Shanghai where mansions owned by international trading companies were clustered from mid-nineteenth-century onwards, after Shanghai was forced to open itself to international trade as one of the five treaty ports. This was on top of China's having to grant Great Britain extraterritoriality and the cession of Hong Kong Island, dictated by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 upon the failure of the first Opium War, also named as Anglo-Chinese War, in 1839-1842. Here, then, is the symbolic historical moment when China was launched into the path of modernity. Today, in the twenty-first century, the Bund is even more crowded with the high-rise buildings of international banks and business centers. The traces of China's socialist past and its postponed economic development during the Maoist era in the middle of the twentieth century were almost entirely erased. Instead, China has caught up with the rest of the world in terms of its economic power with tremendous will and speed within the past two decades. Not only has the progress of modernity been seamlessly sutured, but China has entered center-stage as a world financial power.

What Walter Benjamin called "the aestheticization of politics," the will of the nation that shaped the landscape with bombardments and barbed wires (122-26), now is transformed in the post-1989 and post-socialist era in China into the aestheticization of neoliberal and transnational capitalism. The project of the aestheticization of neoliberal capitalism reflects not only the alteration of the landscape with super-tall buildings, but also the modes of desire deep-rooted in the people, that is, the desire to catch up with and enjoy the materialist and economic growth as the rest of the world. *Tobacco Project 1999-2011: 1st Class*, an installation, size approximately 1500 x 600 cm, that was first exhibited in Virginia in 2011 and also exhibited in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2014, tells us of these intriguing modes of desire. The shape of this piece looks like a tiger-skin rug, but is composed of over 500,000 cigarettes, with the aroma of tobacco permeating the entire space of the exhibition hall. The tiger-skin shaped contour of the *Tobacco Project: 1st Class* refers first and foremost to the trophy won through the capitalist logic, but it also indicates more fundamentally the desire of the people longing for each and every one of the pieces of the 500,000 cigarettes. Here, the logic of capitalism does not only display itself in the accumulation and expansion of capital but also in its claim of *laissez-faire* economic liberalism through free trade, open markets, economic



liberalization, reduction of the government's control and enhancement of the private sectors of the economy. What is accumulated and expanded is not merely capital in the form of money, but all calculable future capital, that is, the financialization of the transnational markets and the distortion it brought to local economics, including drastic economic inequality, the damage of the farming industry and the pollution of rural environment. Xu's artwork thus presents not only his exposition but also his sharp critique of the logic and the aestheticization of neoliberal capitalism.



**Figure 8.** *Phoenix Project*

*Phoenix Project* (鳳凰 *Fonghuang*) (Figure 8) is another extraordinary example of Xu's critique of the effect of the post-1989 neoliberal and transnational capitalism in China. *Phoenix Project* was commissioned in 2008 to create a sculpture for the atrium of the new World Financial Center in Beijing. Earlier that year, Xu had returned to Beijing, 18 years after he left China in 1990, and been struck by the sight of the rapidly changed city and the harsh working conditions of migrant laborers at the construction site. In an interview, Xu said that "When I first visited the building site, I had a sense of shock." The poor working conditions for the migrant laborers made his skin "quiver" (Vogel). These views apparently provided a sharp contrast to the laborers' conditions in the socialist China in the mid-twentieth century, when he

himself used to be one of them working in rural villages. He then gathered the migrant workers at the construction site to help him with the artwork and assembled the rusted and wasted tools used by these workers for his *Phoenix Project*—a huge sculptural work composed of two metallic birds lifted 12 feet above the ground, measuring 28 meters long and weighing 6 tons each. If we look closely at the close-up of the photographs of the sculptures, we can see objects such as tower crane hoists, rusted tire rims, steel saws and scoops, iron barrels, screwdrivers, hose tanks, girders, safety helmets, glass fragments and construction gadgets. These garbage-like objects were the necessary subsistence indispensable to the migrant laborers in their daily works and their daily lives. These migrant laborers also became attached to these metallic tools, while they themselves also have turned out to be part of the objects consumed by the rapid developmental projects and easily disposable through the production process. The elegant but horrifically gigantic figures of the mythological birds, symbolizing the rebirth of China in an ironic way, hang above the ground in the new business center, now marking the alternation of the landscape of Beijing city.

