Spiritual Farming
Performance at Shanghai's Downstream Garage
Michael Leibenluft and Maja-Stina Johansson Wang
Downstream Garage (Xiahemicang) is one of Shanghai’s most dynamic centers for experimentation in performance, not only in terms of the work that is produced in this small fringe theatre, but also in the way that the organization challenges the limits of creating and producing work in today’s political and artistic climate. In Shanghai and throughout China, venues must obtain a certificate from the Cultural Ministry or local Cultural Bureau to legally produce, promote, or charge an entrance fee for a performance, and each individual project must submit a script, photos, and video to the Ministry or Bureau for censorship approval. As a result, for artists who cannot gain the support of sanctioned institutions—including the young, the experimental, the foreign, or the politically subversive—it is logistically difficult and technically illegal to independently present work.

Downstream Garage has emerged as a primary incubator and advocate for these independent artists in Shanghai. The organization labels its presentations as “open rehearsals” to avoid strict oversight by government authorities, and it allows artists use of its space for rehearsal and performance free of charge. Through this arrangement, Downstream is able to present a diverse program of more than 10 original pieces a year, totaling over 100 presentations of new conceptual art, dance, and multidisciplinary performances since the venue’s establishment in 2004 (Wang 2013b). The organization’s precarious survival is a testament to the shifting paradigm for Chinese performing artists, who are coming to experience both more autonomy and commercial influence than ever before.

An alley winds past a wastewater treatment plant and the rear of the Shanghai Cardio-thoracic Hospital before reaching a complex of warehouses that includes the Downstream Garage building. The space is located southwest of the city center and far from Shanghai’s cultural hubs near Moganshan Road, the Jing’an Temple, and People’s Square. Walk past an empty red phone booth and up several flights of an exterior staircase, to reach the “lobby”—a small room lined with glass cases displaying an assemblage of bric-a-brac including old film projectors and Chinese porcelain. At the end of a narrow corridor is a dark open space with red bleachers for an audience opposite a raised black platform that functions as a stage. The layout of Downstream is always changing. As dancer and regular Downstream performer Nunu Kong

1. The venue has two English names, Mecoon and Downstream Garage, as well as its Chinese name, Xiahemicang 下河迷仓.

Figure 1. (facing page) Wang Jingjing in Zhu zai zhuqiang li de zuojia (The Wallman), created and directed by Coco Camillelin (Linchun Yuan). Downstream Garage, 17 October 2010. (Photo by Li Yiman)

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explains, “The structure of the building hasn’t changed, but the interior setting and arrange­ment never stops evolving. If you don’t have change, you won’t have new life. We move, the space moves too. Which means that life is going on” (Kong 2011).²

## The Origins of Downstream

**Hard Han Café and Founders Wang Jingguo and Zhang Xian**

Downstream’s founder is Wang Jingguo, a middle-aged man with long black hair typical of Chinese artists. Wang traveled to Chicago in 1991 on an artist’s fellowship supported by the Ragdale Foundation (Wang 2010). He spent eight years in the United States—mostly in Chicago and New York—and he was impressed by the varied cultural offerings and financial and institutional support offered to freelance artists. Upon returning to Shanghai in 1999, he wanted to emulate his experience in the US by creating a platform to support young performers. So, along with his friend Zhang Xian—one of Shanghai’s most notable experimental playwrights and screenwriters—he created Hard Han Café Theatre (Zhenhan kafei juchang), a café and performance venue that opened in April 2000. Hard Han was an ambitious endeavor: it was the first “café theatre” in the country and, according to Wang, the first privately owned theatre in Shanghai since the Communist revolution in 1949. The collaboration between Wang and Zhang and their failure to achieve their artistic and financial aims through the venture (the café closed after only two years) are crucial to understanding the genesis of their second venue, Downstream Garage.

Zhang and Wang both began studying at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in 1978. They were part of the first cohort of students to enroll when the academy reopened after having been closed during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1978. Zhang was expelled from the university in 1980 for “disclosing state secrets” by sharing his experience during the Cultural Revolution with some English
students at the Academy (see Ferrari 2013:38). He spent six years of compulsory reeducation in Yunnan province. Prior to his collaboration with Wang on Hard Han, Zhang traveled to New York in 1998 at the invitation of the Asia Society to direct his play entitled Muyu (Mother Tongue) as part of an evening of work curated by Hong Kongese artist Danny Yung (Zhang Xian 2013).

Wang supported Hard Han financially and institutionally, while Zhang served as its artistic director and directed most of the 12 original pieces that premiered during the café’s two years of operation. Wang purchased an old factory to use the upper floors for his design company, and the café occupied the lower level (Wu 2013). The café space could accommodate 280 patrons and included four major areas: a central performance space, a bar (with liquor, specialty coffees, and other beverages), a VIP section, and an audience space with seating and tables on two floors. A description of the venue on the entertainment website East Day emphasizes the space’s chic, artistic, and international design: “The interior primarily has an American style, with a steel framework creating the structure of the stage and all four walls of the space covered with stylish and fresh paintings. It has a strong artistic flavor” (East Day 2013). Wang fondly recalls the distinct aesthetic of the space, and his background as a set designer surely influenced his approach to designing the interior:

Looking at the internal and external environment, design, and construction, Hard Han was like a postmodern piece of contemporary art. The colors in the space were black and red. The main construction materials used were steel and copper and teak. The interior looked very much like a transformed iron factory, but also like the bottom compartment of a big British 19th-century ship. (Wang 2013e)

In *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China*, Rossella Ferrari connects the emergence of Hard Han and similar café performance venues with Shanghai’s European heritage:

Recently the Shanghai avant-garde has chiefly operated through a circuit of underground cafes that have sprung up in different parts of the city since the late ’90s. This appears as [...] a unique Shanghai phenomenon that finds no exact parallel in Beijing. Shanghai’s underground performance spaces evoke in some measure the rendezvous of early European avant-garde movements such as Dada’s Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich and the vivid salon culture that animated Shanghai’s social life in the Republican period. (Ferrari 2013:97)

Foreign influence is notable in Hard Han: Wang and Zhang both embarked on the project after returning from the United States, and the café’s concept as an art and performance center melded with the city’s historical European and American historical legacy.
In May 2000, Zhang restaged his piece *Wuli de maotouying* (Owl in the House; 1986) as the premiere production for the café.³ Zhang wrote the play in 1986 at age 31, after his years of exile in Yunnan province. The summer he returned to Shanghai, he rented a cheap apartment in the city, converted an old crate into a writing desk, and turned out *Owl in the House* in a mere four days (Baik 2013). According to Zhang, he wrote the philosophical and abstract text in opposition to the repetitive, commercially oriented pieces he saw presented in Shanghai: “I gave up my hopes of having my work produced and wrote that into my first script, *Owl in the House*. It wasn’t until I abandoned plans for seeing my work onstage that I was able to enter a true creative process” (Wang 2005:71). In fact, the piece first gained exposure as a literary work when *Owl in the House* was published in *Shouhuo* (Harvest) magazine in 1987 in a collection of new avantgarde literature. In 1989, Zhang’s company, Bianyuan Jushe (Edge Drama Society)—which he formed along with Wang Jingguo and several other fellow Theatre Academy alumni—finally managed to produce the piece in partnership with Shanghai Qingnian Huajutuan (the Shanghai Youth Theatre) (Ferrari 2013:38).

The play centers on a housewife who struggles with her feelings of alienation and her repressed sexual desires while trapped in her lonely apartment. Ferrari describes the play’s ambitious thematic content:

“Owl” delves into the private fantasies and nightmares of a mentally fragile agoraphobic woman married to an impotent and deceptive husband. Written in the form of a fable, the play draws heavily on existentialist philosophy and absurdist writing as well as psychoanalytical theory and Freudian tropes of sexual repression, paranoid personalities, split egos, delusional fantasies, oneric and hypnotic states […] The play stunned the audience and critics for its uncanny handling of sexual politics and female desire, and went down in history as China’s earliest staging of an orgasm. (2013:38)

When Wang and Zhang were preparing to open Hard Han in the spring of 2000, they decided to restage *Owl in the House* as the venue’s first project. They wanted to draw on the piece’s initial positive reception while expanding its exposure, and the script’s minimal technical require-

3. *Owl in the House* premiered in Shanghai and Beijing in 1989 with a production directed by Gu Yi’an. Lu Xiaoyan translated and directed the English premiere of the piece at Boston University in December of 1990, and Wu Xiaojiang directed the revival at Hard Han Café Theatre in 2000 (see Ferrari 2013:38).
ments were easily adapted to the café’s spatial constraints. Zhang envisioned an immersive staging for the piece that would make use of the audience’s proximity to the performers:

Back then I considered Hard Han an intimate theatre. I wanted parts of the performance to take place within the audience area: dark lights with the audience peeking in. [I wanted] a real car to be driven onto the stage and have many actors play owls that would jump off and sing and dance, like at a party. This would give Hard Han a lively feeling that surpasses the feeling one normally gets watching a play. I wrote all this into the script, but as I was in New York during the performances, I don’t know how the director ultimately arranged it. (Zhang Xian 2013)

Wang originally suggested that Zhang direct the Hard Han production, but Zhang was scheduled to depart for the US for six months on a grant from the Asian Cultural Council, so the pair recruited Wu Xiaojiang to direct and Wang Jingguo created original designs for the café space. Wu, who is now a resident director at the National Theatre of China, placed the audience at two sides of the performance area and staged the piece around the old factory service entrance at the rear of the café (Wu 2013). As Wu describes it, the opening was covered in paper, and at the play’s climax, actors tore through the threshold. Zhang Xian describes how the piece is an allegory about the difficulty of this breaking through:

[The piece] reflects all Chinese; it is about the ordinary Chinese and about the educated. Those who have lived as if they were hypnotized for a long time. If they were to leave the hypnosis they wouldn’t have anything. Therefore they continue. They continue by hypnotizing themselves. (Zhang Xian 2013)

Notably, the 1989 production transformed audience members into owls by dressing them in cloaks and masks. Wang recalls that the 2000 Hard Han production also creatively cast these roles: “The owls were performed by extras who were chosen from among our 40 to 50 employees” (Wang 2013c).

