


INTRODUCTION



In 2001, China's Ministry of Culture banned art deemed "bloody, violent, or erotic."

Although most nations typically base censorship around public offense, China turned toward defining the aesthetic. The Chinese state's noteworthy and curious emphasis in this ordinance on the quality of art over its social effects demonstrated a shifting mode of governance from regulation to the adjudication of aesthetic categories or traits. This response arose due to the insurgence of performance art at the end of the twentieth century, with the state closing many prominent art shows in Beijing and other areas. In particular, the 2000 *Fuck Off* exhibit located at the Eastlink Gallery was one of the main reasons for the ordinance.¹ Curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, the show was an unsanctioned event outside of official activities for the Third Shanghai Biennial. The ordinance was in reaction to the presence of blood, violence, and eroticism, as typified in Zhu Yu's *Eating People*. The photographs from his performance depict the artist biting into a fetus that was procured from a medical school. Forty-eight additional artists presented work, including Xu Tan and Ai Weiwei. The former displayed sexually explicit photos, while the latter exhibited *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, a photo triptych of Ai dropping an antique urn onto concrete. Collectively, these photographed performances inspired state intervention to morph away from the predominant rationale of protecting public morale. The documentation of performance art became the principal means for the state's turn toward regulating aesthetics, as these photos circulated as evidence for such "bloody, violent, or erotic" ephemeral performances. In this way, the medium of photography became the primary means to not only memorialize performance, but also provide evidence to the state. Mediation and memory intertwine with aesthetics and governance.

The Chinese state's censorship throughout the 1980s and into the 2000s has helped place contemporary Chinese art on the global market. However, the notable nuances around the Chinese state's turn toward aesthetics in the ordinance often go unnoticed. Instead, an immediately legible narrative involving that of the authoritarian state and the herculean, resistant artist

predominates, which facilitates the rapid circulation of contemporary Chinese art. Through these major and predictable narratives of the state and the resistant artist that play into liberal ideals, contemporary Chinese art amasses hefty price tags and Chinese artists regularly appear in blue-chip galleries and festivals across the globe. The sensational examples discussed above—both the performances and the state censorship—are notable for the way they have come to inform liberal understandings of China; what I describe as a major and proper China. In 1994, early in the development of contemporary Chinese art, noted curator Hou Hanru identified how such accounts of contemporary Chinese art were “full of descriptions of how the artists are enduring official censorship” without “any detailed information or interpretation of the work itself.”² This book follows Hou’s astute call and develops a method I call *minor China* to attend to not only these aesthetic details, but also nuances within the state that are occluded by this condition. Indeed, today, more than twenty-five years later, the accounts of contemporary Chinese art remain largely the same. We tend to emphasize major narratives around resistance and romanticized notions of liberal free speech, while setting aside both seemingly minor details about aesthetics as well as complex action by the state.

China studies scholar Lydia Liu astutely locates how this repeated discourse shapes Chinese subjects as often understood within a “single possibility: resistance.”³ And this understanding is far from complete. Within this repeated discourse, there is an entangled relation between state and culture, one that involves a balance between banning and permitting art. Art market interest in—and therefore the circulation of—Chinese art arises from a toggle between hard and soft powers. On one hand, the Chinese state regulates artwork; on the other, artists gain notoriety precisely through such regulation.⁴ Most critics and curators have continually understood the art, however, through a narrative of artist as resistant against the state. After all, most promotional materials, curatorial statements, and reviews of Chinese and most non-Western artists garner public interest by relying on this legible equation. Art and the aesthetic therefore are heralded as the liberal antidotes and primary vehicles for transcendence, possibility, and change, rendering the state as inherently illiberal, behind, and needing to catch up to the West. *Fuck Off* and the subsequent reaction to the show by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emblemize a dominant mode of remembering and constructing what has become the proper historical narrative. Through this lens, the history surrounding contemporary Chinese art comes to rely upon a one-to-one correspondence or mediation between

aesthetics and politics, whereby artists directly resist presumed backward-state practices.

This book, *Minor China*, looks closely at this constellation of media, history, the state, and aesthetics to rethink the predictable ways the category of art known as global or non-Western—a category which, as I discuss, is also racialized and minoritarian—is curated, theorized, displayed, and remembered.⁵ Most critics, journalists, and scholars regularly use China's 2001 ban on specific aesthetic categories in ways that reify China as authoritarian, having repercussions for how Chinese and non-Western art are understood. In particular, non-Western art gains legibility through the logic of the major, limiting which objects circulate, which methods are appropriate, which political and materialist frames dominate, and which mechanisms mediate the circulation of objects. The major privileges immediately legible discourse, analysis, and art, reaffirming liberal and recognizable understandings of the non-West. This book thus uses the minor to rethink this dominant condition for transnational analysis.

Fuck Off is emblematic of how contemporary Chinese art gains notoriety on the art market through the major. Most studies on contemporary Chinese art reference this show for launching the careers of many of its artists, notably Ai Weiwei and Zhu Yu.⁶ And according to Ai, the show and curatorial projects enabled him “to advance his artistic career” and “to foster the growth of Chinese experimental art.”⁷ The show itself is representative of not only how state censorship looms over understandings of contemporary Chinese art—which is often the proper narrative supplied by most critics—but also how the idea of contemporary Chinese art becomes memorialized. The consolidation of these narratives has arisen in tandem with China's economic boom and entrance into global capitalist modernity—key factors that help us understand both China's exceptionality and exemplarity for the enfoldment of other non-Western nations into an understanding of the world.

Ai Weiwei is additionally representative of the ways the non-Western artist and nation have become tethered to expected, major narratives circumscribed by a set of key terms: *history*, *the state*, *subject*, and *agency*. For example, when considering Ai's piece that appeared in the 2000 *Fuck Off* show, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (which was initially created in 1995), critics often first emphasize Ai's allusion to China's long history through his destruction of a Han Dynasty urn (figures I.1–I.3). They then focus on his relation to the state and critiques of China's premodern ways, emphasizing a legible mode of agentic resistance. Following the 2014 scandal that erupted when fellow artist Maximo Caminero smashed one of the urns that Ai



Figures 1.1–1.3. Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio.

painted for Miami's Perez Museum, many journalists foreseeably discussed these urns as representing "the modern world's alienation" and situated the work in relation to the Cultural Revolution.⁸ The urn, in other words, becomes not only a symbol for the dominant presence of China's ancient history and the contemporary state, but also the Duchampian readymade indicative of capitalist alienation. In the critical and theoretical responses that followed both of these works, Ai's art is discussed in ways that illustrate how China has been predominantly imagined within Western discourse and political theory—where the artist is resistant against an oppressive state. It is through this narrative that China's history and state, alongside Chinese subjects and their agency, are rendered fully legible to Western audiences.

Further, since Ai spent time in New York during the 1980s and 1990s, many critics have attributed what they perceive as his critique of the Chinese state to Ai having tasted the possibilities of Western liberal democracy. In accounts from the *New York Times* to the *Guardian*, authors repeatedly stress Ai's exposure to the West as seminal to his approach. However, beyond such narratives that exceptionalize Western liberalism as the paradigm for political action, there are other ways of reading Ai's work that exceed these normative liberal theorizations. If one focuses less on the sensationalized destruction of the urn and more on the affect of boredom in Ai's face, it is possible to begin to unpack a different relation to history and agency. In particular, Ai does not signal an intense anger or an astonished surprise at the dropping of the urn, an expression which might be more expected when performing a liberal ideal of resistance against the state. Instead, Ai's face remains calm and bored throughout the triptych. This minor detail helps us hesitate from

the normative ways Ai is understood. Ai's boredom, in other words, operates as a mechanism to engage other readings: instead of resistance, Ai performs fatigue with the proper narrative prescribed to his work.⁹

Ai additionally plays with the *form* of the triptych and the medium of photography to amplify this exhaustion with routinized approaches to his art. Although the triptych captures the temporal development from Ai holding the urn to its final destruction, it also depicts Ai's sustained boredom alongside his intention to destroy the object. He purposefully drops the urn, as the triptych captures his hands that remain at the same level above his shoulders. His corporeal position illustrates how he remains frozen in time, while the photos capture a developmental sequence. In other words, Ai plays with the temporality associated with the triptych form, pointing to the way non-Western subjects remain stuck in time while ideas of progress move along. These notions of progress are not only about civilizational development but also the avant-garde. The readymade is often understood as progressive experimentation for whiteness and regressive, derivative reperformance for minoritarian subjects. Ai thus engages not only ideas about China's history, but also the differing notions of time (development for the West and static or behind for the rest) embedded in the triptych and the readymade of the urn.

