

Art as a Channel and Embodiment of Symbolic Interaction Between Migrants and Non-Migrants

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Many non-migrant politicians, journalists, and scholars in migrant-destination societies often represent migrants with self-interested objectives and in specific instrumental ways based on stereotypes. Yet research on symbolic interaction reveals migrants are not passive victims. They actively and strategically shape their interactions with non-migrants. The artwork produced by Chinese migrant artists becomes a non-verbal channel through which the migrant can convey such challenges to non-migrants who can more empathetically appreciate these challenges. By analyzing the artwork and narratives of first-generation migrant artists, I show how art highlights various challenges that migrants confront in their process of immigration, like enduring physical pain, conforming to the institutions of the host society, navigating language barriers, confronting regular cultural clashes, accepting social estrangement, and coping with double consciousness. This paper shows how migrant art can serve as a semiotic object that reveals important features of past symbolic interactions between migrants and non-migrants and offers a channel through which non-migrants can potentially empathize more with migrants' experiences.

Keywords: migration, art, language, culture, race and ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

Non-migrants frequently learn about migrants through academics, journalists, and politicians, who represent them in self-interested ways rather than via migrants' representations of themselves. For example, in the past, journalists and politicians associated with right-wing media companies and political parties have depicted migrants as trespassers, criminals, and free-loaders who illegally and regularly

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enter the United States and other migrant-destination societies and take advantage of its health and welfare benefits (Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan 2016; López-Cevallos 2014; Yoo 2002) or even as national security threats like terrorists (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016). Alternatively, scholars note how non-profit organizations, left-wing media companies, and politicians in France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and the United States will selectively portray some migrants as “deserving” of citizenship (Viladrich 2019) by adopting a more compassionate human interest frame (Aalberg and Beyer 2015; Bonizzoni 2018; Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2014; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Kootstra 2016). This is especially the case if non-migrants perceive migrants as responsible or self-disciplined (Horton 2004), suffering through no fault of their own (Viladrich 2012), culturally assimilated to the host society (Lauby 2016; Nicholls and Fiorito 2015), not demanding or uncooperative (Chase et al. 2017; Gonzales, Sigona, and Burciaga 2016) or simply as the type of people who non-migrant audiences most identify with (Achterberg, Raven, and van der Veen 2015). The fact that the non-migrants typically represent migrants instead of the migrants representing themselves may partly be due to a language barrier and a cultural and social disaffinity or distance between migrants and non-migrants. Yet, how powerful non-migrant actors represent migrants to achieve political or commercial objectives may seem a simplistic caricature that does not reveal migrants’ subjective experiences and interactions.

Migrant artwork can serve as one valuable alternative medium through which migrants can convey the diverse challenges migrants confront in their interactions with the migrant-destination society. Through the artwork of migrants, non-migrants can potentially understand the challenges migrants confront, potentially forging an “empathy path” (Ruiz-Junco 2017). Empathy paths are “recurrent patterns of empathic action and attachment, based on interpretive orientations built through cultural stocks of empathy knowledge” (Ruiz-Junco 2017:425). The artwork of migrants can serve as a medium through which the migrant artist communicates their experience to the native-born, potentially forging such an empathy path from non-migrants to migrants. As such, artwork can function as a generalized form of object-mediated symbolic interaction (Peña-Alves 2020) between migrants and non-migrants in society. However, this is only an *invitation* for audience members to empathize with a given aspect of the migrant experience; whether they do so will necessarily depend upon many factors, such as their knowledge, life experiences, political ideologies, and biases, which will elicit diverse audience reactions.

Furthermore, as art historian Christine Ross articulates in her book, *Art as Coexistence: Unlearning the Way We See Migration* (Ross 2022:172–173), for empathy generated via art to be the genuine and prosocial empathy that translates into action requires (1) such empathy to be ambivalent in its affect and maintain the self-and-other distinction to avoid the risks of empathy reinforcing social boundaries and stigma or triggering emotional distress, complete withdrawal, or emotional numbness, (2) for the empathizer be mindful of the macro-historical context that

produced the subject of empathy, (3) to share and cognitively understand in the subject's perspective, and (4) to acknowledge the autonomy of the subject. Achieving all the above can be challenging for art viewers. Although affordances like textual captions accompanying art can facilitate empathetic encounters by providing historical and international context for artwork, much of the practice of forging an empathy path via art is a skill best learned through repeated symbolic encounters with different types of art.

In addition to the above, art emerges due to the collective action by many different actors (Becker 1974), even if individualistic societies conventionally recognize or reward individual artists as the sole creators of their art and center the art's creation around the artists' biographies and account for what motivated the art. As Howard Becker (2008) points out in his book *Art Worlds*, the success of all the artists analyzed below and the attention offered to their artwork is a collective product of not only themselves but also many others, including those who frame, curate, publicize, critique, and even mount or set the stage for the artwork. For example, several contextual and verbal elements collectively constitute a prism through which many interpret artwork. These elements can include a written caption that includes the dates and location of the artist's birth and death, influential historical events in their lifetime, an interpretation of the art often written by the curator, the artist's interpretation of the work, what other art pieces are nearby, and the general theme of the exhibit and its description as conveyed by larger museum panels, leaflets, social media posts, and websites — all of which collectively sometimes can have just as much if not more influence than the artist has in contributing to viewers' interpretation. Virtual technologies also extend the reach of art and make encounters with art more publicly accessible for most non-migrants who live far from the large metropolitan cities where one can view such conceptual and performance art in person. By writing this paper, even I could potentially contribute to the forging of the empathy path for readers who later view the art by putting it into the context of migrants' everyday experiences revealed from empirical studies from social science. In this way, multiple members of the migrant-destination artistic community are also collectively working with migrant artists to build empathy paths, which may not even emerge without the support of many other actors. Many such non-migrant members of the migrant-destination society and other migrants wish to facilitate the artistic expression of specific migrant artists and, therefore, are integral to their success.

In this paper, I analyze various pieces of migrant art that reflect distinct challenges that migrants face as they interact with non-migrant individuals and the migrant-destination society. Drawing upon both prior literature on migrant artists and their artwork as data, I code such challenges as physical anguish, subordination to institutions, language barriers, cultural conflicts and clashes, social alienation, and double consciousness. Such visual artwork emerged in three steps after the migratory process. First, after artists migrate, they have experiences that transform their relationship with the migrant-destination society in unexpected ways, inspiring their art. Second, migrant artists — many who may not speak the majority

language of the migrant-destination society — discover that art can serve as a shared non-verbal language that semiotically conveys their experiences and the challenges they confront in everyday life. This offers the non-migrants more nuanced insight into overlooked aspects of their experiences. Third, the attention migrant artists receive in terms of exhibitions, presentations, performances, films, and books reflects a humanistic desire of some of the non-migrants to empathize with the experiences of migrants and better understand the migrant's view of the migrant-destination society. Non-migrants can potentially gain a different view of the migrants' experiences than they can obtain from the non-migrant elite representations of migrants or through other channels like writing in the local people's language, which tend to come more from second-generation migrants fluent in that language than first-generation migrants. Producing and circulating artwork becomes another way migrant artists can influence and shape migrants' interactions with the non-migrants.

