

Shannon Steen

**WORLD FACTORY: THEATRE, LABOR, AND CHINA'S
"NEW LEFT"**

In today's China, how are we supposed to understand the notion of "work," after the chaos of the socialist period, and after the conversion to capitalism, and now after globalization? Marx said that labor makes people, this was one of his fundamental principles. So how are we supposed to understand labor today? What does it mean for us?

—Grass Stage, *World Factory*¹

The insistence on "socialism with Chinese characteristics" often sounds quite vacuous, and yet it is a constant reminder of the Chinese resistance to dissolution into capitalism and the continued reaffirmation of one kind of socialist past in the search for another kind of socialist future.

—Arif Dirlik, "Back to the Future"²

What does it mean to promote Marxist critique in an avowedly socialist country that also aggressively pursues free-market policies? And what role does theatre play in thinking through this contradiction in a country that continues to deploy significant state controls over public political expression? Shanghai's Grass Stage (*Cao taiban*) tackles these issues in their work *World Factory* (*Shijie gongchang*), an ongoing theatrical project that depicts the problems of labor conditions inside contemporary Chinese factories. Using that play as an example, I'd like to explore the landscape within China of what might be called "theatre of the New Left" that takes post-Mao economic reform and China's role in labor globalization as its core topics. What does it mean to create public discussion in a country with distinctive notions of both public and political

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expression? And how do works like *World Factory* help shape China's political and economic identity going into the future?³

As is routinely noted, despite official claims to be a socialist country China pursues strongly mixed economic policies, a paradox addressed by a domestic political movement known as “the Chinese New Left” (CNL). A school of political and intellectual thought that emerged in China in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the subsequent expansion of economic reform in the early 1990s, the CNL is characterized by a certain degree of heterogeneity. Generally speaking, CNL thinkers promote skepticism of free-market policies within state economic planning, advocate for state-owned and collective enterprise, and resist the mass-scale privatization of state industry undertaken in the reform period on the argument that the benefits to China's workers that accrued during Mao's nationalization process are under increasing threat. Although these points of view are sometimes construed to be Maoist (particularly by detractors of the movement), figures of the CNL are also critical of the Maoist period, and some scholars construe its orientation as continuous with other “New Left” movements in the West, in that its debates about socialism after Mao resemble Western debates about socialism after Stalin.⁴

World Factory (Figure 1) propels CNL critiques of workplace conditions that have accompanied China's rise as a manufacturing power while exploring the tension between that rise and the country's socialist identity, past and present. Inspired by the nineteenth-century phrase to describe British manufacturing dominance, *World Factory* touches multiple interwoven topics related to China's centrality to contemporary global manufacturing: the devastating working conditions of a largely unregulated labor market; the emotional impact on families pulled apart by labor migrations within China itself; environmental destruction; the connected histories of industrialization and labor revolt; the transition from China's communal notions of sociality to individualistic ones; the problems of a consumer-based economic and social world; and the ideological incongruities between China's economic liberalization and its socialist identity. Through an episodic structure that showcases a variety of internationally dispersed theatrical techniques (clown masking, poor-theatre aesthetics, musical numbers, audience participation, first-person testimonial, multimedia projections, and even a quick bit parodying Beijing Opera all make their appearance in the show),⁵ the play catalogs the many varieties of extreme labor conditions in China, thereby undermining narratives of social mobility and progress that have often accompanied its manufacturing rise.⁶ But as the epigraph to this essay suggests, *Grass Stage* frames these issues within a larger one of national identity. Though the play's primary thematic investments appear at first glance to lie in the physical, emotional, and environmental devastations of China's factories, it implicitly asks what it means for the country to think of itself as defined by “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” and its materialist critique is used to explore the tensions between the various poles of China's contemporary identificatory matrix—socialist and free market, communal and individual—leaving open the question of where China will go in the future.

As this thematic constellation suggests, *World Factory* raises a set of questions that are potentially fraught within China. Christopher Balme, who argues that



Figure 1.

World Factory, Grass Stage, Nanjing, December 2014. *Photo:* Courtesy Zhao Chuan, Grass Stage.

theatre's role in constituting the public sphere is often strongest in political contexts in which public expression is most heavily regulated or even censored by the state, defines the public sphere not so much as a spatial entity but rather as "a set of rules enabling debate and discussion to occur."⁷ What might those rules be in a place like China, where the relationship among state, the market, and its citizens is undergoing rapid change, and not necessarily in the ways envisioned in reductive cold war narratives that predict increasing autocratic rule or Western-style liberal democracy as the only possible (or even inevitable) outcomes?⁸ Balme sees the specifically Euro-North American forms that the theatrical public sphere takes as increasingly adapted to non-Western contexts, but to what extent is this true? Is this claim guilty of what Xudong Zhang calls "the intense mythology of freedom and autonomy in so-called open society—a mythology of Enlightenment that proves to be deeply resistant to its own demystification?"⁹ I should note here that I am not a Sinologist, so what follows is my attempt to understand the political topography of expression in the largest country on earth, where Western-centric conceptions of the state, the theatre, and the public

sphere may not cleanly map. If scholars of the theatre want to understand more fully its operation within the public sphere—participation in which is often understood as a central social value or contribution of the artist—then it is necessary for us to undertake as careful as possible an investigation of those regions we assume to be hungry for Euro-American style social organization, and to challenge our assumptions about those regions. I attempt here to undermine the “habit” that Xudong Zhang identifies, of those both in- and outside of China,

to view everything in the PRC through the imagined totality of the government and its official policies and rhetoric. It is . . . customary, even a knee-jerk reaction, to see anything extragovernmental as instantaneously and naturally subversive, progressive, and good. As a result, new configurations of social space often are unaccounted for, and new cultural-intellectual manifestations willfully interpreted and misread.¹⁰

While the exploration of how the theatre helps shape a public sphere in China might seem far afield from questions of Marxism and theatre, we might see these topics as linked via two dynamics: first, given China’s ongoing embrace of neoliberal policy in the context of ongoing control over political expression, Marxist critique is potentially constrained there; second, the nature of European histories of the public sphere raises important questions as to whose interests are promoted within that construct in the first place. Habermas argues that the public sphere—an entity that “mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer [of] public opinion”—emerged in early modern Europe via print culture as a constitutive feature of the shift from feudalism to mercantile capitalism, and with specific and dynamic notions of public versus private (particularly as these qualities operated in relation to equally new formations of the state and the citizen).¹¹ Given that the public sphere originated as a formation of mercantile capitalism as a mechanism for leverage in its power struggle against the monarchical state, what does it mean for the CNL and its theatrical kin to form a public sphere in a country where the state identifies itself as the bearer and guardian of socialist investment in the public distribution of resources, albeit ones undertaken through a series of increasingly private investment-friendly strategies? In that context, given the origins of the public sphere as an institution that primarily represented bourgeois interests, what does it mean to produce a public sphere that promotes the interests of labor or workers? This essay attempts to map one typology of expressive possibilities within the context of contemporary China.¹²

WORLD FACTORY: LABOR GLOBALIZATION IN A SOCIALIST NATION

Grass Stage was founded by writer and visual artist Zhao Chuan in 2005.¹³ Created to initiate discussions about the primary social and political issues facing contemporary China, the organization functions at a subprofessional level, using nonprofessional actors, performing in non-purpose-built spaces, and avoiding the direct sale of tickets for their shows (although donations are encouraged at their conclusion). Zhao Chuan argues the necessity of these strategies for a variety

of reasons, but primarily as a way to avoid how professional or commercial theatre in China often operates as what he calls the “delicate box” that “floats above life.”¹⁴ In his view, the commercial theatre of China creates several obstacles to larger participation, including a pricing system that leaves most people unable to attend; formalist styles that create impediments of cultural capital (wherein the aesthetic strategies and performance histories of a work are legible only to a narrow segment of the population); and state censorship intrusions that can sometimes (but perhaps surprisingly to those from outside China, not always) limit the content of artwork and public debate.¹⁵ These strategies also give the organization more content control, rendering Grass Stage exempt from many of China’s systems of expressive restriction.