The method of minor China that I develop in this book furthers the approach briefly demonstrated above. The minor, however, does not refer to its usual definition surrounding small or unimportant objects or even minority subjects and spaces. I do not ask us to merely include or consider more minor things (or to humanize minor objects into proper subjects). Instead, the minor as a method highlights the epistemological assumptions and ontological conditions that uphold the order of things, the major. More specifically, this book's method tracks tensions across universalization and cultural particularity, since minor subjects and objects are often either enfolded into universal discourses or rendered singular for purposes of liberal consumption. I direct the term *minor* toward minoritarian ends, as my aim is not to flatten the category to include any body or object that has not been enfolded into recognition. Rather, a commitment to minoritarian ends requires that we track analyses toward the larger goal of reenvisioning our habits and protocols in ways that resonate with historical remediation and a Marxist notion of social structuration. In particular, this book focuses on Marxism to not only provide an attunement of minor methods to political economy, but also name an explicit project that moves us beyond critiques of liberalism. For example, in chapter 2, I return to Ai Weiwei and trace how his aesthetics offer a way

to track understandings of the subject that do not default into the liberal strongholds of individual representation and inclusion. Instead, I explore how his uses of repetition with aesthetic objects *and* racialized subjects (for those perceived as “all looking the same”) help produce what Petrus Liu calls for as “a theory that is capable of understanding the human as the subject of political action as well as an effect of social structuration.”¹⁰

Throughout this book, I highlight social structuration to bring to the fore the imbalanced historical conditions and theoretical assumptions that predetermine established terms like *history*, *the state*, *subject*, *agency*, and even *the aesthetic*. These terms are presumed knowable across not only Eurocentric but also minoritarian discourses and fields, especially when they demonstrate the merits of including non-Western spaces, racialized others, and cultural production as the means to expand human knowledge. Put more explicitly, the entrenched argument that non-Western art is worthy of inclusion and valuable for demonstrating resistant agency against the strong state repeats static formulations of subjects, culture, and the state and reinforces the logics of liberalism, modern humanism, and capitalism.¹¹ The minor as method thus hesitates from furthering these logics and attends to the nuanced and vibrant intricacies of minor aesthetics, subjects, spaces, and histories as methods to restructure.

And even so, why engage minorly? The political stakes of this minor method circulate around materialist concerns that grapple with Cold War legacies, global racialization, the idea of a global Left, relational and solidarity politics, and late liberalism. Rather than reify how we conceptualize these structural issues, I turn to the grain of sense.¹² I draw from an admittedly unwieldy archive of the minor—from senses, affects, objects, and things, to those minor subjects who have existed as senses, affects, objects, and things. I do so to examine what insights they provide for a hesitant, minor method. Focusing on the level of sense responds to the exhaustion many minoritarian thinkers experience with most approaches to the social and political. For those theorizing and often enduring forms of major structural violence, there are limits surrounding disciplinary formations, liberal approaches, and dominant Marxist accounts of revolution. A rethinking is needed, one that comes less from major political concerns and, counterintuitively, more from the fact that the minor begs to be sensed differently in order to help us imagine other analytic modes for materialist concerns. And rather than rely on a developmental logic to label these concerns as new(er) materialisms, the focus on sense and minor things expands our methodological approaches to contend with ongoing, old Marxist issues.

This book therefore privileges without glorifying affect and the aesthetic to renegotiate our ideas around the state and its subjects—to read and sense major forms affectively. Affect, a key analytic for this book, refers to not only emotion but also the relations across objects, subjects, and environment. The payoff of these approaches is that they move us away from ethnographic and static notions of difference and liberalist politics surrounding inclusion. Subjects, the state, and objects are in turn reimagined through the minor. *Minor China as method* thus refuses to replicate the major assumptions behind the key terms that situate the non-West, produce better readings of art for China, or privilege new terms over established ones.

The remainder of this introduction unpacks the minor as it reevaluates the nation-state and the global (Hesitating on the Nation, Liberalism, and Capital), alongside the notion of method (*Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method*). After, I examine how these minor approaches grapple with the place of China within critical theory so as to engage the nation-state affectively (*China in Theory/China in Theory*). I then highlight the aesthetic and its entwinement with mediation as a key method for this book, arguing for a renewed theory of the aesthetic that reconsiders its relation to the political in ways that are not dictated by liberal representationalism (*Aesthetics and Politics beyond Liberalism and Translation*). The introduction lastly illuminates the book's contributions to interdisciplinarity (*Hesitant Method and Marxist Materialisms*).

Hesitating on the Nation, Liberalism, and Capital

Minor China examines what happens when we render non-Western sites minor, particularly China which is currently understood as the prototypical authoritarian strong state. The method I produce considers what maintains the global and historical presumptions that transfix the non-West within a condition of the major. Although we must be critical of how Eurocentrism, racism, and colonization shape this conditioning, we should also hesitate or refrain from solely demanding humanization and from constantly making bids for relevance to the moment. These prescribed responses reinforce liberal humanist logics, instead of reconfiguring who and what the subject is, where and when the geographic and racial collide, and how such notions of racial and human worth are differentially valued to buttress the operations of capital. *Minor China* thus is a method that *in form* focuses on relational modes that have typically gone undernoticed and undertheorized, and *in function* reconfigures the dominant structures and terms that dictate our

discourse. Moreover, this method arises from a close attention to the artists' works. Their aesthetics render China minor in ways that do not dissipate the political but rather redefine the political's bounds and understandings.

The broad task of this method imagines China in its minor form—not as a direct counter to modern liberal humanism but rather as a hesitant method that highlights how modern liberal humanism endures.¹³ As Lisa Lowe has encouraged, it can be useful to resist the lure “to recover what has been lost.” Hesitation can help serve this goal—to halt, as Lowe puts it, “the desire for recognition by the present social order and stav[e] off the compulsion to make visible within current epistemological orthodoxy.”¹⁴ Following Lowe, I produce a method that is less heuristic in scope and asks instead to take pause. I take pause from the immediate demands and seeming urgencies of our moment to refrain from prescribed political debates over how important China is or how relevant the site is to the contemporary. By doing so, we better understand what maintains China and the non-West as major—an approach that is separate from the dominant, and that will not seek to become part of it. The minor as method asks us to pause and hesitate instead of answer and challenge. An interrogatory approach to China privileges a process of asking questions about the nation-state over defining it through knowable and immediately available narratives that argue for its value, centrality, and recognition into a modern world order. As such, hesitation broadens analyses of social structure, as understandings of the economic, state, and transnational are expanded, not stabilized. Through hesitation, the minor as method highlights the assumptions of global logics that uphold the West, the rest, and the world.

Hesitation is critical, since we are in a moment when subjects and institutions are well versed in rendering otherness coherent for purposes of capital gain and accumulation. Indeed, asserting one's identity in proper, intelligible ways pays off. And in fact, challenging institutions through legible critiques against mis- and underrepresentation can similarly reap benefits. Although these liberal multicultural dynamics are typically imagined in relation to the United States, they similarly translate into the transnational, whereby diversity is additionally defined as the mere inclusion of a different site or group of people. Within the US and Western Europe, the inclusion of the transnational exists similarly to how minoritized populations are enfolded into discourse. Both global and minor national subjects have entered institutions through the major, a condition that many have recognized as ethnographic entrapment.¹⁵ The logics and legacies of anthropology inflect how not only non-Western, but also racialized, queer, feminist, transgen-

der, disabled, classed, and a variety of nonnormative subjects are made to become legible, proper, and thus known for consumption and surveillance. These approaches merely demand the inclusion of otherness by upholding and appealing to the logic of the major. Instead of trying to make ourselves intelligible as subjects worthy of entering a modern liberal humanist order or relevant to the realm of politics, we might instead hesitate from doing so.

Since it has become increasingly profitable, institutions like the global art market now regularly engage China, other nations, and social difference (even if only through niche events or when it coincides with the appropriate ethnic or identity-based history month). Institutions deploy and include these populations to stave off public critique and to perform solidarity. In order to quell liberal guilt and fulfill capitalist demands, the minor subject and peripheral nation are encouraged to be included as they help increase ticket and book sales and further normalize the operations of private and public institutions. These minor populations are often seen as “less serious” and a regrettable but necessary inclusion in today’s global world. As such, these institutions nonetheless have an objective ideal even amid further inclusion.

Moreover, although there has been a marked increase in cultural production about the non-West and minority populations, institutions continue to enlist these bodies in predictable and proper ways. These minor subjects become recognizable through their major forms and are rarely seen as helping us reconsider larger orders, logics, and structures. The inclusion of those historically denied access has come to index progressive politics, as institutions use inclusion to absolve past exclusionary practices, evade substantive restructuring, and increase revenue. However, even amid the uptick in the representation of otherness, institutions continue to operate in the same ways, whereby profits benefit the same people, the leadership remains in similar hands, and the norms of institutional life endure.¹⁶ Put differently, we exist in a condition C. Riley Snorton and I identify as “representation without Marxism.”¹⁷ Within this late liberal condition, China, the non-West, and modes of social difference enter institutions when they are immediately recognizable through the major and further these smooth operations.