I focus on Chinese migrant artists because the Chinese artist migrant population is large. I do not claim what I find empirically represents all Chinese migrant artists or migrant artists in general. However, I would suggest that the themes they evoke could be theoretically relevant to our understanding of the experiences of other Chinese and other migrants. In this paper, I will analyze the art and narratives of migrant artists to illustrate the six challenges mentioned above. Migrants need to renegotiate their identity with respect to the migrant-destination society while confronting such challenges. I argue that art that reflects these challenges can potentially function as a channel for migrants to communicate their everyday interactional challenges to the non-migrants in the migrant-destination society.

Within the migrant-destination society, those who typically view and interpret the kind of contemporary art and performance art I analyze below generally are (though not exclusively) upper-class or upper-middle class in terms of their level of formal education. In this paper, when I refer to how artists symbolically interact via empathy paths with non-migrant audiences in migrant-destination societies, I refer mainly to this segment of society. Although this limits their audience and, therefore, the aesthetic impact of the art on the migrant-destination society, symbolic interactions of the highly educated classes that view such art are particularly important considering the substantial cultural influence they exercise within migrant-destination societies. Due to their access to such an elite audience, the artists' artwork and reflective narratives offer non-migrants insights into the symbol-laden interactions between migrants and non-migrants and how those interactions are part of the challenging process by which humans from very different cultures adapt to each other's presence and learn to coexist in multicultural migrant-destination societies.

MIGRANTS AS INTERACTIVE SUBJECTS AND INTERACTIONAL DIFFICULTIES BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND NON-MIGRANTS

Previous research about migrants' interactions with non-migrants within a migrant-destination society has stressed the active role migrants play in shaping

those interactions. For example, Valenta (2009) notes how Bosnian Muslims could more easily and effectively suppress Muslim aspects of their identity and emphasize their European characteristics, thereby gaining more acceptance in Norwegian society than Iraqi Muslims. This is more difficult for both groups to do with strangers than with friends. With friends, migrants could ironically ridicule discrediting categorizations or influence the subject of conversation (“altercasting”). Rapoport, Lomsky-Feder, and Heider (2002) show how Russian-Jewish immigrants in Israel and Germany use many distinct narrating tactics and strategies to normalize anti-Semitism when confronted by it, thereby maintaining control over their cultural identity. Such migrants, through their strategic interactions with non-migrants, take an active role in reflexively managing their relations and identity by drawing on various symbols and cultural resources with which they are familiar. This defies popular portrayals of the migrant by non-migrant political and cultural elites as either a passive victim of inhumane immigration policy who is deserving of compassion (Viladrich 2019), a hostile threat to national security or cultural unity (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016), a freeloader (Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan 2016), or hardworking and neoliberal subject to be molded into a model acculturated citizen (Lauby 2016).

However, another way some migrants cope with the interactional challenges of immigrating is to produce art (Chiu 2006). Art can mediate information, experiences, and perceptions of migrants among non-migrant individuals in a way that representations of migrants by non-migrants frequently fail to do. Just as the specter of many migrants crossing borders and politicized expressions of non-migrants’ fear of migrants often circulate through imagery in the mass media, migrant artists reflect aspects of their challenging, every day, subjective experiences and interactions via their artwork.

Whether in the form of objects or performances, such art is relevant to interactions between migrants and non-migrants in two ways. First, art materially reflects the accumulated interactions of the migrant artist with their host society, generated as a way for the migrant artist to process such experiences. Second, art becomes a socially valuable channel by which migrant artists can convey and represent distinct features and dimensions of the migrant experience to non-migrants. Non-migrants can then better appreciate the migrant’s view of native-born individuals and the migrant destination society than they could only from representations of migrants by the non-migrant cultural and political elite.

Scholars of migrant artists in both the social sciences and humanities often portray the work of such artists as primarily a discursive counterpoint to narratives about migrants circulated by politicians and journalists (Brownlie and Abouddahab 2021; Foroutan 2019; Petersen 2017). Such art reflects different specific features of migrants’ experiences interacting with non-migrants during migration. Ross (2022) discusses how migrants use specific aesthetic strategies to interact with viewers, like storytelling, montage, thermos-vision, augmented/virtual reality, conversation, ventriloquial speech acts, occluding faces, and memorialization. All these artistic

methods can trigger self-reflection, often by engaging with viewers on the premise of disclosing the imprint of the historical past on the present and affirming the autonomy of migration. Such literature about migrant artists occasionally evokes multiple challenges that social scientific research has demonstrated much of the general migrant population regularly experiences.

First, one prominent theme in writing about migrant artists is how migrants endure much physical pain, fatigue, and discomfort as they both migrate and settle into a new society, given that many work in low-wage jobs and harsh environments harmful to their health (Holmes 2013; Lucht 2011). For example, the artist Berni Searle has covered her naked body with spices to evoke how migrants struggle to seek shelter and safety in foreign societies where many individuals are hostile toward their survival (Brownlie and Abouddahab 2021). Another physical theme in the migrant experience concerns survival and obtaining legal immigration status. Many migrants often must conform to the structure of various constraining institutions that regulate and structure their interactions with others, and therefore their lifestyle and behaviors, in a regimented way. Such institutions simultaneously provide opportunities for international mobility and deprive migrants of various freedoms — what Parreñas (2011) has conceptualized as “indentured mobility.” Many migrants need to engage in repetitive, tiring, and manual labor in the informal economy to survive or conform to the rigid regulations of specific institutions to become legal residents or citizens. Migrants often can only claim legitimacy for a right to exist based on how much “work” they produce (Sayad 1991). However, this also happens within institutions that often prohibit migrants from working, such as many asylum processes, freezing the progress of their lives in a liminal period of existential waiting (Auyero 2012). Migrant art evokes the more mundane and banal features of a migrant’s life in such constraining institutions, such as the boredom and entrapment into a meaningless present that accompanies living as an asylum-seeker with no right to work or receive benefits.

Migrants also frequently struggle with a language barrier that contributes to often frustrating micro-interactional difficulties with non-migrants. The films of Eloy Dominguez-Seren examine language as an obstacle and limitation to migrants’ everyday survival. Nele Wohlatz incorporates language barrier concerns in a film about a migrant struggling to learn English (Brownlie and Abouddahab 2021). Such obstacles to communication, in turn, can contribute to misunderstandings, ongoing cultural conflicts, and occasionally clashes between different groups. Such conflictual interactions — which can erupt either as micro-aggressions, overt racial discrimination, or more violent hate crimes — remain common between migrants and non-migrants and frequently become themes in the art migrants produce (Schramm et al. 2019). This is due to how many non-migrants continue to racialize and therefore otherize some acculturated non-migrant citizens as “migrants.” Such conflicts, ambivalences, and negotiations continually recur in societies shaped by migration or what some refer to as “post-migrant” societies (Foroutan 2019).