Although the political terrain of state control over public expression has altered substantially in China over the past thirty years, the concept of a public sphere operates very differently to its nominal equivalent within liberal capitalist democracies.¹⁶ Although a focus on China’s internal expressive controls is frequently met with frustration by Sinologists (who often see Western fascination with this matter as both a fetishization of Western-centric conceptions of political freedom and as a substitute for engaging in depth with the nuances of China’s complex cultural and political worlds), it is also a matter at the forefront of the minds of non-Sinologists when we read about cultural politics of the country. Chinese artists are most likely to be known to Euro-North American publics when they promote and embrace dissident topics in their work (which seem almost automatically to propel them into the embrace of the international art market), as has happened with figures from Ai Weiwei to Guo Jian to Chen Guang.¹⁷ In this, Chinese dissident status operates almost as a fetish for Western art publics, creating no small amount of frustration for Chinese artists and Western-based Sinologists alike. Given the ways that Euro-North American constructions of the public sphere are predicated on notions of free expression, however, it seems difficult to talk about a Chinese public sphere without noting at least in brief the complexities of how public expression operates there.

Contrary to popular accounts in the international mediascape, censorship in China is at once more institutionally specific, inconsistently practiced, and deeply internalized by its artists than is easy to comprehend from the outside. Expressive controls are primarily content-driven (in other words, they tend to be exercised over certain topics, leaving formal experimentation largely open), and operate largely within state-sponsored arts organizations and training schools. Artists learn to avoid certain topics (the Tiananmen protests, Tibet, ethnic separatism, sexually explicit material, and so forth) while training for their prospective fields, with the result that they often self-censor when creating new work. In this way, the operation of censorship in China looks more like the forms of Gramscian soft power that we generally associate with liberal democracies than we might expect, and even the top-down organization of expressive control is more inconsistent than is often understood. The state censorship office will sometimes allow performances of shows that might fall foul of taboo topics, but that they think generate a useful discussion: they will sometimes, for example, send a representative on the closing night of a performance who, at the conclusion of the show, will declare the

production out of bounds and closed—but only after the run has been completed, thus retaining the external impression of state control while also allowing distribution of nonexplicitly endorsed ideas.¹⁸

The CNL and its cultural kin operate within these parameters, or perhaps more accurately, partially form these parameters by altering the terrain of commentary regarding Chinese cultural, political, and economic life. While the CNL is generally understood to focus on political and economic matters, it has also self-consciously taken on commentary of the cultural realm as well. As early as 1993, former Minister of Culture Wang Meng published his essay “Avoiding the Sublime” in *Dushu (Readings)*, one of the premier CNL publications, in which he criticized the post-Tiananmen rush to spectacular marketized commercial production—a position rapidly publicly taken up by intellectuals in major cities like Shanghai as well.¹⁹ In fact, concerns over the commercialization of culture formed one important line of critique against the rising liberal consensus of 1990s China.²⁰ Grass Stage has joined this criticism of China’s growing culture industry through a variety of strategies: their abandonment of aesthetic forms like theatrical realism, which have dominated Chinese theatrical practice in the reform period, in favor of poor-theatre techniques; their oft-quoted commitment to work with actors who don’t conform to models of beauty that they see as prevalent within Chinese casting practices; their ongoing narrative focus on those people they see as abandoned by China’s economic reforms; and their insistence on nonprofit, amateur production models.²¹ Despite this, Grass Stage does not explicitly identify itself as a cultural wing of the CNL. When asked directly if he considered himself and the company part of the movement, Zhao Chuan turned this question around, and noted that the CNL likely wouldn’t recognize the company as engaging its work, primarily because the movement doesn’t recognize forms of cultural work as furthering its critique.²²

Though Grass Stage does not explicitly align itself with the CNL, its work frequently engages some of the same social criticisms and forms of advocacy that CNL theorists promote. One typical strand of this critique that *World Factory* dramatizes is that of the plight of workers. For example, one signal characteristic of Chinese factory labor that *World Factory* attempts to represent—and the one most commonly identified by CNL labor scholars like Pun Ngai—is the experience of mind- and body-numbing repetition and the intense pace of labor.²³ At one point in the play, a group of company members murmur a series of overlapping monologues that detail, over and over and over again, the precise bodily choreography of factory labor:

[W]ith the left hand select a component for inspection from the assembly line and locate the position of the name decal. Tilt 45 degrees. With the thumb of the right hand affix the name decal, barcode, and inspection sticker to the top and bottom covers. With the thumbs of the left and right hand press and smooth the name decal. (11)

The delivery of these exhaustingly specific instructions, which are difficult to make sense of even when read on the page, is sped up with every repetition

until the directions become an unintelligible blur of sound. Designed to make the production lines as fast and efficient as possible, these instructions eventually break down into silence, at which point the chorus of workers chant together “for 10 hours, every movement of our hands is precisely regulated by the clock. There are no smiles, no sighs, no gaps, no breaks. Da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da” (11). The instructions eventually become the sound of the factory itself.

While the repetitive and ceaseless nature of factory labor is one of its most infamously devastating features, *World Factory* stresses not just the physical impact of and bodily injuries from factory labor but its emotional consequences as well. In particular, the play explores the impact of familial separations caused by the labor migrations that characterize China’s manufacturing sector from the perspective of both the departing parent and the child left behind, and implicitly points toward the economic desperation that drives the decision to leave for factory income in the first place. The play emphasizes the emotional impact of these separations, which are frequently ignored even in those accounts that acknowledge this phenomenon. In a scene that immediately follows the repetitive instructions to the workers, actor Wu Meng jumps rope repeatedly (to denote the endless routinized labor just detailed) while she describes how exhausted she is from the demands of her work and acknowledges a recurring nightmare from which she wakes screaming every night (Figure 2).

