

THE SHINY BODY OF THE GOOD SOLDIER: IDENTITY AND THE CORPOREAL IN SHEN JINGDONG'S ART

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Like several other young Chinese artists between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, Shen Jingdong experimented with conceptual and performance art before achieving critical and commercial success with paintings and sculptures. In Shen's paintings since the early 2000s, the bodies of people and animals turn into shiny, smooth, and bright-colored "characters" inhabiting empty spaces. In recent portraits by Shen, the smooth surface of these bodies and faces is often damaged by wounds and violence—both represented in painting and physically enacted on the canvas. This chapter examines Shen Jingdong's early conceptual and performance works in relation to the origins and transformations of his portrait paintings. Drawing also on Sinophone art criticism, intellectual history, and interviews with the artist in his studio, this chapter argues that Shen's early conceptual and performance art not only prefigured the language and iconography of his portraits, but also introduced two key themes that underpin them, i.e., the transmutation of the body and the issue of personal identity. As a result, the fragile and increasingly tortured bodies of Shen's characters come to represent extensions and evocations of the artist's avant-gardist experimentation. This study contributes in this way to our understanding of Shen's art while shedding light on the legacy of post-Mao avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art, performance art, simulacra, soldiers, Songzhuang

1. Introduction

Several Chinese artists who experimented with performance art between the 1980s and the early 2000s later established themselves on the scene of contemporary

Chinese art through less ephemeral artistic languages. For instance, Geng Jianyi (耿建翌, 1962–2017) and Zhang Peili (张培力, b. 1957)—before becoming well-known for their paintings and video artworks respectively—together realized the performance artwork *Wrapping: King and Queen* (包扎—国王与王后, 1986) in Hangzhou by tightly wrapping their bodies with newspapers and ropes and remaining bound in this state for about one hour. Earlier that year, Ding Yi (丁乙, b. 1962) had joined Qin Yifeng (秦一峰, b. 1961) and Zhang Guoliang (张国梁, b. 1963) for a performance artwork entitled, *Fabric Sculptures* (布雕, 1986), in which they cloaked their bodies in yellow fabric in public places; today Ding Yi and Qin Yifeng are well-known for their abstract paintings. Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专, b. 1960) also adopted the language of performance art before becoming known for paintings and installations that explore the post-socialist intersections of politics and business by focusing on the written language. Wu reflected on the everyday reality of commerce and consumption in such early examples of performance art in China as *The Action with Big Yes and Big No* (大是大非行为, 1985) and *Big Business* (大生意, 1989), among other works.

It will come as no surprise that artists who have dedicated their career to re-inventing the boundaries of artistic practice from an avant-gardist perspective were also among the first in China to adopt the language of performance art, which RoseLee Goldberg (2009, 7) described as an “execution” of conceptual art. Most studies dedicated to these artists, however, overlook the connection between their performance and conceptual art projects and their more “collectable” artistic production.¹ This chapter will explore this connection with respect to the art of Shen Jingdong (沈敬东, b. 1965), an artist whose paintings since circa 2006 are integral to artistic research that started with conceptual and performance art that revolved around the issues of identity and the corporeal.

In its exploration of Shen Jingdong's art, this chapter puts forward three main arguments. First, it elaborates on the above-mentioned connection between Shen's early works of conceptual and performance art and the approach to the corporeal displayed in his paintings. Second, this chapter argues that Shen's paintings engage with key topics in the Chinese intellectual and cultural discourse by addressing the issue of social identity and the corporeal and their complex evolution in post-reform China. Finally, the chapter employs Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum to interpret the transformation undergone by the human body in Shen's portraits. It suggests that Shen's paintings of porcelain (self-)portraits constitutes a second-order simulacra through which the artist distances himself and the audience from the suffering and violence of corporeal reality. Through a discussion of these points, this chapter aims to make a two-fold contribution to the study of intellectual and artistic life in contemporary China. It demonstrates

¹ Exceptions to this include, e.g., Cacchione (2017) on Zhang Peili.

how a closer look at experimentation with performance art by Chinese artists can shed new light on their more recent and “traditional” (or, commercially viable) work. Moreover, it demonstrates the advantages of collocating Chinese visual art in relation to the intellectual and cultural trends of their epoch—especially when we take into account relevant texts from contemporaneous Sinophone art criticism and wider intellectual discourse.



Figure 1: Shen Jingdong, *Hero Series No. 2*, oil on canvas, 2006

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

A distinctive feature of most of Shen Jingdong’s paintings since the early 2000s is the portrayal of shiny, bright-colored, rounded, over-lit bodies of people (and animals) at the center of an empty and flat background. Seemingly gentle and harmless even when carrying a firearm and donning a military uniform, these characters are usually portrayed while staring ahead with dot-like eyes, their thin-lipped mouths either forming a friendly but restrained smile, or closed in an expressionless horizontal line. Ever since Shen Jingdong developed this language in the early 2000s, a wide range of subjects have undergone this transformation in his paintings, including Chinese deities, art critics, rabbits, birds, fellow contemporary artists like Fang Lijun (方力钧, b. 1963) and Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957), children, ballerinas, many Communist Party personalities including Mao Zedong and Gao Gang (高

岗, 1905–1954), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *petit prince* and his fox, the presenters of China's official evening news television program, the notorious British criminal Charles Bronson, the artist's own friends and family, and even the deer from the seventeenth-century ink-on-paper painting *Deer and Pine Tree* (松鹿图) by Bada Shangren (八大山人, 1626–1705). The artworks by Shen that inaugurated this artistic approach—artworks that arguably constitute his most critically-acclaimed as well as most personal paintings—are portraits of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier. As discussed later in this chapter, the soldier is the protagonist of a series of paintings named, *Hero* (英雄, 2003–2007) (see, e.g., Figure 1) and the subject of a series of homonymous busts realized in ceramic and fiberglass from 2003 onwards. This character has since evolved and multiplied across a variety of artworks.²