The feeling of cultural alienation of migrants toward and from society also frequently appears in studies of migrant art. For example, Chu Yinhua’s *Portable*

Cities expresses how alienated she feels as a Taiwanese migrant in both Japan and Singapore (Petersen 2017). Biemann's film *Sahara Chronicles* intentionally creates obstacles for viewers to identify with her African characters (Brownlie and Aboudahab 2021) in a way that viewers become acutely and consciously aware of external interference in their ability to empathize. Such mutual alienation – typically taken for granted – limits how frequently migrants interact with non-migrants, further amplifying cognitive mechanisms like the language barrier. Finally, such cultural alienation frequently derives from the experience of double consciousness (DuBois and Edwards 1965), whereby such subjects have both their sense of who they are but also become hyper-aware of a second distinct and even more socially-consequential identity as perceived in the hegemonic gaze of non-migrants. Prejudicial portrayals of migrants as racialized, gendered, or classed induce such double consciousness. Migrants often, in this way, experience a division or conflict between how their body “simultaneously sees and is seen” (Merleau-Ponty 1961). Both observational and experimental social science research has demonstrated that such portrayals via double consciousness have impacted political behavior (Nicholls 2013) and the educational/occupational attainment of minority groups via stereotype threat and promise (Lee and Zhou 2015; Steele and Aronson 1995). Unsurprisingly, we observe some cases of this in studies of migrant artists, even though such analysts never cite any specific examples and mainly allude to such artwork. Petersen (2017:56) argues that “migrants, either partly or wholly separated from the places, language and social forms of their home country, have to straddle two cultures that put each other in perspective, often in tensional and illuminating ways,” which is reminiscent of double consciousness. For many migrant artists, identification and disidentification are tactics for negotiating unwanted ascribed identities (Schramm et al. 2019) and resisting such double consciousness. Although prior scholars have cursorily provided examples of all these common features of migrant experiences and how they appear in the work of migrant art in general, I offer below a systematic presentation of examples of migrant visual art that reflects each of these common themes from migrants' interactions and experiences. Such artwork becomes a potentially consequential empathy path through which non-migrants within migrant-destination societies can better understand and appreciate migrants' perspectives on their interactions with non-migrants.

SUBJECTS OF ANALYSIS, MATERIALS, AND METHODS

To illustrate how the artwork of migrants reflects the different interactional difficulties migrants experience and becomes a medium to communicate with non-migrants about those difficulties, I chose specific Chinese migrant artists whose art (1) is displayed and well-received in the Western art world and (2) reflects distinctive features of migrants' experiences in migrant destination societies. I consider an artist “well-received” if they were successful enough to have multiple opportunities to exhibit their art in galleries and museums, explain it in video-recorded presentations

and one-on-one interviews, and even have others publish large books about their art and provide further in-depth analysis of it. The abundant and primary references about these artists that I cite and draw upon are evidence of this. By distinctive features, I mean specific aspects of the challenging experiences that migrants confront in their daily interactions with a migrant-destination society.

I analyzed six artists who produced work since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping became the leader of China. Deng made emigrating out of the country considerably easier than during the reign of Mao Zedong. I evaluated the art as a cultural text if it conveyed a challenge that social scientists have empirically found migrants confront. Although the artists I analyze eventually became successful and well-known, most were not during the period they produced the art I analyze. Their narratives reveal how most came from socio-economically disadvantaged, isolated backgrounds. All these migrant artists created performative and highly conceptual art in the 1990s, after the Tian'anmen Square protests, in a historical period when the public and art institutions in many migrant-destination societies were strongly receptive to migrant artists from China. To some degree, such artists give voice to the far greater number of migrants who undergo similar experiences and who either do not convey their experiences via art or who did but whose art has not received as much attention.

I interpret this art as a scholar of migration with respect to the artist's oral and written biography and reflections about the artwork, rather than as an art critic. I do so to highlight and offer insights about different features of migrant experience over time. I am not focused here on the fame of this work or how the work has "been received" by art institutions or art critics who have written much about these artists (Buckermann 2021). Nor do I claim this work is empirically representative of the experiences that *all* migrants have. Yet the artwork illustrates the experiences that social science research suggests many migrants have.

Since first-generation migrant artists are often not sufficiently fluent in the non-migrants' primary language to convey their experiences and often do not interact with non-migrants' art serves as an ideal non-verbal medium through which migrants can convey their experiences to non-migrants through compositions of aesthetic data. I consider aesthetic data to be distinct from the conventional forms of numerical and textual data that social scientists usually rely upon in that aesthetic data consists of elements like balance, color, movement, pattern, scale, shape, and visual weight. Together these elements synthetically constitute a visual stimulus like an artwork that symbolically conveys meaning, just as statistical figures like coefficients and textual objects like conceptual terms do. Importantly, understanding art often does not depend on a shared language. Art's meaning can often be intuitively understood before one discursively reflects on its meaning in their mind with language (Testa 2017). Therefore, first-generation migrants who are not fluent in the non-migrants' primary language may be able to more effectively convey their experience through art than through other language-based artistic media, like migrant literature, which is often written mainly by second-generation migrant writers fluent in the non-migrants' primary language. Although the semiotic effects of

art are not universal, such visual art has the potential to reduce the “social distance” (Simmel 2004) between non-migrants and migrants who come from a very distinct culture and with whom non-migrants may often only cross paths for commercial and instrumental reasons such as purchasing food, taking public transport, or employing them. This is important because research suggests that this social distance between international migrants and non-migrants is substantial. This may limit trust between them and affect their everyday micro-interactions. For example, in psychological experiments, randomly sampled subjects dislike migrants more than non-migrants partly because they cannot imagine or relate to migrants’ experiences, making it difficult to empathize with migrants (Rubin, Paolini, and Crisp 2010).

A diverse body of methodological literature (DiBartolomeo, Clark, and Davis 2015; Hocking 2019) and empirical studies (Carocci and Pratt 2018) also demonstrate how visual art offers valuable data and theoretical perspectives for social scientists researching embodied, cognitive, and affective experiences. In an age in which powerful and viral images and videos circulated by social media have potentially world-historical impacts, visual art seems an effective way for many migrants to convey their experiences because a growing number of scholars have recognized art as a non-verbal way of knowing, symbolizing, and being-in-the-world that reflects specific experiences (DiBartolomeo, Clark, and Davis 2015; Hocking 2019). Migrants may not be able to communicate their experiences to non-migrants through face-to-face interactions or language. The non-migrant viewer can potentially better understand migrant experiences vicariously through their aesthetic encounters with the art (Chaplin 2005). Art can be a valuable site of semiotic object-mediated communication through which migrants and non-migrants can communicate and understand each other. The migrant experiences reflected in the art enable a non-migrant viewer to acquire knowledge in their interaction with the art before reflecting upon it precisely because visual art directly conveys impressions in how we frequently receive information while moving around the world through our immediate senses rather than via words and numbers. Art, therefore, can serve as a channel and embodiment for symbolic interaction. Art conveys the migrant experience to non-migrants, even if its impact is often limited to the relatively more educated segments of the non-migrant population who take time to engage with the art and strive to understand such art.

The aesthetic encounter with art complements the additional form of data I provide from the artist’s biography and narratives in conveying the experience to the audience and validates my interpretations. I engage with the artwork as a cultural text, both semiotically in terms of what aspects of the art signified intertextually with the artists’ biographical backgrounds and narrative reflections, and in terms of the cultural hermeneutics of what the art meant given the specific historical and cultural context in which they created the art. The narrative of the art unfolds in these specific contexts which generate specific meanings. The diversity of narratives by the artists I analyze about different features of their interactions with non-migrants illustrates how they were not necessarily engaged in the same type of migration

project but captures the variability among migrants' experiences. In sum, this combination of aesthetic data from the visual art of migrant artists complemented with their reflective narrative provides those who have not migrated experiential insights into changes in migrant identity and their relationship to both their societies of migrant-destination and migrant-origin.