This book thus reconsiders China and the non-West beyond this condition through a focus on Marxist formulations of structural change and redistribution, alongside a critique of liberal and modern humanist approaches. Throughout this book, I emphasize several key elements within Chinese art that help us understand how the minor assists in this examination and uncovers the larger logics of the major—particularly the role of

form, affect, nonvisual senses, nonanthropocentric objects, and speculation. In the chapters that follow, I focus on a number of artworks to bring the minor into relief, particularly those by Ai Weiwei, Yan Xing, Cai Guo-Qiang, Samson Young, Zhang Huan, He Chengyao, and Cao Fei. Outside of China, I also look at the work of Isaac Julien for the ways his aesthetics reveal important dimensions of the minor that are pertinent to larger global art discourse and the rendering of the non-West. Additionally, curation and the exhibition of non-Western art directly intersect with the discourses and narratives of the major. For example, the Centre Pompidou's 1989 exhibit *Magiciens de la Terre*, which was one of the first shows that centrally featured non-Western artists, helped produce interest in the global art market for not only Chinese art, but also non-Western art more generally. But the show's curatorial lens also demonstrated how what has come to be known as non-Western or global art was being produced within a specific discourse, one that drew on late liberal logics of inclusion. These logics of inclusion continue to underpin the global art market's approaches to curation, and, in the process, these approaches reinforce the construct of major China and perpetuate the norms surrounding liberal recognition and representation. However, by analyzing aesthetics through the lens of the minor, we are able to bring these logics into view. For example, the practices of Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Su Wei provide crucial alternative means for curating non-Western art outside of the lens of liberalism through the minoriness of affect, something that I discuss further in chapter 3.

This book's emphases on Marxism and on hesitating from the norms of diversity, equity, and inclusion require that we fully contend with the limits of liberalism, particularly when China is evoked. As Daniel Vukovich has emphasized, liberalism limits our ability to imagine and understand China in more complex and minor ways: "Part of 'our' problem in coming to terms with the rise of China is the prison house of liberalism: it is hard to read contemporary China politically without falling back into familiar histories and conceptual shibboleths about what freedom, individuality, human rights, and so on are."¹⁸ This dominant political paradigm immediately dismisses frameworks outside of a liberal order as simply illiberal.¹⁹ Thus, under liberalism, increasing minority representation in institutions becomes the predominant and most logical answer, whereby demands to radically reorder institutions and a comprehensive redistribution of resources to those historically disenfranchised are dismissed as asking for too much, unrealistic, impossible, and illiberal. Under this formulation, the minority subject is thus seen as equal as any other (common in form), deserving of a space at a proverbial

table; however, what is ignored under such a formulation is how the entire apparatus or structure has been built, funded, and premised upon a long history surrounding the minority's subjugation. When all people are rendered common and just like any other, we ignore the interrelated yet singular histories of dehumanization, subjugation, and subjection that have differentially shaped particular populations.

Further, liberalism and capital do not allow space to imagine minor subjects as the very means to rethink how inclusion and the world operate. Liberalism presumes inclusion or increased representation as the logical and universal end game and as indicative of social progress. By extension, the transnational has come to mean that we simply include and consider a foreign space. Through this logic that emphasizes nations as common and equal to one another ("all nations matter"), the transnational appears to not possess a politics: state rationalizations for colonization could be equated with transnational feminist critiques of such colonial forms of violence, due to the fact that both merely discuss the non-West. However, if we shift outside of this liberal and ahistorical logic, transnational analysis comes to possess a politics, a way to help us amend how the dominant, major, and proper sustain themselves. But it requires moving beyond liberalism to consider them. By rethinking this through Marxism, we highlight how domestic and global minor subjects are not simply on the periphery and seeking to be centered, needing to be ethnographically studied for insight, or requiring inclusion into and representation within dominant structures. Rather, minor subjects offer a lens for reformulating our approaches to and understandings of the social structuration of the world. However, such subjects cannot be understood in their proper and major forms; their minor and indeterminate forms are what provide ways to refrain from repeating the normative operations of everyday life and established sense.

Even though China has varied in form throughout history—from the sick man of Asia to a central force in late capital²⁰—it has nonetheless maintained a legible type. To be presumed knowable is not primarily an issue with the positive or negative valence associated with one's knowability; rather, the issue with the major is that one remains a solid form for purposes of Western politics, theory, and knowledge. Amid the growing inclusion of non-Western spaces, the very major terms that inform how we understand universal forms like the subject or history remain intact; they are not rethought through the further inclusion of the non-West. China thus operates within what Rebecca Karl calls a "new inclusionary impulse promising a more superficially culturally diverse, albeit economically monotone, global space."²¹ Karl's

formulation, which bemoans the simplistic additive logic that celebrates the inclusion of proper China rather than questioning how it is rendered legible, highlights how China has been placed within the production of world history. It further points to the need for pausing the impulse to simply celebrate the entrance of China, and by extension arguing for the continued inclusion of other previously ignored nations into recognition and world historical discourse. As Karl underscores, older models of history conceptualize non-Western nation-states as “aggregated fragments,” whereby “the global sits there waiting for areas to demonstrate their worthiness for inclusion by virtue of their previous or contemporary enthusiasm and aptitude for ‘development.’”²² And as this book will show, I build upon Karl’s insights to reveal how when non-Western nations demonstrate an aptitude for aesthetics, they come to enter into the proper and into a liberal humanist order. Rather than reinforcing this formula, this book actively hesitates from doing so.

To this point, I examine how the nation has existed in another site beyond world history: the global art market. This market has received less attention within transnational discourse in comparison to economics, international relations, and the law. And within discussions on global art, many primarily focus on financialization and circulation and less so on their entwinement with global logics of race and capitalist modernity, which I analyze in chapter 1. But focusing on this market provides an opportunity to contend with how the condition of China as a major form paves the way for other non-Western spaces to be enfolded into a sense of the world, particularly through the operations of the aesthetic alongside capital. As such, the aesthetic is not simply a site for possibility but also a problem itself. We must similarly hesitate on the aesthetic and the minor.

Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method

This book uses the complexities of art and aesthetics as lenses and methods to revise the minor outside of its typical mobilization in political, legal, cultural, geographic, and economic terms. In particular, the minor has primarily been understood as a subject to be included so as to increase whom we value or consider. Within liberal frames, non-Western and minor populations are imagined as knowable subjects who require saving from illiberal nations, rationalizing imperial warfare and privileging entrance into a league of civilized modernity. Under this logic, the inclusion of more minor subjects is heralded for increasing those who can enter a liberated liberal order. And as demonstrated by discourses around precarity and the multitude that unify

the interests of minoritized subjects and spaces, leftist and Marxist turns to the relational similarly rely on delimited understandings of the non-Western other. Calls to form a unified leftist sensibility out of the multitudes that are affected by late capital often require that these transnational subjects, who are debilitated by Western warfare and extraction, cast to the side histories of racialization and subjugation in order to join a larger movement. In other words, the minor, when framed primarily as subject or geography, becomes simply about increasing *whom* we value, study, or bring into consideration for one's respective cause. Through such a formulation, the minor comes to be flattened under the demands of liberal multiculturalism *and* the dominant Marxist privileging of class. Inclusion, even if it happens to be primarily composed of minorities and the so-called precariat, appears to be the answer for both liberalism and orthodox Marxism. And beyond political theory, the minor as subject has played a critical role for producing and claiming identity, which has been a crucial project for many (myself included). By extension, though, some then argue that more minor subjects and non-Western spaces need to be enfolded into liberal recognition and its attendant forums, such as the art market and academic curricula.

However, this book interrogates if this is the larger point of the minor—to be recognized and to play a role as subjects of history. The task at hand is not to gain legibility as minority subjects through the very means of the major and proper. Instead, the task of the minor is to rethink the terms, conditions, and operations that define not only whom or what we value but also *how we value*. After all, although one can push for inclusion and increase whom we value or place into consideration, the very mechanisms of exclusion will remain for an other. As such, I formulate the minor beyond the subject toward method so as to revise these dominant approaches and to *decipher* the apparatus and logics that uphold our world and how we produce value.²³ The minor, in particular, offers a way to perform structural analysis that does not solely rely on a focus on institutions or political economy. Oftentimes, the minor is dismissed as primarily about feeling or the individual subject. This book, however, deploys the minor as the very means to engage the *structural*.

Notably, my turn to global and non-Western art, with China as one of the earliest spaces included into the market, hesitates from presuming substantive social change through subject inclusion. The reason I focus on China in this book is due to the fact that it would be easy to recapitulate the established and popular consensus of the nation and its subjects as major and relevant to the world. However, I engage China differently and hesitantly in

order to illustrate the crucial need to produce another project for the minor beyond liberalism. I thus attend to the formal, minor, and affective dynamics within non-Western art to better analyze the rules and regulations around how we value. For example, in this book, I move away from thinking of art as an ethnographic index of proper China. By moving away from art being an aperture into a single space like China, the minorness of aesthetics opens up understandings of the total world at large. To further illustrate this, as I discuss in chapter 4, most critics view the performances of Zhang Huan as a prime example of endurance art that exemplifies liberal ideals of resistance. But what happens when we turn instead to contemplate his work through the haptic, affect, and notions of time that move beyond the space of endurance, the duration of start to finish? Similarly, works by He Chengyao are typically interpreted within a discourse surrounding trauma and Chinese women, something that positions the feminized non-West as in need of saving. But what happens if we instead contemplate the work's sensory elements related to meditation? By hesitating in this way in the minor and the aesthetic, we are able to track the logics of the major and larger value systems that dictate our established understandings of the state, resistance, and political critique.