Shen Jingdong's recent art is frequently discussed in Chinese art magazines and journals, widely exhibited in the country and abroad, highly-priced at auctions and galleries, and collected by the National Art Museum of China as well as by celebrities like Chen Kun (陈坤, b. 1976) and Zhang Ziyi (章子怡, b. 1979). It therefore may come across as just as "mainstream" as contemporary Chinese art can be, and antipodal to the iconoclastic and anti-establishment avant-gardist movements of late-twentieth-century mainland China. Shen himself seems to poke fun at the commercial appeal of his art with the art installation *Xiaodong Kiosk* (小东售货亭, 2017), a wooden structure akin to a souvenir kiosk that the artist has filled with small-scale reproductions of his paintings and sculptures, including printed pillows, mugs, and plastic toys.³ Nevertheless, as this study will show, Shen's conceptual and performance art not only prefigured the language and iconography of his paintings, but also introduced two key themes underpinning them, i.e., the transmutation of the body—the annihilation of its fleshy reality, to borrow Baudrillard's words,⁴ and the issue of personal identity in society.

The following section will focus on the beginning of Shen Jingdong's career to show how those conceptual and performance art projects provide essential background to understand his art. The subsequent section will examine some of Shen's most significant paintings, particularly the *Hero* series and the *Bound-up* series (包扎, 2012–today). It will also discuss the artworks related to the forced relocation of the artist from Songzhuang (宋庄) Art Village in 2017 and reveal how the artist continues to draw on the language and history of performance art for the creation, modification, and presentation of his paintings.

² See section 3.1 of this chapter on the genesis and style of these paintings.

³ On one side of the kiosk Shen has painted a circled "demolish" character (拆), a familiar sign in urban China as it indicates that a building is destined to be demolished and its occupants expelled from it. This is a reference to the fate of Shen's studio in Songzhuang, discussed in section 3.2 of this chapter.

⁴ See Baudrillard ([1976] 2017, 93) and further in this chapter.

2. Shen Jingdong's early conceptual and performance art

Shen Jingdong's first name was chosen by his father, an art teacher in an elementary school, to signify *jing'ai Mao Zedong* (敬爱毛泽东), or "respect and love Mao Zedong" (Wu Hong 2021a, 141).⁵ Encouraged by his family, the young Shen started drawing and exhibiting at an early age. In a recent interview Shen recalled how his grandmother bought him a notebook after other boys had bullied him, so that he would stay at home and draw instead of going outside (in Miss Lu 2020). Art became a form of escapism. A similar relation binds Shen's art to his beloved hometown of Nanjing, known for its rich cultural heritage as the "capital of six dynasties," but also for the tragedies of its twentieth-century history. "Nanjing is a city where it is so easy to get sad," he would write when describing the motivation behind the collective art project, *Hundred Years, Hundred People, Hundred Family Names* (百年 百人 百家姓, 2000; see Shen 2000b). For Shen, the bright and happy face of his art represents a way to exorcise the traumas of that ever-present history (Shen 2023b), and perhaps the agony of human history in general.

After studying art at Nanjing's Xiaozhuang Normal School and working as an art teacher for several years, Shen was admitted to the School of Arts of Nanjing University, where he majored in block printing. Upon his graduation, the 26-year-old Shen was recruited by the PLA and assigned to the renowned Frontline Modern Drama Troupe of the Nanjing military region to work as a stage designer; he would remain in the army until 2009. While he eventually grew unhappy with army life for not being able to fully dedicate himself to his own art, Shen's job afforded him a great deal of time to make art and curate exhibitions, and came to constitute an experience that set him apart from other artists (Miss Lu 2020; Shen 2023b).

2.1 The surname projects

Shortly after joining the army Shen Jingdong developed three projects that focused on the themes of identity and the human body.⁶ He begun working on the first of these projects, *Hundred Family Names* (百家姓), in 1994. While the project ended in 1999 with a collective exhibition he curated, i.e., the above-mentioned *Hundred Years, Hundred People, Hundred Family Names*,⁷ recently the artist has been working on a series of paintings also entitled *Hundred Family*

⁵ All translations from Chinese are by the author unless otherwise specified.

⁶ The third collective project, which will not be examined here on account of space constraints, is *One Hundred Artists Tell Their Stories* (一百个艺术家讲自己的故事, 2001–2003; see Shen 2003a). The exhibition dedicated to this project was held in Nanjing in 2003. Shen describes these three projects as a "trilogy" (Shen 2003b).

⁷ Held in Nanjing first and then in Shanghai, the exhibition was curated by Shen Jingdong and opened on December 30, 1999 as a way—Shen wrote—to commemorate the end of the century (Shen 2000b).

Names (2020–today). As part of that early project, Shen Jingdong realized several paintings and installations, including a 1995 triptyc—also entitled *Hundred Family Names*—consisting of eighty-four paintings (i.e., twenty-eight in each panel) in which as many surnames are painted in thick strokes of varying shades of gray over gray backgrounds (see, e.g., Wu 2021a, 76–77).

For the project that led to the collective 1999 exhibition Shen Jingdong invited a hundred artists to each contribute an artwork of any kind—sized twenty-eight by forty centimeters—that portrayed their own surname. Shen emphasizes how the key aspects of this project were “the process and its participatory, interactive, and playful nature” (Shen 2000b). Art critic Chen Xiaoxin (陈孝信, b. 1943) writes in his preface to the catalog of the exhibition that Shen’s project constituted a “conceptual art activity” that employed Chinese surnames as an “entry point” (Chen 2000). Surnames, argues Chen, not only represent the accumulation of Chinese experience and culture, but also a mark of identity (身份烙印) engraved into the psyche of every Chinese person (Chen 2000). Shen believes that surnames represent a reminder of our origins and ancestry (Shen 2023b), pointing at the roots of our personal identities. Surnames, he once wrote, remind us of the eternal questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? (Shen 2000b).

