

The Uncertain Body: Lin Tianmiao's Mother Machine and Postsocialist Biopolitics

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Lin Tianmiao, *Broken—Mother's!!! No. 12*, 2008, polyuria, silk, cotton threads, dimensions variable, installation view, Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

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1. In her conceptual sketch of *Warm Currents* (2018), Lin notes that she has always been interested in using synthetic materials to mimic visceral organs and body tissues. In doing so, she tends to evoke physical experiences in her installations while addressing the issue of artificial life. The original sketchbook was displayed in the 2018 exhibition *Lin Tianmiao: System* at the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai.

2. Sam Gaskin, "Lin Tianmiao Speaks to Artnet News about the Art of Endurance," *Artnet News*, October 1, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-lin-tianmiao-artwork-336164>. See also Karen Smith, "Lin Tianmiao," in *Lin Tianmiao: Non Zero* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004), 5–21.

3. Peggy Wang, "Tensile Strength: Threads of Resistance in Lin Tianmiao's Art," *Positions: Asia Critique* 28, no. 1 (February 2020): 123.

4. Borge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51.

5. Aihwa Ong, "Introduction: An Analytics of Biotechnology and Ethics at Multiple Scales," in *Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Nancy N. Chen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

6. From the 1950s to the 1970s Mao's government followed Soviet Lysenkoism, a political campaign against genetics and scientific agriculture from the 1930s to the 1960s. Genetics was dismissed as reactionary pseudoscience serving the bourgeoisie. For details about the impact of Lysenkoism on Chinese biologists, see Zhao Gongmin, "Jianguo chuqi de zhongguo yichuan xue" [Chinese genetics in the early days of P. R. China], *Shengming shijie* 69, no. 9 (2009): 71.

The fractured maternal body, spherical-shaped organisms welling out of the skin, and capillary-like threads scattered over the floor are frequent visual metaphors in contemporary Chinese artist Lin Tianmiao's (b. 1961) mixed-media installations.¹ Her uncanny rendition of the reproductive body collapses the bound-

Linda Huang

ary between the inner and the outer, the biological and the synthetic. Echoing this border-challenging aesthetic form, the titles of Lin's work, such as *Spawn* (1999), *Sewing* (1997), and *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), reveal her concerns about reproduction and labor—two entangled motifs of her art. As Lin has repeatedly articulated in various interviews, the conceptions of her installations are derived from her personal experience as a Chinese woman.² Born in the 1960s and entering childbearing age in the 1980s, Lin belongs to the generation of women whose reproductive lives were mediated and reshaped by the radical one-child policy—an integral part of China's biogovernance. Her juxtaposition

of breeding and weaving punctuates the bodily experience of the country's emergent scientific regime while implying an increasingly blurred relationship between reproduction and production. In the installations she has created since 2000, Lin has mixed female bodies with machine parts and biomaterials. The half-machine, half-organic creatures pose questions of her artistic and social agenda: what biopolitical changes are motivating her work, and what does her work suggest about the reengineered female body and the emergent biotechnical reality in China?

As one of the few Chinese female artists recognized within the international art milieu, Lin has been overwhelmingly labeled as a "woman artist" resisting the country's patriarchal tradition.³ Her major aesthetic materials—threads, textiles, and stereotypically "female" crafts—have reinforced a simplistic gendered framework for interpreting her art as a feminist gesture against the invisible violence of domestic labor. These accounts, however, assume that China's patriarchal mechanism has remained unchanged in the post-Mao era while overlooking the centrality of the female body in state governance. After the end of the Maoist proletarian revolution, female subjectivity was no longer shaped by mass movements and personality cults. Instead, the ascending power of technocracy, biotechnology, and genetic engineering in the 1980s led to new modes of state control and social management.⁴ In Aihwa Ong's words, "biotechnical innovation in China is a strategic political project, and the valorization of the sciences recreates, rather than undermines, authoritarian state power."⁵ As genetics-informed biology was taken up as a state-sanctioned scientific project in support of the country's birth control policy, the Marxist class-based conception of the "human" gave way to the universal biologized notion of the "human."⁶ This shifting notion implied that biotech governance dominated by male scientists had eclipsed the heavy-handed class struggle—biological bodies and reproductive behaviors were now the major site of the country's biopolitical practices.

With a special focus on the interplay between gender and biogovernance, I move beyond an oversimplified feminist framework by recontextualizing Lin's installations in terms of the country's contested history of population control as well as the socialist tradition of remaking national bodies and minds. In doing so,



Lin Tianmiao, *Non Zero—Procreating*, 2004. fiberglass, silk, mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view, Beijing Tokyo Art Project, Beijing, 2004 (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

I illuminate the specific sociopolitical implications of her work, particularly her concerns about the technopolitical manipulation of the female body in post-Mao China. Drawing attention to the visual motifs of embryos, cellular tissues, and DNA threads in her work, I analyze how she blends together textile-weaving techniques and genetic fantasies to interrogate the increasingly precarious status of humanity, labor, and womanhood. Through provocative forms of embodiment, Lin's work opens up a critical space in a male-dominated technocratic society while activating alternative political imaginations about technogender, bodily production, and human engineering.

To unpack the nuances of her work, I first introduce how the monstrous maternal body staged in her installations deviates from images of the wombless goddess and graceful women in post-Mao visual culture. This unconventional body image spurred patriarchal anxiety about female fertility while exposing the brutal experience of forced sterilization and contraception concealed by the official media. I then examine Lin's presentation of the maternal body as a productive machine, through which she reflects on the new forms of labor, exploitation, and surplus enabled by biomedical technology. Lastly I scrutinize her reinvention of an imaginary molecular body in relation to the country's political practices of human engineering and biometric surveillance. The destabilized body images in her work capture society's paranoia about bioinsecurity, showing that the corporeal body has become a politicized site where the state tracks, monitors, and governs its subjects.



Artist unknown, *It Is a Revolutionary Requirement to Marry Late*, 1970. Cultural Revolution poster, 30 x 20¾ in. (77 x 53 cm) (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

Yuan Yunsheng, *Water-Splashing Festival: The Ode of Life*, 1979. mural painting, acrylic on canvas, 11 ft. 1¾ in. x 68 ft. 10½ in. (3.4 x 21 m). Former dining room, Beijing International Airport (artwork © Yuan Yunsheng; photograph provided by Joan Lebold Cohen Archive and Asia Art Archive)



The Female Body in Post-Mao Chinese Art

How were female bodies depicted during the Mao era and what changed after the fact? How do the grotesque installations of Lin respond to these shifting modes of representation? In order to track the position of Lin's work within the context of contemporary Chinese art, I start with an analysis of how Chinese artists, both male and female, presented female bodies after the 1980s. Situating Lin's work regarding the changing body aesthetics and politics in post-Mao artistic production, I examine how her unique approach to the female body enables critical encounters between female subjects and the state, technology, and the body. In the Mao-era propaganda posters and socialist realist paintings, ideal females were portrayed as workers and peasants performing labor in factories, on farms, or in production teams.⁷ They were often garbed in androgynous military uniforms, which subdued their feminine qualities.⁸ Their masculine physiques, sturdy hands, and rosy cheeks demonstrate their capacity for physical labor, implying that they were the qualified subjects of the proletarian revolution.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Chinese artists, especially those who were characterized as “academic,” “official,” or “mainstream” (mostly male), spared no effort to restore the elegance of the female body.⁹ The revival of female beauty was deemed a backlash against the masculinized and militarized female body in the visual culture of the Mao era.¹⁰ One of the most iconic examples of this tendency is Yuan Yunsheng's (b. 1937) spectacular mural *Water-Splashing Festival: The Ode of Life* (1979). In contrast to the heroic proletarian body in socialist realist art, Yuan adopts a quasi-art nouveau style to feature willowy female nudes bathing in a ritual festival. Due to the harsh repression of sexuality in the Mao era, the blatant display of nudity stirred huge controversy at the time.¹¹ Yuan's

7. Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 197.