CBC in the end cancelled the commission and, after a long process of negotiation, the artwork was exhibited instead in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, among other places in the U.S., in 2014. The displaced location of the exhibition of this sculptural Phoenix, removed from Beijing and re-installed in New York, to me, manifested the ironic turn of the capitalist move, with the huge iron birds as the embodiment of the aestheticization of the neoliberal capitalist logic and the rebirth of a new China, energized by its tremendous financial power.

## **Forms of Life and the Political Economy**

The double cycle of the consumption and production of objects that I mentioned previously needs further elaboration. Let us first think about the question of the primary cycle of the transformation of the consumption and production of things in life. To be more precise, my question here is why and in what ways human life is shaped, measured, calculated, regulated and processed into various compartmentalized forms of life through the apparatus of the socially functional and utilitarian uses of things, bodies and objects, and how and in what ways are human agents at the same time retroactively mass producing and conditioning an even more powerful mechanism of the uses of bodies, aided by remote forces of the global flow of capital.

What Xu demonstrates in his *Tobacco Project: Shanghai*, *Tobacco Project: 1st Class* and *The Phoenix Project* may be thought of as the forms of life that have been

drawn and shaped through a process of rapid involution in post-socialist China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of the farmer-workers (農民工 *nongmingong*) amounted up to 268,940,000 at the highest, with a 2.4% increase rate from the previous year (“2013Nian”). In a recent study by Huang Dan, we learn that the percentage of the “new workers” is currently about 20% of the entire population of China (4). The large number of migrant workers was sucked in and dispersed along with the speedy swirl of the emerging new status of China both as the financial center, the world markets and the world factory. The construction of the high-rise buildings that occupied the urban space in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and other major cities, and the heavy traffics of commercial, informational and financial activities, not only attracted but also up-rooted the farmer-workers from their hometowns. These internal migrant farmer-workers mostly could no longer go back to their former ways of life because they had sold up their farmlands and because they prefer higher salaries that they could earn through the construction projects in the big cities, despite the fact that they could never get settled, might not have regular income, could only inhabit in a tiny room with the entire family, and would always be marginalized in the cities. They could not even obtain labor contracts. As a result, they were forced to move from one construction site to another construction site. (Wang Hui “Gaizhi,” “Woyou”; Lyu; Pun and Chan; Pun and Lu)

These displaced bodies are literally utilized in accordance with the huge increase of the demand for laborers because of the rapid growth of the infrastructure of transnational entrepreneurial networks and financial centers in China. These forms of life, caught up by the momentum of the global neoliberal flow of capital, have also been embodied by the compartmentalization of urban space—that is, the segregation of high-rise skyscrapers, on the one hand, and the ghetto areas of the laborers’ villages, on the other, which is another demonstration of the aestheticization of the post-1989 neoliberal capitalist logic in China.

How do we consider the life of these male-utilized migrant laborers? Why do they voluntarily accept or, in fact, desire such forms of life? They come to big cities to work at randomly chosen construction sites, displaced and dispersed in urban ghettos, with no contracts and no protection from the law. They literally become the bare life in the camp, as described by Agamben in his *Homo Sacer*, “a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zōē*” (Agamben, *Homo* 188). These workers are no longer the farmers and laborers that co-habited in the people’s communes who shared the common beliefs and common life experiences, working for the common goal, but are isolated individuals who had been cut off from their hometowns and inserted into various laborer’s villages in the margins of the big

cities. We seem to see various metamorphoses of the camp, the hidden matrix of the bio-politics that function as an apparatus of *dislocating localization*. Or as Agamben puts it: “The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical norms in a determinate space; rather, it contains within itself a *dislocating localization* that exceeds it and in which virtually every form of life and every norm can be captured” (Agamben, “Form” 44).