The artworks created in response to Shen Jingdong’s invitation included oil and ink-on-paper paintings, video artworks, and “readymade” photographs that repurposed existing objects or writing—e.g., a character on a cup, a sign, a window frame, etc.—to represent each artist’s surname (Shen 2000a). Artists from all across the country participated in the project, including Zhu Zhengeng (朱振庚, 1939–2012), Shang Yang (尚扬, b. 1942), Chen Xinmao (陈心懋, b. 1954), Guan Ce (管策, b. 1957), Wu Gaozhong (吴高钟, b. 1962), Huang Yan (黄岩, b. 1966) and Wang Guofeng (王国锋, b. 1967), among others.

Shen Jingdong’s own contribution to the exhibition is striking in its resemblance to the paintings of the *Hero* series. It is neither a painting nor a soldier, however, but the photograph of a toy called Knowledge Bear (识字熊, i.e., literally, “character-recognition bear”; the names in English and Chinese are written on the toy itself; see Figure 2). The educational toy consists of a yellow bear-shaped frame with round features, black dots for eyes above a line that describes a smile. Enclosed inside the plastic bear is a card with the artist’s surname written in red; in the background of the photo, we see what appear to be the lockers of a kindergarten decorated with children’s drawings. In her essay on a recent solo exhibition of Shen’s paintings, *The Beautiful Fairy Tales* (London, 2020), Wenny Teo perceptively observes how “the luminous viscosity of the paintwork [in Shen’s paintings] serves to further the sense of artificiality, so much so that the figures come to resemble the cheaply mass-produced



Figure 2: Shen Jingdong, *Shen*, installation and photography, 1999

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

plastic toys that are made in China and sold at an inflated price throughout the world" (Teo 2020, 56). That early conceptual artwork, entitled *Shen* (沈, 1999), not only points at a specific toy that may have inspired the style of *Hero* and subsequent paintings, but also suggests a deeper interpretative dimension to Shen's subsequent art—a dimension that has to do with identity and self-representation. This chapter will show how this dimension resurfaces again and again in Shen's *Hero* series and other works.

For the ongoing series of paintings entitled *Hundred Family Names*, which he started in 2020, Shen Jingdong aims at realizing an individual, small-scale painting for each of the over five-hundred Chinese surnames included in the homonymous classic compiled during the Song dynasty (960–1279). At a time of my first visit to his studio in Yanjiao (燕郊; Hebei province) in 2023, approximately a hundred of such paintings had already been completed. The series adopts the style of his post-*Hero* portraits, this time applying it to Chinese characters. Shen breaks the character of each surname into lines and dots and turns these



Figure 3: Shen Jingdong, *Shen (Hundred Family Names)*, oil on canvas, 2020

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

into brightly colored, balloon-like, three-dimensional objects that he casts against a neutral, cement-like background that recalls the hues of the above-mentioned tryptic from 1995 (see, e.g., Figure 3). Because the artist often breaks the constitutive strokes of the characters into smaller segments, and sometimes merges strokes together, painting each of these new shapes in very distinct colors, the painting turns these common characters into unfamiliar collections of shapes that have lost their calligraphic cohesiveness or "bone structure," sometimes to the point of rendering the surname almost illegible.⁸ If one's surname represents

⁸ The characters are painted according to their "traditional" or non-simplified form (繁体字). In this form, for example, the surname Sun (孫) is composed of ten strokes. In Shen Jingdong's painting of this surname (*Sun*, 2020), this character is divided into twelve shapes, one of which actually merges two strokes. As if to emphasize how this process results in rendering

a symbol of one's roots and identity, then Shen's new paintings point at these becoming increasingly ambiguous and fragmented as they undergo a seemingly playful metamorphosis into shiny toys.

2.2 Faces, bodies, identities

In 1999 Shen Jingdong begun working on a second collective project, this time to gather self-portraits from a hundred artists. The resulting exhibition in Nanjing, *100 Artistic Faces*⁹ (100个艺术家面孔, 2001), saw the participation, among other artists, of Shang Yang (尚扬, b. 1942), Huang Yong Ping (黄永砵, 1954–2019), Li Luming (李路明, b. 1957), Song Yongping (宋永平, b. 1961), Cheng Yong (成勇, 1961–2014), Zhang Dali (张大力, b. 1963), Song Dong (宋冬, b. 1966), and Yang Jinsong (杨劲松, b. 1971); the self-portraits of Slovenian artists such as Petra Varl (b. 1965), and Metod Frlic (b. 1965) were also featured.

In his octopartite commentary to the exhibition, Shen Jingdong explains his goal in facilitating this collective project:

The face is one of the most distinctive symbols of what is innate in a person. I consider the style that emerges when an artist engages in artistic creation as constituting their second face, because when I think of an artwork, I think of the artist themselves. Now I have this weakness: When I look at an art catalog, I first look at the photo of the artist and then at the artworks. So this time I have combined the two into one—the artwork, i.e., the second face, with its creator, i.e., the first face. The result is both the artwork and the artist themselves. (Shen 2001b)

Shen also cites here the portraits that had the strongest influence on his art. As a child, he writes, he marveled in awe at the larger-than-life portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao (Shen 2001b). As to more recent portraits that inspired him, Shen cites *Father* (父亲, 1980) by Luo Zhongli (罗中立, b. 1948), Geng Jianyi's *The Second State* (第二状态, 1987), and the *Large Portraits* series (大肖像系列, 1993) by Zhou Xiping (周细平, b. 1953). While the above-mentioned artworks by Luo and Geng are discussed in most histories of contemporary Chinese art (e.g., Lu 2013), it is worth mentioning a few details about Zhou's art. Zhou Xiping was a member of the New History Group (新历史小组) in Wuhan, which was responsible for group performance artworks such as *Disinfection* (消毒, 1992). His

the characters harder to read, the first three paintings in this series present an arrangement of numerous "deconstructed" surnames and random shapes that fills the entire canvas, the surnames almost dissolving into the disorienting accumulation. Shen has also experimented with hiding messages in these seemingly random accumulation of shapes.