8. During the Cultural Revolution, wearing military uniforms became fashionable among Red Guards and the sent-down youth. This clothing trend soon developed into a nationwide fad. See Xurong Kong, “Military Uniform as a Fashion during the Cultural Revolution,” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 287–303.

9. These artists include Yuan Yunsheng (b. 1937), Jin Shangyi (b. 1934), and Chen Yifei (1946–2005), among many others.

10. Gao Minglu, “Dangdai zhongguo meishu yundong” [Contemporary Chinese art movements], in *Bashi niandai wenhua yishi* [Cultural consciousness of the 1980s], ed. Gan Yang (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1989), 36.



Meng Luding and Zhang Qun, *New Era: The Revelation of Adam and Eve*, 1985. oil on canvas, 77¼ x 65⅝ in. (196 x 164 cm) (artwork © Meng Luding and Zhang Qun; photograph provided by Taikang Space, Beijing)

11. Chinese officials found Yuan's bathing mural too offensive for public display, and the controversial part of the mural was soon boarded up. See Andrews and Shen, *Art of Modern China*, 211.

12. During the Mao era the new socialist person was rendered as a worker and a peasant. Yet when engineers, scientists, and intellectuals gained ground in the 1980s, they were elevated as versions of the "New Man" of the New Era. See Cheng Yinghong, *Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 48–126.

mobilization of the modernist decorative style and his celebration of the female nude conveyed an urgent impulse to rehabilitate human dignity, which had been devastated by the violent political movement that lasted a decade.

While restoring the nobility of the female body, Meng Luding (b. 1962) and Zhang Qun (b. 1962) associated female images with new symbolism. Their epic painting *New Era: The Revelation of Adam and Eve* (1985) portrays a miraculous moment in which a graceful, intellectual-looking woman floats in the air. She is in the act of imparting the fruits of knowledge to the gigantic nudes at either side, and the light radiating from her body illuminates the perfect proportions of these anatomic bodies. By imagining a "new socialist person" revitalized by the "light of science," the artists render the woman as a mother goddess who possesses the power to enlighten the nation.¹²

As shown in these examples, in the 1980s the female body became a site to be mystified and fetishized by male artists. While the new types of female images challenged the patriarchal authority embodied by the idolized image of Mao, they nonetheless exposed the persistence of male domination over female subjectivity and physicality. In the works mentioned above, male artists cast their female subjects as the corporeal embodiment of their social ideals and political desires. The female body thereby turned into the personification of science, enlightenment,



Xing Danwen, *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, 1995. gelatin silver, printed later, 20 x 29¾ in. (50.8 x 75.6 cm) (artwork © Xing Danwen; photograph provided by the artist)

and humanity. As images of highly feminized women became a new norm within the mainstream visual culture, female experimental artists started to deviate from this overly idealized mode of embodiment.¹³ Rather than conforming to the aesthetic agenda of their male counterparts, they included previously abandoned subjects, such as the pregnant body, the menstrual cycle, and flowering plants that resemble female genital organs, as alternative themes in their work.¹⁴ In doing so, they explored the physical experience of the female body, through which they reconstructed the embodied female consciousness.

A few examples may help illustrate these novel means of presenting the female body and their political implications. Xing Danwen's (b. 1967) photography series *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) subverts the image of a glorious, ageless goddess suspended in midair. Rather, it features an "ugly" pregnant body set against the backdrop of Mao's portraits and a national flag hanging on the wall—a typical domestic setting of the Cultural Revolution. Framing the shot from a low angle, Xing gives prominence to the strikingly enlarged abdomen and the swollen nipples of the woman. The strategy of juxtaposing political icons and the pregnant body, a subject absent from official history, opens up a critical space in which women's personal experiences disrupt the state-dominated collective memory.

Cai Jin's (b. 1965) oil-painting series *Banana Plant* (1991–2017) explores the sensuality and vulnerability of the female body through startlingly bold portraits of banana plants—a metaphor for female sexual organs. Using thick crimson pigment to magnify the voluptuous texture of the flower, these paintings challenge the historically inhibited expression of female desires. The fierce and bloody sentiment evoked by her brushstrokes unsettles the lyrical quality of literati painting,

13. For details about the alternative means of representing female bodies in women's art, see Cui Shuqin, *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

14. *Ibid.*, 9.



Cai Jin, *Banana Plant 38, 1993*, oil on canvas, 15⁵/₈ x 13³/₄ in. (40 x 35 cm) (artwork © Cai Jin; photograph provided by Francesca dal Lago Archive and Asia Art Archive)

Lin Tianmiao, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding, 1995*, white cotton thread, rice paper, steel needles, bed, video player, television monitor, dimensions variable, installation view, open studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing, 1995 (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

in which flowers and plants symbolize the noble virtues of male scholars. By blurring the boundary between spirit and flesh, humans and nonhumans, her paintings activate the bodily awareness of women, which had been subdued by the country's male-dominated political history.

Uterine Horror, Reproductive Anxiety, and Population Cybernetics

Like Xing and Cai, Lin's work strays away from the celebration of female beauty. Yet her approach to the female body is a technobiological one, which sets her apart from other female artists of her generation. Rather than handling the female body as a gendered medium, Lin treats the body as a "system" where organic and technological, life and nonlife entwine. Her conception of the body-system responds to the growing tension between the social and the biological, production and reproduction in China at this moment. Her 1995 installation *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* captures the collective paranoia about female fertility in post-Mao China. In this installation Lin lures viewers into a dimmed narrow space where she displays an old wooden bedstead covered with creamy white



15. During the mid-1990s Lin was an active participant in the Beijing-based phenomenon of so-called apartment art. In 1995 she transformed her apartment into an open studio where she exhibited many of her installations. See Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 271.

16. Chelsea Follett, "Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India," *Policy Analysis*, no. 897, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, July 21, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/neo-malthusianism-coercive-population-control-china-india-overpopulation-concerns>.