Over the course of two years, Wang and his friends presented over 300 performances of 12 shows: 8 full-scale productions, a traditional music performance, and 3 productions by other local companies.4 The venue was regularly at 60 percent capacity, and audience numbers increased over time (Wang 2013c). The programming included Harold Pinter’s *The Lovers* and an all-female production of *Waiting for Godot*. But because of the government’s restrictive framework Wang and his team found it hard to develop the café as a legal and sustainable institution. In order to legally publicize and produce work as a theatre, the government required the establishment to pay ¥500,000 (the equivalent of $80,000) to register (Wang 2013a). This sum was far out of reach for the fledgling venture, and registration was only open to public organizations and not private individuals (Wang 2013a). Without official status, publicizing the café’s activities was challenging. Wang recollects:

I went to newspapers with cash in hand to print an announcement. But I was not allowed to do so since I did not have a normal performance permit. So every morning, I asked my staff to put up posters in populated areas. They would put up [the posters at six in the morning only to have them torn down at eight by the cleaning staff. [My staff was often]
arrested by the City Management Authorities, and then I had to go to get them out. That was how we did the marketing, very very hard! But still, we got quite large audiences. (Wang 2010)

Zhang Xian asserts that the café’s challenges were not merely logistical but also indicative of larger problems rooted in the economic model of the venture. He explains:

The café theatre failed with honor. Originally it was meant to be a café and a theatre managed together. If the cafe and the bar could make money, then this money could support the theatre. [...] But the café lost money. This made it difficult to manage, and finally we couldn’t take it anymore, so we closed down. (2013)

Bureaucratic and logistical restrictions made it impossible to integrate the theatre and the café and transform either into a sustainable institution. Furthermore, the venue struggled to satisfy the expectations of both its theatregoing and coffee-drinking patrons. As Wu recalls of the audience for Owl in the House: “It was very difficult to make the people who came to drink coffee appreciate experimental and intellectual work. They were mostly couples and they clearly wanted to see something more romantic” (Wu 2013).

While Hard Han’s closure was partly due to the failure of its hybrid business model, it was also indicative of a lack of vitality in the city’s contemporary theatre scene. Following the explosion of China’s new avantgarde in the 1980s with such notables as playwright Gao Xingjian and director Meng Jinghui,5 1990s audiences were drawn to more commercial offerings of television and film, and experimental theatre artists such as Wang and Zhang struggled to reinvigorate their artistic practice. David W. Jiang — former Dean of Drama at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts — visited Shanghai in 1994 and observed:

Today, theatre people can mount productions much more freely than ever before, but audiences are not interested. Even the number of moviegoers is down from a few years ago. People are fed up with shows that “educate,” have too strong a political flavor, or convey “artistic values.” They no longer seem to enjoy love stories, old Chinese legends, or Western-style theatre. Most of the young people prefer nightclubs, discos, or karaoke. Others stay at home watching TV. (Jiang 1994:73)

Jiang’s assessment reveals that in their café venture, Wang and Zhang were not only charged with overcoming logistical and organizational hurdles, but also with cultivating a new type of experimental work, and, most importantly, a new audience for that work. As Ferrari comments on the period from the mid- to late 1990s, “the Chinese avant-garde was trapped in a state of discursive aphasia and a sense of impotence pervaded the experimental scene [...] High art and culture became increasingly isolated and socially ineffectual” (2013:85). Wang and Zhang’s project of establishing a new theatre and their goal of reinventing the way theatre is produced was rooted in their search for a new audience and a revitalized artistic discourse.

The “Wild Garden”

The Conception, Creation, and Operation of Downstream Garage

After shutting down the Hard Han Café Theatre in June of 2002, Wang Jingguo found himself disillusioned and in debt (many of his friends had loaned money to support the failed venture). He debated giving up theatre and jumping into the whirlwind of US-China trade. Yet after only two years, he hatched a new plan. He rented a comparatively cheap storage space

5. For more on Meng Jinghui, see Claire Conceison’s article “China’s Experimental Mainstream: The Badass Theatre of Meng Jinghui” in this issue (Conceison 2014).
in the Xuhui district near the city’s south train station and converted it into a flexible gallery and theatre space. Wang named the space *micang*, meaning “storage space” or “garage.” Zhang added the characters *xiahe* or “downstream” to indicate the location of the venue south of the Longhuagang river and also that the work performed at the theatre would offer an experimental alternative to the “mainstream” (Zhang Xian 2012).

Wang envisioned that the warehouse would house not only a new theatre, but serve as a new institutional model. Rather than try to fold a performing arts venue into a business venture, Wang wanted to create an institution that minimized the economic pressures increasingly burdening artists. Starting with the statewide reform and opening of the 1980s and continuing with Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms of 1992, professional companies transitioned from fully state-operated and state-subsidized enterprises to mixed organizations dependent upon alternative revenue sources (such as box office returns and private investment). In 1995, the fully subsidized Shanghai People’s Art Theatre merged with the Shanghai Youth Drama Company to form the partially subsidized Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center (SDAC), now one of Shanghai’s most prominent repertory houses and largest state-run companies. According to the company’s current general manager, Yang Shaolin, government funding now only accounts for 30 percent of the company’s budget, while 40 percent comes from ticket sales and the remaining 30 percent from other funding sources (Yang 2011). With the Deng financial reforms, institutions loosened their control over artists, and opportunities arose for performers to produce work independently outside of an assigned work unit. When he laid the groundwork for his new theatre, Wang wanted to support the growing autonomy of artists while at the same time countering the commercialization transforming Shanghai’s producing institutions.