⁹ This is the English title on the cover of the exhibition catalog (i.e., Shen 2001a). The Chinese title could be translated as *Faces of a Hundred Artists*. The artist has followed-up on the 2001 exhibition with two more iterations of the same project, one in 2011 and the latest in 2021.

Large Portraits series of paintings comprises several portraits of CEOs and business owners painted against a neutral background. Each painting—which may equally evoke the portrait of a political cadre or a magazine cover—is accompanied on the canvas by their name, the name of their company, a vacuous slogan (e.g., “innovating products is a necessity of the times”), a telephone number, and the characters of “large portrait” in red. The *Large Portraits* series, among other art by Zhou (e.g., *Rules of Transaction*, 交易规则, n.d.), commented in this way on the increasingly blurred line between the political leadership and the economic elite—and between art, propaganda, and advertising—in China’s post-reform era.

In his commentary to *100 Artistic Faces*, Shen observed how a self-portrait used to represent the most meaningful work in an artist’s career. In today’s world of material abundance and spiritual paucity, however, showing off has become commonplace, and the expression of gravity in the self-portrait of a contemporary artist is actually hilarious (Shen 2001b). Evoking the Confucian *Classic of Filial Piety* (“Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them”),¹⁰ Shen (2001b) concludes: “Today we have made a mess of the faces that our parents gave us. What are we going to mess up tomorrow?”

Most of the portraits included in the catalog of *100 Artistic Faces* are photographic artworks, many of which consist of variously altered or manipulated images, e.g., by means of photomontage, overpainting, and so forth. Shen Jingdong’s own contribution, entitled *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform* (穿老军装的自拍像, 1997), is a close-up photograph of the artist as he stares expressionless at the camera while in front of a blue background. The photograph resembles the type used for identification documents and for official portraits of party cadres. The viewer could believe the photo to be one of such portraits if it weren’t for the anachronistic clothing, unlikely to be Shen’s real uniform, which introduces an element of ambiguity in this otherwise ordinary portrait (Lü and Shen 2008; see also in the next section on this artwork).

Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform had previously been the protagonist of another participatory art project by Shen Jingdong, *Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work* (请观众与我作品合影, 1997). Here I employ the term “participatory” with reference to Bishop’s (2012) and Harvie’s (2013) theorization of a range of contemporary art practices where the artist involves the audience in the making of the artwork, thus turning its members into their central artistic “material.” After realizing a very large print of the above-mentioned self-portrait for an exhibition, Shen took photos of himself (in civilian clothing) and several members of the

¹⁰ *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝经), Chapter 1, “The Scope and Meaning of the Treatise” (开宗明义). English translation from Legge (1879, 466).



Figure 4: Shen Jingdong, *Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work No. 3*, performance and photography, 1997

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

audience as they stood next to it, turning this activity into what may be described as a work of performance art.

Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work was featured in a book on "behavior photography" (行为摄影)¹¹ in China edited by critics Luo Qi (洛齐, b. 1960) and

¹¹ "Behaviour photography" is how this Chinese expression is translated in the English title on the cover of the book. The Chinese term translated here as "behaviour" (行为) renders the English "performance" in the standard Chinese phrase for "performance art" (行为艺术). The Chinese term (and its translation), therefore, arguably highlight the connection between this type of photography and performance art.

Guan Yuda (管郁达, b. 1963) (see Luo and Guan 2000, 82–85). The artworks they chose to collect under this category may be collectively described as examples of conceptual photography that draws on performance art. Most of these works show the artist or other individuals performing or posing *for the camera*, and often place a particular emphasis on the bodily dimension of the image. This reflects what Guan Yuda will later describe as a corporeal trend in Chinese culture at the turn of the century (Guan 2005). Notable examples featured in Luo and Guan's book were, for instance, Huang Yan's *Chinese Landscape* (中国山水, 1999) and Song Yongping's *My Parents: New Life* (我的父母—新生活, 1999). Other works by Shen Jingdong that could be described as "behavior photography" include *Catching the Bad Guy* (抓坏人, 2002), a photomontage in which a uniform-wearing Shen Jingdong points a rifle towards a worried-looking Shen Jingdong in civilian clothes; and *Riding Beijing's White Mule* (骑上北京的白骡子, 2004), a photograph from a performance artwork in which a semi-naked Shen rides a white mule indoors while writing calligraphy (see Wu 2021a, 147–149; Shen 2023b).¹²

In the early 2000s China boasted a vibrant performance art scene that was increasingly attracting the attention of critics and collectors, even if only thanks to the controversy it occasionally stirred (Berghuis 2004; 2023, 8). Nonetheless, performance art continued to occupy the margins of the art world, as it was intrinsically ill-suited for the emerging market for contemporary Chinese art, and largely frowned upon by local art institutions and audiences alike (Lu and Sun 2006, V). By participating in that scene through performance artworks like *Shave Shave Shave* (刮刮刮, 2002), Shen opened a new dimension in his reflection on the relationship between art and the artist's body and identity (see Figure 5).

During *Shave Shave Shave*, the hair on Shen Jingdong's naked body is thoroughly shaved off with razor blades by others. The fifteen-minute video of the artwork begins with these four lines showing across the screen:

I scraped off my hair with a blade
because I could not bear to peel off my skin
I have used art to record my life
slowly my art has become my autobiography.