I thus develop the minor from emphases on aspects that are often discounted due to an overreliance on language or text over relations or emotions (affective turn); visual economies over other senses (sonic, aural, haptic, and olfactory); anthropocentric accounts over objects and things (new materialisms and object-oriented ontology); and demands for realistic, practical solutions over less determined meanings (speculative realism). Each of these “turns” have their respective genealogies and critiques, yet I place these multiple theoretical registers under the rubric of the minor to capture the essence of their critiques that direct us to imagine, feel, theorize, and politicize otherwise.²⁴ However, even amid this project of the “otherwise,” I hope not to remain in the minor. After all, the affective turn and other related movements have become quite popular and the minorness of play and affect has been well integrated into neoliberal art markets.

This book, in other words, does not focus on the minor for minor's sake. Instead, a focus on the minor ultimately benefits historically minoritized communities by contending with racialization and by redistributing intellectual capital toward those who have often been denied full access. As such, I pair the minor with China and Marxist notions of structuration to produce a method that not only gestures toward an otherwise, but also refuses to linger solely in possibility. I propose projects surrounding redistribution, reordering, revolution, and structural analysis by targeting our intellectual efforts

toward renegotiating the terms that shape existence, like the human subject, rather than including more individuals into the category. And although I ask us to hesitate, hesitation is a momentary action, not a permanent state. Hesitation involves a pause but does not stop, as one nonetheless continues an action or speech, albeit changed. Put differently, hesitation is not nihilism.

This pairing of minor with China, nonetheless, might still seem counterintuitive, since the country is quite central to theorizations of the global as an imperial and colonial force. China's treatment of its own minority populations requires concern and action. Racial logics undergird the CCP's privileging of Han bodies and the violent policing of ethnic and religious populations like the Uighurs. Beyond its immediate borders, China plays a central role in the management of international debt with its active trading with many partners on the African continent. In my afterword, I examine these questions as they relate to subjects (like the Uighurs) who are minor in, and spaces (like Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan) that are minor to, the Chinese state.

My use of the minor does not discount these realities. Even amid China's contemporary dominance within global empire,²⁵ the minor is nonetheless the means to hesitate from established approaches that presume intelligible the state and its subjects and that delimit any critique of China as solely informed by liberalism (about speech and rights). Although it is important to contend with China's current political significance and its imperial and authoritarian tendencies, a perpetual focus on relevance and contemporary concerns eclipses other ways of knowing and theorizing a space. China should not simply be further included into discourse nor be deployed as an example that paves the way for other nations to become central to empire and capitalist modernity. As such, the method of the minor approaches China and Chineseness as concepts in order to examine the political and theoretical possibilities of differently engaging the subject, state, and social structures as affective entities, rather than solid facts. Through the molecular and relational, affect offers an important mechanism to track the production of sites, the state, and other objects presumed to be transparent, absolute, and fully knowable.

Minor China therefore responds to the force that prescribes how and why proper context predominates in overdetermined ways that presume the Chinese state and its subjects as clear and solidified truths, what Jacques Derrida calls the *force of law*.²⁶ Derrida defines the concept as "the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge."²⁷ Due to political crisis and its attendant feelings of urgency, we are often compelled by this force to privilege

legible answers. However, by reacting in immediate and direct ways, the force of law limits more open and hesitant responses that may seem initially illegible, unreasonable, and illiberal. Yet, they are intensely needed. For example, in moments of crisis, activists often retort that they need practical solutions to a problem and that there is no space for the luxury of overthinking things. This compulsion and force limit minor theorizations due to the immediacy of the moment. Yet, the minor as a method helps us envision movements beyond a single-issue politic and refrain from replicating the power dynamics that often plague activist work, like respectability politics, ableism, or masculinist dismissal.

For China studies, the force of law translates into theorists critiquing China under the auspices of liberalism or showing the true realities of the non-West to question the long history of Eurocentric and racist configurations of the non-West and its subjects—something that is seen in the way Chinese artists are categorized and discussed for their value as herculean resistors to an authoritarian state. Ai Weiwei has become emblematic of this, although he is by no means the only one. Rey Chow locates this predicament more broadly at the level of subjective experience: “Often, in an attempt to show ‘the way things really are’ our discourses produce a non-West that is deprived of fantasy, desires, and contradictory emotions.”²⁸ Extending Chow’s astute analysis, I study the work of artists like Yan Xing, Zhang Huan, He Chengyao, and Cao Fei, among others, to delve deeply into fantasy, affect, and feelings—seemingly minor forms particularly under the force of law which demands legibility and direct critique. For example, in chapter 4, by looking at Cao Fei’s photo series on cosplay through the lens of fabulation, we come to understand the major presumptions around political action that are informed by Marxist discourses on demystification, alienation, and performativity. Cao Fei’s use of affect rethinks the premise that the performance of agency must always translate into direct action in order to be considered properly political. Nonetheless, to argue for the import of looking at affect, fantasy, or contradictory emotions in this way is not to simply assert their inclusion into academic analysis (“we need more feeling in theory”).

The minor as method, as such, does not seek to produce new theories or redefine the major terms that respond within the norms of the force of law. Instead, minor China pauses before the moment of prescription and counterargument. This book’s method hesitates by turning to the basic building blocks that structure universal notions, specifically those minor details that are often eschewed by the force of law. In other words, I critique the universal without dismissing it, following an established tradition within postcolonial

studies and China studies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty astutely observes in relation to Frantz Fanon's simultaneous critique of and belief in the Enlightenment notion of the human, "there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity."²⁹ Similarly, as Wang Hui argues, "as we correct the errors in the idea of Asia, we must also reexamine the idea of Europe."³⁰ Although writing from different contexts, they emphasize the need to critique yet work within the limits of these dominant concepts and ideas.

To ground this methodological approach for the minor, let us consider the affective *relation* between the major and minor within bodily registers. Major and minor muscle groups support one another, while the former tends to be the most physically dominant or noticeable in form. When one removes the minor, however, one notices the relation between the two once the major fails and cannot function as usual. One could focus solely on the discrete operations of minor muscle groups. However, when one attends to the physiological functions of the minor as they relate to major muscle groups, we glean more about the reliance on major muscles in their relation to minor ones. This particular relationship of the minor redirects our focus from the subject itself to (affective) relations *and*, most importantly, how the major operates. This example thus illustrates how an affective reading is necessary to not only reorder major formulations like the state, but also avoid simply privileging the minor. To be explicit, the minor cannot exist without or merely replace the major or universal.

Another corporeal dimension of the minor corresponds to sound. The minor's relation to the major is akin to the aesthetic structure of major and minor scales, where the latter has a different affective tone in comparison to the former yet both interrelate in terms of content or structure. Every major scale has a relative minor which shares the same key signature; the minor key, however, has a more "serious or melancholic" affect.³¹ This affective distinction of the minor from the major enables one to track the resonance of the major. Further, tone constructs these major and minor sonic qualities. Within a tonal music system, the relationship between major and minor tones creates either consonance or dissonance. Although music systems are culturally defined as to what is perceived as consonant and dissonant, the metastructure of how major and minor tones interrelate informs my analytic model for the minor. From the standpoint of musicology, the major and minor system is one rooted in Western-defined ideals, with Enlightenment investments in placing classical music as part of the higher order within natural(ized) law.³² With civilizational sensibilities being closely aligned with

the high construction of the major key against the naturalized, low order of the minor, a system came into place to produce our sonic norms. The very notion and logic of major and minor tones rely on the creation of a heptatonic system, involving seven notes. However, the vast majority of the minoritarian world deploys a sonic scheme involving five notes, a pentatonic scale. For a listener primarily conditioned within a heptatonic system, the auditory difference of the pentatonic evokes the exotic. In fact, the invocation of Oriental sonic tropes that opens up Carl Douglas's "Kung Fu Fighting" and the Vapors' "Turning Japanese" demonstrates the use of the pentatonic in a globalized cultural imaginary. Thus, our musical system reproduces colonial logics that transfix the racialized as below civilizational ideals into an ostensibly natural sonic order. Through an unequivocal focus on the seemingly less important or minor system, we come to better understand the very terms and logics that undergird the major's operations, its force.