From the start, Wang and his collaborators emphasized openness and flexibility. Generally, Downstream does not curate work or plan a season of productions. Wang relies on regular Downstream artists Ge Weida and Zang Ningbei to volunteer their time to manage the space and review proposals for rehearsals or performances. In a recent interview, Ge remarked that “Downstream is like a wild garden: animals and plants can grow freely” (Ge 2012). Projects are not judged by their artistic quality per se, but rather by the commitment of the artist, the level of creativity, and the need for the space. Original work is favored over standard revivals of Chinese or Western classics, and companies are discouraged from using the venue as rehearsal space for work that is planned for a commercial venue (Ge 2012). Many of these standards are inherently arbitrary, and the kind of productions found in the Downstream Garage has evolved along with the transient community that supports it.

Over its near decade of existence, Downstream has presented almost a hundred new pieces created by dozens of independent companies, many of which formed because of their work at Downstream. These groups include Caotaiban (Grass Stage, est. 2005) led by director Zhao Chuan; Zuhensuo (est. 2005) led by Zhang Xian; Cebuzhun xiju jigou (Uncertainty Theatre; est. 2004), led by dancer Gao Xiaozhen (also known as Ah Gao); and Lingwu jutuan (Linc2 Theatre Company; est. 2005), led by dramatist and director Ren Ming Yang. Each group usually only presents three or four performances of a single production, and audience size can range from 10 to 300 (Ge 2012). Foreigners cannot legally produce works in China without a Chinese producing partner. Therefore, Shanghai’s swiftly growing number of expatriate-led, English-language theatre companies, such as East West Theatre, often use Downstream. Below, we provide an account of a few of the many productions presented at the very active Downstream Garage in hopes of representing the variety of works offered.

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6. Foreign artists presenting work in China must do so under the rubric of a Chinese organization’s performance permit, and the company must submit script and video material to the Cultural Ministry or Bureau for approval.
In 2009 and 2010, Downstream focused its energies on organizing an annual Fall Harvest Festival (zhongqiu xijie) consisting mostly of physical theatre and dance. While most performers were local to Shanghai, some companies traveled from around China—including Beijing, Guangzhou, and Jinan—to participate (Ge 2012). All of the groups selected departed from the standard, often naturalistic, spoken drama (huaju) plays typical of contemporary Chinese theatre. Zhao Chuan, a cocurator of the festival along with Wang Jingguo, explains: “We have dance and many physical performances that use language in an experimental way [...] performance that is hard to assign to a particular genre” (Zhao 2011).

One of the notable pieces presented in the festival’s first year was Zhunbei (Prepare; 2009), performed and conceived by actor/director Li Ning and his company J-Town Physical Theatre and Film Lab. The physical piece was based on experiments the company conducted back at home in the city of Jinan. Liu Yang, a Shanghai-based director and frequenter of Downstream, explains one of the company’s preparatory activities that they videotaped and projected as a segment of the piece:

They were preparing to drive a truck out on the streets and distribute fake money. But this is something that the police will interfere with, right? So, they were just doing the preparations like planning how to avoid the police, planning what to do if they end up in a traffic jam. (Liu 2013)

The performance itself opened with a very different type of preparation: an empty stage with the back wall filled with a live projection of Li Ning and actress Qin Lei nude and engaged in sexual foreplay. Gradually, the pair, now wearing pants but still topless, made their way onstage.

7. For a full listing of the 2009 Autumn Harvest Festival see: NJuchang (2009); for the 2010 festival see Xiju zhuangji liuxing tao (2010).
and began to dance intimately. Liu Yang: “Nudity is rarely seen onstage in China [...] and is certainly illegal [...] so it often shocks an audience. But in this instance, it seemed quite natural and the rhythm and expression of the performance were quite stunning” (Liu 2013).

Of all the groups that perform at Downstream, Caotaiban (Grass Stage) is the company whose practice is most closely linked with the development of the venue. In fact, several members of Grass Stage are central to the management of the theatre. Grass Stage’s work is ever-evolving and exploratory. Participation in the group is open to anyone, regardless of training or performance experience, and pieces are formed around whoever is available for rehearsals and performances.

Both aesthetically and thematically, Grass Stage strives to create work that concerns the lives of China’s common people and popularizes theatre as an artistic form. The group’s name refers to the amateur troupes that used to travel throughout rural China to perform at funerals, temple fairs, weddings, and other village gatherings. From 2009 to 2011, the company toured one of their most notable pieces, Xiao Shehui (Little Society) — described in more detail below — to Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, and Beijing to carry on this tradition of itinerant performance. These tours and Grass Stage’s activities in Shanghai regularly include free public workshops, panels, and film screenings to spur social discourse on topics ranging from gender in performance to urban development.