The forms of life that are turned into forms of death are the stakes Agamben addressed in his *Homo Sacer* projects. The techniques of the management of human life includes everything from his birth to his death, the entry and exit of the territory, the crossing of the borders, preventive quarantine, protective custodies, eugenics, citizenships and so on. As Michel Foucault and Agamben have pointed out, the motor that triggers the apparatus of bio-politics is therefore no longer only the nexus connecting the juridical rule with the techniques of subjectivation, but the power of political economy at the center.

Political economy here apparently does not refer to a system of rules or a science of knowledge, but to a paradigm that was associated with administrative activities, including management, arrangement, *dispositif*, organization and execution of the order of things in the household, as what *oikos-nomia* suggests (Agamben, *Kingdom* 17-18). *Oikos* designates private household space while *polis* refers to the public domain, and therefore *oikos-nomia* should mean the arrangement of household affairs. But the line between the *oikos* and *polis* is a tricky question. Carl Schmitt drawing on Erich Przywara’s etymological studies, pointed out that in the Western context of *pneumatic logos*, *oikos* refers to the house of God. From the beginning of the patriarchal society, *oikos-nomia* is in the realm of *polis* and is essentially political economy (Schmitt 336-45). To this, Agamben adds the notion that economic theology, conceived as an “immanent ordering” of both divine and human life, was the roots for modern bio-politics. The current triumph of economy and government over every aspect of social life is due to this tradition of economic theology (Agamben, *Kingdom* 1). Agamben’s research shows that, in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, the *oikia* was defined as “a *polis* on a small and contracted scale” and economy as “a contracted . . . *politeia*,” while the *polis* was defined as “a large house [*oikos megas*],” and politics as “a [common] economy [*koinē tis oikonomia*]”. Community therefore was referred to as “the house of God” (*oikos theou*) and the messianic community was also conceived of in the mode of *oikonomia*. (*Kingdom* 24-25; emphasis in original)

The question here then is: what are the “things” and according to what orders are they arranged, administered and distributed in the *oikos/polis* now that *oikos* and

*polis* are inter-penetrated and overlaid with one another?

In the practice of modern bio-politics, not only natural resources such as agricultural, fishery, mining, forestry, industrial and commercial products are to be managed, reproduced and circulated, but also human physical, intellectual and moral powers are to be controlled, guided and monitored so that they can be part of the reproduction machine. The power of human life turns out to be the productive forces of the State. The forms of human life, consequently, are shaped and engineered according to the rational and utilitarian goals of the State and have turned out to be the bodies and appendixes that are annexed to the social productive apparatus, as can be seen in the figures of the migrant workers at the construction sites that Xu reflected and critiqued through his artworks.

What is life, or the power of life, then is the question for us to consider.

### **The Power of Life, the Manipulation of Form, or the Chinese Way?**

Is life merely the productive forces to be shaped and utilized by the State? Are the powers of life inevitably managed and manipulated by the social apparatus in terms of the visible and actual labor force? How do we conceive of the potential of life, the generic power of life that is to remain as constantly active and not as readily actualized into fixated forms?

Self-consciously distancing himself from the Western philosophical mode, François Jullien, in *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China* (*La propension des choses: Pour une histoire de l'efficacité en Chine*), offers an interpretation of the potential of things, based on his readings of the classical Chinese philosophical concept of “*shi*” (勢). Jullien’s notion of “*shi*” is particularly inspired by the writings Sunzi (孫子) on military strategy that stresses the need to minimize armed engagement and seek victory at the earliest stage. According to Sunzi, as Jullien explains, the leader of the army needs to know how to intervene “when dispositions [*shi*] and maneuvers are still depending on our own initiatives and to be adjusted at will.” The force of the development of the combat is derived from the correlation of all factors involved in the situation. Sunzi wrote: “For a man who is expert at using his troops, this potential born of disposition [*shi*] may be likened to making round stones roll down from the highest summit” (“善戰人之勢，如轉石於千仞之山者，勢也”) (qtd. in Jullien, *Propensity* 27-29).