Based on a thematic analysis of the literature above about the interactional challenges migrant artists confront in migrant-destination societies, I will focus on six types of challenges below: (1) bodily discomfort or pain, and (2) the corporeal experience of conforming to exploitative disciplinary regimes of social control necessary for migrants to immigrate legally and survive, (3) the interactional challenges of communicating in the host society's language, (4) the cultural conflicts and clashes between migrants and non-migrants, (5) the estrangement migrants often feel with respect to the migrant-destination society, and (6) how hegemonic representations of migrants as a group condition a migrant's affect, self-perception, and behavior — the phenomenon of “double consciousness” (DuBois and Edwards 1965). Although all migrants may not experience all these phenomena in their interactions with non-migrants, most confront at least one.

ENDURING BODILY DISCOMFORT AND PAIN IN THE MIGRANT'S JOURNEY: ZHĀNG HUÁN

While both migrating and settling in their destination society, migrants often must move, work, and reside in uncomfortable and crowded spaces, such as decrepit vehicles, neighborhoods, and housing, even if they also sometimes move through relatively more affluent, comfortable, and peaceful public areas than they inhabited in their country of origin. This might make them tense, sick, and sore. The painter and performance artist Zhāng Huán frequently raised awareness of bodily discomfort by intentionally and viscerally suffering through his transgressive performance art in Mainland China.

In 1998, Zhāng moved to New York City, an important stage for non-migrant and migrant performance artists since the 1960s (Yoshimoto 2005:1–3). Here, he highlighted the bodily discomfort immigrants suffered there as well. Like many previous Chinese artists in the 1990s, he hoped to find more opportunities, but like other migrants, he often suffered through brutally cold winters with wind, rain, and snow (Zhang et al. 2003). In *Pilgrimage — Wind and Water in New York* (1998), Zhāng set up a traditional Chinese wooden bed furnished with an ice mattress in the city's Meat Packing district (Figure 1). The Meat Packing District was then gentrifying from a gritty area to one of New York's most fashionable neighborhoods with many boutique stores catering to young hipsters and professionals (Renzi 2012), the demographic group most likely to view his performance. Zhāng rested naked in a prone position upon this bed of ice for nearly 10 min. The haptically-painful sensation of ice touching his bare skin contrasted with his expressionless face and still body. He



FIGURE 1. Pilgrimage – Wind and Water in New York (1998) by Zhāng Huán.

leashed many dogs to the bed, conveying a sense of captivity. Eventually, he could not bear resting on the bed and slowly rose (Zhang et al. 2003).

Zhāng—who acknowledges that his art has also been profoundly influenced by Buddhism and its stoic practices of relinquishing one's desires (Zhang et al. 2003)—noted how the fear pervading New York City was what inspired this piece:

I do like this city, but at the same time I have an unnamable fear. I want to feel it with my body, just as I feel the ice. I try to melt off a reality in the way I try to melt off the ice with the warmth of my body. (Zhijian 1999:71)

By expressing and feeling this fear through a performatively visceral encounter with extreme cold, Zhāng's performance also embodied the physical dis-ease many migrants might suffer while living under environmental extremes in such an impersonal, cold, diverse, and fast-paced city. Zhāng's stoicism reflects how many migrants can come to perceive this discomfort and pain as something they should expect and not even question the ethics or morality of having to endure it. Yet such discomfort and pain can be how a migrant remains grounded. Zhāng suggested inflicting this pain upon his body through performance art was also a way of protecting and centering both his autonomous identity as a migrant artist in a foreign and at times hostile environment of a society viewed as superior to his society of migrant-origin:

It felt that I was coming from the periphery and going to the core. But I wanted to change that dynamic, to subvert it, to treat myself as the core and all the countries that I visited as the periphery. Wherever I went—it could be New York, it could be Rome—I saw the new city as the periphery and my own creative energy as the core, and I combined what I had within me, using my body to connect with the different peripheries. It was a good way for me to be true to myself and not lose myself in another culture ... I had to find a strategy to keep my individuality and let it grow out of this idea of the periphery and the core. (Art Space Editors 2017)

By voluntarily performing an accentuated experience of pain that most other migrants endure every day in unnoticed ways in public space, Zhāng's performative art startlingly and viscerally drew the attention of New Yorkers nearby to the physical discomfort that migrants often endure involuntarily (Zhang et al. 2003). This resonated with one viewer of his art in 1999 as forcing "the audience to be aware of and accept the cruelty of reality ... expressing and making clear the existence and inescapability of external pressures by means of the body ... the conflict between the body and its surrounding conditions" (Zhijian 1999). His work began to attract an enormous receptive audience, leading many to invite him to produce more performance art (Rosenberg 2020). Through a shockingly masochistic performance, Zhāng willingly endured and brought to public awareness the kind of discomfort that migrants involuntarily suffer. Whereas many non-migrants might habitually overlook or unconsciously keep such suffering out of their peripheral vision in their everyday encounters with migrants, those who encountered Zhāng's show confronted the type of bodily discomfort that is part of the ordinary life of many migrants. For non-migrants, Zhāng put into shocking relief the mundane pain that migrants confront daily, whether during their journey to another society or within that society.

FORCED CONFORMITY OF MIGRANTS TO HOST SOCIETY INSTITUTIONS: TEHCHING HSIEH

The process of immigrating typically requires migrants to surrender to various coercive political, economic, and social institutions of a migrant-destination society that eventually structure the rhythm of their daily lives. Although institutions sometimes provide partial relief to the physical discomfort and pain, they often constrain migrants' lives by forcing them to occupy limited physical space, engage in repetitive and tedious tasks, deprive them of their leisure time, and often effectively give up a completely free pursuit of their dreams. The performance art of Tehching Hsieh expresses how institutions often structure and domesticate the lives and physical movement of migrants (Heathfield 2007:374). His art situates those embodied experiences that Zhāng portrayed "in the wild" within institutions of indentured mobility like regimented jobs, marriages, social service bureaucracies, and detention camps in which migrants — often under duress and out of a desire for physical, financial, and legal security — voluntarily and contractually submit and entangle themselves.