She doesn’t relate the content of her dream until the scene’s end, at which point she finally notes that her anguish is not simply a result of harsh labor conditions, but of the impact of leaving her children behind:

I’ve woken up screaming every night for a month. It bothers me hearing other people talk about it. It’s the same dream every night: I dream I’m walking toward the dock, to take a boat across a river. The river separates me from my children. I’m worried because I see that the boat is leaving, I’m very nervous. But my body won’t move, it’s sore and tired, it won’t move—I see the boat about to leave, and I’m about to be left behind. It’s getting darker, and I’m stuck. . . . (14)

The play powerfully demonstrates the way that the emotional devastations of familial separation are profoundly interwoven with the different kinds of anxiety and fear workers experience as a result of the difficulty of the labor itself. The worker’s narration of her nightmare is bisected by a sound overlay of three different women workers describing a variety of safety and health problems created by their work. One woman relates the back pain she endures, another notes the way she hoards painkillers given out by her supervisor to suppress stress-based stomach pains she experiences, and yet a third describes chemical hazards so intense that she might return home: “[N]o one wants to work in the clean room. So they send the new people in there, and I can’t get them to transfer me out. It smells so bad in the clean room you can hardly breathe. The acid makes me dizzy and I can’t concentrate. If I keep having these headaches I’m going back home” (13–14). The interweaving of these descriptions with the story of the rope-jumping worker’s recurrent nightmare demonstrates the ways physical and emotional pain are



Figure 2.

Grass Stage ensemble member Wu Meng jumps rope, with other factory workers in the background, in *World Factory*, Shenzhen, November 2014. *Photo:* Courtesy Zhao Chuan, Grass Stage.

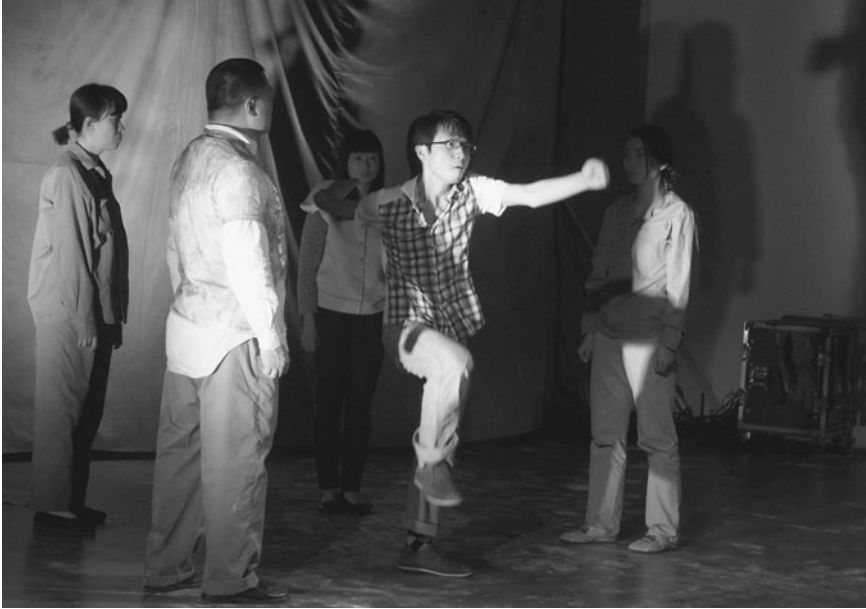


Figure 3.

Wu Jiamin marches to the anthem of the People's Revolutionary Army as the "Left Behind Child," in *World Factory*, Nanjing, December 2014.

Photo: Courtesy Zhao Chuan, Grass Stage.

coconstitutive for the workers, clarifying that the familial dislocations that the rope-jumping worker has to undertake intensify her experiences of physical exhaustion, and vice versa.

Grass Stage sets the emotional devastation of these labor migrations against the backdrop of China's Maoist idealization of the worker. A later scene in the play focuses on the difficulties faced by the "Left-Behind Child" in a story based on the life of ensemble member Wu Jiamin, one of the tens of millions of children whose parents left rural regions of China in search of urban factory employment. His scene, "Far from the City, Farther from Home," begins with the Left-Behind Child singing and marching in time with a recording of "The March of the People's Liberation Army" (Figure 3).²⁴ As he marches, the first verse of the song is heard over loudspeakers while a crowd appears and gathers around him. But before he relates the story of his childhood migrations from his home in rural Sichuan (one of China's primary agricultural regions), the Left-Behind Child is first peppered with questions by the crowd who, in a moment reminiscent of public confessions of the Cultural Revolution, bookend an interrogation over whether he likes to study hard and misses his parents with the repeated question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"—to which the Child invariably answers "a worker." After the boy then narrates the difficulties of his childhood

separation from his parents, the crowd debates the problems of these migrations, noting both the huge numbers of people involved and the impact on rural Chinese life (e.g., the loss of traditional lifeways and the rural labor shortage created).

As *World Factory* pointedly notes, the questions about the largely hidden costs of a consumer-driven system of wealth generation are not new. In this, *World Factory* echoes claims by CNL figures like Wang Hui (largely seen as one of the primary, if not the premier, figures of the CNL), who insists that market-driven social models (wherein problems of social inequality created by the market could be ameliorated by stronger citizenship and legal protections by the state) are illusory, and that grassroots social organizing critical of the market's operation is instead necessary.²⁵ The play insists that the problems that create the need for labor organizing are far from over or in China's past, and perhaps have unique salience in a country that still claims to be organized on socialist principles. The Child repeats singing the People's Liberation Army anthem, but breaks down in the process, shouting and ranting and thrashing. After he reveals a childhood photo of himself with his parents in their village, a film screens behind him of a high-speed rail line along a Chinese village, supplanted by footage of a contemporary factory. As these images scroll along, a voice-over plays of a worker describing the lack of respect he faces in contemporary factories, noting, "in the past to be a 'worker' was an honorable thing. Now there is no sense of honor, only shame. These operators or laborers belong to the lowest class, the lowest profession" (19). The contrast between the idealized Maoist celebration of the People's Revolution and the realities of the migrating workers is particularly heightened by the lyrics of the first verse of the PLA anthem: "Forward forward forward! / We march across our homeland into the sun / Carrying the hopes of our people; Ever victorious . . . / We are the weapons of the people" (16). The celebration of the People's Army's victorious forward progress across the country is mapped onto the new forward movement of the mass rural-to-urban migrations of China's workers. The ironies of this juxtaposition weigh heavily over the scene, as the Left-Behind Child seems increasingly abandoned not only by his parents in their desperate search for economic survival, but also by the government that supposedly acts as the guarantor of his family's security. The scene concludes by addressing this problem directly, with the voice-over from which the epigraph to this essay is taken:

In today's China, how are we supposed to understand the notion of "work," after the chaos of the socialist period, and after the conversion to capitalism, and now after globalization? Marx said that labor makes people, this was one of his fundamental principles. So how are we supposed to understand labor today? What does it mean for us? (21)

With these questions, *World Factory* doesn't simply historicize the problems of China's entry into the global labor market; it actually reframes that history so that the emotional devastations, such as familial disruption, are understood as part of a larger crisis that potentially undermines the capacity for workers to organize around an identity formation like class in the first place.

The questions of identity formation for workers are extended through an interrogation of China's shift from communal to individualist notions more generally. For example, one of the major episodes of *World Factory* is "The Workers' March through History," in which the ensemble lay out the trajectory of British labor struggles while marching with signs in Chinese that point to the parallel struggles in contemporary China:

Several workers remain onstage after the others have left, still marching and holding signs. As they talk and throw down their signs . . . on which are written "strike," "8 hour workday," deportation," "NGO," "negotiations," "protecting the status quo," "police," "law," "protecting rights," "unions," "brainwashing," etc. . . .