Jullien elaborated on the logic of “*shi*” which extends in different aspects of life and considers reality as “a process of transformation” with the inherent tendency,

inclination and propensity. The propensities of things lie within every element in reality and in the very “configuration or disposition of things.” In politics, Jullien pointed out, we see the potential born of “hierarchical disposition”; in calligraphy, painting and literature, we see the force working through the form of a character in “the tension emanating from the disposition of things”; in the process of history, we see “the tendencies resulting from particular situations in history and the propensity that governs the overall process.” (*Propensity* 14)

The notion of “*shi*” is best exemplified through Jullien’s illustrations of the Chinese aesthetics of calligraphies and paintings. In the study of calligraphy, *shi* is extremely important. There is potential force or *shi* inherent within the forms of the configuration and the strokes of the ideograms. The strategic positioning of the elements on the paper, as the troops on the battlefield, creates the potential (*shi*) that would run through the entire sphere. Jullien explained that *shi* could be defined as the *force* that runs through the *form* of the written character and animates it aesthetically: “a particular gesture is converted into a form, just as a particular form is equally converted into a gesture. In this schema the figure produced and the movement producing it are equivalent; one can speak of the *shi* of the brush that delineates the ideogram just as one speaks of the *shi* of the ideogram that it traces” (*Propensity* 76). Jullien further stressed that the function of *shi* from stroke to stroke is evaluated through its correlation with the totality of the work: the factors within the overall sphere operate and interact with one another not only through networks of affinities but also through contrast in a series of co-related polarities and tensions. (*Propensity* 77-78)

“*Shi*,” then, is employed in the description of the effects of the tension and suspension of these correlated elements and the tendencies of the movements. In his discussion of the dynamism of *shi* in Chinese landscape paintings, Jullien reveals to us how the Chinese would notice the narrow crest of rock creating a “dynamic configuration” (*shi*) through its line “snaking and weaving like a dragon” (蜿蜒如龍 *wanshanrulong*). The tension and suspension between the lines and forms depends on the correlation and composition of the entire scope, the rise and fall of the pinnacles and flanks of the mountains, the trail of clouds or mist circulating along the stretches and folds of the mountains, the woods, waterfalls, rivers, huts, villages and figures here and there on the canvas (Jullien, *Propensity* 79-82).

Jullien also points out that it is crucial to conceive of *shi* in its “totality” because the reality of things “only exists—and thus only manifests itself—in a totality, through the force of propensity that links its various elements as a whole” (*Propensity* 99). This imperative need for *shi*, according to Jullien, merges with the need for the

unity of composition that is seen as a source of dynamism. Jullien wrote: “even the bridges and hamlets, towers and belvederes, boats and carriages, people and their houses, at times shown clearly, at times hidden, should from the beginning be determined by this general order” (*Propensity* 100).

Here, a question arises: following Jullien’s analysis of the composition of the elements in their totality and unity on the canvas, every part within the canvas would have been determined by the overall structure of the composition. If we judge only on the level of the surface composition, are we able to tell the difference of Dong’s painting from the work of Wang Shen of the same title, or that of Xu from Dong’s work of the same title?