17. Under the guidance of the Maoist agenda of "a larger population means greater manpower," China experienced an unprecedented "baby boom" from 1962 to 1965. This phase of explosive growth increased China's population to 725 million in 1965. In the late 1970s the sent-down youth returned to their cities of origin. The drastic growth of the urban population worried Deng Xiaoping and the new leading bodies. They were deeply concerned about looming social crises caused by overpopulation, such as labor surplus, housing shortages, and the urban-rural divide. See Liu Yi, De Xinjian, and Xiong Cai, "'Yitaihua' de zhengzhi xue: Linian, liyi, zhidu" [The politics of "one-child": Ideas, interests, and institutions], *Kaifang shidai* 3 (2014): 47.

18. He Qinglian, *Renkou: Zhongguo de xuanjian* [Population: China's Sword of Damocles] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1988), 39.

19. Dennis Meadows and Jorgen Randers, *Zengzhang de jixian* [The limits to growth], trans. Li Baoheng (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1983).

20. Follett, "Neo-Malthusianism in China," 5.

21. Wang Xiangxian, "Weishenme nanxing jieza neng chengwei yixie guojia de zhuyao biyun fangshi?: Nanxing qizhi, guojia, he jihua shengyu yundong de xianghu goujian" [Why vasectomy become the major birth control method in some countries?: The mutual constitution of masculinity, state, and birth control], in *Quanmin shenhua gaige he shehui zhili xiandaihua* [Deepening the reform and modernizing social governance], ed. Lin Zeng and Song Yaping (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2015), 360–79.

22. *Ibid.*, 365.

23. *Ibid.*, 370.

24. Follett, "Neo-Malthusianism in China," 6.

25. While urban women tended to define the one-child policy as voluntary, rural women who wanted more children were more likely subjected to severe penalties and abuses. The son-preference tradition in rural China caught women between the policy requirement of one child and the family demands for a son, which had increased the numbers for female infanticide and abandonment. See Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1997).

bedding.¹⁵ The central area of the bed is occupied by a huge, vagina-shaped cavity in which she embeds twenty thousand large sewing needles. The contrasting texture of the soft textiles and the steel needles reminds viewers of the vulnerability of female genital organs. Lin connects each needle to a cotton ball with a long white thread that differs in length. The twenty thousand cotton balls fall to the floor, radiating away from the bed and seeming to colonize the entire room. The cocoon-like cotton balls are reminiscent of somatic cells that divide and reproduce themselves. As viewers enter this claustrophobic room, they feel that they are placed inside a uterus, peeping at the spectacular proliferation of life. This uncanny scenario evokes a multilayered sensory experience—a mixture of voyeuristic pleasure and the horror caused by the clusters of parasitic organisms.

Lin's installation constructs a symbolic place of birth and a body of horror. The relentless propagation and the gruesome representation of the maternal body hints at a nidus, a breeding place that fosters bacteria, parasites, and other agents of disease. The mottled bedstead and the yellowed bedding are reminiscent of a huge petri dish for microbial proliferation, which creates the atmosphere of a haunted house. Playing with metaphors of uterus, disease, and fertility, Lin provokes Chinese society's anxiety about population explosion. In the late 1970s and 1980s, neo-Malthusian thoughts gained prominence in China's intellectual circle while spreading widely among technocrats and political leaders.¹⁶ The idea that a large population size was the major cause of various social problems and environmental disasters drove public panic about the country's population crisis.¹⁷ This overpopulation hysteria was encapsulated by sociologist He Qinglian's book *Population: China's Sword of Damocles* (1988). In her writing He states that the enormous population had become a "national disease," which would lead to "the declining of civilization, impoverishment of national creativity, and the prevalence of poverty."¹⁸ He's monograph, along with *The Limits to Growth*, a research project commissioned by the Club of Rome to track the unremitting human expansion, gained wide popularity all over the country.¹⁹ These anxiety-ridden texts reshaped people's perception of childbearing while serving to motivate and justify the country's one-child policy (1979–2015).²⁰

In the 1980s Chinese society reached a consensus—namely, for the sake of a healthy national body, women should feel compelled to sacrifice their reproductive freedom. While the 1980 revision of the Marriage Law stated that "both husband and wife have the duty to practice birth planning," more than 85 percent of the contraceptive surgeries were performed on women.²¹ This was partly due to the deep-rooted patriarchal family structure and the persistent misconceptions about male contraception. In China it was believed that the vasectomy was equivalent to castration and thereby would undermine masculinity.²² Since fathers usually provided financial support for the family, the pressure of sterilization was pushed onto mothers.²³ During the thirty years of the one-child policy, more than three hundred million Chinese women were forced to be fitted with intrauterine devices (IUDs) after giving birth to their first child, and these devices were modified to be irremovable without surgery.²⁴ The coercive procedure of the policy had led to millions of forced abortions and sterilizations.²⁵

Grappling with a state policy over which she had no control, Lin's approach is double-edged. While evoking patriarchal anxiety about the unruly reproductive body, her installation reveals the male-centered, technocratic logic embedded in

the policymaking itself. In *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* the cocoon-like cotton balls mimic living embryos, which appear to spread throughout and occupy the entire room. The movement of the cotton balls, however, is not as unbridled as it seems—the white threads and steel needles restrain their motion and their desire to expand. By arranging the balls and strings in a highly controlled manner, Lin contrives a central-peripheral structure that recalls the country's top-down, engineering-type strategy of population control.

In the late 1970s the missile scientist Song Jian, later the architect of China's one-child policy, proposed the application of defense science, particularly cybernetics and systems science, as a solution for human problems.²⁶ Inspired by the Club of Rome's mathematical models for prediction, Song believed that the mechanistic approach of cybernetics, the science of control and communication, could provide a scientific solution to China's population crisis. As an expert in defense systems, he saw overpopulation as a threat to national security and survival, and therefore a strategic military problem that required a radical and enforced resolution. As Susan Greenhalgh notes, in the post-Mao era, "China's enemy was no longer external but internal: the Chinese people themselves."²⁷ Armed with a cybernetics-oriented, computer-assisted systems model, Song's data-modeling method defeated the traditional statistical method used by social scientists and won the trust of party leaders.²⁸

When dealing with the problem of "humans," Song disregarded the vulnerability of life and focused rather on "the mathematics of population."²⁹ For him, the population was a "biological entity" whose major features could be captured, measured, and quantified by a few indicators (that is, fertility and mortality). Treating the population as a target of optimal control—a concept appropriated from missile science, Song aimed to optimize the fertility trajectory through mass campaign of sterilization. Gesturing against the quantified humanity envisioned by Song, Lin employs delicate cotton threads to show the subtlety and fragility of female genital organs. The excessive and repetitive visual impact of embryo-like cotton balls alludes to the uncontrollable and unquantifiable quality of life. Her maneuvering of intimate fabric materials unsettles the increasingly abstract conception of the "human" reshaped by computational models and flows of data. By constructing a womb-like space, Lin invites viewers to reimagine the mechanism of life through female sensibility and to experience physically the division, proliferation, and struggle of living organisms.