China *in Theory*/China *in Theory*

A core goal of this book is thus to reimagine the methods for transnational analysis through the minor. An attention to not only major political concerns but also minor details helps us understand what upholds the major and politics, while the major amplifies the ethical commitments of the minor. This dialectical method arises from the differences between how China has functioned *in theory* and what it means to situate China *in theory*. In particular, we must attend to how China has operated across area and ethnic studies, particularly with regard to the ways each conceptualizes the state. Both question the ways China within the tradition of critical theory has become arrested as unmodern and behind. However, both fields, albeit differently, have limited how we might think of the state affectively, or China *in theory*. These rubrics, in other words, highlight field overlaps, alongside the need to develop an apparatus for approaching the state speculatively and affectively, as a *becoming*. This method through the minor thus helps us not dissipate the state into pure affect nor overdetermine its contours.

China *in* critical theory has been rendered major and proper in several identifiable ways. German idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel set the stage for disciplinary approaches with his philosophy of world history, whereby Asia occupies the beginning of time while Europe represents "the end of History."³³ Most importantly, Hegel's philosophy of world history casts China within theory as peripheral and supplementary to the center. The minor other is understood as outside of the major—the minor must

simply be enfolded into this order so as to presumably fix Hegel's errors. His construction of China within theory thus prescribes two predominant responses: humanize the minor outsider to be central to history and learn more about the other so as to be represented. This book, however, reconsiders these responses as the proper ones.

In light of China's "rise," a number of fields have directly countered these proper and major renderings. For example, as scholars from ethnic and area studies have come to grapple with China in the global, some have responded in ways that are immediately legible under the force of law. China has historically been—and continues to be—presumed as fully knowable, whether this be understood as "the sick man of Asia," a burgeoning locus for global Marxism, or even a space to produce a diasporic sentiment for solidarity. Area studies has long sought to decode and make knowable Chinese ways, customs, and languages. Further, ethnic studies has rendered stable the nation of China and the region of Asia to produce a diasporic ethnic identity, known as Chinese American or Asian American. Even as these fields work in different ways against limited and racialized understandings of China *in* theory, they similarly arrest the nation-state's form in economized ways in order to counteract Eurocentrism and racism.

Asian American studies was originally inspired by activist movements from the 1960s. Mobilization eventually led to the field's institutionalization. With such an orientation, China, or more broadly Asia, was imagined as a stable geographic locale. China and Asia became the diasporic centers which immigrants, and those whose families had been in the US for decades, could identify with to form solidarity that challenged the racialized aggression from within the United States. Of course, some Asian American activists were part of larger Third World movements that critiqued and challenged US empire. However, what interests me is how Asia comes to be produced or solidified. Although Asian American studies is typically imagined as distinct from Asian studies, the region of Asia has been understood in entangled ways. To enable solidarity across diverse groups that have substantive differences and tensions, the category of Asian American renders race and Asia stable and knowable. Asian American studies rejects essentialized understandings of Asia yet imagines a stabilized locale of "Asia" for its racialized migrants on US soil so as to unite distinct groups. Both area and ethnic studies have historically approached China through knowable, particular, and major forms of representation surrounding geography and history (for area studies) and race and diaspora (for ethnic studies), thus allowing them to attend to what are typically viewed as "classical" political concerns.

Even though a rapid change in understanding China occurred during the twentieth century—from sick and unimportant to a space that produces diaspora, a global Marxism, or a critical presence in late capital—the nation nonetheless is an economized object presumed to be geographically bound, tidy, and clear. China operates within a logic of economism and abstraction that mediates the West’s anxieties and political desires. In other words, China *within* theory may shift in form yet maintains its status as knowable. This condition arises across political ideologies and from within China itself. In a study from the 1960s, Donald Lowe notably examined the political function of “China” for Marx, Lenin, and even Mao.³⁴ Lowe tracked how the figure of China was operationalized *within* theory for the Left and for China itself. Vukovich has gone on to describe the use of China as always existing as an abstraction to fit arguments within continental philosophy. China, from this perspective, provides a “labor-saving operation” whereby an “economism” around theoretical arguments deploys China as the West’s imagined other.³⁵

In the wake of global shifts during the 1960s, China *in* theory took a turn. Following mass decolonization movements across the Global South, Maoism in China buttressed global Left yearnings for political and cultural change. French intellectuals and activists from the student movements of the 1960s drew inspiration from economized understandings of China and Maoism.³⁶ Regardless of the political purpose, China existed in a knowable and codified form. Further, with shifts in late capital and the opening of China’s markets at the end of the twentieth century, the nation took on a different narrative form, although it remained within the condition of China *in* theory. This larger condition produces China into its economized, knowable form as major China. Major China provides the basis for multiple fields, theoretical approaches, and political leanings to place their anxieties and hopes into proper notions of the state and its attendant citizen-subjects. Since China currently plays a critical role for contemporary political economic questions around power and late capital, most discussions around China and its subjects respond through proper and legible means as dictated by the force of law. To work against earlier dismissals of China as inhuman and sick, our impulses economize China in order to be applicable to today’s political world and to be recognizable in form.

This move to make China legible in today’s world—the primary responses of which include the impulse to humanize the Chinese, to argue for China’s relevance to global affairs, or to critique yet simultaneously reinforce the notion of the authoritarian state—has led to a radical shift in how major

China is understood in Western theory. As noted by Vukovich: “Whereas in the recent past one would not have had to reference China without a specific, direct interest in the revolution or culture, today it is difficult to avoid it. It simply *must* be referred to by the critic at large. As if the West must now respond to China—a remarkable reversal of the classic model of Sinology whereby China must respond to ‘us.’”³⁷ Such a reversal operates under the norms of the force of law, whereby this revised condition often necessitates the masculinist, major force of inclusion and “righting” or rewriting the historical record. Since the nation has always been conditioned to be legible to the West, the counterresponse is to make others contend with the truths and realities of China. A number of thinkers—including Wang Hui, Gao Minglu, Dai Jinhua, and others—have complicated past narratives and uses of China by offering counterfactual histories and theorizations that reassess China’s economism for theory. These figures, in addition to Vukovich and Donald Lowe, ultimately force us to contend with the condition of being abstracted in this way for leftist agendas. Rather than merely arguing for truths about China to be unearthed or for us to have a deeper area studies orientation, we might hesitate and pause to consider this repeated conditioning of China *within* theory.

A number of scholars and theorists provide useful formulations for approaching the non-West beyond the major and beyond how the non-West has circulated *within* theory. The provocations discussed earlier by Chakrabarty, Fanon, and Wang to render the non-West minor or in speculative ways—whereby a place like China can be understood in theory but not overly universalized so as to dissipate history—are a generative starting point. To render an object *in theory* means to speculate and not presume its borders defined. For the arguments in this book, this means moving away from understanding China in its prototypical form as an economized object. It does not, however, simply mean arguing for the dissolution of borders, a post-nation-state discourse, or the end of history. Rather, to render China *in theory* is to provide space to sense the changes and shifts within the established nation-state form, while retaining a sense of its materiality and history. And in fact, this call to rework overdetermined understandings of the subject and nation has been echoed throughout American studies,³⁸ women of color and transnational feminisms,³⁹ China studies,⁴⁰ Black feminism, disability studies, queer of color critique,⁴¹ and Asian/American studies.⁴²

In addition, to imagine the state *in theory*, Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts provide critical insights. Many of the artists I engaged often theorized and produced in ways that resonated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In particular, their notion of becoming came to inform my understanding of many of the practices in this book, as becoming provides the mechanism by which to situate China as minor and *in theory*, the state through affect. The nation-state form is both real and not fully predefined. This model of molecularization tracks minor contours within the nation-state—at the level of its becoming. To engage the past, Deleuze distinguishes becoming from history: “one being to follow the course of the event, gathering how it comes about historically, how it’s prepared and then decomposes in history, while the other way is to go back into the event, to take one’s place in it as in a becoming, to grow both young and old in it at once, going through all its components and singularities. Becoming isn’t a part of history; history amounts to only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is to create something new.”⁴³ Becoming differs from historical contextualization in that the former does not presume the knowability of time, space, or an event. As a method, becoming provides additional modes to formulate and imagine time and space. In turn, becoming approaches objects and events in “unassimilated” and “not yet established” ways—where they can be understood speculatively or *in theory*.

