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A Metaphor for Identities in Transition through Urbanization and Globalization: Tofu and One Hundred Surnames¹

Yang Jing

Nowadays, mobility is celebrated as one of the most significant ideologies of contemporary art. A multitude of notions, such as migration, displacement, diaspora, nomadism and deterritorialization have become trendy topics in contemporary artworks and exhibitions; mobility in contemporary art engages all agents of the art system, including artists, critics, curators, collectors, art dealers and audiences; it has been articulated on different levels, such as the production and dissemination of the artworks, the identity of the artists and the reception of artworks by

audiences. Joaquín Barriendos Rodríguez suggested that in the social context, the term mobility does not merely mean the changes in people's geographical position; more significantly, it refers to the social and individual representations of the meaning of displacement experiences. The symbolic dimension of mobility is "that which shapes the cultural processes and contexts where [...] new subjectivities are being negotiated."² Thus, the symbolic dimension of mobility is understood as the fluidity of subjectivity, the displacement of imaginaries, and the question-

ing of a number of associated terms which are conventionally regarded as fixed and inherently bonded to a certain field, such as identity, nationality, race, gender, belonging, neighbourhood, etc.³ In the light of migratory aesthetics, symbolic mobility in contemporary art often focuses on the experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself into new modalities, new artwork and new ways of being and variously engages with themes of travel, identity and shifting concepts of home in a world in which domestic and international relocation has become a commonplace.⁴ The obvious, fixed and immutable identity is being replaced by obscure, drifting and unstable ones, dependent upon temporal and spatial changes.

Richard Meyer, by citing Philip Gleason's analysis of the historical context of identity, points out that identity actually means some "uncertainty" from the very beginning. When the term identity came into use in the 1950s, rather than suggesting a stable sense of selfhood, it was often used to designate "an identity crisis" or "a search for identity", stemming from the individual's "alienation in an



increasingly anonymous society.”⁵ Later, the social and political movements in the 1960s bonded the notion of identity with race, religion, national background, or other cultural markers.⁶ In artworks, the problem of the identities of both the artist and the intended audience, on the individual and broader cultural level, is not only the theme of artwork, but also determines how the work is constructed.⁷ Cultural identity is a constantly shifting understanding of one’s identity in relation to others, constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritages, languages, aesthetics, norms and customs. The presentation of the mobility of cultural identity is often focused on how artists acknowledge and negotiate with the geographical distance and cultural strangeness that result in the making of artworks, which is seen in the artists’ preferences for and shifts between various concepts, subject matters, formal properties, materials and mediums.

This paper focuses on the work of Chen Qiulin — a Chinese artist who has been taking displacement and the resulting unrest in people’s identity as her persistent theme since the early 1990s. Working in multiple

mediums including installation, performance, photography and video, Chen is widely noted for her *Migration* series that includes five video works, accompanied by numerous photos, taken in her hometown Wanxian between 2002 and 2012.⁸ The *Migration (Qian xi, 迁徙)* series reveals her traumatic feeling of being uprooted and the sense of uncertainty about the future. She interrogates the problem of identity as a consequence of forced domestic displacement due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. According to Wu Hung, the significance of her work “lies not in documenting the transformation of the region, but in her sensitive representation of the conflicting emotions and desires of an artist who identifies herself as her subject.”⁹ Bearing artistic as well as social and cultural significance, the *Migration* series attracted wide attention both within China and abroad and established Chen a unique and prominent figure in Chinese contemporary art.

Since 2004 Chen has created a sequence of single and multi-channel videos, photos, performances and installations dealing explicitly with tofu and Chinese surnames. This series, titled *Tofu and One Hundred Sur-*

names, refers to a metaphorical expression of the identity issue in a broader context of urbanization and globalization, and forms a significant part of the artist’ multi-angle and multi-level presentation of the complexity of identity. However, as most scholarly studies on Chen were focused on *Migration* series, her *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* series has yet to attract more attention.