Like many Chinese people who had been convinced by the alarmist, neo-Malthusian narrative of population crisis, Lin agrees with the necessity of the one-child policy.³⁰ Nonetheless she has repeatedly articulated that she is deeply concerned about the violation of women's rights caused by the country's big-push population control.³¹ Her seemingly paradoxical position reveals the dilemma of Chinese women, who were trapped between the country's stringent one-child policy and individual ownership of their bodies. While the one-child policy was legitimized as a nationwide political practice, discussion about how this policy was carried out in female bodies remained taboo.³² By making the maternal body invisible, the state media minimized attention to the execution of the "one size fits all" policy victimizing millions of Chinese women.

Rather than posing a direct critique of the one-child policy, Lin's installation etches out an intimate space where repressed female trauma could be

26. Susan Greenhalgh, "Missile Science, Population Science: The Origin of China's One-Child Policy," *China Quarterly* 182 (2005): 267.

27. *Ibid.*, 265.

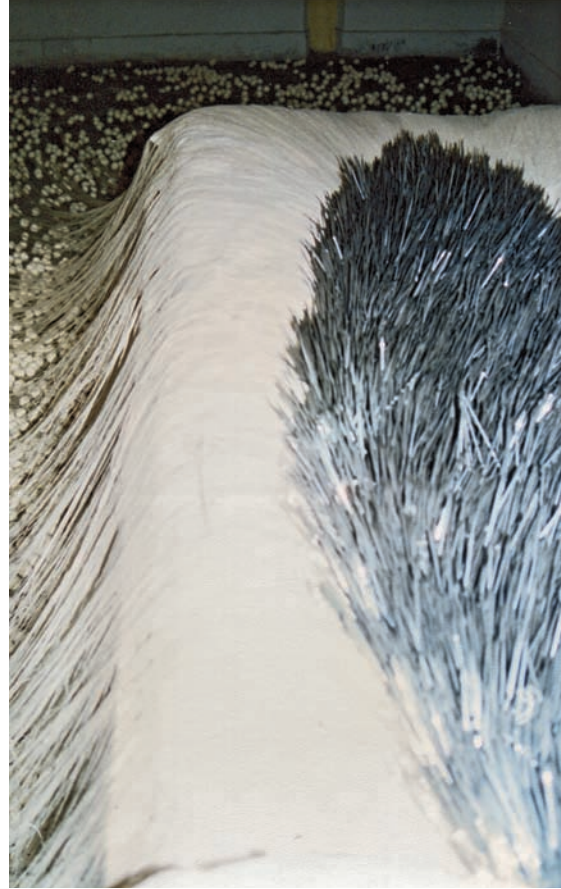
28. *Ibid.*, 268.

29. Song Jian and Li Guangyuan, "Renkou fazhan wenti de dingliang yanjiu" [Quantitative research on the problem of population development], *Jingji yanjiu* 2 (1980): 60–67.

30. Lin Tianmiao, interview with the author, March 8, 2021.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Kay Ann Johnson, *China's Hidden Children, Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 24.



Lin Tianmiao, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, detail of the cotton balls (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

Lin Tianmiao, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, detail of the steel needles (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

rediscovered, materialized, and remembered. Her imaginative use of needles and threads unveils the violent invasion of state power into female genital organs. The steel needles tugged by long cotton threads resemble the T-shaped intrauterine device (IUD) and the string attached to it. The pliable bedding, pierced and dotted thickly with needles, points to the physical pain brought about by the forced insertions of IUDs. As Cecilia Milwertz points out, the Chinese government wielded contraceptive devices and technologies more as weapons of coercive control than as tools of reproductive choice.³³ In fact the government was only responsible for IUD insertion surgery and disregarded follow-up examinations and removal surgery.³⁴ The brutal and inappropriate means of handling the IUD caused horrifying pain and diseases, including perforation of the uterus, intrauterine hemorrhage, and ectopic pregnancy.³⁵ Moreover, no official organizations in China were responsible for informing women that the IUD had to be removed before menopause.³⁶ As an IUD remained implanted in the uterus for more than a decade, its removal became a terrifying, bloody experience for numerous Chinese women.

By staging an embodied experience of contraception, Lin highlights the secret suffering experienced by Chinese women due to the persistent state control over sexuality in post-Mao China. Scholars such as Harriet Evans have claimed that the fading away of the Maoist degenderization of women brought new promises of sexual liberation.³⁷ Nonetheless, the historical rupture asserted by such scholarship has been overly sweeping and imprecise. As male scientists and technocrats dominated the making and implementation of state policies, women were deprived of political power. They were still the passive subjects of these policies, but their voices were suppressed during the policymaking pro-

33. Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control*, 4.

34. Li Shanshan, "Yibu shanghuan zhudao de zhongguo nüxing biyun shi" [An IUD-dominated history of birth control], *Huxiu News*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/271426.html>.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

cess. As sociologist Liu Zhongdong notes, male population experts tended to imagine the maternal body as a plastic, manageable biological organism and an animal-like, inarticulate being submissive to the state.³⁸ Working against the male-dominated governance of female fertility, Lin unveils society's morbid angst over the reproductive body. Her rendition of a monstrous maternal body suggests that female sexuality remained a threatening and pathological impulse that needed to be watched and monitored by the state.

Human Factory, the Productive Body, and Eroticized Labor

In *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* Lin embeds a video screen inside the pillow showcasing her two hands ceaselessly winding the twenty thousand cotton balls. The onerous and repetitive labor performed by her reminds viewers of the spinner working in a textile mill. Using threads and cotton balls to symbolize the process of breeding, Lin draws an analogy between the uterus and a factory—like a factory where the spinning machine produces textiles, the uterus is the site where mothers nurture fetuses. Drawing this connection, her work interrogates the new forms of labor and corporeal imagination enabled by biomedical science.

In the post-Mao 1980s, the rapid development of imaging technology and microphotography allowed the physician's gaze to penetrate the skin and cell membranes of humans and animals. The internal body of a living organism was no longer a black-box container but became increasingly permeable for scientific observation. The microscopic images of the inner body, such as cells, embryos, and neurons, became widely accessible. In many biology-themed science education films, such as *Cell Reformation* (1985) and *Cradle: Artificial Eggs and Trichogramma* (1986), life was represented as a biological product that could be manually assembled, manufactured, and modified.³⁹ Rather than a natural process, the hybridization and transplantation of cells could now be achieved through tiny microinjection pipettes and high-powered microscopes. The molecular body, on the one hand, was portrayed as a productive entity that could be used to hatch new forms of organisms. On the other hand, breeding became increasingly independent from the maternal body with the assistance of biotechnology. In other words, the maternal body was merely a site and a medium for gestation, which could be replaced by artificial biomaterials. While the exhilarating images of the molecular body remystified procreation as a process dominated by humans, they nonetheless camouflaged the centrality of the female body to state governance and manipulation.

