

13 August 2018

Frieze

"Tao Hui's Politics of Sentimentality"

Link: <https://frieze.com/article/tao-huis-politics-sentimentality>

Features /

🐦 📘 ✉️ 📌

BY ALVIN LI
13 AUG 2018

Tao Hui's Politics of Sentimentality

The Beijing-based artist's films draw on the emotional strategies of pop culture to explore identity and belonging in a hyper-mediatized world



Part of China's post-1980s generation, the Beijing-based artist Tao Hui makes films influenced by the tropes of the mass cultural productions – television series, films, reality shows – that have flooded the country since the era of reform and opening up. Through his playful, subtly transgressive recycling of materials from this rich visual repertoire, Tao probes the relationship between the media landscape and the social body and reflects on the fraught ethics of belonging in a hyper-mediatized reality.

Tao was born in a small mountain village in Yunyang County, just outside of Chongqing, a city in southwest China, in 1987. Widespread television ownership was a burgeoning phenomenon in 1980s China; newly produced shows and films began to serve as powerful public allegories that promised new freedoms, gripping vast audiences across divides between rural and urban populations. Growing up, Tao watched television every day after school. In his culturally and ethnically homogenous hometown, it became the window for him to imagine lives elsewhere.



Tao Hui, *The Dusk of Tehran*, 2014, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Aike Gallery, Shanghai

When Tao was admitted to the esteemed Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing in 2006, he was advised to study painting rather than broadcasting and television. (In the Chinese academy, painting was – and still is – considered the higher art form.) But, early on, he began experimenting with video: *Miss Green*, *Remember to Forget* (2008) and *Mongolism* (2010), both made while the artist was still in college, draw on two of his favourite childhood television shows, *New Legend of Madame White Snake* (1992–93), based on the classic Chinese folk tale, and *My Fair Princess* (1998–99), a Cinderella-like costume drama set during the 18th-century Qing dynasty. Tao invited friends to act minor roles from these 1990s period dramas and assigned them new fates. Shot in his immediate surroundings, these early, amateur experiments – with low-fi effects and a campy humour that recall George Kuchar's oeuvre – allowed him to explore the narrative conventions of mass-media productions.

The politics of sentimentality – how emotions manipulate and are manipulated, particularly within popular television and film productions – is central to Tao's work. In conversation, the artist describes himself as a melancholic person: a temperament he likes to believe he inherited from his mother. However, the sentimental disposition he speaks of is, in fact, a leitmotif that the cultural critic Rey Chow has described as resonating across Chinese culture. In her 2007 study of contemporary Chinese cinema, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*, Chow argues that, in a culture heavily centred around family values, sentimentality is what underlies the modes of human relationships, rooted in an idea of home. When emotional excess, which is often attributed to the sentimental, is evoked on screen, it is intended to produce 'the delineation and elaboration of a comfortable/homely interiority, replete with the implications of exclusion that such delineation and elaboration by necessity entail'.¹



Tao Hui, *Hello Finale!*, 2017,
video still. Courtesy: the artist
and Aike Gallery, Shanghai

If Rey's argument implies that there is a xenophobic (not to mention heteronormative) subtext to the deployment of sentimentality in Chinese cinema, Tao stages complex sentimental situations that recuperate emotional excess to quietly subversive ends. *Talk About Body* (2013) invites us into a domestic setting. Surrounded by a group of people, a slim figure, dressed in a hijab, sits on a bed and delivers a deadpan monologue. As the narration goes on, we might begin to question who is really speaking. The voice, which sounds too feeble to be coming from the young person on screen is, in fact, a recording of an old woman, while the words being spoken are from a biological report describing the body of the artist. (Though playing the Muslim 'girl' on-screen, Tao is Han Chinese and biologically male: 'I have a round-shaped head, which is the exact opposite to most males of Han ethnicity, who are known for their square-shaped heads.') The speech ends with the statement: 'I have given up all my prejudice, using only natural facts to construct my body. I belong to soil.' In Chinese poetry and lyrical prose, soil is often invoked as a metaphor for the dialectic between nature and culture, settlement and migration. In a cultural context in which discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality is still commonplace, and where conflicts between Han and ethnic minorities periodically flare up, Tao's bedroom cross-ethnic drag performance embodies two sets of aggressive challenges to the 'comfortable/homely interiority' of popular imaginary.