The emphasis on the general order that determines the totality of the situation is further discussed in his *Traité de l’efficacité*. Jullien explains there that, for the Chinese, the form (形 *xing*) and the potential (勢 *shi*) are coupled concepts. On the one hand, there is the situation or the configuration (the form) of the actualized power relation that takes shape before our eyes; on the other hand, there is the propensity of things that is implicated in this situation. We are not merely driven by the disposition of things within this situation; we can also manipulate the order of things so that it can turn out to be beneficial to us (Jullien, *Traité* 37-38). Jullien stressed that the Chinese emperor knew the art of governing by relying on the efficacy of the apparatus in the position and let the totality of a situation unfold its inherent inclination. As long as the emperor made the apparatus of the position function, his people would automatically submit to the position. (Jullien, *Traité* 57)

In order to further explicate the Chinese wisdom of absolute immanent governmentality, Jullien interpreted the concept of “the potential of the situation” (幾之勢 *jizhishi*) as the initial moment of conception, as embryonic primal point, the point that is far antecedent to the happening of the event (Jullien, *Traité* 109-10). Jullien repetitively stressed that the Chinese ruler knows how to manipulate the situation in the very beginning, make it implicated with the desired tendencies and let the transformation take place on its own (受含帶而自化 *shouhandaiierzihua*). This immanent “pure dispositif” could accomplish the development of things by not doing anything, *sans agir* (無為 *wuwei*), and leave the rest to the inclination of things, *laisser advenir l’effet* (任其自成 *renqizicheng*) (Jullien, *Traité* 143). Jullien writes: this “act-without-acting” is a “laisser faire (laisser-faire, laisser-passer),” and this doing nothing is not really nothing because this “letting” is an active act (ce *laisser* est actif) (Jullien, *Traité* 147).

The active and strategic “non-act,” for Jullien, had inspired the Chinese tradition of dictatorship and achieved the apparatus of immanent submission. The

apparatus of power functions in the way that the ruler does not need to judge because the punishments and retributions are automatic. There is no need for surveillance because there's already a system of denouncement. When this regime is perfectly assimilated, there's also no need for chastisement because the desire or repulsion is already internalized and each one would spontaneously respect the law that has been imposed upon him. There will be no grudge of the conscience and no waste of efforts. Everything will be smoothly processed. The imperceptible manipulation could result in automatically and spontaneously subjectivated docile bodies. (Jullien, *Traité* 156)

What is striking in Jullien's argument is that, bringing together the dynamism of *shi* that he observed in Chinese military strategies, calligraphy, paintings, literature and discourse of geomancy, Jullien arrived at his conclusion about the Chinese ways of governmentality. In the "Preface" to *The Propensity of Things*, Jullien wrote: the art and wisdom in "exploiting the propensity emanating from that particular configuration of reality to the maximum effect," that is, "the notion of efficacy" (15). Jullien stressed that, from ancient times, the Chinese knew perfectly well the techniques of governmentality through the manipulation of *shi* so that the entire mechanism might function automatically and that the manipulator is inconspicuous. The people are not forced to obey, but would spontaneously follow the dictate of the emperor (Jullien, *Propensity* 60). According to this area of Chinese thought, everything is implicated by tendencies and therefore is ineluctable. The sequence of changes stems entirely from the power relations inherent in the initial situation and thereby constitutes "a closed system" (*Propensity* 221). In the concluding section, Jullien again stresses that the necessary evolving process is already implicated within the system and its variation through alternation. Conforming and adapting to the propensity of things—and not going against it—is, Jullien suggests, the wisdom and strategy particularly demonstrated by the Chinese (*Propensity* 262-63). As he more baldly states the matter: "It is therefore hardly surprising that Chinese thought is so conformist. It does not seek to distance itself from the 'world,' does not question reality, is not even surprised by it." There is no need for myth to save reality from absurdity and to confer meaning on it. There are only *rites* to regulate behavior on the reality level (*Propensity* 264).

In Jullien's elaborations, through his employment of the concepts of apparatus, *dispositif*, *régime* and *efficacité*, we see an immanent system of total manipulation and conformity within the Chinese culture. According to Jullien, Chinese people are used to conform, to obey and to adapt to the propensities of the situation to the extent that all human activities and tendencies are implicated and manipulated in the very beginning of the total scheme and therefore has paved the path for a perfect scheme



of governmentality. The propensities of things are determined in the configuration of the larger situation, and even the potential power of each and everyone in the scheme has been implicated, measured, calculated and prescribed in the first place.