The marginalization of maternal bodies in reproduction echoed the withering political appeal of motherhood in post-Mao China. After the end of the Maoist revolution, the majestic body of the "hero mother" no longer functioned as a valid political icon for mass mobilization.⁴⁰ Instead, the maternal body became increasingly outdated and was replaced by images of intelligent modern women who devoted themselves to research and career development.⁴¹ In contrast to the flimsy image of the hero mother, male scientists were often portrayed as godlike characters who mastered the secret of life. In science-education films the frequent use of montages that juxtaposed male scientists and microscopic images implied that high-tech imaging devices had become the power stick of male scientists. As the visibility of procreative molecules announced the obsolescence of

38. Liu Zhongdong, "Guojia zhengce zhixia de nüxing shenti" [Female bodies under state policy], in *Nüxing chujing baipishu* [The white paper of women's living condition], ed. Liu Yuxiu (Taipei: Shibao Cultural Press, 1995), 236.

39. Zhao Huikang and Jia Leilei, *Zhongguo kejiào diánying shi* [The history of Chinese science education films] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2005), 68.

40. Sally Taylor Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 105.

41. *Ibid.*

the macrolevel evolutionary perspective of life, male scientists were granted the authority to create and reinvent life. Along with the rise of a knowledge-intensive society, the male-dominated molecular imagination excluded the maternal body from the sphere of knowledge production. The female body was thereby turned into a passive experimental subject to be studied, tested, and reconfigured by male scientists.

Instead of submitting to a male-programmed imagination of life and breeding, Lin inventively combines techniques of textile production with visual signifiers of DNA to explore what a body can do in the age of molecular biology. In *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* she probes the technopolitical implications of winding and spinning. In the 1980s the imagery of threads was prevalent in the popular discourses on genetics. In the illustrations of popular-science books the process of DNA replication was depicted as resembling the act of weaving and unraveling a pair of intertwining threads: “When DNA wants to replicate itself, it unbinds the double helix, rotates and unfolds itself, and eventually becomes two single strands. Each strand serves as a new template for producing two new strands.”⁴² Making use of the visual analogy between the winding thread and the DNA strand, Lin uses numerous cotton balls and threads to mimic the process of duplicating, coiling, and proliferating genetic materials. Her staging of an embodied experience of procreation materializes the increasingly abstracted concept of breeding while repositioning the female body in the center of bearing and rearing. Lin’s maneuvering of thread winding, however, goes beyond the mimetic representation of genetic mechanisms. The radiating threads and cotton balls signify the faculty of female fertility, implying the way that the maternal body mutated into an apparatus of production that fit in with an increasingly commercialized biomedical industry in postreform China.

In *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* the subtle connection between traditional textile production and the new form of production based on corporeal bodies hints at the overlap between the reproductive body and the productive body—a peculiar trend closely tied to the prevalence of precarious labor.⁴³ In the womb-like studio room viewers are invited to situate themselves in a microscopic system of the maternal body. Their act of peeping at the mystery of life signifies the technologically reorganized gaze of the state and the invasion of global capitalism into the uterus of Chinese women. After Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour in 1992, China ushered in an era of reform and opening up. For the first time, Chinese female laborers exposed their productive bodies to both national and international capital and became hyperexploited human subjects.⁴⁴ In Lin’s video installation the two hands winding the threads reference the staggering amount of low-wage labor shouldered by Chinese women under the tide of economic reform. Her juxtaposition of breeding and weaving intimates that not only did female migrant workers provide cheap labor for the global market but their reproductive capability, the surplus value of their body, also became a resource for fertility services—they were lured to rent out their uteri and serve as surrogate mothers for the domestic and global fertility market.

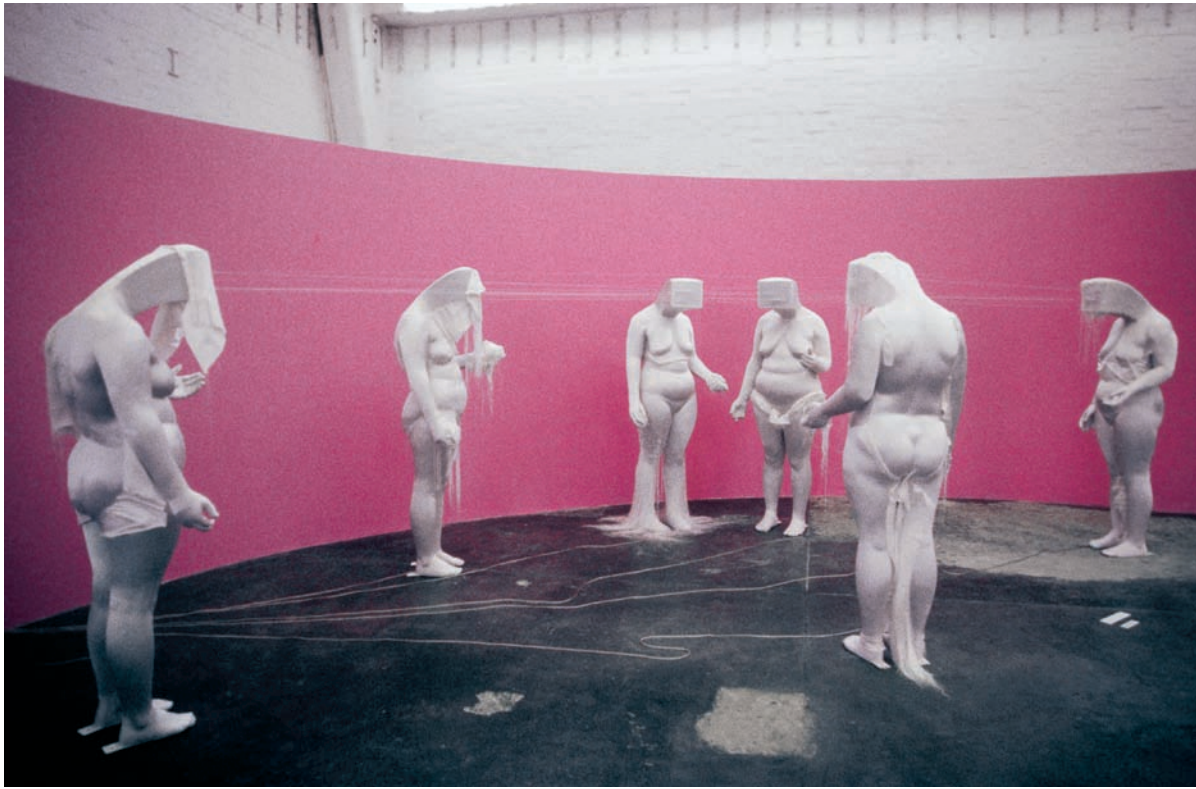
By 2010 the thirty-year-long implementation of the one-child policy had led to 660 million families of “lost singletons.” While eager to have another child, these couples were often too old to conceive naturally.⁴⁵ The urgent need for reproductive services hastened the boom of China’s underground surrogacy

42. D. O. Woodward and V. W. Woodward, *Fenzi yichuanxue gailun: yichuan yu jinhua zhong de xinxiu* [Concepts of molecular genetics: information flow in genetics and evolution], trans. Ge Koulin (Shanghai: Shanghai Science and Technology Press, 1983), 136.