WORKER A: At the factory, we got to know each other; we organized.
WORKERS [chorus]: First we smashed the machines.
WORKER B: They brought in bosses, laws, and police to discipline our bodies and regulate our sense of time, and clocks to regularize our movements.
WORKERS: But we kept fighting back. . . .
WORKER B: They made an empty formalism of our democracy.
WORKER A: They made bureaucratic authoritarianism out of our revolution.
WORKERS: We kept fighting back.
WORKER B: They gave us social welfare.

The workers stop throwing down their signs. Only one remains, with the word "I" written on it.

WORKER A: They made a consumer society for us. They gave us TV, movies, soft drinks, computers, cheap clothes, mobile phones you have to upgrade all the time. . . . WORKER B: They created self-centeredness. WORKER A: They made me this I. WORKER B: And ceaselessly, they make my desires for me. WORKER A AND B: (*calling*) I—there's only I.

They continue to throw signs, but they all have "I" written on them. They disperse. (8–9)

Although it is not indicated in the stage directions, the workers begin with a sign that reads "Solidarity," so the signs trace the transformation (alluded to in the dialogue) from a collective orientation to individualism.

World Factory additionally frames these problems of worker identity with the crucial question of *audience* identification, by implicitly asking audience members whether they identify with the workers under stress or with the managers who oversee them. The play opens with a pair of clowns who perform an absurdist depiction of the 2010 Foxconn worker suicides (Figure 4).²⁶ The female clown enters the stage with a large string of blue paper dolls, and is joined by her male partner, who plays a corporate psychologist. The female clown quizzes the

psychologist on the personality characteristics that would most likely lead workers to jump to their deaths. As the psychologist “evaluates” each of the dolls, the female clown cuts them from the string with an outsize pair of scissors, laughing hysterically as she does so:

- MASKED CLOWN: Professor Lü, could you take a look at these people and tell us which ones seem to be lacking in psychological resilience?
- PSYCHOLOGIST
[played by
male clown]: Well this one for instance (*pointing to a blue paper person hanging crooked [sic]*) can’t even stand up straight. The psychological resilience in this case is most assuredly weak. (*takes the scissors and cuts, and the paper figure falls to the ground*)
- MASKED CLOWN: (*excitedly*) Ha-ha, who else?
- PSYCHOLOGIST: This one works day and night, 14 hour shifts 6 days a week. Can’t handle it. He’s a jumper— (*cuts him down*)
- MASKED CLOWN: Ha-ha, Professor Lü, who else?
- PSYCHOLOGIST: Look at this girl, thin as a rail. She can deal with the overtime, but not heartbreak. Lost love sends her straight over the edge (*takes the scissors and cuts her off at the head, and the headless paper figure floats to the floor*) . . .

The masked clown and the psychologist cut down all the remaining paper figures and watch them float to the floor, occasionally yelling “Jump! Jump!” and laughing. Their actions are nervous, excited, exaggerated. (3–4)

At the conclusion of the scene, the female clown parodies a series of Beijing Opera poses, in the process wrapping herself in the string of remaining dolls on which she nearly strangles herself.

The scene disrupts expectations for what might be a typical representation of the worker suicides that is sympathetic to their plight, one that would focus on and would ask the viewer to step into the experience that drives them to end their own lives. Instead, the scene implicitly positions the viewer as identifying with the experts who label the workers with the supposed weaknesses that render them likely to suicide. That the experts laugh hysterically at the suiciding workers, even taunt them to jump, undermines the supposed neutrality of experts like the industrial psychologists called in by Foxconn to halt the phenomenon in the first place, positioning them instead as enabling, even hastening it. The refusal to reenact or give a first-person account of the suicides avoids spectacularizing the workers’ anguish, and also invites the viewer to consider how his or her own response might be more akin to those of the clowns than one of empathy toward the workers.

The formal, theatrical devices that Grass Stage uses are key to their attempt to reframe the experience of factory labor in China. These strategies are often paired in emotionally vertiginous ways, as a wrenching personal story is followed by a scene using gallows or absurdist humor. The scene with the rope-jumping worker is immediately followed by the reentry of the masked clown pair, one of whom this time plays an environmental health expert detailing the effects of



Figure 4.

Yu Lingna (*left*) as Masked Clown and Lu Lu (*right*) as the psychologist Professor Lü, with paper-doll workers, in *World Factory*, Beijing, June 2014. *Photo:* Courtesy Zhao Chuan, Grass Stage.

industrial pollution. As the environmental expert explains the source and causes of smog, the female clown playfully throws powder that represents industrial pollutants into his face. The expert jokingly imitates pulmonary failure and mental retardation caused by the chemicals while the female clown laughs at him. At the end of the scene, they jest:

- EXPERT: Our world factory is actually nothing but a world garbage dump!
- FEMALE CLOWN: Shh! This is a big secret! You can't just tell everyone.
- EXPERT: Everyone in the factory already knows! You think I'm the only expert?
- FEMALE CLOWN: Ha-ha-ha—turns out we live in a filthy dump! (*pointing to the audience*) Look at them, all dressed up in suits, thinking they're so clean when really they're maggots in a latrine, living on shit, Ha-ha-ha—
- EXPERT: (*dragging the female clown with him*) Shhhhhh—that's the real secret. We're all trying our best to get by in this hopeless world. You can't just tell people that. (16)

Focusing the consequences of pollution onto the audience members by pointing out that they too live in the filth produced by the factories ties the fortunes of the viewer to those of the workers. These rapid emotional shifts complicate a purely identificatory or empathetic response for audience members, who are here implicitly asked to think about how the factory conditions destroy their own world too.

PUBLIC SPHERE AS SPATIAL PARADOX

In order to think about what kind of public sphere might be constructed through a work like *World Factory*, I'd like to use as an example the public symposium I was invited to join surrounding a performance of the show. In November 2014, I participated in a series of workshop activities surrounding a performance of *World Factory* at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT) in Shenzhen, China.²⁷ The symposium hosted two performances of the show and roundtable discussions by the members of Grass Stage, heads of local labor NGOs, artists both from China and the UK, international academics like myself, and figures of the CNL like Wang Hui and Pun Ngai (a labor sociologist and one of the CNL's foremost labor critics). This disparate group of people spoke about the history of theatrical representations of factory labor and workers, the contemporary labor landscape in China, international perspectives on China's manufacturing rise, and so forth. Grass Stage had invited both students from the local university and workers from local factories to view the performances—including from the infamous Foxconn, which had witnessed a rash of worker suicides in 2010 in the wake of production of Apple's iPad. Activities included a parallel workshop of an associated production by the METIS theatre company of the UK, also titled *World Factory*, that tries to create a space for audience participants to experience the complexities of contemporary manufacturing landscapes in China.²⁸

Interspersed throughout the activities were also auditions for the Migrant Workers' Spring Festival Gala organized by Grass Stage member Xu Duo, which features workers from across China's factories with exactly the kinds of background and experience described in *World Factory*.²⁹

The workshop's location in Shenzhen carried enormous symbolic weight. Shenzhen has served as center stage for China's manufacturing rise, and the premier site of experimentation with what "socialism with Chinese characteristics" might look like. When Deng Xiaoping began his economic reforms in the late 1970s in the wake of Mao's death, he selected Shenzhen as the first "Special Economic Zone" (SEZ), those regions in which China would experiment with direct foreign investment, relaxation of market controls over basic commodities and housing, and international manufacturing. Since that time, Shenzhen has become not only one of China's largest cities (growing from a small fishing village to a city of over ten million people in a few decades—one of the fastest urbanization projects in human history), but a primary stage for global manufacturing more generally.