In 2016, I conducted interviews with Chen twice, in August and then again in November. Each interview lasted about 2.5 hours. I also examined closely her works that are preserved at the A Thousand Plateaus Art Space in Chengdu. Since then we have maintained regular correspondence by phone, e-mail and WeChat. Chen has kindly given permission for her work to be published and discussed here. In what follows, taking her *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* series as an example, I attempt to reveal the conception, form, medium, material, and exhibition strategy of this series. My analysis is built on two issues that somehow overlap with each other. First I will analyze how the artist has transformed tofu and surname into a metaphorical language for revealing the identity conflict stemming from the enormous





Figure 1: Chen Qiulin, *Tofu*, Photograph, 2004 © the artist and the A Thousand Plateaus Art Space. Courtesy of the artist.

influence of China's urbanization in recent decades. Second I will illuminate how the artist has integrated her trans-cultural experiences with Chinese migrant communities in Australia with a specific focus on Chinese immigrants' surnames and their cooking and eating experience with tofu, to reflect the continuity and fluidity of cultural identity against the background of global migration. The *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* series provides a significant example for revealing the ambiguity, ephemerality, instability and fragility in identity in Chinese contemporary art, which have previously not been fully recognized.

Tofu and One Hundred Surnames

The first work of this sequence is titled *Tofu on February 14th (Er yue shi si hao de dou fu, 二月十四号的豆腐)*, a mixture of installation, video, performance and event. This

work was first presented at the Blue Roof Art Centre in Chengdu on February 14th, 2004. Chen displayed a hundred Chinese surnames carved out of Tofu accompanied by a series of photo and video records of the carving process. After the opening ceremony a hot-pot dinner was served. The guests were her friends and randomly invited visitors at the exhibition. Three girls in nurses uniforms pushed hospital carts around to distribute pieces of tofu characters and kept asking the guests: "Would you like to eat some tofu?" Then, the guests cooked the tofu surnames in five hot-pots and enjoyed a candlelit dinner party. Shortly after displaying this work in the Blue Roof Art Centre, the artist put the tofu surnames on the edge of an expressway near Chengdu. At first glance, the tofu characters look like the political slogans that can be seen in many public spaces in Chi-

na although the content and the white colour show the difference. This work was documented by digital photography and has since then been displayed at many exhibitions.

Chen soon started to include the spoilage process of tofu into her art. She took part in the 2014 Art Stage Singapore. She initially planned to install 100 surnames carved out of tofu; due to the restriction of display space, only about 60 surnames were displayed in the exhibition hall. Before the opening day of the exhibition, Chen transported these surnames to the site where she also gave a performance of carving tofu into surnames. During the exhibition, the tofu gradually started to weep; its fragrance changed to a slightly unpleasant odour, creating a disturbing feeling, this introduction of the smell into the interaction with the visitors being an integral part of the work. Later, when the odour





Figure 2: Chen Qiulin, *One Hundred Surnames in Tofu*, Video Installation, 100 Screen (25x35cm/ Screen), 2'15"/Screen, dimensions variable, 2004-2014 © the artist and the A Thousand Plateaus Art Space. Courtesy of the artist.

became more oppressive, Chen demolished the installation and replaced it with a detailed documentation in images and texts of her creative process for this work. Since 2004, she has been using video to record the spoilage process of the Chinese surnames carved in Tofu and that resulted in a 100 screen videos, titled *One Hundred Surnames in Tofu* (*Dou fu bai jia xing*, 豆腐百家姓). According to the exhibition space, the number of screens can be adjusted. In 2015, she took part in Art Basel Hong Kong where she displayed about 40 screens of video.

In 2015, commissioned by the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney, Chen started to make *One Hundred Names*

for *Kwong Wah Chong* (*Guang he chang de dou fu bai jia xing*, 广和昌的豆腐百家姓), a multi-channel video installation for her first Australian solo exhibition *One Hundred Names*. *One Hundred Names for Kwong Wah Chong* explores the history of early Chinese immigrants to Australia. The 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art is located in Sydney's Haymarket district, where the city's first Chinese-owned and operated shopfront business named Kwong Wah Chong was once located. The title was to commemorate this historic district and, in particular, Kwong Wah Chong, which was an economic and social cornerstone for the Chinese community in the early twentieth century. *One Hundred*

