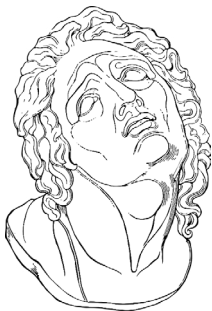


Jiehong Jiang, *The Conformed Body: Contemporary Art in China*

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The Conformed Body is the latest book by scholar Jiehong Jiang, a specialist in Chinese contemporary art and visual culture. Jiang was born and raised in Shanghai and has been based in England since the late 1990s. Over the years, he has consistently emphasised the profound influence of China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and of the realities of everyday life in China on contemporary artistic practice. These views have been expressed in his essay "Burden or Legacy" (2007), as well as in the books *The Revolution Continues* (2008) and *The Art of Contemporary China* (2021).¹ Although he coined the term "the conformed body" in a 2015 essay, Jiang had already been developing his analysis of "conformity" in those earlier writings.² He argues that Mao Zedong's legacy continues to exert a lasting impact, evident in the collective experience of conformity in Chinese society.

The experience of conformity manifests in daily practices within educational institutions and workplaces, such as: in radio calisthenics, routine exercises, and university military training; in traditional study, including calligraphic training and martial arts; in ceremonial events, such as military parades and mass assemblies; and in public activities, notably urban square dancing. These forms of bodily training and social phenomena form part of the collective memories of those who grew up in mainland China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Positioning himself within this collective, Jiang includes a self-narrative of his training and observations in mainland China. His central premise is that these collective experiences inspire Chinese artists to explore and reflect upon the power structures and mechanisms of control embedded in "the conformed body."

Instead of offering a comprehensive chronological history of Chinese contemporary art, *The Conformed Body* is organised into five thematic chapters addressing various mediums and artistic forms. It features artists born between the 1940s and the 1990s who have lived and worked in mainland China. It frames its analysis through Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and punishment, power, and technologies of the self.

The book begins with a concise history of art in the PRC since the launch of the Reform and Opening up policy in 1978, stating that contemporary art in China has its own path. It then engages with debates surrounding Mao's legacy in both society and art. Through accounts of the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremonies and the Communist Party anniversary ceremony, the introduction delineates the rigid uniformity of state spectacle and its fixation on order, conformity, and grandeur.

Within this context, Chapter One employs the term *danwei* (work unit) to examine how regional and local organisations in socialist and contemporary China govern individuals collectively. Readers familiar with China's social system since 1978, including reforms to

state-owned enterprises, are better positioned to discern the subtle distinctions of *danwei* explored across generations of artists. Expanding the notion of *danwei*, this chapter also considers how artist groups, such as Polit-Sheer-Form Office, comprising artists born in the 1960s, and Boloho, whose members were born in the 1980s and 1990s, work collectively.

Chapter Two addresses the appearance of the conformed body, with its uniforms, standardised ornaments, and identical facial expressions or masks. The shell and mask function metaphorically either as protective coverings that conceal the body and face beneath a collective identity, or as symbols of enforced sameness through uniformity. This chapter also reflects on the political and symbolic dimensions of uniforms since the Maoist period (1949-1976), exemplified by the Mao suit and its connotations of authority and power.

Chapter Three investigates the mechanisms of training and disciplinary control, focusing on the regulation of bodily positions, gestures, and movements, and on how self-discipline becomes embedded within the body, shaping modes of thought and work. Several artworks highlight repetitive labour in performance and paintings. The established artist Geng Jianyi's meticulous staging of everyday gestures exposes the ironic rigidity of conformity. However, in discussing the younger artist Ge Yulu, readers unfamiliar with his practice may require knowledge of his earlier urban interventions to grasp the radical character of his work.

Chapter Four examines the performative dimensions of training, including both cultural practices and daily exercises. It discusses artists' unconventional approaches to Chinese calligraphy, although readers may require additional background in calligraphy to understand them fully. It also analyses various performance pieces from the 1990s onwards, exploring how artists use their bodies or collaborate with others to explore themes of resistance, labour, freedom, and control.

Chapter Five shifts to ideals of conduct shaped by surveillance, discipline, and punishment. It showcases Chinese artists' long-term reflections on how pervasive surveillance and data control have permeated everyday life. However, unexpectedly 'imprisoning' visitors in exhibition spaces, as in pieces by Zhang Peili, raises ethical concerns and demands rigorous risk assessment in curatorial practice. Finally, the concluding chapter reflects on bodily regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, emphasising how extreme conditions intensified control and enforced conformity.

Although published in 2024, the book overlooks the contributions of women artists in China. Artists He Chengyao (b. 1964), Tong Wenmin (b. 1989), Zhang Qiong (b. 1988), and Xie Jing (b. 1993) have utilised their bodies to interrogate control, regulation, and power in performance art, as seen in *He's Broadcast Exercise* (2004), *Tong's Factory Project* (2016), and Xie and Zhang's *Shooting in the Dark* (2020). Furthermore, it would have been valuable for male artists and writers from China to reflect on their privileges. In the author's case, these include training in calligraphy and drawing in cosmopolitan Shanghai, as well as overseas education and privileged mobility.

Overall, the book's strength lies in its compelling portrayal of conformity as a collective experience, shown through everyday life in China and the state's representations, and in the ways it demonstrates how artists across generations have explored and reflected on it. It also clarifies the explicit and implicit ways Mao's legacy shapes contemporary China. Jiang's citation of Mao's theory of art as superstructure attests to that influence in his writing.

References

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