We cannot but propose our doubts: isn't Jullien's interpretation of the active "non-act" (*sans agir*) and "letting it be" (*laisser advenir l'effet*) already imbedded in the logic of neoliberal *laissez-faire*, meaning that all is pre-determined in the configuration of the form according to the intended rationality of utility and efficacy?

We need to reverse the question and start all over from the very beginning. Can we think the power of life through the configuration and re-configuration of the use of things? Can we envision a life that can be considered, as Agamben suggested, as a life of power?

Or, as what this paper tries to address: can we propose a different understanding of the power of form that can be achieved through art and thought through the political uses of the bodies and the forms? How do we think, for example, the hidden potential power of life beyond the dimension of the visible assemblage of the objects and bodies? How do we conceive the alter-dimensions of the objects and bodies that are related to the physical movements and life processes, be it the artist, the thinker, and each and everyone among us, beyond the form that he presents in front of our eyes, as what we can see in the artworks through the artistic labors?

### **Sovereign Thought and Sovereign Form: The Political Uses of the Bodies in Life**

In discussing the concept of power (potential) in Baruch Spinoza's writings, Antonio Negri pointed out that power does not merely refer to the "intensive relevance" of the self-foundation of being, but also to the "extensive relevance" in terms of the articulation of the various levels of reality. Articulation always is "a possibility" (51). The generic motor of being is what concerns Negri, and he differentiated *potentia* from *potestas* in his discussion of power: "*Potentia* as the dynamic and constitutive inherence of the single in the multiplicity, of mind in the body, of freedom in necessity—power against Power—where *potestas* is presented as the subordination of the multiplicity, of the mind, of freedom, and of *potentia*" (190-91; emphasis in original). Negri stressed that the Spinozian mechanism denies any possibility of a conception of the world that is not represented as a singular, flat, and superficial emergence of being. Within the totality of events, "each is absolute in itself." The points on which constitutive thought is developed are those that result "from the critical process: points, instances, events that . . . are submitted once again

to the tension, the power of the totality of being” (212). The reconstruction of the world is the very process of “the continual physical composition and recomposition of things” (Negri 212-23).

Negri’s emphasis on the constitutive power of each “point” within the totality of event, and the continual composition and re-composition of things, is important for us to consider. Following this line of thought, Jullien’s depiction of the “first point” as the embryonic moment that implicates and determines the propensity and inclination of the totality of the situation would not be possible. From one point to the other point, there are all the possibilities.

But, to Agamben, Negri’s proposal of the constituent power and the continuing act of free choice, as the re-composition of the multitude, cannot solve the question that every sovereign act is in the first place an act of original ban and exclusion (Agamben, *Homo* 47). In order to think a life of power that is not an expansion of limitless sovereign power, and a life that is not separated from itself by the grasp of the law and the ban, Agamben suggested, in his recent writing *The Highest Poverty*, we need to take a step further and to think a different “theory of use.” The question raised by Agamben in this study, I think, is revealing for our discussion here. Agamben wrote:

How can use—that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriate—be translated into an ethos and a form of life? And what ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form? The attempt to respond to these questions will necessarily demand a confrontation with the operative ontological paradigm into whose mold liturgy, by means of a secular process has ended up forcing the ethics and politics of the West. (*Poverty* 144-45)

The task to expose and to critique “the operative and governmental ontology” hidden behind various disguises is essential for Agamben in order to resist the appropriation of life and bodies as properties according to the given utilitarian functions.