(Shen 2002, 00:46)¹³

¹² The latter work evokes a legendary episode from the history of Mount Tai (泰山). Emperor Gaozong (高宗, 628–683) of Tang (唐, 618–907) was persuaded by empress Wu Zetian (武则天, 624–705) and the powerful governor of Yizhou (益州) to travel to the sacred mountain on the back of a white mule, even though mules and donkeys were considered more appropriate for low-ranking officials than for an emperor. This attracted ridicule on Gaozong and exposed his feebleness. At the end of the journey the mule, of which they had not taken good care, died. Gaozong posthumously appointed it "General White Mule" and had a tomb built for the animal (Xiao 1932, 43).

¹³ Original text: 我用刀刮去我的毛 / 因为我舍不得剥去我的皮 / 我用艺术记载着我的生活 / 慢慢



Figure 5: Shen Jingdong, *Shave Shave Shave*, performance and photography, 2002

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

The performance took place on a sun-bathed rooftop, where the artists changes position—now sitting on a chair, now laying face-down on the floor—but always appearing motionless. After the procedure, Shen Jingdong stands nude and hairless as the luminosity of the video increases and the screen fades to white, as if the artist's body had become overwhelmingly bright.

Shave Shave Shave shares key characteristics with celebrated Chinese performance artworks from the 1990s and 2000s, such as works by Yang Zhichao (杨志超, b. 1963) (e.g., *Hide*, 藏, 2002), Zhang Huan (张洹, b. 1965) (e.g., *65 kg*, 65公斤, 1994), and He Yunchang (何云昌, b. 1967) (e.g., *One Meter Democracy*, 一米民主, 2010), to name but a few. Such characteristics include the passivity of the action enacted on the artist's naked body by others and the modification or endangerment of the body through the action. With *Shave Shave Shave* Shen Jingdong appears to provide an answer to the question he had asked at the end of *100 Artistic Faces* (see above). That is, after experimenting with one's face, it was time to "mess up" with the hair and skin which—like our surnames—remind us of where we came from. Art critic Wu Hong (吴鸿, b. 1968) similarly conclude that this artwork—not unlike the *Hero* series—stemmed from Shen's long-standing anxiety and inner conflict about his own identity as an artist and a soldier (Wu 2021b, 21).

的 我的艺术便成了我的自传. For the video recording of *Shave Shave Shave*, Shen Jingdong collaborated with above-mentioned artist Cheng Yong and film director Xu Xin (徐辛, b. 1966).

Around the same time that he begun working on the soldier figure portrayed in *Hero*, Shen Jingdong realized another work of performance art that epitomizes the “corporeal turn” in his reflection on the relationship between identity and artistic self-expression. For *Resume on the Back* (背上的简历, 2003) Shen had a summary of his educational and professional experience written in yellow on the skin of his back in both Chinese and English. *Resume on the Back* joins other performance artworks of those years that used “corpography”—to adopt Bachner’s (2014) term—to reflect on the relationship between the corporeal materiality and social identity of the individual. According to Bachner, corpographies in Chinese performance art foreground the negation and erasure of the body while, at the same time, they make signification dependent on an organic medium that is subject to decay and death – thus creating a paradoxical connection between textuality and corporeality (Bachner 2014, 40–42). Such artworks include, for instance, the mid-1990s series *Tattoo* (纹身) by Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰, b. 1969), *Iron* (烙, 2000) by Yang Zhichao, and Zhang Huan’s *Family Tree* (家谱, 2000).¹⁴

Resume on the Back also suggests an affinity between Shen’s research and the art of Zhu Fadong (朱发东, b. 1960), which often engages with issues of identity, its manipulation, and its disappearance under the action of political and economic forces. While Zhu’s artistic research on these issues later found expression in photography and painting (see, e.g., his *Model* and *Celebrity* series, 2001 and 2007 respectively), it started with performance artworks such as *Missing Person Notice* (1993) and *This Person Is for Sale* (1994). For the latter work, which extended over a year’s time, Zhu wore a worker’s blue clothes with a sign on his back that read, “this person is for sale, price negotiable” (此人出售, 价格面议), thus “essentially offering himself up to society [...] to transact a symbolic value exchange” (Lü 2013, 668).¹⁵ By turning his body into a breathing and walking resume, Shen advertised his very flesh for employment, this time—as the addition of the English text suggests—with an eye to the international market. If works like Yang Zhichao’s *Iron* and *Suntanning* (晒, 2000) may have foregrounded “the working of state power” on people’s bodies through “corpographies” where writing becomes “an instrument of subjection,” as Bachner (2014, 39) claims, then Shen’s *Resume on the Back* comments on the commodifying power of the market on an artist’s body and identity.

3. Artist versus hero

One could argue that most of the artworks by Shen Jingdong discussed thus far in this chapter are centered around the identity and the body of the artist, more than

¹⁴ On body art by, e.g., Yang Zhichao, see Strafella and Berg (2023a, 2023b).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Shen Jingdong is a friend of Zhu Fadong’s and has collected his work.

on those of Chinese people and humanity in general. While they may speak to issues that are arguably relevant to the latter, too—from our relationship with our roots, to the body politics of post-socialist China—these artworks primarily contribute to an artistic meta-discourse on the predicament of the artist in post-Mao China.

Shen himself notes how the issue of identity (身份 and 身份认同)—particularly, one's individual identity and status in society—was widely debated in Chinese cultural circles when he began working on the *Hero* series (Shen 2023b). Nanjing-based scholars Zhang Guangmang (张光芒, b. 1966) and Tong Di (童娣) have argued that much of the intellectual and literary debates of the 1990s and early 2000s revolved around the issue of identity. According to Zhang and Tong (2009) and Du Kun (2014), this occurred in response to an increasingly market-oriented and globalized society, a feeling of marginalization among intellectuals, and a shift in importance from national or collective identity to individual identity (自我认同). As an example of intellectual debates of this kind, Zhang and Tong (2009, 97) cite the discussion on “the spirit of the humanities” (人文精神讨论). This debate spread nationwide in the mid-1990s and revolved around the question of what role Chinese intellectuals could and should play vis-à-vis the party-state and the socialist market economy, and therefore represented an instance of intellectual meta-discourse (Strafella 2017, 145).