But the symposium personnel were as important to the kind of public sphere created as the location. In particular, Wang Hui's participation lent his imprimatur to the production, imbuing it with crucial public critical cachet, in that he is a key public intellectual of the CNL (thereby granting a degree of visibility and aura of importance that the production might otherwise lack, notwithstanding Grass Stage's importance in the experimental theatre scene), and by extension creating an important site to discuss the plight of factory workers more generally.

The international identity of participants—including figures from Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and the United States as well as from across China—added to the visibility and prestige for the workshop, and also widened the scope of the public sphere of the event to include a transnational set of orientations. The talk that I gave, for example, on the ways that contemporary discourses on Chinese labor in the United States are echoes of older discourses that emerged in the wake of Chinese immigration to the US West in the mid-nineteenth century, had an explicitly transnational purview. In this, the symposium reflected the transnational nature of the CNL itself. While the movement in no way directly imports Western political theories or solutions to China's problems, and in fact rejects the label "New Left" partly on the grounds that it comprises a Western political formation, it nevertheless constitutes a transnational formation, with several of its central figures and even its publications located outside of the PRC. And though its transnational identity might seem unsurprising in the age of globalization, given the CNL's insistence on Chinese solutions for Chinese problems, its transnational structure significantly complicates what that might mean.

The symposium activities also exposed the ways that Grass Stage conceives of its activities as essentially spatial in nature. Interestingly, while contemporary analyses of the public sphere in theatre studies and elsewhere tend to define it as a set of rules governing expressibility and legitimacy,³⁰ company members of Grass Stage explicitly and intentionally frame their work—and its political operations—in spatial terms. In addition to Zhao Chuan's desire, stated at the symposium, for the theatre to operate in ways that more directly (and less delicately)

interpenetrate “real life,” he also insists on the metaphor of the “field maneuver” to describe Grass Stage’s touring across China, of which the Shenzhen weekend workshop was one example. In a personal interview with theatre scholars Pu Bo and Yang Zi, Zhao Chuan insisted that the company’s national tours (which they have undertaken extensively with *World Factory*) operate in this way:

Field maneuver is different from a theatre company’s touring because it also requests Grass Stage members to carry out self-training. In addition, it is the expansion of our idea of “space.” To people like us who live in Shanghai, a highly commercial environment with extremely limited living space, field maneuver is like the [Red Army’s] Long March [1934–5]. Through the maneuver, we intend to break the confines and to construct a larger space . . . apart from doing more creative work and making good shows, we should also think how to shape the theatre. Since 2009 Grass Stage has started “field maneuver” practice and performed in differing environments.³¹

If in military parlance a field maneuver encompasses both a practice exercise to prepare participants for actual battle and also an on-the-spot improvisation that restructures battlefield tactics in medias res, then Grass Stage sees their tours in both ways—as a mechanism to train their mentalities relative to the work of social change, and also as creating the grounds for innovations that could restructure social relations more generally. Zhao Chuan’s reference here to the Communist Party’s Long March of the 1930s—a particularly desperate moment in the party’s history, when the Red Army completed a 5,600-mile retreat from their stronghold in the southeast into the northeastern province of Shaanxi via some of China’s most challenging terrain—indicates his sense of embattled perseverance in the wake of Shanghai’s aggressive embrace of economic reform and global wealth, and also evokes the wide spatial trajectory of the company’s work. While Pu Bo and Yang Zi do not explicitly state this, Zhao Chuan’s notion of field maneuver is effectively a means of transforming the company’s Bourdieusian habitus, in which participants remake long-held conceptual and bodily predispositions. While Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is generally understood as fundamentally corporeal, he devotes a significant portion of his discussion to how habitus operates within specific spatial contexts (as in what he refers to as the “sense of the field”). In this way, Grass Stage’s tours operate reciprocally, requiring them to alter their internal conceptual predispositions as they interact with audiences in different locations, and simultaneously transforming the social spaces in which they find themselves.

To this end, Grass Stage embraces non-purpose-built performance spaces for the locations for their work. When I first witnessed *World Factory*, it was performed in an abandoned office building; in Beijing it was performed in a cinema in front of the film screen; in Shenzhen it was performed in a large lecture room (which used preinstalled risers for seating, but otherwise comprised an open space). Grass Stage restages certain elements of the work in order to remake performer–spectator relationships in each of these spaces—in the more intimate space of the Shanghai office building, for example, the performers walked through the audience in the scene in which they unraveled their knit gloves (see [Figure 1](#)),

bringing spectators more directly into the performance field. And while this strategy is familiar to audiences of the Western avant-garde, in China, where realism and verisimilitude are the order of the day, it created a much more unusual effect for audience members.

But even these spatial operations open up a paradox that Grass Stage shares with the CNL. The Chinese Communist Party took as one of their central mandates the idea that the state should prevent the circulation of ideas that promote class exploitation and false consciousness, meaning that the party sees itself as already promoting socialist ideals of the very kind Grass Stage might endorse.³² In other words, Grass Stage (and the CNL for that matter) in no way occupy a political space *outside* of official state doctrine. This paradox—wherein the Chinese state is officially both the enabler of global manufacturing and the protector of the worker—makes the ability to think of oneself as exterior to either position especially difficult.³³ As company member Christopher Connery (who also serves as director for the Center for East Asian Studies at UC Santa Cruz) notes, in China “there is really very little outside the space of the state and the space of the market.”³⁴ This produces an interesting problem for mapping Habermas’s theory of the public sphere onto the CNL’s work, since they don’t in fact provide a mediating space between the state and its citizens. Grass Stage occupy a similarly contradictory position, in that the company is less interested in criticizing the state than they are in pointing to neoliberalist activity within it, which renders the space they produce less one of mediation against the state than against the market.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the spatial paradox in which Grass Stage operates so much as the identity of the host organization of the Shenzhen performances, OCAT. The flagship institution of a nationwide chain of contemporary art sites, OCAT Shenzhen is owned by a corporation called Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), which operates a set of major theme parks in Shenzhen, including Window of the World (which replicates in miniature form major international tourist destinations like the Egyptian pyramids, the Grand Canyon, and the Sydney Opera House),³⁵ Splendid China (which reproduces in miniature versions of domestic Chinese destinations like the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Three Gorges Dam), Folk Culture Villages (which focuses on China’s internal minoritized ethnic groups),³⁶ and more. The parks are a major domestic tourism venue in their own right, and generate enough income for OCT to have created an entire retail, residential, and dining and entertainment district in Shenzhen called the OCT Lofts, in which OCAT (the contemporary arts complex) is located, and through which the OCAT chain of arts venues is funded. In other words, the events scheduled around *World Factory* operated as part of a wider spectrum of cultural performances, much of it closer to what might easily be construed as part of the commercial cultural circuit that the CNL has criticized—which dramatizes powerfully the difficulties of operating outside of the market or the state that Chris Connery identifies.