Tehching realized that in the repressive autocratic Taiwan of the 1970s, "there was no way ... to do art" (Tehching 2017). He trained as a seaman for Taiwan's government in 1974, only a year before Chiang Kai-shek died. While in the United States for mandatory military training, he jumped ship, then migrated to New York City. There, from nine to five every day of the week for 6 years, he washed dishes to survive while pondering how he could start a career as an artist (Tehching 2017): "I am just work, back, work, back, work, and come home thinking, and then one day I say, 'what am I looking for?' I am already in the [art] piece" (Tehching 2017). As he suggested, the

rigor of this life as an undocumented immigrant energized and prepared him for his art performances of endurance: “I felt good doing my work in an illegal context; it was difficult, but I had some kind of freedom. I had no identity. Of course, that’s a difficult status, but it gave me energy. If you’re scared, you can’t do it. You have to take the risk.” (Huang 2023) After saving up enough money to quit his job, from 1978 to 1986, Tehching in his *One Year Performance* art pieces expressed through his daily actions how, in the process of migrating, migrants often endure soul-crushing, self-alienating, and dehumanizing institutions that can smother the possibility of self-actualizing their dreams. Although not all migrants must conform to such institutions to successfully migrate, and some non-migrants must conform to them as well, many migrants submit to such institutions to obtain legal immigration status. For example, echoing the experience of many low-income and undocumented working-class migrants like himself who join an under-paid wage manual laboring class to survive, in *Time Clock Piece* (1980–1981), Tehching wears a bland, gray work uniform and engages in the self-disciplined practice of “clocking in” for a job at a time stamp machine: “I punched time every hour on the hour for one year ... I sleep in the other room and every hour I had to go in the time-clock room to punch. In one year ... it is a very good unit of real life” (Tehching 2017). (Figure 2) This performance expressed how Tehching, after escaping the regimented and repetitive life of the military, joined an analogously regimented and repetitive life as a time-scheduled laborer in the US economy, conforming to a Procrustean timetable that is mechanically structured. For Tehching (2017), this establishes a scheduled regularity and periodicity. He captured the temporality of submitting to this institution by taking photos of himself each day next to the time-stamp machine. As one viewer expressed, “Hsieh created a performance in which the details of his undocumented life could be preserved in history, yet remain free” (Huang 2023).

Tehching evoked the way other immigration policies and institutions structure the lives of migrants in multiple other pieces. In *Cage Piece* (1978–1979), Tehching trapped himself in a wooden cage for 1 year and had food passed to him as if he were a captured animal. This was evocative of the spatial deprivation many asylum seekers endure within and outside immigrant detention centers, waiting long periods for their court hearings (Vianelli, Gill, and Hoellerer 2021). In *Outdoor Piece* (1981–198), he stayed outside all buildings for a year. He had experiences of a civilian harassing him, him defending himself, and then police officers forcibly trying to remove him from the street into a building despite him violently resisting in his effort to remain outside and not violate the terms of his performance art (Heathfield 2007). This performance evoked how unauthorized migrants with ethnic, racial, or religious minority backgrounds are frequently vulnerable victims of crime since if they report a crime to police, they may be deported (Carling and Haugen 2021).

In *Rope Piece* (1983–1984), he and female artist Linda Montano signed a contract to have their bodies tethered together by a rope for a year, engaging in mundane activities like eating, drinking, working, talking, exercising, meeting friends, traveling, and going to the toilet to defecate and urinate — but never touching each



FIGURE 2. Time Clock Piece (1980–1981) by Tehching Hsieh.

other (Heathfield 2007:46–49). They metaphorically “tied the knot” and remained together with each other out of duty, fulfilling a marriage contract. Their performance evoked the experience of many migrants who – due to wedlock being the only viable route to immigrate – will marry and live with someone whom they do not have any strong emotional affection or physical connection and who may even physically, verbally, or sexually abuse them or even undermine their sense of confidence (Hoogenraad 2021). If Tehching had been one of the more socio-economically privileged recent Chinese student migrants, he hypothetically might have spent another year performing a study of English or engineering or some other subject that did not elicit any intellectual interest like foreign students that stay perennially enrolled in community colleges to maintain legal immigration status – “paying to stay” – while they wait to find a job and obtain a working visa (Kim and Yellow Horse 2018:71).

Once public interest in Tehching’s artwork peaked, he suddenly began his *No Art Piece* (1985–1986), in which he refused to create, talk about, read about, or view art for 1 year. This alluded to how many immigrants lack time and resources to express, share, and process their experiences or dreams and engage in activities like the arts due to competing demands like working part-time or maintaining status as a student (Sooudi 2014). Tehching stopped producing such pieces in 1986, the

same year Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act that by 1988 would offer him and others in similar circumstances a pathway to legal status (Heathfield 2007:374), obviating the need for all the above-mentioned forms of indentured mobility and wayward pathways to citizenship unnecessary. However, given how few contemporary options exist for migrants to secure or attain legal status, such institutions continue to exist for many migrants.

From 1986 until 1999, Tehching performed his *Thirteen Year Plan*, in which he said he would begin making art again but refused to show or sell any of it publicly, effectively becoming like most migrants who produce beautiful work and, due to their lack of access to art markets, go unnoticed and unappreciated by the public for years (Heathfield 2007). Tehching's work reflects how, under the highly restrictive immigration policies of most countries, the lives of many migrants become just about "passing time" (Tate 2017) while sacrificing time, money, and energy to survive that they might otherwise commit to other activities more beneficial to themselves, their families, and their host society. This living-as-waiting conveys a different perspective on what a migrant's life means than the more widespread narratives of life that cultural and political elites propagate and project onto migrants, like the life as an entrepreneurial pursuit, adventure, or pulling-oneself-up-by-the-bootstraps (Mahalingam 2012).

THE CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING LANGUAGE BARRIERS: SHĚN YUǎN

Migrants also frequently face the interactional challenge of being unable to understand or communicate as well as they could in their origin society. ShĚn Yuǎn often addressed gender-related subjects by working with local children and adults in China. Like many other feminist artists, she produced transgressive art that incorporated different aspects of her body. In doing so, she highlighted her positionality as a migrant. Four years after she migrated from China to Paris after the Tian'anmen protests (Phaidon 2019), she produced her piece *Wasting One's Saliva* (1994). (Figure 3) This consists of a series of over-sized tongues in the form of pink ice hanging from the gallery wall. The ice melts slowly into steel pots directly below. As the tongues melt, viewers find that the ice encloses sharp kitchen knives, viscerally alluding to one's tongue being cut off. As ShĚn reflected,

A sixteen-hour flight and at last I arrive in the paradise [Paris] I had imaged the West to be ... my mother tongue becomes useless. Language is nothing more than noise. My brain enters into a sponge-like state. It is like having a mouth but not knowing how to open it ... My first reflection: how does one start one's life again, aged thirty-one? (Campbell and Tawadros 2001:35).

Echoing the thoughts contained in the quote, the melting water uselessly drips into puddles below, symbolizing the useless product of many migrant mouths. Like animals or children unable to communicate their interests or desires, migrants not



FIGURE 3. Wasting One's Saliva (1994) by Shěn Yuǎn.

fluent in the local language of a society where few speak their language can only, in frustration, shed tears and communicate with the tone of their voice or facial or bodily movements but often only confronting baffled faces. In contrast, many non-migrants never have the experience of navigating or needing to survive in a social context where no one can understand them, and one's ability to interact with others is severely compromised, leading often to an enormous social and psychological distance between non-migrants and migrants that confront language barriers. The dripping saliva viscerally evokes the frustration of an adult needing to learn how to navigate a world again after suddenly losing the often taken-for-granted interactional ability to communicate easily with others through oral speech. Audience members often approached and actively conversed with Shěn Yuǎn, with some discussing how her art raised for them questions about the loss of a migrant's native language and the inability to communicate in a newly adopted tongue, prompting inhibitions in communicating with others (Silvester 2019).