Deleuze and Guattari not only help us produce China *in theory* and as a becoming, but also illustrate the disciplinary tendencies and formations that often preclude the thinking of China and the transnational speculatively. In particular, they are often less cited to engage the state. In a general sense, Deleuze and Guattari are more central for queer studies than area and ethnic studies.⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari have a relatively stable position in relation to certain branches of queer theory, particularly for discussions around affect. This schematic delineation demonstrates how these theorists, as citational figures for affect, becoming, and other minor approaches, are thus questioned for their lack of “classical ideas of normativity and political critique,” an ongoing concern across the humanities.⁴⁵ When compared to Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari possess less of a citational pull for area and ethnic studies.⁴⁶ In other words, Deleuze and Guattari play a secondary role for theories about subjects and representation, while they operate as primary influences on theorizations around what I have been calling the minor turn. In addition, Deleuzo-Guattarian ideas possess a genealogy in China. Henri Bergson is known to be a central figure for Deleuze and Guattari’s theories. Bergson heavily influenced one of the first curators

and central theorizers of contemporary Chinese art, Fei Dawei. He trained in philosophy and focused his studies on Bergson, translating many of his works from French to Chinese. This relationship offers a moment to reexamine the theoretical bases of how discourse around contemporary Chinese art was inflected by a key figure central to Deleuze and Guattari.⁴⁷

And yet, as I argue throughout this book and particularly in chapter 3, the excesses of minoritarian subjects cannot be fully enfolded into major discourses surrounding history and context. Such subjects cannot be completely known. Thus, to render China *in theory* is to decipher this limitation, and to embrace it—the minor as method offers a means to do so. Following Deleuze and Guattari, I privilege a stance of *becoming China* which means to imagine China *in theory*. Importantly, becoming enables incomplete and affective engagements with China without delving into a purely universalist discourse or dissipating borders. China is not necessarily different but has differently become. Becoming balances an acknowledgment of difference without reifying and ascribing such difference to all Chinese people. This sense of becoming thus teeters across the fine line separating essentialism from antiessentialism, a key issue that has often kept area and ethnic studies apart. The aim in tracking the becoming of China is not merely to argue that we all happen to come into being—becoming might happen universally but the process is far from equivalent. Put differently, we all might become, but how it feels and how power inflects becoming is a different story.⁴⁸

Aesthetics and Politics beyond Liberalism and Translation

A minor method relies upon the formal and more seemingly minor details of artworks to illustrate how context and history for understanding the transnational have been privileged over an examination of its becoming. The aesthetic, however, is not simply heralded as pure possibility or rendered major; instead, this book theorizes the aesthetic in ways that implicate it within and through the structural. To illustrate the method of minor China, I look at the production of a number of artists, primarily ones working after the Cultural Revolution. Although some have complicated this history of how avant-garde aesthetics and practices came to enter and develop in China well before 1979, I rely on this particular historicization for contemporary Chinese art less as historical fact and more as a way to identify the dominant narrative surrounding the genre. I thus consider, in chapter 1, how and why the Cultural Revolution and 1989 become the primary means that make the idea of contemporary China proper and legible to larger audiences (China

in theory). My chapters engage some canonical artists in this field, along with many identified as feminist and queer. I analyze artists like Cao Fei, He Chengyao, and Yan Xing, since their identities as women or gay often invoke overdetermined narratives around the perils of tradition and their fight for a representative voice. Although I do not discount the abuses of the Chinese state against minoritarian communities, I ask what these narratives surrounding feminist and queer artists reproduce. I also consider canonical artists like Ai Weiwei and Zhang Huan, as both of them are often taken to represent masculinist and herculean responses against the state. The ways both sets of artists are discussed on the global art market ultimately reproduce the dominant liberal narratives around the Chinese state, with canonical artists representing the masculinist and resistant challenges against the state and the minoritarian ones illuminating the strong hand of the state and tradition. The context of contemporary China provides the opportunity to rethink how we imagine the transnational and aesthetics outside of these major, prescribed ways.

To do so, I renegotiate the established discourse on aesthetics and politics through the method of minor China. The relationship between aesthetics and politics is often presumed to involve a direct, linear mediation, whereby the aesthetic responds to and shapes the political. The discourse on aesthetics and politics, as influenced by Jacques Rancière, and which I discuss in more detail in chapter 1, emerged around the same time as the concept of global art (around 1989). Anna Kornbluh astutely summarizes this Rancièrian approach: “far from being an epiphenomenon dispelling politics, aesthetics amount to the core of politics.”⁴⁹ For Rancière, the proliferation of the aesthetic operates similarly to liberal logics surrounding representation, whereby an increase of art by those historically excluded will presumably expand *whom* society values and what it deems sensible.

This book develops a theory of the aesthetic in its relation to the political that does not exist within this liberal model, privileging instead social structuration and an analysis of *how we value*. To this point, during the interviews I conducted with many of the artists discussed in this book, the conversations would eventually touch upon how or if they considered themselves political. Many artists acknowledged that this label enables modes of circulation for their art. Others would respond in ways that resonate with “no, but people think I am.” These moments underscore how dominant discourses surrounding aesthetics and politics are limited in their capacity to address more complex understandings of both terms. As such, this book is less interested in entering established debates over the agency or significance

of the aesthetic and focuses more upon rethinking how we conceptualize and structure the mediation across aesthetics and politics. I thus use the framework of mediation to highlight how dominant models assume art's capacity to linearly respond to the political akin to liberal representationalism—an increase of art from those previously excluded supposedly translates into a broadening of our communal sensibilities. Another mode of *indirect mediation* expands and revises this presumed direct mediation of aesthetics being at the core of the political.⁵⁰

These different models of mediation, from linear to indirect, help us grapple with 1) the limits of linear mediation to conceptualize culture and politics, and 2) the dominance of translation to understand aesthetics and politics in the global. First, in order to rethink this presumed equation across culture and politics, I turn to aesthetic objects and analytic readings that do not always mediate a direct relationship to the political. I focus on works that cannot be properly understood as “political” because they allow us to hesitate from defaulting into discourses that mediate a singular relation across aesthetics and politics. Such a direct mediation is often registered under the framework of resistance. In addition, even if a work might initially be framed as properly political, I offer analytic readings that engage such a work minorly. This reading against the grain expands how we perform aesthetic analysis beyond a linear mediation. Direct mediation fuels the major and proper. Through indirect mediation, we delve into the problems and possibilities of the aesthetic on its own terms, rather than debating its direct value for the political. In other words, this book privileges developing a fuller discourse for the aesthetic (one that embeds the aesthetic further with and through the structural) over arguing for its relevance or role in shaping politics. The aesthetic is not used to illustrate possibility (as in resistance) or problem (as in emblematic of capitalist logics); it is simultaneously both.

This book thus lingers with the minoriness of the aesthetic, rather than rendering it as a major or significant mediating force like politics. I thus approach the aesthetic similar to how I theorize minor subjects through the question of method. I do so because the aesthetic produces the very means to operate indirectly and to pause before the force of law takes hold. The aesthetic does not always make immediate sense in relation to the force of law, which demands that the aesthetic reacts with parity to material “urgency.” If we continue to analyze art for the ways it increases our political sensibilities (à la liberal representation) or changes the social as equal to law or activism (through resistance), we miss other critical tactics that operate in a different plane and rhythm. It is precisely within such limited capacities that I track

minor methodological impulses so as to query our established terms and to hesitate from responding in fully legible ways. Although cultural objects can certainly attempt to respond with immediacy, I privilege objects and readings that veer away from such a direct correlation between aesthetic response and discursive urgency. Some may claim that “confusing” works and minor analytic readings are not as political as those that respond with parity against the demands of political life. However, I argue that such responses are often predicated on a desire to render aesthetics into a social possibility that is equivalent to politics and on a reinstatement of politics as that which can directly respond through the proper terms at hand—the terms that are immediately legible.

For example, how might we contend with works that are more formalist in nature and less overtly political or sensational than Zhu Yu’s *Eating People*? Yan Xing, whom I discuss in chapter 3, is one artist whose queer identity renders him as a proper subject who questions homophobia within the state and across society. However, his video installation *Kill (the) TV-Set* speaks to many formalist concerns and abstract aesthetic experimentations with mediation and reperformance (figure 1.4). This piece reenacts a performance by Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik, which originally reperformed a sound score by John Cage. In other words, Yan Xing reperforms a reperformance of a sound performance directly engaged with minimalism and modernism. On one hand, if one solely focuses on purely formalist approaches, we run the risk of decontextualizing and dehistoricizing Yan’s work away from rich insights around formalist and modernist trends in China or the history of new media and film. On the other, the reliance on deep contextualization limits what the aesthetic can offer for a structural, political critique, often defaulting into overdetermined accounts of how queer artists resist the state or how their growing inclusion expands our communal sensibilities. I engage and take the aesthetics of objects like *Kill (the) TV-Set* as providing the methods for reexamining these limited approaches to Chinese art and for reconfiguring the terms at hand for discussing the political.

Second, in addition to bringing to the fore the need for an indirect relation between aesthetics and politics, mediation refigures the role of translation for understanding non-Western art. The minor as method offers a way to situate China *in theory*, as a mediating and mediated form, whereby China becomes material in construct yet porous in its details and operations. I frame China through mediation so as to further the notion of China *in theory*, thereby expanding the dominant way the non-West is often discussed: translation. I develop mediation as a way to grapple with the ever-increasing



Figure I.4. Yan Xing, *Kill (the) TV-Set*, 2012. 2-channel video installation, 1st channel, single HD digital video (b/w, silent, loop), 2'30". Dimensions variable. © Yan Xing. Courtesy of the artist.

circulation of visual, mediated, performance-based, and sonic objects that are not predominantly language-based nor purely representational. Since translation is and continues to be a critical method and approach,⁵¹ mediation is deployed as a supplement to this frame. Performance theorist Sean Metzger highlights the predominance of translation to provocatively ask which nonlinguistic notions help us produce a sense of China.⁵² With China's linguistic system, many have turned toward translation with a focus on the ideogram. I thus deploy mediation to explore other ways of contending with China and globality.