Grass Stage addresses this spatial paradox structurally and in the content of their work. The company avoids an explicit critique of free-market state policies. One of the content problems with which the company must contend is that its primary audiences (who are largely urban and white-collar) are most likely to identify

as beneficiaries of free-market liberalization schemes in China. This problem they resolve in *World Factory* through its narrator figure, the New Industrialist. Functioning as a mechanism for narrative coherence through the play's episodic structure, the New Industrialist, we learn, is herself a former factory worker who has risen through the ranks to own her own manufacturing operation. The various problems that the play catalogs are organized as scenes of revelation, as answers to the questions (never explicitly asked) "What does manufacturing labor in China really look like, and how did we get here?" One of the more confusing elements of the drama for outsiders is the extent to which the New Industrialist is never characterized as villainous, despite how easy that characterization might have been given the play's overall political orientation. But the play's lack of moral judgment toward this figure means that the audience members—who in its more urban spaces likely belong to the class of Chinese who have benefited from China's extraordinary economic growth in the reform period—are given a space to explore what might well be their own confusion over how to contend with the problems of extreme wealth bifurcation that China's spectacular economic growth has wrought.

Grass Stage also counters this spatial paradox by including talk-back sessions at the end of every show that they refer to as "post-show performances."³⁷ The insistence that these segments constitute part of the performance (rather than a managerial outreach strategy tacked on to its end) not only extends the content explorations of the plays to the response from audiences, but acknowledges their locally specific qualities as well. Zhao Chuan reports that the postshow discussions about *World Factory* in the so-called provincial cities of the northwest differed quite substantially from those in the Tier One cities.³⁸ In Beijing and Shanghai, several audience members responded to the show angrily, defending China's manufacturing operations by arguing that people needed to be able to work, or that Chinese citizens needed the consumer goods produced in the factories. In Beijing, two audience members actually came to blows over whether the show's content constituted "good theatre" (an aesthetic question that Zhao Chuan thought might actually have served as a proxy for questions of whether China's labor conditions constituted appropriate material for the theatre). In Shenzhen, audience members raised questions as to whether actors should be performing the stories of workers, or whether the workers themselves should be performing (although I also witnessed audience members in Shenzhen openly weeping during the section of the show in which the rope-jumping worker recounts her nightmare).³⁹ The audiences of the so-called provincial cities tended to be less accustomed to attending theatre of this kind, and focused on the show's content.⁴⁰

These distinctions are important not just for what they say about regional politics in China, but also for what they reveal about the potential conduct of a public sphere there. What might be the implications for an emergent public sphere if the most theatrically experienced audiences are more focused on the aesthetic issues of a work like *World Factory* than they are on its content, or are more explosively protective of certain content boundaries (as was the case in Beijing) in the wealthier cities (where the manufacturing labor often occurs) than in the rural

regions (which typically supply the workers themselves)? And how might those regional disparities unsettle the historical associations we have in the developed world with cities as the primary site of public sphere activities?

Regardless (or perhaps especially because) of its attempts to negotiate a Chinese public sphere, *World Factory* gives us a window into the CNL's clear (and unsurprising) concerns about the conditions and effects of China's manufacturing sector. It feels key that a leftist theatre organization is trying to grapple not only with the impact of labor conditions themselves, but with their implications for China's national identity, particularly its socialist identity. By implication, the play asks, "Is this what we mean by 'socialism with Chinese characteristics?' And if so, is this acceptable given socialism's putative goals?"

Given the impact of China's manufacturing rise on labor and environmental issues worldwide, the answers to those questions have significant global consequences. As labor conditions in the developed world have declined in the face of China's rise, and as improvements to conditions in the rest of the developing world have been stalled or suppressed in order to attract manufacturing operations away from China itself, the attempt to define a socialism of the future there is in no way a trivial or even a local matter. As Lisa Rofel has pointed out, international interest in China's domestic political debates is by no means a new phenomenon; if anything, external scrutiny of China's attempt to chart socialist policy post-Mao, particularly by the Western Left, is especially intense precisely because the developed world has largely failed to find an alternative to global capitalism. In that context, it would seem that much of the Western Left's interest in the CNL may well be predicated on hopes for a model that could be imported elsewhere (a charge that includes this author in its sweep).⁴¹ As theatre and performance scholars continue to question our own political formations vis-à-vis neoliberalism and other recent versions of global capitalism, it seems particularly important to watch how performance companies like Grass Stage are working to negotiate political and economic realities in China.

ENDNOTES

1. Grass Stage, "World Factory," unpublished script [2014], translated by Lennet Daigle, 21. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text. My profound thanks to Zhao Chuan, Chris Connery, and Lennet Daigle for this translated version of the playscript. Please note that as *World Factory* is an ongoing project, with scenes added and deleted as Grass Stage revises based on workshops it conducts across China, this article refers to the version performed at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen China, 21–22 November 2014.

2. Arif Dirlik, "Back to the Future: Contemporary China in the Perspective of Its Past, circa 1980," in *China and New Left Visions: Political and Cultural Interventions*, ed. Ban Wang and Jie Lu (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 3–42, at 37.

3. A shortened version of the performance piece with some sections performed in English was performed at San Francisco's LaborFest 23 July 2015 and may be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4apuwuAHZg, posted 23 September 2015, accessed 29 September 2015.

4. Members of the CNL movement often reject this label for their work, arguing both that it is a name intended to discredit them within China (by linking them with Maoism, which promarket reformers in particular have been apt to do) and that it is largely a term derived from Euro-North American political contexts, where it is mostly associated with the incorporation of neoliberal agendas in the

center-left parties (e.g., the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom). The New Leftists are critical of both these political formations. Daniel Vukovich notes the heterogeneity of the movement, however: “the label therefore includes as well a range of explicit and implicit political orientations within the work of various intellectuals, from Marxism and/or Maoism to neo-Confucianism, old-fashioned social democracy, and ‘third way’ left liberalism, as well as the less formalized populisms, nationalisms, and anti-imperialisms and even feminisms.” Daniel Vukovich, “The Battle for Chinese Discourse and the Rise of the Chinese New Left: Toward a Postcolonial Politics of Knowledge,” in *China and New Left Visions*, 61–80, at 61. In general, though, the movement has its roots in China’s Maoist–Leninist variant of classical Marxism, and sees China’s party-state system of governance as a potential solution to wealth inequality and political disenfranchisement rather than as an impediment to these. For a more extended summation of the CNL, see Wang Chaohua, “Introduction: Minds of the Nineties” (9–45) and Wang Hui, “The New Criticism” (55–86) in *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Wang Chaohua (London: Verso, 2003). For the argument that China’s New Left resembles that of the West, see Lisa Rofel, “The Geopolitics of the New Left in China,” in *China and New Left Visions*, 43–59.

5. My thanks to Joshua Williams for pointing out the internationalist nature of these strategies. It’s key to note that although the company uses a series of theatrical strategies recognizable as part of the international avant-garde, neither Grass Stage nor the CNL advocate for the importation of Western-style democratic solutions to China’s economic and political situation. The question of whether and to what extent or how China should adopt Western-style democracy is very much open, even among those intellectuals who favor political (as opposed to merely economic) liberalization in the country. In parallel, Grass Stage still has internal debates within the company over whether they should even perform abroad (although they have done so), seeing themselves as attempting to initiate discussion in their home country, and not as inviting outside forms of political intervention. See Xudong Zhang, “Preface,” in *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), vii–ix, at ix.