3.1 *Hero and Little Porcelain People*

The genesis of the *Hero* series not only helps us understand how these portraits relate to Shen Jingdong's conceptual and performance art, but also how they address the issue of identity and its corporeal dimension. At the time, a military-themed drama set in the 1950s was being shot at Shen's work unit and actors were wearing uniforms from that era, so he also donned one such uniform and took a photo of himself (Lü and Shen 2008). That was the origin of *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform*, a sort of Ur-image to the *Hero* series. Shen then experimented with turning that photograph into painting; it is not unusual for Chinese performance artists who were trained at art schools to turn photographs or stills from their performance artworks into paintings, drawings, and even sculptures (see also in the next section). In an early example of a painting based on *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform*, entitled *Self-portrait* (自画像, 2002; see Wu 2021b, 173), the subject has maintained the facial features of the artist while his skin, eyes, and uniform are still of distinct and realistic colors. In a second stage, Shen Jingdong turned that portrait into a fiberglass sculpture (i.e., *Hero*, 英雄, 2003). At this stage, the facial features of the artist dissolve into the *Hero* character, giving him—or them, as their gender is a moot point henceforth—an “Everyman quality” (see also Bloch 2019, 65; Zhu [2006] 2014). Having then fired and painted the character into a porcelain sculpture, Shen proceeded to paint it on canvas (i.e., Figure 1).

Also because of this creation process, the hero's facial features and clothes are almost entirely of the same color—except for badges and insignia. More importantly, the matter of their body and uniform has also become homogeneous, equally smooth and shiny under neon-like, cold, intense lighting. Writing on the work of Camille Renault (1866–1954), Jean Baudrillard described this French sculptor as having attempted to “capture the world as God had left it (that is, in its natural state), to eliminate all its organic spontaneity and replace it with a single polymorphous material: reinforced concrete” (Baudrillard [1976] 2017, 73). Similarly to Renault's concrete, porcelain constitutes Shen Jingdong's *mental* substance that allows him to order and separate the phenomena of the world at will (see Baudrillard [1976] 2017, 74). As a result, the *Hero* paintings come to represent a second-order simulacrum. Absorbed into a single substance, the real is liquidated for a fairy tale.



Figure 6: Shen Jingdong, *Little Porcelain People No. 4*, oil on canvas, 2003

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

Around the same time as he worked on the fiberglass sculpture, Shen realized another series of paintings where bodies are first (mentally) turned into rounded porcelain sculptures and then rendered by brush with oil colors on canvas. The series entitled *Little Porcelain People* (小瓷人, 2003) comprises four paintings, each depicting a porcelain sculpture that shows two figures on a leaf-shaped support having sex in various positions (e.g., Figure 6). In paintings of this series, the male figure sports a long queue similar to the one that men had to wear during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), while

the female character has her hair collected in a high bun (高髻). Erotic figurines much like those portrayed here by Shen appear to have been mass produced in China from the late Qing period until as recently as the 1980s. Similarly to what occurs in the *Hero* paintings, the corporeal reality of the subject is twice removed—first the representation of the scene in porcelain objects, and then by Shen's brush on the canvas. In *Little Porcelain People*, the distance between the living referent and its twice-removed representation in the painting contrasts with the intensely corporeal nature of the activity in which the figurines are engaged. These paintings also compel the viewer to notice a constant in Shen's works from this period onwards, namely, the immobility of his characters. Whether they are represented in the act of reading, playing the trumpet, jumping or dancing, their shiny bodies and uncomfortable smiles appear suspended outside time and space.

Shen Jingdong's paintings of military characters as over-lit porcelain sculptures create a stylistic contrast with portraits of PLA figures in paintings from the socialist era (1949–1978). Shen himself was trained by art teachers who imparted to him the techniques of socialist realism (Shen 2023b). The intense use of shading and shadowing that is characteristic of socialist realist painting is so different from *Hero*, that the latter could be seen as a repudiation of that tradition. Nonetheless, Shen is adamant that his portraits are not meant as a mockery of those figures, or indeed of communist ideals, and that his paintings from *Hero* onwards have more to do with the influence of consumer culture than with political rhetoric (Zhang 2018; Shen 2023b). Art critic and scholar Gao Ling (高岭, b. 1964) also maintains that Shen's paintings do not negate the ideals of China's socialist past—a time when the image of the PLA serviceman was venerated as a symbol of the People's Republic and closely identified with Mao's regime (2008, 6). To Gao, Shen's paintings of “porcelain people on canvas”—as Gao describes the *Hero* portraits—signal the decline of the ideology that conferred a halo of heroism to the PLA soldier and cipher a shift to a new ideology with its cartoon-like, fragile, and more ordinary-looking idols (Gao 2008, 6–7).

Shen Jingdong's paintings of serviceman (and servicewomen) may echo the Maoist narrative of soldiers as lovable (可爱) heroes, which—as Shen once noted—contrasted with ancient images of warriors as devils and monsters (Lü and Shen 2008, 88). Incidentally, the word 可爱 is also Chinese for “cute,” a theoretical category that has been employed by Stallabrass (2020) and Teo (2020), among others, to interpret Shen Jingdong's art. Official party discourse has long referred to soldiers as “the most lovable people” (最可爱的人), an expression originating from a 1951 reportage by journalist Wei Wei (魏巍, 1920–2008) that extolled acts of sacrifice by members of the People's Volunteer Army during the Korean War.