Another of Shěn Yuǎn's art piece, *Diverged Tongue* (1999), is a party air whistle that an air compressor blows out into a bright orange forked tongue at regular intervals. The forked tongue resembles the tongue of a snake, an animal that also uses the tongue to detect movement. Shěn noted,

the one with his tongue stuck out — the one with the forked tongue — speaks with a trill and the accent of a distant place. The one with the forked tongue wishes to speak two languages with one tongue, but neither language is spoken clearly. ... He wants to speak, but cannot express himself. (Campbell and Tawadros 2001:18)

All the tongue can do is signal that it cannot communicate and try to elicit and receive signals from others. This is similar to how a snake's tongue functions, a much blunter communicative instrument than fluency in the local language. Over time, even as immigrants learn the language, they must constantly switch between the adopted language of their host society and their origin society. This can also present another struggle reflected in Shěn's narrative. Examining Shěn's art critically evokes the interactional difficulties migrants confront daily with a language barrier, which those who never migrated have little prior experience and only become frustrated and erroneously perceive migrants as cognitively inept. This typically leads to frustration for non-migrants as well, although given how often they have never had a similar experience they often have difficulty empathizing with the migrant. Audience members were often shocked by the unleashing of the tongue as it was unexpected, almost like a physical assault, shocking some into thinking about how, for migrants, two or more languages are often constantly vying for space (Silvester 2019). In this way, Shěn's art metaphorically expresses what living with a language barrier is like for those non-migrants who may have never experienced one. This is societally important because language barriers sometimes lead to intercultural misunderstanding and violent conflict.

EXPLOSIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH CULTURAL CLASHES AND RECONCILIATION: CÀI GUÓ QIÁNG

Non-migrants in a migrant-destination societies are often unaware of latent cultural divides and the gradually accumulating cultural tensions until they explode. CÀI Guó-Qiáng is a Chinese artist who migrated from Fujian province to New York City and New Jersey via Japan (Cai 2016). He developed an ideal medium to handle such themes: utilizing explosive material in his artwork. His art dramatically presages such cultural conflicts and clashes, a warning sign before they erupt in real life.

Cài Guó-Qiáng grew up in Quanzhou, Fujian province, during the 1960s and 1970s, directly across from Taiwan during the Cultural Revolution. He often heard air raid sirens, gunfire, and other explosions due to the constant threat that a conflict would break out between mainland China and Taiwan (Cai 2016). CÀI used gunpowder and explosions as media to express cultural conflict from an early age when his father introduced him to firecrackers. He migrated to Japan as soon as he could obtain a passport and decided to stay there after China's government repressed the Tian'anmen protesters. His explosive art then became more destruction-oriented and went outdoors — produced by not only him but dozens and sometimes even hundreds of artisans. He produced his piece, *The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 16* (1994). This consisted of a five-kilometer-long line of gunpowder dynamite exploding and burning in the water near the seaside Japanese town of Iwaki. The distance between the shore and the explosions was evocative of the distant gunfire and shelling that people often view in televised war scenes, providing some eerie, contemplative distance from the violent attacks and bloodshed. CÀI described this work in universal terms: “After Tian'anmen, I realized that throughout history human beings are repeatedly engulfed in violence and suffering. I wanted to reflect on the behavior of the human race from the larger perspective of the universe and to remind us we are not alone” (Cai 2016). Although many artists optimistically suggest humanity will evolve away from its violent tendencies, CÀI perceived this as an unfortunate part of the human condition and encounters between people of different backgrounds.

His migration from Japan to the United States made him appreciate this even more. In 1995, CÀI reflected, “Since coming to America and living in the West, I have more of a perspective on differences between East and West, which in turn made me much more interested in conflicts between cultures” (Chiu 2006:93). This quote evokes his sensitivity to the tensions between Asian and Western cultures. In *The Century with Mushroom Clouds* (1996), CÀI had his standing body photographed with his back to the viewer at a nuclear bomb test site in Nevada while holding up a small cylinder of gunpowder emitting a mushroom cloud-shaped explosion from firecrackers he had bought in Chinatown and ignited from handheld devices. (Figure 4) Then — five years before two planes flew into the World Trade Center in New York — he prophetically struck the same pose in front of the two



FIGURE 4. *The Century with Mushroom Clouds* (1996) by Cài Guó-Qiáng.

later-destroyed towers in a way that seemed to mimic the stance of the Statue of Liberty nearby. He did this again before the Eiffel Tower in Paris and on London Bridge in London — only years before both those cities also suffered indiscriminately violent and explosive attacks on civil society by those whom journalists and politicians portrayed as dangerous migrant “terrorists.” His art also metaphorically reflects broader cultural conflicts that migrants experience daily in the form of micro-aggressions (Sue 2010) and dramatic xenophobic hate crimes and that non-migrants become more acutely aware of only after things “blow up”

Cài’s later work also optimistically expressed how such intercultural interactions do not necessarily need to result in violent conflict but instead in greater intercultural empathy. *Cultural Meeting Bath* (1997) was a Jacuzzi surrounded by elaborately shaped rocks with holes many Chinese people believe to be portals into other worlds. The hot tub was covered with Banyan trees and filled with various Chinese roots, herbs, and medicinal products to remove toxins. When Cài was disappointed to discover that visitors to this piece were not bathing in it — perhaps having not thought about bringing their swimsuits and a towel to a museum — he invited friends from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds to enjoy the therapeutic waters with him. Cài hoped that the sight of diverse Americans enjoying the medicinal properties of the bath might help symbolically heal the profound cultural and racial tensions and wounds he observed in the United States. Such reconciliation and conflict resolution also can be common among migrants. Cài’s work about such cultural conflicts over the years has resonated with many Americans, mainly because it brought many

cultural conflicts to the surface with such powerful historical symbols, culminating in the production of a Netflix documentary about his artwork in 2016. Ignorance and a lack of awareness of such inter-cultural tensions and conflicts by both the non-migrants and migrants may later present troubles for both and also result in migrants feeling socially alienated from others in the migrant-receiving society.

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ESTRANGEMENT OF MIGRANTS TOWARD NON-MIGRANT INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS: ZHÈNG LIÁNJIÉ AND HUÁNG YǒNG PĪNG

Migrants are often culturally and psychologically estranged from others due to the social distance and cultural differences between them and non-migrants. This results in difficulties migrants confront in establishing durable friendships, professional ties, or romantic relationships with non-migrants in migrant-destination societies, as expressed in the art of Zhèng Liánjié. Zhèng grew up during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, he began to produce performance art, after migrating from Beijing to New York City (Zhèng 2018), which at the time had a gentrifying expansion of art galleries and business (Deutsche and Ryan 1984). In *Subzero New York*, Zhèng stood in New York City's Meat-Packing District for 40 min with his naked body covered in white flour on a street with a White American woman named Susan. She is dressed in a black Chinese cheongsam dress. (Figure 5) Zhèng sprinkled flour on the cobblestone street to create two large circles of equal size. He placed several colored balloons in them. He splashed water in the circle where Susan would stand. Zhèng, holding up a white mask, kept his gaze locked on Susan's eyes as he slowly entered her circle, handing her the white mask. After a moment's pause, he took the mask back from her. He left the space holding the mask, returning to his circle. In doing so, he symbolically exchanges identities with Susan, expressing how estranged he feels from her as they both struggle impossibly to become like each other, he by immersing himself in white flour and holding a mask of a White face in front of his body, and she by wearing a Chinese-style dress. The white flour and the multi-colored balloons between them represent the symbolic racial barriers and the ersatz token multiculturalism, expressing the frequently large and absurd cultural distance that exists between migrants and non-migrants in their everyday encounters and interactions (Zhèng 2018) and how this reduces the probability of them forming stronger and more durable bonds from their chance encounters. Zhèng's performance enables non-migrants to appreciate how migrants experience cultural distance in a subaltern way, different from how non-migrants experience that distance in a society with increasing numbers of migrants.