6. For a typical example of this narrative, see *Time* magazine’s 2009 article by Austin Ramzy in which “The Chinese Worker” is named a runner-up for “Person of the Year”; *Time* 174.25–6 (2009), http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1946375_1947252_1947256,00.html, accessed 17 September 2016. Published right around the time that Grass Stage began their work on the *World Factory* project, the article argued that workers there had made China “the world’s fastest-growing major economy—and an economic stimulus for everyone else.” Noting that China was “leading the world to economic recovery” in the midst of the global financial crisis, Ramzy credited “the tens of millions of workers who have left their homes, and often their families, to find work in the factories of China’s booming coastal cities” for this accomplishment. The *Time* narrative about Chinese workers is quite heroic in tone, stressing the worldwide economic miracle enabled by the sacrifices of Chinese factory workers, and forms a striking contrast to the more common American narrative around manufacturing labor in China, which usually positions Chinese workers as a threat to their American counterparts. For more on the bifurcated US narrative around the Chinese worker and its historical roots in nineteenth-century labor immigration, see my “*World Factory*: Disrupting the Myths of Globalization and the Chinese Worker” (in Mandarin) in *Sucheng* (December 2015). For an analysis of US theatrical depictions of Chinese factory work, see my “Neoliberal Scandals: Foxconn, Mike Daisey, and the Turn Towards Non-Fiction Drama,” *Theatre Journal* 66.1 (2014): 1–18.

7. Christopher B. Balme, “Preface,” in *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), ix–xi, at ix.

8. Balme’s statement on this—“that [the European conventions of the theatrical public sphere] have been exported around the world and adapted and altered to suit local conditions is one of the defining characteristics of theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (x)—seems to be of a piece with, for example, Brian Hook’s introduction to his *The Individual and the State in China*. Hook argues that “modernization in the cause of achieving wealth and power will entail unavoidable consequences. Among them, it will inevitably empower the individual to the extent that the authority of the state will, of necessity, be moderated and the relationship between the individual and the state permanently

modified.” Brian Hook, “Introduction: Reshaping the Relationship between the Individual and the State in China,” in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–15, at 4. Conversely, Xudong Zhang notes the problems with this conception of China, positing, “[m]echanical and superficial views still . . . invariably depend on obsolete binary opposites—state versus society, ‘official’ versus ‘nonofficial,’ dictatorship versus democracy, communism versus capitalism, hard-liners versus reformers. . . . We are experiencing an increasing and intensifying discrepancy between the perceived object called China and the lingering epistemological models rooted in the Cold War, backed by the even more time-honored machinery of ‘knowing the Other’ that is integral to the long history of the global expansion of capitalism. . . . As long as the old regime of knowledge and its reproduction holds sway, the emerging complexity of Chinese . . . everyday life will remain concealed, distorted, and oppressed in the symbolic global terrain.” Xudong Zhang, “The Making of the Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Field: A Critical Overview,” *Whither China?* 1–75, at 1–2. See Balme, x.

9. Zhang, “Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Field,” 3.

10. Ibid.

11. Habermas argues that the public sphere emerged “out of a specific phase of bourgeois society and . . . enter[ed] into the order of the bourgeois constitutional state only as a result of a particular constellation of interests.” Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49–55, at 50–1 (quotes on 50).

12. For an example of an earlier attempt to map the possibilities of a Chinese public sphere, see Philip C. C. Huang, “‘Public Sphere’/‘Civil Society’ in China? The Third Realm between State and Society,” *Modern China* 19.2 (1993): 216–40. Huang notes the difficulties in trying to apply Habermas’s theory to China (and debates within China studies over previous attempts to do so), but also argues that in explicitly framing his construct within the emergence of bourgeois liberalism in England and France, he implicitly claims the possibility of multiple forms of public sphere, inviting others to postulate alternative models for other contexts. Huang, 217; 220–3.

13. Grass Stage’s place in China’s avant-garde is well documented at this point, with particular attention from Euro-American-based theatre scholars on the company’s 2011 production *The Little Society*. For contextualization of Grass Stage within the theatre of China’s reform period (1979–present), see Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (London: Seagull Books, 2012), 98–104. For writing on *Little Society*, see Mark Driscoll, “Grass Stage’s Theater of Precarity in Shanghai,” in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin (Abingdon, Oxon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2015), 139–47; also Pu Bo and Yang Zi, “Constructing the Alternative: Grass Stage and *The Little Society*,” in *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Li Ruru (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 203–14.

14. Zhao Chuan, at public workshop for *World Factory*, 22 November 2014, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), Shenzhen, China. Live simultaneous translation was provided by Grass Stage company member Bruce Ding.

15. Grass Stage seems to succeed in its attempts to interact with a broader audience better than might be expected for an otherwise avant-garde theatre; at the performances of *World Factory* that I witnessed in Shenzhen in November 2014, workers from the local factories attended (including from the infamous Foxconn, where a rash of copycat suicides had occurred in the spring of 2010), with quite emotional results.

16. For accounts on China’s changing political topography, see Zhang, “Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Field.” China’s political landscape remains somewhat unique in the political encroachments of neoliberalism, in that its variant is characterized by strong state controls over financial liberalization schemes—in this, neoliberalism in China has in many ways reinforced the power of the state rather than weakened it. See David Harvey, “Neoliberalism ‘with Chinese Characteristics,’” in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120–51.

17. Ai Weiwei’s work and trouble with the Chinese state is well known in the West, but for an example of how he is regarded outside of China see Mark Stevens, “Is Ai Weiwei China’s Most Dangerous Man?” *Smithsonian Magazine*, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/is-ai-weiwei-chinas-most-dangerous-man-17989316/?no-ist, posted September 2012, accessed 10 August 2016.

Guo Jian's and Chen Guang's work directly addresses the events of the Tiananmen protests (albeit more abstractly in Chen's work), virtually guaranteeing them both trouble with the state and also notoriety in the international press. On Chen Guang, see Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Artist Detained before Tiananmen Anniversary," *New York Times*, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/chinese-artist-detained-before-tiananmen-anniversary/?_r=0, posted 9 May 2014, accessed 10 August 2016. On Guo Jian, see Tom Mitchell, "Lunch with the FT: Guo Jian," *Financial Times*, www.ft.com/cms/s/2/8f280a54-e5b5-11e3-a7f5-00144feabdc0.html#slide0, posted 30 May 2014, accessed 10 August 2014.

18. Personal discussion, Jiayun Zhuang, 22 November 2014. Profound thanks to Zhuang for explaining this element of state censorship operations.

19. For a description of this moment in CNL debates, see Wang Chao-hua, 20–1. Wang notes that "intellectuals working in the humanities based in Shanghai and Nanjing, where commercialization ran far ahead of other parts of the country, were among the first to see the turn of the party towards garish popular entertainment as a big blow, and a dozen of them struck out against the new trends in *Dushu*." For an example of this kind of response, see Wang Xiaoming, "A Manifesto for Cultural Studies," in *One China, Many Paths*, 274–91. Wang Hui, a later editor of *Dushu* and a major figure of the CNL, has summarized this moment up somewhat differently: "a number of leading intellectuals attacked the increasing commercialization of life in China as destructive of its 'humanistic spirit.' . . . The underlying attitude was fairly apolitical—behind it lay the offended dignity of scholars in the humanities. But they were now becoming aware that marketization in China relied on a political system that in their eyes remained unchanged." Wang Hui, 59.