Despite the difference in style, it is possible to identify parallels between the socialist-era iconography of military heroes and Shen Jingdong's *Hero*. One is

particularly reminded of a series of propaganda posters by Xu Jiping (徐寄萍, 1919–2005), entitled *The Young Heroes' Scrolls* (青年英雄屏, 1958). The lower part of each scroll shows the hero in action during their extreme act of sacrifice for the motherland and communism. The upper part of the scroll is occupied by a portrait of the hero, looking forward with a calm expression, against an empty background – a funeral or commemorative portrait of sorts.¹⁶ Socialist-era narratives may well have a connection with the nameless protagonists of the *Hero* series—particularly the well-known story of Lei Feng (雷锋, 1940–1962), which Shen mentions as an influence (Lü and Shen 2008, 88) and whom he has portrayed in several works (i.e., Lei Feng, 2011).

According to art critic Zhu Qi (朱其, b. 1966), who has studied the art of Shen Jingdong since the early days of *Hundred Surnames*, Shen attempts with *Hero* to break away from the binary of propaganda art versus the satirical re-purposing of propaganda art (Zhu [2006] 2014). Zhu Qi is alluding here to the Political Pop trend in contemporary Chinese painting, a trend that gained considerable attention in China and abroad during the 1990s thanks to the works of such artists as Wang Guangyi (王广义, b. 1957) and Yu Youhan (余友涵, b. 1943) (cf. Li 1993, xix–xxii). Instead, Zhu Qi contends, Shen paints his PLA heroes as devoid of any sense of sublime or loftiness, thus making them both more ordinary and more universal (Zhu [2006] 2014). However, one could argue that the colors of the earliest paintings in the *Hero* series suggest a more complex, if subtle relation between the character and the political context. In early *Hero* portraits such as the one reproduced in Figure 1, the body and clothes of the soldier-hero have been homogeneously subsumed into a porcelain simulacrum that is painted entirely in yellow and red—i.e., the dominant colors of the emblems and flags of the Chinese state, party, and army. This further emphasizes the conflict between the creative identity of the contemporary Chinese artist, defined by their defiance vis-à-vis established artistic ideas and institutions, and the role of the soldier, whose identity is dependent on their selfless service to the party-state.

Finally, among the sources for the idea behind his uniformed characters Shen Jingdong also cites the protagonist of the Czech literary classic, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921–1923) by Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923), whom he knows through the 1956 film adaptation directed by Karel Steklý (1903–1987) (Wu 2021b, 23; Shen 2023b). According to Wu Hong's interpretation of the affinity between Shen's heroes and Hašek's anti-hero, the dark satirical effect of Josef Švejk's story derives from the fact that the more Švejk tries to

¹⁶ See, e.g., Dong Cunrui (董存瑞, 1958), <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-162>. On ancestor portraits in Chinese tradition, see, e.g., Olivová (2022). A discussion of the connections between Shen Jingdong's portraits and the tradition of Chinese portraiture—including the use of clothing and costumes—is outside the scope of this study.

behave like a good soldier, the more the absurdity of the category of “good” in his topsy-turvy world becomes apparent (Wu 2021b, 16). The image of Shen’s heroes might remind some of Švejk as portrayed in the illustrations of Hašek’s novel by Josef Lada (1887–1957), or the collage re-interpretation of these by John Heartfield (1891–1968). While Shen was not familiar with Lada’s work when he painted *Hero*, the actor who played Švejk in Steklý’s film, Rudolf Hrušínský (1920–1994), is said to have gained weight for this film so that his countenance would resemble that of Švejk in Lada’s illustrations.



Figure 7: Shen Jingdong, *Bound-up No. 1*, oil on canvas, 2012

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

3.2 From the *Bound-up* series to new performances

Around 2011 Shen Jingdong appears to manifest growing unease with the immaculate surface of his heroes. In a series of paintings entitled *Split* (裂, 2011) and other works from the same period, Shen’s military heroes are portrayed

on canvas as variously cracked, chipped and broken, revealing their nature as lifeless porcelain sculptures. In 2012, he introduces a figure without uniform—or indeed any individual feature—whose head and body are wrapped in white bandages with red stains. The *Bound-up* series portrays this figure in various activities—most notably, in combat poses similar to those of Xu Jiping's heroes (compare, e.g., Shen's *Bound up No. 2* and *No. 3*, and Xu's *Huang Jiguang*, 黄继光, 1958).

When read against the background of Shen Jingdong's career, references in *Bound-up* to Chinese and foreign performance artworks become evident—from the above-mentioned *Wrapping No. 1: King and Queen* by Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili, the performance work by Concept 21 (观念21) on the Great Wall in 1988, and *One Meter Democracy* by He Yunchang, to *3rd Action* (3. Aktion, 1965) by Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940–1969). “The act of wrapping the body in white bandages”—as Carlos Rojas (2011, 157) observed—“was a recurrent theme in performance art in China in the 1980s, connoting among other things an image of bodily wounds or scars.” According to Rojas (2011, 157), such works posed the question of what it means to be human in contemporary China. As if to emphasize the link between his wounded characters and performance art, in 2012 Shen Jingdong modified three works he had originally painted in 2008 in the style of the Hero paintings. The 2008 paintings depict the performances *Catching the Bad Guy*, *Shave Shave Shave*, and *Riding Beijing's White Mule*, and are entitled, respectively, *Memento 2001* (纪念 2001), *Memento 2002* (纪念 2002), and *Memento 2005* (纪念 2005). In 2012, Shen added bandages and blood stains on the body of the portrayed subjects. These paintings and their subsequent modifications show that Shen has not renegaded or forgotten his most avant-gardist work, and underscore its continuing relevance for Shen's current artistic research.

Since around 2012, Shen has enacted the violation of his painted surfaces as well as of the bodies in his portraits in various ways, as if to return to that original determination to “mess up” one's concept of identity through interventions on the body and its image. In a series of artworks entitled *Suture* (缝合, 2018)—which, together with *International Joke* (国际玩笑, 2018), probably constitutes his darkest art to date—Shen painted stitched-up cuts across a canvas where he had previously painted a blue bandaged figure. An even more violent transformation of Shen's art was enacted through a collaboration between Shen and the Chinese-American artist Jon Tsoi (蔡江, b. 1958). For a joint project by Shen and Tsoi entitled *Headless and Heartless* (无头无心, 2016), several paintings from Shen's *Bound-up* series were printed on canvases before Tsoi slashed them with a blade, and then bound and tied up pieces of the cut-up canvases with white gauze bandages (see, e.g., *New Bound-up No. 1*, 新包扎之一, 2016).