43. François Guéry and Didier Deleule define the productive body as the social body organized for capitalist production. For more on this topic, see Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, “Editors’ Introduction to the English Edition,” in *The Productive Body*, ed. François Guéry and Didier Deleule (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 11.

44. L. H. M. Ling, “Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 72, no. 2 (1999): 277–306.

45. “Women Who Lost Their Only Child in China and Their Family Status Facts and Figures 2015,” NBS/UNFPA/UNICEF Joint Data Project, December 15, 2015, <https://china.unfpa.org/en/publications/women-who-lost-their-only-child-china-and-their-family-status-facts-and-figures-2015>.



Lin Tianmiao, *Chatting*, 2004, fibreglass, synthetic silk, mixed media, sound, dimensions variable, installation view, Beijing Tokyo Art Project, Beijing, 2004 (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

industry. Along with the maturity of assisted reproductive technology and the privatization of medical agencies, China's surrogacy industry thrived by making use of legal loopholes and collaborating with the for-profit healthcare industry.⁴⁶ Since the payment for surrogacy was five to six times higher than money earned as a laborer in a sweatshop factory, an increasing number of female migrant workers chose to rent out their uteri and serve as surrogate mothers. As suggested in Lin's installation, the maternal body literally, instead of metaphorically, became a factory that manufactured babies. The monstrous maternal body and the machine-like process of winding punctuate the devalued and distorted experience of surrogacy; the emotionally charged process of breeding was now turned into streamlined machinery production. In other words, the surrogate mother was reduced to a walking uterus—what feminist scholar Alice E. Adams phrased as “a reproductive laborer alienated from their products.”⁴⁷

Lin's concerns about exploitation and the requisition of the female body are expressed more concretely in her 2004 installation *Chatting*. In this work Lin staged six naked women with similar statures and gestures. The women's skin is made of white, silk-like fabric. The smooth, cheap texture of the fabric reminds viewers of the made-in-China textile products. The six women stand in a circle, with their heads mutated into six monitors connected by a number of white threads. The tension of the threads forces them to bow their heads and hunch their backs. Such a posture makes them look constrained and depressed. Three of these women hold lumps of cellular, tissue-like materials in their slightly raised left hands. These biomimetic materials are distributed on their backs and hips and effused from their lower bodies. These female bodies are set against a pink,

46. Chunyan Ding, “Surrogacy Litigation in China and Beyond,” *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 36, no. 2 (2015): 33.

47. Alice E. Adams, *Images of Childbirth in Science, Feminist Theory, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 150.



Lin Tianmiao, *Chatting*, detail of cellular tissue-like materials in a woman's hand (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

Lin Tianmiao, *Chatting*, detail of the woman's back and lower body (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)



semicircular background. The audio installation in the background plays the sounds of panting and moaning during sexual intercourse, which creates an eerie and erotic ambiance.

In this installation the alienated female bodies cross the boundary between internal and external, biological and artificial. The abject and border-challenged bodily aesthetic registers the drastic plasticity of the female laboring body in the age of global capitalism. As Pun Ngai points out, multinational sweatshops branded themselves as the land of peach blossoms where female workers waited to be pursued by men.⁴⁸ Ngai's description implies that the sexualized production machine encapsulates the hidden impulse of the state, capital, and patriarchy, which was to transform female workers into the objects and subjects of desire at once. Calling attention to the drastically remolded subjectivity of Chinese female workers, Lin presses viewers to question what the laboring body has become under the guise of the country's economic miracle.

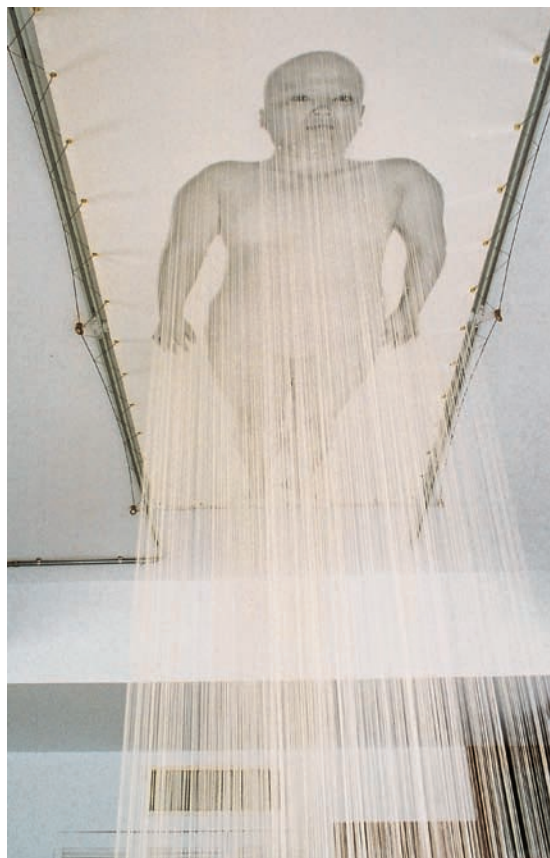
In *Chatting* Lin substitutes the women's skin with synthetic fabric. The smooth and stainless quality of their appearances makes them look docile, cheap, and enduring—desirable bodies to be expropriated as a part of the global factory. The rosy backdrop and the moaning sounds in the background allude to the needs and desires fabricated by global capitalism. The need to commercialize their labor and the desire to become modern consumers enticed female workers into factories where they produced electronic products for the global market. Moreover the lumps of cellular tissue-like materials effused from the women's lower bodies

48. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.



Lin Tianmiao, *Daydreamer*, 2000, white cotton thread, white sheet, mattress, digital C-type print, 59 x 86½ x 196¾ in. (150 x 220 x 500 cm), installation view, IT Park Gallery and Photo Studio, Taipei, 2000 (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

Lin Tianmiao, *Daydreamer*, detail of the computer-scanned body image (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)



recall industrial components, such as fiber optics and coils. These amorphous organisms testify to the reconfiguration of reproductive bodies into production materials. By replacing the women's heads with the monitors they produced, Lin implies that the internalized gaze of the state forced female workers to morph into submissive, machine-like subalterns. The cyborg-like female bodies staged in *Chatting* disclose a poignant fact: the hypermasculinized economic development of China was indeed built upon the dual exploitation of female workers' biological bodies and productive bodies.

“Clone Fever,” Human Engineering, and Biogovernance

Lin's 1999 installation *Daydreamer* seizes on the country's collective fascination with cloning to interrogate its persistent obsession with human engineering. In this work she uses numerous vertical white threads to connect a computer-scanned body image of herself on the ceiling and a mattress on the ground. The image and the mattress are the same size and are laid out horizontally—like a set of parallel-plane mirrors. The white threads, which resemble rays of light, project Lin's body image onto the mattress, outlining a barely formulated replica of her figuration. Making an analogy between the cotton threads and DNA strings, Lin mimics the process of mitotic DNA replication: the genetic information carried by DNA is transmitted to the copy of itself through the division of its centromere, and DNA is doubled in this process.