Zhao Chuan, the company’s artistic director, termed the company’s tours lalian, “field maneuvers,” after military training exercises conducted throughout China. He explains:

“Field maneuvers” is the term used for military training in which the unit leaves the base to march out in the wild [...] I grew up in the ’70s and ’80s [...] when military language such as “field maneuvers” was a part of daily life [...] In the process of participating in field maneuvers, an individual would encounter new environments and challenge himself, and the group would reach a new stage of unity and togetherness. (Zhao 2011)

8. From the manuscript from Gaozi Peng’s unreleased documentary Caotaiban’s Field Maneuvers 2011 (2011), courtesy of artistic director Zhao Chuan: “The Little Society, Volume I was performed as ‘field maneuvers’ in 2009 in Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, and Beijing. After a mid-August 2011 premier of The Little Society, Volume I and II in Hangzhou, the group participated in the Beijing Fringe in mid-September, and then traveled by train to Wuhan, Guiyang, Chongqing, Huaihua (Hunan), performing in small theaters, big university auditoriums, classrooms, library lecture halls, TV stations, hotel banquet rooms, or open-air spaces in schools, giving over 10 performances, as well as a few public colloquia titled ‘Social Theater: the Grass Stage Way.’ They returned to Shanghai in early October, successfully concluding the second ‘field maneuver.’”
By coopting military vocabulary and subverting an established political model Zhao and his company play within and around existing social structures to revitalize civil discourse.

The company’s oeuvre utilizes a diversity of physicality and language rarely seen on stages in China. Zhao Chuan sees Grass Stage’s performances and other activities at Downstream as an alternative to the conventions of orthodox Chinese theatre, both huaju and classical:

What is created now on many of our stages is a type of oppression. Institutions such as the Shanghai Theatre Academy tell us what is “professional” and what is “amateur.” For example, they say one must speak a certain way [standard Mandarin]. But this is not the way that people speak on the street. This leads to a conception that most people are not fit for performing onstage because they don’t speak prettily. Then there is a commercial factor that leads to the idea that only beautiful people can go onstage. Downstream leads to new possibilities in these respects. To break through, we are exploring new ways of speaking—not just with our mouths, but with our bodies. (Zhao 2011)

Exploration through movement is essential to Grass Stage’s training and development of new work. In the program for the 2010 Harvest Festival in which Grass Stage premiered the second volume of their piece Little Society, Zhao Chuan explains that “originating from the body” is the unifying theme for the year’s performances:

In the present age, as so many great concepts collapse, when commercialism is so irresponsibly rampant, when individual desires are misinterpreted as overinflated ever-pervasive freedoms, theatre has become an important place for examining people, a utopia based on the human as the root. Here there is no need for decoration or packaging, which is consistent with the simple environ of the theatre provided by Downstream Garage [...] The body is that aspect of our life which can not only be analyzed but also be explored, moreover, it is an important source of energy for change and creation. The interpretation of one’s own body is the first solid step by which to glorify, critique or escape. (Zhao 2010)

Just as Wang created Downstream to purify the economics of theatrical production in Shanghai, Zhao’s focus on the body seeks to strip down form and expression—both for Grass Stage’s work and for all of the pieces curated for Downstream’s Harvest Festival in 2010. By promoting and presenting pieces that have the body at the core, the artists are able to peel away the artifice of society and mainstream theatre and examine a fundamental portrayal of human identity.

Over the past four years, the company has developed four “volumes” of their landmark work, Little Society, which fuses autobiographical pieces with portrayals of a wide array of individuals, often from marginalized communities. The company describes the concept for the piece in their blog:

Grass Stage’s Little Society was created from solo material developed by the performers based on detailed societal observation. Through careful refinement, these segments treating individuals with different stratifications of body, language, and spirit were pieced together through both humorous and “high art” theatrical forms. (Grass Stage 2009)

By portraying subjects from a wide variety of backgrounds, the company confronts both the limitations of artistic production in China and the gulf between various subsections of contemporary society. Scholar Li Yi Nan from the Central Academy of Drama describes how Little Society enacts an ethical obligation among both audiences and performers to empathize with the marginalized subjects of the piece:

Clearly, the performers belong to a very different social class from the characters they portray (prostitutes, scavengers, veterans...). They see it as their responsibility to “experience” the lives of these people. Through performing these figures of “low status,” what
they express is almost a kind of empathy, and they aim to arouse a similar empathy among the audience as well. (Li 2013)

Li Yi Nan recalls a segment of Little Society Vol. II, performed in the 2010 Fall Harvest Festival, which used movement to realize Grass Stage’s project of identification:

Through physical training, [the performers] shed the attributes of their own social class and connected with the toiling masses. In Little Society Vol. II, there is a segment in which two male actors play construction workers and at a high-speed move, throw, and catch bricks from a scattered mound. The two actors have superb control over their bodies [...] and they seem just like real construction workers. At this moment, the corporeal bodies onstage are experiencing true danger [...] to take the audience into the bitter lives of the masses. (Li 2013)9

In a country with a strong legacy of performance produced and/or controlled by the government, Zhao Chuan’s insistence on the linguistic and physical diversity of both performer and artistic subject is a call for expanded artistic expression. At the core of Grass Stage’s work is the idea that everyone should have the opportunity to climb onstage and perform and that the stories of individuals from all corners of society should be represented. This folk, populist bent in Grass Stage’s practice is a defining characteristic of many of the groups involved with Downstream.