This observation is consistent with Agamben’s works in the past with regards to his inquiries into the separation and appropriation of things and lives by law. In his dialogue with Martin Heidegger (1995) in *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben proposed to make the anthropological machine inoperative so that the animality of living being could be disinhibited and a new path and a new space could be opened (Agamben, *Open* 79-80). For Agamben, the task of maintaining the sovereignty of

life is one of dis-articulating the link constituted by the law and restoring the liveability of every life in itself. Religion for Agamben exercised the first power of separation, and to profane means to challenge the line of separation and to restore life that is not separated from its form. In this sense, the “pure use” of things means that the use takes place in relations, while the concept of property and ownership makes the thing attached to juridical rights instead of relations. Agamben wrote: “The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative” (Agamben, *Profanations* 86). To deactivate an old use, to make it inoperative and to create a new use, it requires the power of thought. The power of life, for Agamben, is the power of thought as the nexus that can constitute the forms of life “in an inseparable context as form-of-life.” Agamben explained that it is not the individual exercise of an organ or of a psychic faculty, but rather “an experience, an *experimentum* that has as its object the potential character of life and of human intelligence” (Agamben, “Form” 9).

Agamben’s proposal to deactivate the old use and create a new use of things resonates with the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi’s (莊子 369 BC-286 BC) discussion of the use of things in his *Qiwulun* (齊物論 *On the Equality of All Things*). Zhuangzi said that a thing is called by its name through the constant application of the name to it, and the thing is therefore differentiated by its name and becomes partially recognized. But everything has its inherent character and capability, and is not limited by the name attached to it. If we can give up the views we have acquired by learning, and use the things as they are, the use then is in mutual access (用也者，通也 *yongyezhe tongye*). It is so-called Dao (道), that is, the ways of things. To Zhuangzi, to restore the things from the confinement of their names is to access them as they are, just like to make the music of the nature sound their own notes (吹萬不同，使其自己 *chuiwanbutong, shiqiziyi*). This self-same-ness, *ziji* (自己), is to denounce the confinement of the nominal system, to acknowledge the mutual implication of self and other (彼是方生 *bishifangsheng*), and to allow one’s constant appearing and disappearing to manifest itself (方生方死，方死方生 *fangshengfangsi, fangsifangsheng*) (Guo 50, 66, 69-70). According to the commentator Guo Xiang (郭象 Ca. 252-312) of the third century, *ziji* means to allow everything to follow its own natural path (自己而然 *zijierran*), and not to be enslaved by the things according to one’s will (非役物使從己 *feiyiwushicongji*) (Guo 50). Zhang Taiyan (章太炎 1869-1936) further interpreted this selfsame-ness, freed from the nominal confinement, as *ālāya* or the eighth consciousness, which is explained as “thusness” or “suchness” (真如，*Zhenru, Tathata*), that is, one who has arrived at suchness and every moment of this suchness would be different from the

other moments (Zhang 296).

In Zhuangzi, we see a relation to the world in the use of things. These relations could easily be confined by our customary acquisition and the pre-given nominal system. When the symbolic law separates things and bodies according to subjective utilities and functions, the forms of people's life would also be transformed into functional and fragmentary bodies. Zhuangzi's proposal to receive new bodies in a vacuous and inoperative position (虛而待物 *xuerdaiwu*) is a politics of dialectic negativity to constantly work on the unbinding of the fixated images and ideas bound by the nominal system, and to maintain the dynamic and dialectic flow of opening and closing of oneself as the rise and fall of ideas in our encounter with different bodies. Zhuangzi said, to face the others as they are, one needs to experience and listen to them not with his ear (聽之以耳 *tingzhiyier*), nor with his mind (聽之以心 *tingzhiyixin*), but with his *qi* (聽之以氣 *tingzhiyiqi*) (Guo 147). For Zhuangzi, it requires *qi* (氣) to access the other bodies, to disentangle the logic of separation and to restore all things to their *thusness*, that is, to dis-articulate the things from the names that they are attached to.