Lin's presentation of a replicated self echoed Chinese society's "clone fever" and its mystification of DNA in the 1990s. In 1997, the sheep Dolly, the first successfully cloned mammal created through somatic-cell nuclear transfer, brought enormous exhilaration, anxiety, and crises of ethics to the world. In particular this artificially produced animal stirred new fantasies about human engineering in China, a country with a century-long political history of remaking its national subjects. As scholar Jiang Jing notes, human engineering had been practiced through political, cultural, and scientific techniques throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁹ Jiang points out that the obsession with reinventing the bodies, brains, and hearts of Chinese people had specific historical logic and national consciousness. In 1906 Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) introduced to Chinese readers the American science-fiction novel *Technique for Creating Humans*, a story about creating "life-germs" in a lab.⁵⁰ He entrusted the story with the hope of creating a new species of humans with strengthened physiology that fit into a progressive modern country. In the Mao era the ideal of creating a socialist "New Man" was even closer to the notion of cloning. The ultimate goal of the Maoist revolution was to mass-produce a unified proletarian class sharing "one heart and one mind."⁵¹ Instead of using scientific approaches, Mao installed the proletarian worldview into individual minds through heavy-handed mass movements, labor reeducation, broadcasts, and propaganda posters.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government relaunched research projects on genetics and molecular biology, seeking to catch up with the global race for biomedical breakthroughs. China's participation in the Human Genome Project in 1994 further fueled society's enthusiasm for genetic engineering. As a country accounting for more than one-fifth of the world's population, China's contribution to the international sequencing efforts registered a "deep nationalist fervency"—an impulse to restore the country's collective national identity and to get over its humiliating past.⁵² Dubbed a state project likened to a "moon landing rocket," the state-funded research on genetic engineering was deemed a "Sputnik opportunity" for China to surpass the West. In the discourse of popular science, DNA was portrayed as the genetic material that constituted the biological core of individual life and the manual for the production of life.⁵³ Such a description implies that once the state authority acquired the DNA code of life, it would obtain the power to create governable subjects with desired fidelities.

Instead of conforming to the state's obsession with reengineering its national subjects, Lin's *Daydreamer* displays a rather judicious attitude toward the nationwide "clone fever." In contrast to the exhilarating news reports on cloning technologies, the white, clinical tone of Lin's installation creates an affectless atmosphere. In her computer-scanned body image, Lin uses image-processing software to erase the gender characteristics of her naked body—she presents herself as hairless and breastless. The digitized self-portrait looks like a genderless human replica, deprived of social and cultural identity. The gray tone of her flattened body and the pure white background of the print remind viewers of a sanitized lab where she lies on a bench and waits for surgery. Being spotlighted from below, her body image seems to be dissected by numerous cotton threads. The threads pierced through her body are reminiscent of DNA strands that transmitted her genetic information to the white mattress on the floor. However, what is projected onto the mattress is not a concrete body image but rather a shadow-like

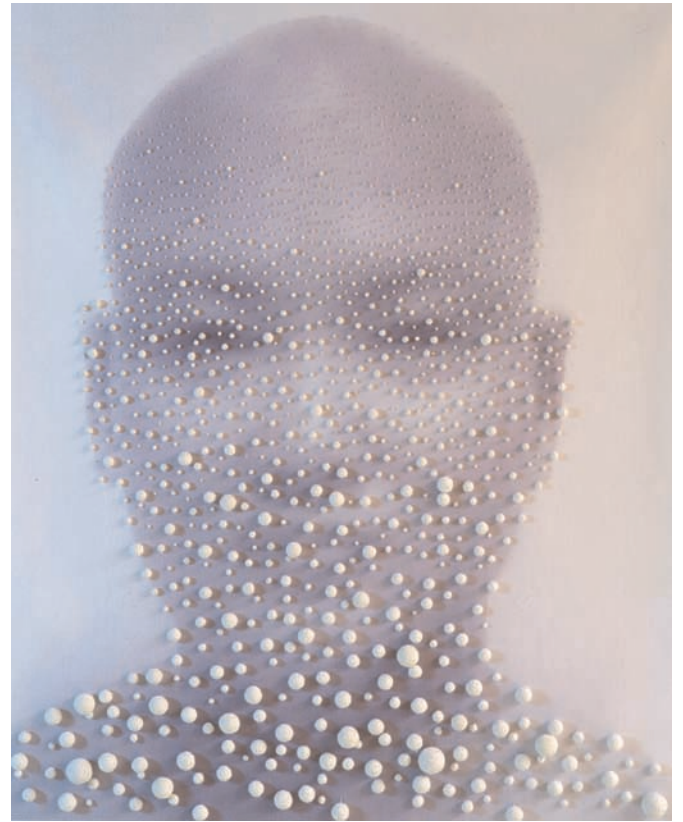
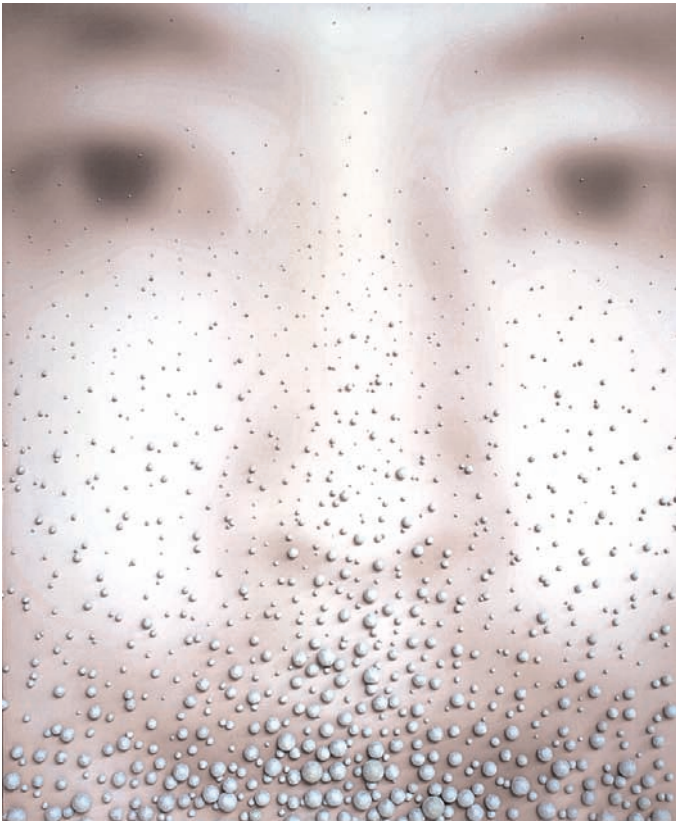
49. Jing Jiang, "From the Technique for Creating Humans to the Art of Reprogramming Hearts: Scientists, Writers, and the Genesis of China's Modern Literary Vision," *Cultural Critique* 80 (Winter 2012): 131–49.