Like Zhao Chuan, Zhang Xian emphasizes the proximity between artistic creation and the public as a fundamental principle in his conception of performance:

If you want to make “theatre” then I think it’s very important that you create a space for the people. A nongovernmental space, so to speak. Secondly, since it is a small venue, performances should be intimate. This is very important because in most cases we are watching from a long distance, as if watching something in a frame. If you have a very close distance, the audience can’t avoid you—they become included. This is very important for the new contemporary theatres. (Zhang Xian 2012)

9. During the vignette with the bricks, the actors recite the following text: “A farmer came to town to make his way / Became a construction worker day today / He carried bricks up to the 44th floor, / Fell down: a pile of blood and gore / His family came to town from their home far away / And could do naught but dig him a secret grave” (Grass Stage [2010] 2011).
The work of both Zhang Xian and Zhao Chuan fully integrates theory and practice: the two artists investigate the intersection between art and society by offering an alternative to politicized or commercialized cultural products. Both thematically and in terms of the live event of performance, the directors seek to draw their audiences into the theatre, to literally put them onstage.

Grass Stage’s pieces are nonnarrative and jump between various characters, social topics, and theatrical forms, making them sometimes difficult for audiences to digest. But the company has a large, mostly young following that includes a mixture of artists, intellectuals, and young professionals. Liu Yang, a director who is also a founding member of Grass Stage, describes Downstream’s audiences as particularly open-minded and likely to consider work from a socio-political and philosophical angle: “At Downstream people will express what they saw and discuss that with you rather than ask what you wanted them to see” (Liu 2013).

Director Deng Guanqian, currently an MFA candidate at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, directed the new play *jǐngshēnbìng huànzhé* (The Psychopath; 2009) by Chen Guofeng at Downstream Garage in July of 2009. Deng comments that even though there are comparatively few female artists that work at Downstream, she believes that “the best part of Downstream is its fairness and equality. It doesn’t judge by gender, age, or professional experience” (Deng 2013a). Furthermore, Deng notes that the audience was open to her work: “I know that the opinions they give are very objective,” she explains. “It’s not like they will think I’m too small and weak to hear the truth” (Deng 2013b).

Navigating Censorship and Governmental Oversight

While the performers at Downstream have in many ways carved out an oasis for creating and presenting their work, they are ultimately still influenced by the same censorship endured by Chinese artists in all art forms and genres. Officials from the Communist Party’s Propaganda Department occasionally attend performances, and Wang and others within the organization have been “invited for a cup of coffee”—a commonly used euphemism for arranged meetings in which officials keep tabs on potentially subversive individuals (Wang 2010).

Despite this surveillance, and the pressure to “get along with the authorities,” Downstream Garage has no policy that restricts content and it has never prevented an artist from presenting sensitive material. Nunu Kong explains the process:

> If someone wants to do a piece that has potentially controversial material, we will talk to them and make sure that they have fully considered what they are doing and the implications for the space. We won’t tell them not to do it, but we will ask them to consider more deeply. (Kong 2011)

Wang insists that Downstream only presents material in-process—as open rehearsals or “draft pieces”—so he does not submit projects to the local authorities through the official censorship and registration procedure. Nonetheless, he does maintain close connections with supervising officials and notifies them about planned projects. He also allows them to supervise performances: an official videotaped every event during the three-month-long 2009 Fall Harvest Festival and afterward he thanked Wang for staying consistent with his submitted list of programming (Wang 2013c). If necessary, Wang defends projects on a case-by-case basis. The informal “don’t ask, don’t tell” operational style allows the theatre to present controversial and sensitive material—such as the nudity in *Prepare* or the political commentary in Grass Stage’s *Little Society*—that might not be approved through official channels. At the same time, it also contributes to the instability of the organization and its artists: without proper registration, performers cannot legally sell tickets or apply for funding. Projects are at risk of being shut down—either by the authorities or due to lack of funds.
Over the last decade, dozens of nongovernmental venues—both commercially oriented and nonprofit—have emerged throughout China, and each organization, like Downstream, must negotiate its relationship with the authorities. Wang Xiang is a dentist who established Beijing’s independent Penghao Theatre in 2008 and has since presented over 200 productions and 6 festivals at the venue. He compares Wang Jingguo’s approach with his own:

Downstream does not cooperate with the authorities. [At Penghao], we are willing to “play chess” rather than avoid the government. We bargain, we actively collaborate with the Cultural Ministry and Central Government to promote reforms and changes to the national cultural policy. (Wang Xiang 2013)

While Wang Xiang considers Penghao an independent organization, he does supplement his private investment in the company with governmental and other sources of funding. Any programmatic choices he makes have the potential to endanger this support.

Zhang Hong is a project manager at the Ke Center in Shanghai, a nongovernmental performing arts center that sometimes presents the same artists as those seen at Downstream:

Downstream is an icon for independent theatre. Wang [Jingguo] cannot possibly get a license [to legally produce], but he can keep creation very pure because he almost stands outside the government’s inspection. As an artist there I can be very direct, I don’t need to act around what I want to say. [The Ke Center] lives in such a contradiction. [We have] better equipment than Downstream and more seats, but without government support, we can’t survive. We try to survive in the cracks between the rocks—we try to find possibilities. (Zhang Hong 2013)

Since it was founded by artistic director Zhou Ke, producer Zhoujin and visual artist Li Xiaomi in 2007, management of the Ke Center has changed over time, and in January 2013, new leadership took over from Xixiaotang, a Beijing-based commercial theatre company. Zhang Hong notes that since its “restart,” the organization is seeking both commercial projects and government funding in order to survive. Penghao, the Ke Center, and Downstream have different institutional goals, yet all three organizations must balance governmental, commercial, and individual investment—both in terms of money and effort. The exact equation of that balance directly impacts the programming and growth of the institutions. In China, the political and cultural landscapes are constantly shifting, requiring each of these organizations to frequently reinvent themselves and dig out new paths to stability.