20. The emerging liberal consensus included support for government schemes for economic liberalism, but criticism for its failure to uphold other Western liberal values like open expression or human rights. The CNL were in many ways defined by their critical stance toward this consensus: "[I]t wasn't till 1997–98 that the label New Left became widely used, to indicate positions outside the consensus. Liberals adopted the term, relying on the negative identification [of] the idea of the 'Left' with late Maoism, to imply that these must be a throw-back to the Cultural Revolution. Up till then, they had more frequently attacked anyone who criticized the rush to marketization as a 'conservative'." Wang Hui, 61.

21. On the nonprofit model that Grass Stage uses, see for example Pu Bo and Yang Zi, who argue (205) that "'alternativeness' and 'grass stage' as perceived by Zhao Chuan are, in the first place, in opposition to the spiritually restraining power of excessive marketization and capitalization. Thus, the company is independent of commercialized marketing, with self-controlled revenue and expenditure and a nonprofit mode of production." On Grass Stage's casting practices: "Feeling that pretty, professional actors are too good to be real, Zhao Chuan and other drama advocates co-founded Grass Stage, a non-profit 'underground' theater group, to reenact the average person's 'anonymous' life, affected by China's ever-changing ideologies and to 'show the beauty of those who are not beautiful enough [to perform in mainstream theaters].'" Coco Liu, "Zhao Chuan and Grass Stage Celebrate the Lives of Those Not Beautiful Enough," *CNN Travel*, <http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/play/zhao-chuan-bringing-theater-masses-356459/>, posted 26 May 2010, accessed 25 August 2016.

22. Personal interview, 8 January 2015. Having noted this, I would be remiss not to point out that scholars of the CNL in the West have highlighted a range of cultural productions that they see as very much in keeping with the questions asked by the movement. See the essays in "New Left Literature in China," pt. II of *China and New Left Visions*.

23. See Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

24. The military anthem of the PLA is commemorated in one of the major battle scenes of the 1965 song-and-dance film epic *The East Is Red*, directed by Ping Yang, which celebrated the Communist Party's victory in the Chinese Civil War. The section of *The East Is Red* that uses the PLA anthem can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=31FSj7RuqGU, accessed 15 May 2016.

25. Wang Hui argues, for example, that in the eyes of Chinese liberals—those in favor of economic liberalization—"it is only the absence of political reform that warps the workings of the market—

but if the constitution were revised to protect the rights of the citizen, then we would have a reasonably equal society and a satisfactory degree of social justice. In my view, that is an illusion. Political democracy will not come from a legally impartial market, secured by constitutional amendments, but from the strength of social movements against the existing order.” Wang Hui, 64.

26. For more on the 2010 Foxconn suicides see my essay “Neoliberal Scandals.”

27. The event ran four days in all (20–3 November 2014) and included lectures, workshops, an international seminar, and two performances of the play (Friday and Saturday). British Council, “*World Factory*—Theatre as Social Studies and Practice,” www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/arts/upcoming-arts-activities/worldfactory, posting date unknown, accessed 23 September 2016. Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) is discussed later in this section.

28. For more on the METIS production, see Zoë Svendsen et al., “*World Factory*: The Politics of Conversation,” *Contemporary Theatre Review: Interventions* 25.4 (October 2015), online at www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2015/world-factory/, posting date unavailable, accessed 27 August 2016; Lyn Gardner, “*World Factory* Review—Interactive Play Smartly Unravels Fashion Industry,” *The Guardian* www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/may/20/world-factory-metis-theatre-fashion-industry-review, posted 20 May 2015, accessed 27 August 2016; METIS, “*World Factory*,” <http://metisarts.co.uk/world-factory/>, posting date unavailable [2016], accessed 27 August 2016.

29. The workers’ gala is an alternative to the multiple-city Spring Festival Gala run by China Central Television (the primary state broadcaster in the country) that comprises a “China’s Got Talent”-style variety show that touts itself as “the World’s Most Watched Television Show.” The CCTV Spring Festival Gala purportedly attracts something on the order of seven hundred million viewers. See CCTV.com, “World’s Most Watched TV Show Underway,” <http://english.cntv.cn/2016/02/07/VIDE091gsz4CwmkR0bVp2h4160207.shtml>, posted 7 February 2016, accessed 26 August 2016. For more on the Migrant Workers’ Spring Festival, see Wei Yao, “Work Hard, Play Hard,” www.bjreview.com.cn/print/txt/2015-02/23/content_670967_2.htm, posted 23 February 2015, accessed 26 August 2016.

30. See, e.g., Balme; Habermas; and Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24.4 (2007): 7–30.

31. Pu Bo and Yang Zi, 210.

32. According to Emily Wilcox, this dynamic renders certain topics within Chinese arts almost incognizable: “The idea that art should serve the state because the Party (who leads the state) has society’s best interests in mind and that in this way serving the state means serving society is still the basic premise for the majority of China’s arts system. Mainstream art education and art criticism in China does not give serious consideration to the idea that art’s purpose is to challenge state agendas or anything else accepted as ‘good’ or ‘normal’ by the majority of society. I just gave a talk yesterday about how queer dance is almost completely nonexistent in China, in part because the idea that dance should challenge officially condoned mainstream culture or social relations is difficult to conceive for most people working in the arts in China. When you propose the idea of queer dance to Chinese choreographers, most answer, ‘Why would someone want to do that?’ as opposed to, ‘That would never be allowed by the state.’” Private correspondence, 26 September 2015. My profound thanks to Wilcox for her expertise on the current state of censorship in the Chinese arts world.

33. Moreover, many CNL figures are academics who work in China’s prominent universities, with the upshot that they work *within* the structural sphere of the state. Though, as Vukovich notes (63), this identification doesn’t mean that members of the CNL are merely mouthpieces for the Chinese Communist Party: “Far from being a state-managed or even state-sanctioned plot to propagandize China’s rise, or some result of nationalist fever, the existence and weight of the Chinese New Left movement has to do with the academic and professional achievements of the people involved (some of whom are remarkably prolific authors and researchers).”

34. Christopher Connery, personal interview, 24 July 2015.

35. See “Window of the World, Shenzhen,” www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangdong/shenzhen/window.htm, accessed 29 August 2016.

36. See “Splendid China—Folk Culture Villages,” www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangdong/shenzhen/splendid.htm, accessed 29 August 2016.

37. Zhao Chuan, personal interview, 8 January 2015.

38. In China, “Tier One” cities are those of sufficiently large populations and economic complexity to be considered at the same level as a province when the government undertakes its central economic planning. Tier One cities include the “big four”—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. The “provincial cities” are those outside the Tier One designation.

39. Moreover, at the *World Factory* symposium I attended in Shenzhen, featured speaker Wang Hui praised the production strongly.

40. Zhao Chuan thought this response resulted from their lack of preconceived notions about what theatre should look like, allowing them to focus more on content.

41. Rofel (44) notes that “the current moment is distinct in the sense that it is the confluence of two phenomena: after the contradictions of Maoist socialism have exploded Maoism’s heady dreams; and new struggles around the world to find alternatives to global capitalism have not yet picked up momentum.”