50. Lu Xun, "Zao renshu" [The technique for creating humans], *Nüzi shijie* 4 (1906): 81.

51. Jiang, "From Creating Humans to Reprogramming Hearts," 136.

52. Ong, "Introduction," 21.

53. Chen Shouyi and Lao Weide, *Yichuan yu jiyin gongcheng* [Heredity and genetic engineering] (Beijing: Beijing Press, 1980).



Lin Tianmiao, *Focus no. 2*, 2001, digital C-type print on canvas, silk threads, cotton threads, and cotton balls, 95¼ × 69¾ × 5 in. (242 × 177 × 13 cm) (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

Lin Tianmiao, *Focus no. 3*, 2001, digital C-type print on canvas, silk threads, cotton threads, and cotton balls, 95¼ × 69¾ × 5 in. (242 × 177 × 13 cm) (artwork © Lin Tianmiao; photograph provided by the artist)

humanoid—a phantom with no corporeal substance. The ghost-like human replica ironizes the mystified power of biotechnology: instead of transforming the human into a godlike being, it leads to the annihilation of human subjectivity and corporeality.

Lin's 2001 work *Focus* further addresses the issue of biogovernance in postreform China. In this work Lin creates a series of computer-processed grayscale head portraits of a group of men, women, and children of various ages (including Lin herself). On the surface of these portraits she uses threads and cotton balls to obscure the facial features of these figures—their genders, ages, and appearances become indistinguishable from one another. The cotton balls are of different sizes and in irregular shapes. They mimic cellular tissues or tumors inside the body. As the clusters of lump-like tissues occupy the face images, they appear reminiscent of an appalling skin disease, which evokes the nameless dread of unpredictable invasion and infiltration.

The peculiar portraits in *Focus* raise a question: what has the human body become in the era of biotechnology, and how does one deal with the precariousness of the body? The bodies presented by Lin were no longer classical, anatomic bodies in which the somatic tissues and organs remained securely inside the body capsule. Instead, Lin transplanted the subcutaneous lumps to the skin surface, alluding to the instability and insecurity of the molecular body. In the 1980s, genes were thought of as time bombs that carried information about genetic diseases, such as cancers.⁵⁴ Regardless of an individual's gender, age, and social class, cancer cells could devour a corporeal body once the "bomb" was detonated. In *Focus*, Lin

54. Fan Changsheng and Hu Baolong, "DNA chao-luoxuan zhuanhuan" [DNA superhelix switch], *Shengming de huaxue* 3 (1983): 10.

exploits Chinese society's paranoia about genetic diseases to address the emergent mode of state governance—the governance of life itself. Given the potential threat of the molecular body, it must be monitored, tested, and treated by the state.⁵⁵ Unlike the enforced big-push policy of birth control, this new form of governance has been carried out voluntarily by citizens/patients. The state has thus become a huge hospital where the biometric data of individuals are collected, stored, and deployed for the sake of society's biosecurity.

As revealed by its title, *Focus*, the real focus of these portraits is not the physiques or facial features of the individuals. Rather, Lin brings to the fore the molecules, tissues, and cells underneath the skin. This uncanny mode of embodiment discloses a shifting relationship between subjects and the state, from which new forms of biopolitics emerged. Since the 1990s the popular discourses on hygiene, the body, and health care have colonized the mainstream media. The idea of understanding oneself was no longer confined to the conduct of certain behaviors or values but was increasingly geared toward an understanding of the genetic self and the molecular body. The slogan “popularizing the knowledge of eugenics and improving prenatal care” no longer meant simply to follow the one-child policy but to make wise reproductive decisions based on the understanding of the genetic making of oneself.⁵⁶ As Ong notes, biotechnology has steered state governance toward the sphere of subject construction and self-knowledge.⁵⁷ Reverberating with Ong's description of postsocialist biopower, *Focus* demonstrates that the corporeal body has become the key site for working on the self—the neoliberal subject that fits into an increasingly commercialized market economy.

Epilogue: Toward an Uncertain Body

I understand Lin's oeuvre not to be complicit with a specific political agenda but to be actively questioning the relationship between bodies and technology, subjects and the state. Her interest in bodily transformation and the permeable surface of skin intimates that, in contrast to the class-based politics of the Mao era, the value of humanity has shifted from the code of conduct—the behavior of the proletarian body—to the makeup of the body per se. The precarious body staged in her installations points to the rapidly alienated humanity and new subjectivities brought about by the radical social reform in postsocialist China. In her work, the body is presented as an unstable entity and a constantly evolving structure. The uncertainty of these bodies shows that the flesh has become increasingly malleable and penetrable vis-à-vis the heroic, eternalized “iron body” celebrated in socialist realist art. This changing body aesthetic marks the shift from a perpetuated ideal of the socialist man to a flexible body-machine prone to technocratic governance.

Lin's work, however, does not merely visualize how state power has employed biotechnology to manipulate and reprogram the body. Instead, the tactical combination of textile technology, envisioning technology, and the body underscores the collaboration between women and technology. Responding to Chinese society's fantasy about molecular biology and reproductive technology, she weaves together gender politics and biopolitics while etching out creative spaces for examining the fabrication of female subjectivity. Lin treats the techni-

55. For more on this topic, see Vincanne Adams, Kathleen Erwin, and Phouc V. Le, “Governing Through Blood: Biology, Donation, and Exchange in Urban China,” in Ong and Chen, *Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate*, 167–89.

56. Distinct from the Nazi eugenics and its racial hygiene, the practices of eugenics in post-Mao China were centered on the improvement of prenatal health care. Yet the country's recent legislation programs, such as the second Marriage Law (1980) and genetic enhancement programs after the 2000s, have displayed dangerous eugenic intent. In some provinces the municipal government prohibited reproduction by intellectually impaired persons, who were considered a threat to the overall quality of national health. Along with the development of genetic technology, this type of legislation could lead to novel forms of genetic discrimination and bioinsecurity. See Zhang Di, *Youshengxue de lunli fansi: Renlei yichuanxue de lishi jiaoxun* [The ethical reflection on eugenics: The historical lessons of genetics] (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2018).

57. Ong, “Introduction,” 12.

cal image of the flesh as a form of data that can be recoded and reprogrammed. Her gesture of “weaving” transforms traditional textile technology into a technique for self-reinvention. This creative grafting of art and technology, body and information, enables new possibilities for women to regain sovereignty over their bodies within a male-dominated technocratic society. As pioneering examples of China’s new media practices, Lin’s work might appear to some viewers as low-tech. Yet the metaphorical use of the thread and the metamorphic corporeal forms she creates manifest the political productivity of the molecular body—the fluid, posthuman imaginations they stir transgress the boundaries between gender, subject, and identity.

Linda Huang is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History at the Ohio State University, specializing in contemporary Asian art. Her research includes posthumanism, socialist history of technology, biopolitics, and the aesthetics of labor. Her dissertation project, “Re-imagining Postsocialist Corporeality,” addresses how the fantasies of information during the 1980s affected the development of Chinese media art.