The medium of performance in China exemplifies the need to account further for a model of mediation. Performance art, what was often called “apartment art” by early practitioners, emerged during the 1980s and early 1990s. Due to increased regulation, many artists in China began to present work in smaller venues, primarily involving a network of private apartments. This era of “apartment art” often relied on performance for a variety of reasons. Economically, the use of the body for artistic exploration was cheaper than purchasing materials, which was of concern for most as they regained financial grounding after the Cultural Revolution. Logistically, performance initially did not involve documentation, which was appealing for some trying to avoid regulation. Quite central to the development of contemporary Chinese art, performance, however, takes on different inflections depending on the term deployed. *Xingwei yishu*, which means “behavior art,” is the Chinese term oft-used to refer to performance art.⁵³ Although *biaoyan* is more closely analogous to the English meaning of performance, *biaoyan* possesses a closer relation to theatrical and dance genealogies. Thus, why choose behavior to describe performance, when other translations might be more literal or direct? Archival research shows debates occurring between Gao Minglu and other figures in the 1990s art scene over the use of this term. The choice of behavior (*xingwei*) arose from an antitheatrical stance, where the Chinese version of “performance art” (*xingwei yishu*) came to be differentiated from spectacle and the virtuosic associations of theater and dance. Meiling Cheng highlights Yang Zhichao's choice of *xingwei* over *biaoyan* in order to establish how Chinese performance artists desired to translate or Sinicize Western concepts, such as performance art.⁵⁴ Although Cheng helpfully directs us toward the translation-based and culturally engaged use of the term, the different meanings for performance in China require grappling with mediation and medial relations. Performance, as internal behavior or external theatricality, offers two different means by which to mediate the aesthetic with the social or political.

Although one could delineate the distinction between *xingwei* and *biaoyan* as one solely about translation (in that we must choose the “best” or most local term), their meanings also direct us to mediation. *Xingwei* translates as “action,” “behavior,” or “conduct.” The first character *xing* has a variety of meanings that primarily circulate within the realm of pedestrian acts, such as walking, behaving, and doing. The second character, *wei*, is a preposition, which means to be in the interest of and toward the goal of such pedestrian acts. Unlike the pedestrian frame embedded in *xingwei*, *biaoyan* circulates within acting, dancing, and playing. The first character, *biao*, indicates expressive action oriented toward outside reception. Opposed to the internal focus of *xing* on behavior, *biao* orients itself externally as its meanings encompass how people judge an act. The second character, *yan*, connotes a sense of practice inherent to performance: evolve, practice, and put on. This second character reveals how the external orientation of *biao* must be rehearsed in order to maximize its potential.

This book’s exploration of the minor highlights the importance of focusing on the ways these words are understood for not only concerns over translation, but also differing forms of mediation. The internal focus of behavior and the external practice of theater highlight how these terms are not solely about the practice of translation but also multiple modes of mediation, whereby internality and externality differently convey the body to self, self to others, and aesthetics to politics. Further, embedded in the single medium of performance art are multiple media and their respective approaches. *Xingwei* privileges the everyday; its antitheatrical stance obscures additional analytic tools like those from dance and theater, or *biaoyan*. These medial relations reveal how dance and theater are often considered minor in relation to a visual and performance art orientation for *xingwei yishu*. In most accounts of performance art in China, the discourse relies upon understandings of visual art. However, what might happen if we reimagined expanded art practices in ways that could contend with not only these multiple etymologies, but also multiple forms of mediation? If hapticity, corporeality, staging, repetition, and choreography become additional analytics by which to work through the dynamics of contemporary Chinese art practices, we might better attend to multiple levels of mediation that help us rethink theorizations of the subject, aesthetics, and politics. My turn to mediation thus contends with questions of medial specificity; different models of how we grapple with situating the body and culture with the political; and how information is relayed, received, and processed.

Hesitant Method and Marxist Materialisms

Ultimately, this book's development of the minor contributes to discourses on disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, specifically through its proposal for a model of hesitation. The transnational artists and their aesthetics that I discuss throughout this book consistently demonstrate the need to engage their work from a wide range of fields, directing us to the disciplinary limits that often hinder how we analyze and theorize. Similar to Ai in his work *Dropping*—which brings to the fore concerns related to fields ranging from ethnic to area studies, art history to performance, and socialism to liberalism—the artists whose works I discuss in each of the following chapters consistently highlight these limits.

What if we attended to these calls by transnational artists and thus hesitated in our engagements with citations, methods, and disciplinarity? I hesitate from established citational practices throughout this book in order to grapple with tensions and fractures across disciplines that are often eclipsed by the fervor for interdisciplinarity. In particular, I think through the place of two bodies of theory, along with their intersections,⁵⁵ as they complicate a study of the transnational and Asia: *Francophone metaphysical thought* and *Black feminist theory*. Scholars from the former include Henri Bergson, Deleuze, Guattari, and Frantz Fanon, among others; scholars from the latter include Hortense Spillers, Audre Lorde, and Saidiya Hartman, among others. By engaging China through the minor, I develop an analytic from these two locations of thought to produce a different ethical orientation that does not reproduce disciplinary expectations around citation. Further, the interplay across these two entwined approaches brings to the fore questions surrounding materialisms and method.

Although both discourses engage the universal and particular, Black feminism is often situated as too particular while Francophone metaphysics is viewed as overly universal. I nonetheless focus on how both share a focus on minor objects, subjects, and methods to revamp established materialist concerns, while also not losing sight of critical tensions and overlaps between the two. Further, they both animate their critiques at the minor level of sense to ultimately engage the political and structural.

Although Black feminist theory, which has been developing for centuries, draws from across the social sciences and humanities, the main thrust of the project has been to reconsider how minor identities function in relation to institutions. Many of these theorists direct us to the limits of “classical” approaches to being and state power, including Francophone metaphysical

discourse itself. A focus on the category of Black woman is deployed not as an insular fixation but rather as the method to revise universalizing frames around power and institutional life. A more recent development from Black feminist theory has been a turn toward affect, the haptic, and other sensorial relations to objects. Thus, key questions for the humanities today are how exactly we methodologically “listen to an image” (per Tina Campt’s suggestion), grapple with fungibility as a political, sensory, and aesthetic category (per C. Riley Snorton), contend with sensation and flesh (per Amber Musser and Hortense Spillers), and “sense” or “haptically” relate to visuality (per Rizvana Bradley drawing from the earlier work of Laura Marks).⁵⁶ This book offers explicit methodological takes on such questions, since hesitation reorders not only intellectual practices but also our senses.⁵⁷ Of course, the minor turns discussed throughout this book have a longer genealogy related to not only Black feminism, but also women of color discourse, queer of color critique, crip theory, and indigenous studies.⁵⁸

Francophone metaphysical thought similarly overlaps through a focus on the grain of sense. The project is also unwieldy with a range of theorists and approaches from figures like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza to Simone Weil, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Deleuze, and Guattari. It encompasses questions surrounding ontology, sensation, imagination, and perception, traversing through discourses like affect, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism. From this approach, Deleuze proposes a “hesitant method,” which involves “the means of that knowledge which regulates the collaboration of all the faculties.” He reminds us to reorganize our senses and what makes sense in this world: “There is no more a method for learning than there is a method for finding treasures, but a violent training, a culture or *paideia* which affects the entire individual (an albino in whom emerges the act of sensing in sensibility, an aphasic in whom emerges the act of speech in language, an acephalous being in whom emerges the act of thinking in thought).”⁵⁹

Although both projects have multiple and complex goals, I focus here on the way they offer minor methods that not only restructure sensory faculties, but also suture the minorness of sense to Marxist materialist concerns. They each provide mechanisms to rethink multiple scales throughout our world. Rather than understanding either as enabling newer materialist concerns, I fixate on how they respectively turn to the minor to help us grapple with old questions surrounding social structuration, archives and memory, institutions, state power, globality, and racialization. Each of these projects furthers Marxist materialist questions, although admittedly they both have complex

relations to one another and, most critically, to dogmatic Marxism. Schematically, Francophone metaphysical thought, particularly through Deleuze and Guattari, locates the import of desire to help us produce what Nicholas Thoburn calls a “minor Marxism.”⁶⁰ Their approach generally grapples with materialism through a rethinking of subjects, alongside a reformulation of theories of power that are not only structural or hierarchical but also lateral and rhizomatic. Similar to Francophone metaphysicists, some Black feminists have used and reworked psychoanalysis to reconsider subject formation. Further, Black feminist theory engages Marxist materialism by questioning dominant accounts as to how institutions and subjects function. By doing so, Cathy Cohen revises theorizations of the subject through social structuration, developing “a politics where one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s comrades.”⁶¹

Both projects overlap in ways that draw from minor subjects for their “relations to power” (the proletariat and Black women, and their overlapping existences) to produce minor analytics. This conceptual shift ultimately allows us to move beyond identity without forgetting it. To move beyond comes from within. This enables a relational politics that exceeds the bounds of particularity to grapple with social structuration. In addition, they focus on the codes that construct our lives. Rather than understanding difference as naturalized in bodies, they denaturalize difference and provide the sensual and minor approaches to do so. The minor thus becomes not solely about insular, singular, knowable, and representable subjects. As such, Black feminism and Francophone metaphysics further the minor as method as the means to enact and reconfigure the project of relationality.