What is *Qi*? *Qi* is not any physical or conceptual capacity, but the flow and the movement which uphold and support life, that is, the liveliness of life itself in its totality. In this sense, *qi* is nothing else but life itself.

The experience or the experiment that Agamben proposes to conceive a "form-of-life" that is not separated from life itself and to bring things back to pure use, and the politics of negativity proposed by Zhuangzi to clear away the nominal confinement and to use things as they are, to access the others with one's *qi* [life], can give us a new perspective to the question of the power of form that is not separated from life.

## The Political Uses of Bodies and the Power of Form

Jullien's problem is that he places too much emphasis on the manipulatable closed system. For him, the potential of things is primarily implicated at the first point, the initial embryonic moment, and even the non-act would work with full efficacy to the extent that every subject would naturally submit to the manipulation of the design of the entire scheme. The part is therefore fundamentally premeditated and determined by the totality of things.

If we read the visible forms in Xu Bing's works through Jullien's analysis of the configurations within the totality of the frame, we would see only misty rivers and layered ridges on the surface of the panel, consumable objects produced through

the tobacco industry, and the beautiful phoenix from ancient Chinese mythology. It would be a flat two-dimensional space, and we could not see the “background stories” Xu wanted to draw our attention to. The composition of each element is organically related, but is also initially determined.

The power of the form, however, lies in the dynamic linking force of the composite parts to their background. The traces on each and every one of the objects told us all the background stories. The consumed objects, the tobacco, the rusted tire rims, steel saws and scoops, iron barrels, screwdrivers and safety helmets all demonstrated the primary cycle of use and exposed the forms of life shaped and driven by the logic of development. The workers migrated from rural places to big cities, working in different construction sites. The marginalized inhabitants in the cities were further marginalized and put into different ghettos. The workers lost their status as respected laborers in the socialist China fifty years ago, and became utterly homeless. The primary process of the functional and utilitarian uses of the bodies, through the technique of political economy, have formed people’s life into fragmentary forms of life in order to not only to better govern them, but to have them produce better according to the interest of the *polis*.

Even though the forms of all things appear to our eyes in their two-dimensional modes, it is in fact interwoven with multiple physical trajectories, temporal processes and manual labors, combined with layers of local and global histories, as in a topological space. Through his political uses of the bodies, Xu did not only disarticulate and deactivate the functional uses of the bodies, as suggested differently by Agamben and by Zhuangzi, but further exposed the logic of the neoliberal capitalist development that is linked with the bodies and is rapidly altering the Chinese society. It is therefore important to note at this point that the artistic and political uses of the bodies, as what we see in Xu Bing’s artistic labor, besides exposing the law of separation and putting the bodies into new use, also displayed at the same time how the various forms of life were linked with these re-assembled bodies, the used-up objects as forms of death, and thus all the ironies and paradoxes constituted through the historical processes were presented in the form. Here, in the form of the artwork, and the forms of death, we see a newly forged force of critical thought.

The power of form in Xu’s works, therefore, does not lie in the bodies and objects arranged within the context, but in the interwoven force of thoughts. The secondary process of the aestheticization, that is, the politics of aesthetics, is the power of thought that demonstrates itself through the political uses of the bodies and the artistic labor, each time a critical experiment, and each time a new use of the bodies that exposes the gap between the bodies and their lives, and thereby opening

up a new space of critical thought, with new understandings and new experiences.

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### **About the Author**

Joyce C. H. Liu is Professor of Critical Theory, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature in the Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan. Her research covers psychoanalysis, continental critical theories, radical political philosophy, transcultural philosophy, classical Chinese philosophy, East-Asian modernity, and inter-art studies. She has published several books, including *The Topology of Psyche: The Post-1895 Reconfiguration of Ethics* (2011), *The Perverted Heart: The Psychic Forms of Modernity* (2004), *Orphan, Goddess, and the Writing of the Negative: The Performance of Our Symptoms* (2000).

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