During the last few years, Shen has also carried out performance artworks during his exhibitions, both outside and within the exhibition spaces. These works involve the artist intervening on his own body, his portraits, and the spaces of galleries and museums. For instance, during a 2019 show, Shen had his semi-naked body covered in stickers that read “Shen Jingdong was here” while standing at the center of the gallery. Stickers were also left by the artist and his associates to adorn surfaces across every city where the show was exhibited.¹⁷ During the opening of a 2023 solo exhibition in New York entitled *Begin Again*,¹⁸ the artist smeared paint over one of the portraits on view and all over his own face, recording the process with videos and photographs. The Chinese title of this performance work, *Bianlian* (变脸), is a verb-noun construct that literally means “to change face,” but commonly refers to someone suddenly turning hostile or, in theater, to a rapid change in the emotions displayed on an actor’s face—as demonstrated by Shen in photos from the performance. Finally, at the closing ceremony of a comprehensive exhibition of his art entitled, *The Art Journey of a Good Soldier*,¹⁹ Shen lined up a group of uniformed security staff for a performance entitled *Hiring Security Guards* (雇佣保安, 2018). These and other recent artworks show how important it is for Shen to reclaim his own avant-gardist experience as integral to even his most recent art.

Starting from the Hero series up until today, the art of Shen Jingdong has staged an effort to multiply the distance between us and our real bodies and conflicted identities, but also the inevitable return of violence and the corporeal in art as much as in life. Two paintings realized by Shen between 2017 and 2018—two relatively rare examples of art by Shen that depicts an actual event in the artist’s life, other than a performance—best illustrate this tension. On the morning of March 29, 2017, Shen posted on WeChat that his house and studio in Songzhuang was being demolished without prior notice, asking his friends to come out in support of his protest. Shen had moved to Beijing in 2004 and in 2009 had settled in the town of Songzhuang, in the Tongzhou (通州) district on the outskirts of the capital, where starting in the mid-1990s a community of thousands of artists had been gathering also thanks to the encouragement and support of local authorities. After the 2008 Beijing Olympics and especially since 2015, when the transfer of many government departments of the Beijing municipality to the Tongzhou district was announced, a familiar process of

¹⁷ *Shen Jingdong Is Here*, curated by Shen Cen (沈岑, b. 1967), New York, Venice, Singapore, etc., 2019.

¹⁸ Curated by Charles A. Riley II and Lydia Duanmu, New York, 2023.

¹⁹ Curated by Wu Hong, Songzhuang, 2017–2018. The Chinese title of the exhibition, which closely paraphrases the Chinese title of Hašek’s novel, was Hao bing Jingdong cong yi ji 好兵敬东从艺记 (literally, “record of the good soldier Jingdong’s doing art”).



Figure 8: Shen Jingdong, *Just a Game, Just a Dream* (detail), oil on canvas, 2018

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

gentrification accompanied by demolitions and re-development has been taking place. As a result, many artists have been forced to leave Songzhuang during the last few years. As Shen and other artists protested the demolitions, they were thrown to the ground and a few of them were injured. A photograph taken by a bystander during the events of that day shows Shen and another protester being pinned to the ground by security guards with anti-riot forks (防爆叉), an ubiquitous tool of policing in present-day Beijing.

Shen has painted this scene at least twice. In a first, more realistic painting, entitled *March 29, 2017* (2017年3月29日, 2017), the people in the photograph are portrayed as shiny porcelain characters, but with realistic colors. Anonymized and looking like each other, the characters appear still against the background of a semi-demolished wall that alludes to the events of that day. In the second painting, *Just a Game, Just a Dream* (一场游戏, 一场梦, 2018, Figure 8),²⁰ the scene

²⁰ This painting is divided onto two canvases of similar size, both showing security guards with smileys as faces as they hold protesters to the ground with anti-riot forks; the part reproduced in Figure 8 is the right-hand canvas.

has been recreated to take it further away from a realistic portrayal of the violence and brutality of the event. The blue hues, the smiley stickers, the expressionless faces, and an inscription reading, “this is just a game, just a dream” attempt—in vain—to defuse the ignominy of the scene, as if to reassure the viewer (or the painter) that this is but another fairy-tale. They emphasize, in contrast, the degraded condition of the artist and the brutality of the scene. The elaborate candy-colored veil between reality and the protagonists of Shen’s art is broken, and what on the surface appeared as cute, escapist art suddenly becomes protest art and social commentary.

4. Conclusion

Underneath Shen Jingdong’s seemingly joyful and eye-pleasing portraits lie connections to avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art and to wider debates on issues related to identity and the corporeal in post-reform China. This chapter has explored the evolution of these themes throughout Shen’s art, showing how a conflicted reflection on the artist’s identity underpins his early conceptual and performance art projects as well as his recent paintings. The analysis of Shen’s early works of conceptual photography and performance art in this study has revealed the links between those and his subsequent artistic production. Although the discussion of Shen Jingdong’s paintings in this chapter is, by necessity, limited to a small selection of artworks, it has addressed the key turning points in his figurative research, including the landmark *Hero* series and the *Bound-up* series, among other works. While Shen’s art since the mid-2000s has attracted a great deal of critical and commercial attention, turning him into one of China’s most successful contemporary painters, this study has attempted to address the dearth of research into how to place his oeuvre into the artistic and intellectual context of post-1989 China. Finally, this study demonstrated how the experimental years of contemporary Chinese art between the mid-1980s until the early 2000s are crucial to understand the art of the last twenty years, even when the latter may appear much more conventional and congenial to mass consumption.

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