**From Downstream to Mainstream**

Downstream’s unofficial status and refusal of governmental funding means that its future is uncertain and its existence precarious. In the past two years, Wang has turned his focus to his personal life and other artistic ventures, and the Fall Harvest Festival has ceased to exist due to lack of funds. While Downstream Garage provides a platform and a refuge for artists working in the margins, its insularity and economic instability make it an unsuitable home for many, especially young performers setting out to establish careers. Zhao Chuan observes that “ultimately organizations like Downstream and Grass Stage provide a fun place to play, but they do not solve the problem of needing to bring hand to mouth” (Zhao 2011).

The emerging problem is how to bridge Downstream’s tight community with other performing arts venues and audiences in Shanghai. Ferrari notes that Shanghai’s cultural offerings are particularly fragmented when contrasted with Beijing:

[...W]hereas Beijing exhibits conspicuous interpenetration of independent and governmental, marginal and mainstream, experimental and commercial—so much that most avant-garde practitioners can operate quite comfortably in both realms—there seems to
be a more distinct divide in Shanghai, one that does not allow for a vibrant and varied heterogeneous grey zone between the two spheres. (2013:96)

Perhaps this segmentation is due to the fact that Shanghai’s arts scene is smaller and therefore more limited than Beijing’s—there are simply less opportunities for mixing and matching. In his 2011 talk at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, Yang Shaolin addressed this division between Shanghai’s fringe and its mainstream. “The contemporary theatre scene in China is still relatively young,” he said. “In this landscape, our company is quite powerful and influential, but this is not necessarily good. When you don’t have competitors, you lose a sense of direction. I wish we had more peers in the field” (Yang 2011). As one of only a handful of producing venues, and the most active producer of “spoken drama” in Shanghai, SDAC dominates the city’s theatre scene, and its breadth of programming prevents it from specializing in any particular form of performance. The venue produces Chinese classics, popular American and European contemporary dramas, and touring productions from America and Europe.

Nick Yu Rongjun, SDAC’s deputy general manager and one of the country’s most prolific playwrights,10 asserts that the institution does play an active role in supporting experimental work and the city’s independent artists. The company annually organizes the Youth Creative Theatre Festival and Shanghai International Contemporary Theatre Festival (both of which have included work by companies that also present at Downstream), and one third of the company’s total programming is performed by independent theatre groups (Yu 2013).

In recent years, Wang Jingguo has collaborated with a handful of young and increasingly recognized independent artists to present their work in more established venues, including the Dramatic Arts Center. It is an attempt to ensure that Downstream’s influence also spreads upstream. In 2010, Wang partnered with lighting designer Xin Shuting to establish Yuandai Yanyi Gongsi (Original Performance/Arts Company) with the goal of acquiring a performance permit to present a number of “mature” works at venues throughout the city as part of the 2011 Fall Harvest Festival (Wang 2013d). Wang submitted eight projects for official approval and five were presented: *Ai de Gushi* (*Histoire d’amour*; 1990) by Jean-Luc Lagarce, directed by Zang Ningbei in 2011; *Shashibiya de ai ya quan se* (Shakespeare’s Love, Desire and Power; 2011) directed by Robert Draffin; and *Yuxian* (*Fish Numen*; 2009) created and directed by Cai Yiyun were presented at the Ke Arts Center in 2011; *Meishenme* (*Pour un oui ou pour un non*; 1982) by Nathalie Sarraute and directed by Ren Mingyang was presented at the Hongqiao Contemporary Arts Theatre in 2011; and *Ketang Jinghun* (*La Leçon*; 1950) by Eugène Ionesco, directed by Liu Yang, was presented at the Hongqiao Contemporary Arts Theatre as well as the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center.11

Perhaps this collaboration between Downstream and its presenting partners is indicative of a larger trend in the Chinese avantgarde: an increased willingness to diversify and combine the mainstream with the experimental, both in terms of content and venue. Ferrari sees this adaptability as the avantgarde’s attempt to ensure its survival and stave off irrelevancy:

While still committed to delivering aesthetically engaging and socially relevant content, the avant-garde has consistently aimed at reaching a broader range of social groups, albeit mostly confined to the better educated and financially comfortable sectors of the urban population, and has therefore come to operate in a middle ground of experimentalism and entertainment, art and the market. (2013:87)

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10. For a full Chinese listing of Nick Yu’s work see the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center website: www.china-drama.com/page/9;actorview.vp.aspx.