Beyond these two terrains, additional engagements with method inform my approach. From the works of Chela Sandoval and Linda Tuhiwai Smith to the development of queer method, there has been a growing consideration of method beyond critiques of it as masculinist and scientist.⁶² It may, at first, seem counterintuitive to pair minor and method together, considering many have attempted to render the openness of the minor away from the scientism implicit in method.⁶³ Method is an easy intellectual discourse to fetishize, with its connotations of masculinist and deracialized rigor for the humanities and humanistic social sciences. Despite the racialized and gendered underpinnings of method, however, it has been an ongoing and productive concern for minoritarian fields.⁶⁴

Moreover, China itself stages concerns over materialisms and method. China, as a postsocialist space, indexes changes in Marxist politics. Further, Chen Kuan-Hsing’s *Asia as Method* centers method to consider Asia as an

“anchoring point” to think beyond its immediate geographic borders.⁶⁵ Chen aims to decolonize, deimperialize, and de-Cold War thought by situating his work on minor spaces toward minoritarian ends.⁶⁶ A noted difference, however, with the method I produce here is that I analyze the anchor of the West in relation to China. The point of Chen’s work is to turn away from an area studies model of single nation-states and from a focus on Asia with the US and Europe, as he emphasizes the relations across Japan, China, and Taiwan, for example. Although my goals are similar to Chen’s in that method offers ways to hesitate from dominant understandings of Asia, I primarily refocus on the dialectic perpetuated with the West due to its dominance within the global art market.

Chapter Outline

This book addresses multiple audiences who might best take a moment to rework the very terms that construct their economic, aesthetic, and intellectual projects. For the humanities, my hope is to theorize the broader minor turns around ontology, materialism, and affect in ways that account more critically for materiality, race, and the transnational. By approaching the state and subjects affectively, I demarcate the larger political projects of social structuration and political economy for our minor turns. In addition, this book engages the ongoing debate around social context and form and situates it in relation to questions surrounding the non-West.⁶⁷ Although I do not fully attend to these debates—which are happening primarily in literary theory—I examine what aesthetic minoriness provides for this larger concern. And I do so with a deep consideration of the transnational, since it brings to the fore the limits of how we even define context and form in the first place. Although this book highlights the minor in relation to China and the global art market, it ultimately produces a larger methodology for not only non-Western art, but also academic fields whose fractures reproduce the very limits described in this introduction.

For the art world, particularly curators, this book renegotiates how non-Western others are framed and included. Relatedly, for artists and activists, I expand understandings of the political, aesthetic, and critique by analyzing institutional relations beyond direct resistance and frameworks that refrain from responding in terms solely legible to the very institutions that we are theoretically trying to work beyond. The rise of contemporary Chinese art occasions reimagining how otherness has been and can be differently enfolded into academia, the art world, and their publics. I take stock of and

question the available methodological and theoretical frameworks for this body of art. Most importantly, this book's minor method reorders the disciplinary orientations and overdetermined assumptions that limit how we understand otherness in this world through key ideas: history, the state, subjects, and their agency. Rather than arguing further for the multicultural inclusion of minority bodies, this book deploys minoritarian life to revise the very terms that structure existence.

Before illustrating these goals and delving into what I identify throughout each chapter as a set of minor modes as they relate to social structuration, I offer background in chapter 1 on contemporary China and its art. I expand this, however, beyond a localized examination of China to contend with larger issues surrounding late liberalism, race, financialization, capitalist modernity, the culture wars, and interdisciplinarity as they shape the art market around 1989. In particular, I analyze Cai Guo-Qiang's *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* to illustrate concerns around postsocialism, reperformance, and late capital; the work ultimately helps us produce a theory of the aesthetic for its relation to the political beyond a model of liberalism.

Chapter 2 turns to the ways the art market has included China. I examine the work of Ai Weiwei and read his aesthetics against the dominant ways he is discussed as a resistant artist. I instead turn to his formal use of repetition, which I situate in relation to his critique of the racist trope that all Asians look the same. I argue that the artist does not simply counter this racist trope by humanizing Chinese subjects. Ai moves us beyond modes of multicultural inclusion and intersubjective exchange in order to think through socialist legacies, comrade aesthetics, racialized masses, and the multitude. I offer the structural affect of racial anger, arising from being repeatedly read as "all looking the same," to reformulate how inclusion is conceptualized by not only liberalism, but also leftist and Marxist discourses around the multitude.

Chapter 3 renegotiates history and context, as they relate to recurring debates over the universal and particular. I focus on two projects. First, I discuss how the curatorial practices of Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Su Wei produce alternative formations of the history of contemporary Chinese art. Rather than structuring their exhibits based on historical time, they emphasize how artists related to one another and felt. In other words, they turn to affect as a curatorial method and shift away from depicting the history of Chinese art through a linear or filial model. This seemingly simple shift renegotiates teleological formations of time that structure the non-West within understandings of developing from ancient to modern. Second, I examine the work of Yan Xing. His use of fuzzy, molecular, and formal aesthetics,

along with his engagement with parody, renegotiates how bodies, ranging from individual to national, can be read through affective means. The overall goal of this chapter is to situate how minor analytics from Deleuze and Guattari bring to the fore disciplinary fractures across the very fields that engage minor subjects. This pairing of art projects ultimately reconsiders the debate surrounding universality and particularity. These works do not provide an answer per se; rather, they each question how and why this debate recurs, allowing us to scale back (not discard) the idea of the universal.

Following history and context, I then pivot in chapter 4 to overdetermined theorizations around subjects and their agency, questioning the narrative of resistance that structures non-Western artists. I examine two minor modes of imagination—fabulation and meditation—that reconsider strong forms of resistance and cognition. Both meditation and fabulation intervene in the Marxist model of demystification as it enmeshes with performativity. Demystification and performativity structure the normative foundations of political critique as a linear relation across demystified subject, art object, and performed resistance. I first revisit the canonical work of Zhang Huan to reconsider his performances against the grain. Most have situated Zhang through endurance as he is commonly understood as resisting the rapid modernization of China; however, I focus on his use of meditation as a cognitive mode to rethink agency and demystification. In addition, He Chengyao's use of meditation within her artistic practice directs us to less stable forms of critique that do not default into ableist norms surrounding cognition. Her performances undo narratives of trauma that dominate our understandings of Third World women. Lastly, I discuss how Cao Fei's photos document the phenomenon of cosplay and direct us to the imaginary form of fabulation that complicates what counts as political critique.

Chapter 5 situates minor China in relation to the grand notions of totality and social structuration. I examine Black queer British artist Isaac Julien's turn to the history of China in *Ten Thousand Waves*. This immersive video installation depicts divergent moments in Chinese history to reformulate the Marxist tradition around totality, the Deleuzo-Guattarian monad, and the Frankfurt School use of minor forms through the *Denkbilder* (the "thought-image"). By focusing on structural changes across capital and late capital, modernity and postmodernity, and the bodies we use for the labor in these shifts, we obtain a fuller sense of all worlds, what Édouard Glissant calls the *tout-monde*, through the fractures across different forms of racialization. In particular, Julien focuses on China in ways that require different senses to contend with late capital and the *tout-monde*. In addition, the artist engages

the different roles Chinese women play across theater and film to reconsider racialized and gendered objecthood. As both theatrical surrogate and cinematic icon, the Chinese woman offers an ethics for renegotiating object repetition and relationality in the *tout-monde*.

Moreover, chapter 5 highlights a central objective for this book: to consider what minor China as a method offers for the relational turn occurring across the humanities. Affect, becoming, and other minor approaches have provided mechanisms that blur our understandings of individual subjects and spaces in order to consider them in relation, beyond their singular bounds and identities. In this way, subjects come to be in relation to one another to produce forms of solidarity and to imagine other modes of political engagement. Amid this relational turn, afforded through minor methods, a number of questions arise surrounding how we presume relationality as stable or finite and what we do with histories around different forms of racialization (particularly anti-Blackness and indigenous genocide) that are often obscured in bids for connection. I bring to the fore questions around relationality, particularly in chapters 2, 3, and 5.

In the afterword, I close the book with a discussion of the idea that, in fact, China is quite major, especially for those who are minorities within China and minor to China (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and other spaces). When we consider China's own colonial relations throughout the region, alongside the hegemony of Han Chinese, it initially appears difficult to respond to the minor as proposed in this book. I contend with this question through the work of Hong Kong sound and media artist Samson Young. His *Songs for Disaster Relief* at the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale provides a critical example of how to engage the immediacy of China's presence through the minor.