Another artist who expresses cultural estrangement in a more asymmetric institutional context is Shěn Yuǎn's husband, Huáng Yǒng Pīng. He migrated from Xiamen to France in 1989 and decided to immigrate after he was in Paris for an exhibition during the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests. He conveyed his experience of suddenly feeling socially excluded by French art circles, focusing on the rejection



FIGURE 5. Subzero New York (1998) by Zhèng Liánjié.

of Chinese migrants by non-migrants within migrant-destination societies (Chiu 2016:122–123). Huáng expressed the experience of cultural alienation in *Should We Reconstruct a Cathedral?* (1991). This piece consisted of the pulp of burnt French and German copies of the 1991 art historical tome *Ein Gespräch/Una Discussione* — a dinner debate between several renowned white male Western artists — which Huáng mixed with the pulp of artwork by those artists. He threw it all onto a wooden ensemble of tables and chairs by a wall with a photo of those artists dining together. Huáng,

profoundly influenced and inspired by these Western artists, seemed to be trying to enter and become accepted by their elite art circle. However, as Chiu (2006:126) notes, the elite knowledge of these artists remains unintelligible and inaccessible to him — as social scientists find the jargon of specific fields often is for migrants struggling to professionally break into industries and professions to which they have less access than non-migrants, both in formal terms of licensure and certification as well in terms of exclusionary mores and tacit cultural dispositions and habitus (Guo 2009). As Huáng put it,

When you have a home, a stable home somewhere, you don't have to move. The question of location doesn't arise. But when you start moving around, become displaced, or become a migrant, the question of home is raised. Then you have to consider what is your earth, what is your water. So actually when you travel you don't have a home but you need a home. (Jantjes 1998:113)

To the extent “home” poetically represents not a place for living but a space of social belonging — a metaphorical cathedral where migrant artists like Huáng can commune with those who inspire them — Huáng's acceptance into that artistic tradition was arguably such a home, just as a research program, company, school, industry, or profession may be for many migrants who feel symbolically excluded from such institutions. A lack of cultural belonging constitutes a cultural barrier to becoming accepted into such a “home.” One viewer of this piece noted how feeling like an outsider gave Huáng the freedom to invent as he was not constrained by belonging to a home and, therefore, could challenge order and meaning (Greenberger 2019). Often, migrants feel excluded when they become aware that how they perceive themselves differs greatly from how non-migrants perceive them.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS INDUCED BY HEGEMONIC REPRESENTATIONS: ÀI WÈI WÈI

The artwork of Ài Wèi Wèi forcefully compels its non-migrant viewers to confront how hegemonic portrayals of migrants by social and mass media can induce such a “double consciousness” (DuBois 1965) in migrants' everyday interactions. Ài's biography illustrates how he had been migrating for much of his life, from a city in China to a much more rural impoverished area in Xinjiang, then to the United States before returning to urban China, then to Germany, and then to Portugal. From the age of one until the time he was 19, the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976) policies forced Ài and his family to work in an isolated, rural labor camp in Xinjiang. Hence, he grew up with the double consciousness of an internal working-class migrant (Ai 2021:122). When China began allowing its citizens to go abroad in the 1980s, Ài went to Philadelphia to improve his English and later to New York to study art in museums, sketch portraits of tourists, and produce photographs of police brutality in protests for the New York Times. However, ultimately, he decided to return to China after an American shot one of his talented Chinese painter friends in the street, and he learned

that his father had become extremely ill. He simultaneously confronted his father's fragility and his own after confronting American "violence, so deeply rooted in the society that you could never escape it" (Ai 2021:195).

After returning to Beijing, Ai became increasingly famous as an influential online political activist and dissident about social problems in China. He quickly became conscious that the government perceived him in a very different way than his fans: China's government began to censor his online presence more intensively; held him under house arrest and intense surveillance; demolished his studio; separated him from his family by imprisoning and interrogating him for 81 days; fined him 2.4 million dollars in fines for tax invasion; and prevented him from going abroad to attend his overseas art exhibitions by confiscating his passport (Ai 2021:246–359). Ai expresses how surveillance by the government also induced double consciousness in him by writing, "As time went on, the intrusions afflicted me with a nameless exhaustion, as though some unidentifiable foreign body had been planted inside me, controlling my judgments of myself and the people around me" (Ai 2021:293). China only permitted him to leave for Germany in 2015 after facing intense diplomatic pressure from many Western governments and civil society organizations, making him realize foreign governments represented him differently than China's government (Ai 2021:359–361).

Ai's artwork — like his epic documentary *Human Flow* — is distinct from the previous artists in that he produced it in a later period and that it more directly engages with the subject of migration as a social phenomenon rather than merely reflecting his personal experience of migration. Ai reflects on his critical observations about the West as a migrant abroad by increasingly critiquing the politically and socially constructed way Western governments and audiences induce double consciousness in migrants. For example, Ai's piece *Law of the Journey* (2017) was a black 60-m giant inflatable raft made from the exact rubber of those rafts that refugees use in crossing the Mediterranean Sea. (Figure 6) Three hundred Black bodies without facial features faced each other in the raft. Some bodies lay below the raft. The raft was elevated — putting it above everyone else — in contrast to the media's portrayals of rafts from an aerial perspective. This piece expresses the experience of migrant subjects as being perceived as faceless, stripped of all identity and humanity, reduced to bare life (Agamben 1998), or "a human waste" (Ai 2019). One viewer empathized with the artwork, as it reminded him of "fallen soldiers during the arduous crossing, some who have already passed, others who reach out for safety — they are a reminder of just how perilous these journeys can be" (Stewart 2017).

This piece reflects a universal turn in Ai's artwork by exposing the West as hypocritical in its frequent critiques of China's disregard for human rights. Now Western governments — after offering Ai, as a refugee, the rights and freedoms of expression China denied him — must confront his critique of how the West's visa and migration policies require refugees to undertake dangerous journeys over land and sea, thereby undermining the Western societies identity as humane and making such governments appear hypocritical when they scold China and other governments for not respecting



FIGURE 6. Law of the Journey (2017) by Ài Wèi Wèi.

human rights. As Ai (2019) expresses the tensions in both Western society's and the refugee's joint crisis of double consciousness induced by such refugee flows, "We are human, but we are different ... empathy, but not toward certain people ... testing not just the refugees, but the European condition." Migrants and the way that European governments treat them exposes the hypocrisy of Europeans' enlightened professed claim that human rights are universal by offering evidence of how migrants experience the limits of this universality daily. Ài's awareness of and empathy toward migrant double consciousness led him to migrate the focus of his artistic corpus from a critique of only Chinese victims of human rights abuses to all victims of human rights abuses. For one audience member, the art piece alluded to the theme of the double consciousness of migrants due to how such representations of refugees by the Global North in the global circulation of art and social media are strikingly more internationally mobile than the migrants themselves and even how the migrants perceive themselves (Nguyen 2019). This artwork also reminded him of an experience of double consciousness among the leaders of the art institution, Sydney Biennial, that exhibited the art piece: One of the founders of Sydney Biennale, Transfield Holdings, was a shipbuilding company contracted to manage the infamous off-shore refugee detention centers for the Australian government on Nauru and Manus Island. Only after some media revelations and a collective boycott by artists in 2014 did the Sydney Biennale become conscious of how this appeared to its patrons and cut ties with Transfield Holdings.