In *The Dusk of Tehran* (2014), Tao develops his narrative and performative strategies further. Shot during a residency in Tehran, the four-and-a-half-minute film transposes a heart-rending speech given by the late Hong Kong pop singer Anita Mui into a conversation between a young Iranian actress and her taxi driver. Having gone public about her terminal illness (Mui died of cervical cancer in 2003 at the age of 40), the singer – who lived a single life in Hong Kong, where women are by and large still expected to marry and have children – spoke to fans at her final concert of her desire for love and the difficulty of finding it, while dressed in a bridal gown. In Tao's work, the actress sits in the back of the car, also in a bridal gown, and reprises the Hong Kong star's words in Persian. Mui went on to perform her hit 'Sunset Melody' (1989) after her speech; the female actress in Tao's re-enactment instead asks the driver to play a Persian song on the radio ('Why Did You Leave?', 2014, by Homayoun Shajarian). Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has prohibited solo performances by female singers due to the belief that women's voices can potentially trigger arousal. Here, the sentimental mood creates a bond between oppressed women in two disparate cultures, hinting at commonalities – and possibilities of resistance – across cultural and political divides.



Tao Hui, *Hello Finale!*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Aike Gallery, Shanghai

Tao's works almost exclusively feature female protagonists. According to the artist, this is not a deliberate strategy, but a result of the fact that the kind of emotional narratives he's drawn to – laden with negative affects, such as envy and irritation, or what the literary theorist Sianne Ngai describes as 'ugly feelings'² – are historically gendered. However, Tao's characters are often of ambiguous gender as well as frequently nameless: they resist simple, affirmative identifications and, instead, suture the audience into their emotional narratives. We might also see this elusiveness as being positioned against the reigning economy of what Chow terms 'global visibility': 'The ongoing, late-capitalist phenomenon of mediatized spectacularization in which the endeavour to seek social recognition amounts to an incessant production and consumption of oneself and one's group as images.'³

The logic of social recognition premised on hyper-visibility and incessant performance is dramatized in Tao's satirical film, *The Acting Tutorial* (2014). In an empty warehouse, a group of young actresses, surrounded by a team of cameramen, follow their tutor and attempt to deliver their most convincing performances. Similarly, *Double Talk* (2018), commissioned by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul for the recent group show 'How Little You Know About Me', takes narrative cues from the Korean entertainment industry's notorious exploitation of labour, both physical and affective, which has led to a number of high-profile celebrity suicides. In this two-channel video installation, one screen shows a magical realist drama about a failed Korean pop idol who comes back to life only to begin performing again in front of the press. On the other, a teacher analyzes the pop star's performance in front of a room of adolescent students.



Tao Hui, *Hello Finale!*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Aike Gallery, Shanghai

Tao often stresses that his work does not take a definitive stance on popular culture; rather, he appropriates the materials he finds inspiring and dramatizes their effects on the public consciousness, while leaving it to the audience to draw their own conclusions. Commissioned by the Rockbund Art Museum and presented as part of his entry to last year's edition of the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award, the video installation *Hello, Finale!* (2017) sees the artist weave his reflections on the contemporary media landscape into the melodramatic form. Comprising nine videos shown across nine television monitors, installed in three rows of three with a couch in front of each, the piece intends to mimic the viewing experience of channel surfing. Each screen shows a scene of a character speaking on the phone to an unknown interlocutor. Their emotional utterances are marked by a sense of loss and the desire to escape from an increasingly corrupt world. Shot in nine different locations in Kyoto, and featuring local actors speaking in Japanese, the work evokes, through its *mises-en-scène*, the visual tropes of Japanese television. However, the script is, in fact, based on news events that took place in China as well as the artist's personal encounters.

At its core, Tao's investment in both sentimentality and our hyper-mediatized global reality is bound to a question of truthfulness: narratives and performances can be fabricated, but the underlying emotions must be 'authentic' to traverse culture and time. His latest project is *The History of Southern Drama* (2018), the first part of which opened at Chi-Wen Gallery in Taipei in July. Consisting of a series of installations and filmic fragments, it asks the audience to piece together an old Taiwanese woman writer's heart-wrenching stories of immigration, passion and betrayal, set against the sociopolitical backdrop of the cold war. Tao's tragic heroine chronicles the evolving desires produced by a nation's historical transformation while, with a sense of pathos that runs through all of the artist's work, touching upon a universal narrative of yearning.

Published in frieze issue 197, September 2018, with the title Love's Labour Lost.

Main image: Tao Hui, Double Talk, 2018, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Aike Gallery, Shanghai

1 Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*, 2007, Columbia University Press, New York, p.19

2 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2005, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

3 Chow, op. cit., p.22

ALVIN LI

Alvin Li is a writer and contributing editor of *frieze*, based in Shanghai, China.

First published in Issue 197
September 2018