11. Three shows were canceled: *Zhu zai zhuanqiang li de zuojia* (*The Wallman*) by Coco Camillelin; *An Fang* (*Darkrooms*) by Cai Yiyun; and *Zhongyang gongyuan xilu* (*Central Park West*) by Woody Allen.
In addition to the five projects produced “off-site” in the 2011 Fall Harvest Festival, three productions were rejected by the authorities, illustrating the existing challenges in developing the work of Downstream artists through officially licensed channels. Beijing-based director Wang Chong and his company Théâtre du Rêve Expérimentional were prevented from staging a Chinese-language version of Woody Allen’s play Central Park West (Wang 2013a). When submitting the script for approval, the company forgot to remove a passage about a naked woman attracting attention in Tiananmen Square (the lines had been added in rehearsal but subsequently cut from the piece). When an official required that the group remove the line and retape their proposal video, Wang Jingguo refused on principle, and the engagement was canceled (notably, the project was approved for commercial productions in nine cities in China, including Shanghai, and has had 110 performances). Zhu zai zhuangqiang li de zuojia (The Wallman), created and directed by Guangzhou-based Coco Camillelin (Linchun Yuan), was rejected outright because the text was written in prose rather than dialogue. The previous year, the production had received three performances in the 2010 Fall Harvest Festival in Downstream’s own space. Linc2 Theatre Company’s Dark Room, written and directed by Cai Yiyun, was the third project rejected and was refused on grounds of “vulgar content.” However, in May of 2010, the production had received sponsorship by the Jing’an district government to present at the Zhijiang Dream Factory as part of an Expo presentation of young directors from Beijing, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.12

Since no theatre productions have been censored or shut down at Downstream Garage, these examples of thwarted projects illustrate the murky restrictions and red tape Wang Jingguo and Downstream artists are generally able to avoid by presenting their work unofficially.13 Furthermore, the instances of censorship convey the idiosyncrasies of the local officials who judge the projects. Performances and material within performances can be rejected on virtually any grounds. When both Wang and Zhao speak to this ambiguity surrounding permissible expression, their frustration is directed towards a lack of clear guidelines and governmental policy rather than the existence of restrictions per se. Zhao comments:

Before the 1980s, it was fairly clear what could be performed and what could not. With the emergence of commercial culture in the 1990s, it has become very unclear because our sense of identity [as a country] has been disturbed, cut off. Before, we had a better sense of what was wrong and what was right. There was a standard. Now, even the people in charge lack clarity. The only thing they know is not to make the leaders unhappy. No one will tell you what you’ve done is wrong — they’ll tell you it’s not smart. There’s no good or bad. (Zhao 2011)

Zhao’s reflection conveys a sense of moral disorientation on a governmental and societal level; a disconnect between official policy and an evolving national psyche. Wang expressed similar discontent with the lack of an apparent ethical framework:

I’m willing to let them make a decision, even if they decide against me, as long as it’s clear. I need political stability. Otherwise there’s no way to do this. In today’s society, I don’t want the government to be ignorant concerning culture. (Wang 2013a)

**Hazy Future for an “Unpolluted Place”**

As we witness this melding of the experimental and the mainstream unfold on Shanghai’s stages, the inevitable question is if the dichotomy between the mainstream and the fringe will become...
irrelevant, necessitating a new conceptual frame for categorizing performance in Shanghai. It is difficult to determine whether cross-pollination will indeed increase, and if Downstream will come to play a more prominent role in seeding projects and artists that move on to more established venues. Or perhaps endeavors such as Wang’s partnerships with the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, the Ke Center, and the Hongqiao Arts Center in 2011 will result in stricter oversight and less seclusion for artists at Downstream. Nonetheless, the microcosm the artists have created is emblematic of the fragility and dynamism of independent performance in contemporary China. The desire for new modes of creating on both an institutional and aesthetic level and the impulse to create work for and about the general public speak to the prevailing limits—political, artistic, and economic—on how and what artists are able to produce. Venues such as Downstream Garage also point to the possibility of a new civil discourse emerging, one that, despite the odds, has somehow found its place among Shanghai’s landscape of cultural institutions and governmental bodies.

Beyond the political, economic, and logistical concerns, Downstream fulfills a deeper, personal need for the artists who call it home. Zang Ningbei, a director and current co-coordinator of the space, describes the venue as a “clean, unpolluted place in society,” like the Sukhavati or “Land of Bliss” in Buddhist scripture (Zang 2012). Wang Jingguo also sees his pioneering work as an act of purifying and sanctifying space: “We are the spiritual farmers of our era,” he mused. “We also need land” (Wang 2010). The shared desire for a purified spiritual space unifies the artists at Downstream, but this core vision is most clear in opposition. Like the avantgarde itself, which only exists as a counterpoint to the mainstream, Downstream is more defined by what it is not than by what it is. As boundaries blur separating the commercial from the governmental, the mainstream from the experimental, Downstream may fracture or dissolve. However, the venue’s legacy as a platform for exploration in artistic form, audience/performer relationship, and models for artistic production will leave an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of Shanghai and all of China.

Postscript

On 27 November 2013, after this article had gone to press, Zang Ningbei, one of the two managers of the space, wrote on his website: “From today, Downstream Garage has temporarily stopped all activities.” Wang Jingguo has not gone into details about the closing, but when interviewed for an article published online by Xinhua, the official government news agency, he commented: “Downstream has stopped temporarily; it’s not closed for good. I’m just letting go of the building and waiting until I have more money so I can rent it again...There are opportunities [that would allow us to keep Downstream open], but they require me to compromise...But, I am a stubborn man...If Downstream Garage had anything of value, then that would be that it always stuck to its basic principle.” Unfortunately, it seems that Wang and the Downstream community have finally encountered the breaking point at which this basic principle is unattainable.

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