A more recent sculptural work of Ài's, *Life Cycle* (2019), was seemingly more optimistic about both the form that double consciousness can take among non-migrant allies of the migrants, and the dialectical struggle between migrants and the illiberal

and restrictive migration control policies of democratic governments that prevent their entry. A bamboo raft contains angelic-like semi-deities with animal heads from the Chinese Zodiac system. Zodiac is, incidentally, the name of the Chinese company that was the biggest industrial manufacturer of inexpensive rubber rafts advertised as “migrant rafts” and exported to Egypt that migrants rode upon in their journeys from the coast of Libya to Europe. At the head of the boat was a masthead resembling the bust of Queen Nefertiti, the wife of King Ramses II, whose dynasty later expelled and banished Jews from ancient Pharaonic Egypt to Palestine. The grounded position of the sculpture led the viewers to meditate upon several quotations by influential Western thinkers of migration that collectively suggest migration is a human right that “the Western invention of nationality” (Roth 2001:15) cannot legitimately curtail. As one viewer articulated her reaction to the piece, Ài “reveals the pain, heartache, and uncertainty associated with stripping a person from their societal background” (Nimptsch 2018), suggesting how a migrant’s choice of forsaking their society often out of survival induces heightened double-consciousness among unauthorized migrants.

Yet, as I discovered on my visit to this piece, the boat was not isolated, as such actual boats of migrants typically appear in media coverage: Around the boat are “Ten Windows,” which Ài produced with kite-making techniques (Ai 2018). These evoke symbols of Chinese culture and mythology, 20th-century art, and past work by Ài that echo his experiences of double consciousness: A bicycle alluded to how people would put flowers in Ài’s bike basket while he was under house arrest. A hand holds a gun with a mounted security camera, evoking the governmental surveillance under which Ài lived in China, and many migrants evade as they cross borders. A stake ran through the body of Ài, expressing the daily torture of migrants by governments worldwide. The Windows symbols hover above the boat like guardian angels of migrants. One was the Goddess of the Sea Mazu, which anthropologist Julie Chu discovered Fujian fishermen believed for centuries would protect them when they went deep sea fishing or later emigrated as unauthorized stowaways aboard ships bound for the United States (Chu 2010).

The piece is an affirmative counter-narrative to the stereotypical depiction of mass migration as an infringement on nation-state sovereignty, manifesting a greater sense of hope and optimism about the dangerous journeys that migrants undertake to cross borders. On a longer historical time scale, migrants in this piece appear as angels and heroic models for a future world of free mobility by transgressing boundaries they view as illegitimate. Spiritual beings also accompany them — whether God, Allah, or Chinese deities — along with intellectuals, artists, and activists who express solidarity with migrants. In providing a counter-representation of migrants, *Life Cycle* countered and resisted the more derogatory and oppressive forms of double consciousness reflected in the *Law of the Journey* with a more celestial portrayal and claim of humanity’s universal and natural right of movement across borders. Ài’s otherworldly portrayal of the migrants’ vessels suggests they are guided by moral forces far more powerful and enduring than the mortal governments that exclude them.

After Western audiences had for years received and defined Ài as an artist whose work politically challenged China (Ai 2021:246–359), Ài's recent work politically challenged Western viewers to confront how their actions undermined their principles regarding the universality of human rights. As Ài has recently reflected, "My focus on the refugee crisis allowed me to move beyond the arena of resistance to China's autocratic government and engage in more universal observations about human nature, and to more fully express my understanding of human rights" (Ai 2021:368). As such, his art highlights the double consciousness of not only migrants but also that of non-migrants in migrant-destination societies, provoking them to critically reflect on whether their professed values about respecting and protecting human rights are universal or segmented by nationality. His work serves again as a potential empathetic channel through which non-migrants and migrants can better understand each other with respect to migration.

CONCLUSION

Influential non-migrant cultural and political elites typically structure how the non-migrant majority in a migrant-destination society perceive migrants. Prior scholars have shown how migrants are not helpless victims of such representations but instead strategically resist them via various tactics in their everyday interactions with non-migrants (Rapoport, Lomsky-Feder, and Heider 2002; Valenta 2009). Due to such popular depictions, some aspects of the subjective migrant experience I highlight, such as cultural anguish and cultural clashes, may be more apparent or familiar to non-migrants than others, like the language barrier and double consciousness. Migrants art provides a means through which migrant artists can forge an empathy path (Ruiz-Junco 2017). Such empathy paths offer a way for the non-migrant population who interact with the art to gain more of a holistic and comprehensive grasp of all the challenges that migrants confront as they interact with non-migrants, in turn enabling them to become more reflexively aware of challenges that migrants confront that may not be apparent to non-migrants in their interactions with migrants. Greater awareness and sensitivity of migrant perspectives could potentially help facilitate and improve interactions between migrants and non-migrants in everyday encounters. Although many may consider conceptual or performative art to be too difficult for the broader public to understand, many of the specific experiences that the artists express in the above examples, like discomfort, conformity to exploitative labor institutions, and social estrangement, are widespread and arguably even more relatable for working-class non-migrants within migrant-destination societies than the more elite non-migrants who often view art more. The genius of these artworks stems from their ability to reflect on and convey Chinese migrants' experiences visually to non-migrants. Their art as an object also semiotically mediates communication (Peña-Alves 2020) and non-verbal interaction between non-migrants and migrants.

This type of aesthetic data can be especially methodologically valuable for many monolingual non-migrants in migrant-destination societies, whom scholars of art

argue often only obtain information in a single language. Due to this, mono-lingual non-migrants often deprive themselves of empirical findings with which they can think, develop, and test their ideas because they only understand or read in a single language (Lu 2015). For monolingual non-migrants, becoming more skilled at acquiring knowledge and perspective through a visual medium, such as art, could enrich their understanding of the world as it becomes another empathy path through which to symbolically interact with those different from them and understand others' experiences.

Together, through their art and personal narratives these Chinese migrant artists have offered us a more multi-dimensional perspective of their diverse interactions in migrant-destination societies. The artists and their artwork also provide insight to people today who increasingly face challenges transforming their relationship with their society as they cope with and adapt to simultaneous unanticipated cultural, demographic, epidemiological, environmental, and economic changes. They demonstrate how societies can confront and cope with global challenges like large refugee flows rather than resist or deny them. Finally, although social scientists rarely draw upon the visual art of migrant artists as an alternative form of valuable and under-analyzed aesthetic data, scholars have demonstrated how we can also understand the experiences of migrants' experiences and symbolic interactions in more visceral, direct, and immediate ways through art than is possible with words and numbers (Chaplin 2005; DiBartolomeo, Clark, and Davis 2015; Hocking 2019). As such, aesthetic data can further inform social science research by providing another way to convey such themes and aspects of migration and other social phenomenon, making visual art and imagery an empirically and theoretically valuable resource.

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