Names for Kwong Wah Chong consists of 25 screens of video. These videos document the gradually decaying carved surnames of those early Chinese immigrants. The artist interviewed 15 Chinese immigrants who are the decedents of the early Chinese immigrants and recorded the interviews and juxtaposed them with her previously conducted interviews with the inhabitants in Chengdu who share family names with those early Chinese immigrants in Sydney. The artist cooked different tofu meals with the participants and asked the participants to describe their favourite tofu recipe. Focusing on personal experiences and memories, these conversations connected contemporary Chinese society and the world of early Chinese immigrants in Australia and allowed audiences to think about migration on a broader scale. In 2016, the *One Hundred Names* exhibition journeyed to the Shepparton Art Museum. In addition to the multi-channel video installation she displayed in Sydney, Chen organized a tofu feast through cooperating with a local Chinese restaurant. The feast attracted many participants to join in the convivial atmosphere and the event was reported in the local media news. The income from the





Figure 3: Chen Qiulin, *Stills from One Hundred Surnames in Tofu* © the artist and the A Thousand Plateaus Art Space. Courtesy of the artist.

sale of dinner tickets was used to support the Shepparton Art Museum.

As one of the most important parts of daily life and culture, food can evoke memories of time, place and belonging. Everything relating to the food, including what we consume, how we obtain and prepare our food, where we consume it and which rituals are performed as the food is being eaten can be seen as being a “sensory point of entry into a web of sentiments, memories and fantasies, which largely constitute the sense of identity.”¹⁰ Many contemporary artists have been applying food as an artistic medium. Owing to food’s inherent abilities to bring people together, the ritual of making and sharing a meal has become a widely adopted tactic for interpersonal and intercultural exchange, through which the artists could facilitate a

conversation about a series of challenging topics, in which the identity issue is either highlighted or mingled with other issues.

In *Traditional Rural Oven for Baking Bread* (1972), Victor Grippo and his partners baked bread from a clay oven built in a square in Buenos Aires and distributed bread to thousands of passers-by for free; by doing it the artist reminded the community about their lost tradition of baking and sharing breads. Grippo’s recall of the traditional ritual goes along with a critical reflection on the contemporary culture of consumption as well as on the increasing poverty in Argentina. In Bobby Baker’s edible installation exhibited in 1976, *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*, each member of a family was cast from a different sort of confection. The head of the figure of the mother is made as a teapot from which

everyone was offered a cup of tea. The artist’s objective was to facilitate contemplation on her own role as well as on women’s roles generally in the kitchen as well as in society. Between 2003 and 2008, the artist Victoria Stanton performed *ESSEN* in different cities around the world. The artist took pairs of participants to a selected restaurant and asked them to sit opposite one another; when food was served, the participants had to feed their partners in pairs. This alternative eating experience recalled people’s childhood experience of being fed and conveyed contradictory meanings in interpersonal relationships, such as helping vs. dominating, self-control vs. dependence. Rirkrit Tiravanija is one of the most prominent relational art practitioners. Since his first performance at Gallery 303 in New York in 1992, he has been



well-known for cooking and serving food to viewers at galleries. He changed the gallery space into a temporary kitchen with ingredients and cooking utensils and performed as a chef cooking Thai curry for everyone who attended the exhibition. In all these projects centring on food, such as the making and sharing of food and/or the smell and taste of food, are associated with multi-sensory memory, through which, as pointed out by Robertson and McDaniel, we construct identity, purpose and meaning.¹¹

Among contemporary Chinese artists, Song Dong has developed a series of projects in which making edible artworks are the basic idea. In his *Edible Pen Jing (Bonsai) (Chi pen jing, 吃盆景)*, he made miniature landscapes, that have been a widely appreciated Chinese art form since ancient times, but by using bacon ham, chocolate, salmon and so on. In his *Eating the City (Chi cheng shi, 吃盆景)* series, the visitors were invited to eat the cities built with biscuits and candies. Song Dong's work not only blurred the boundaries between art and daily life, between usefulness and uselessness, but also conveyed a sharp irony: eating that satisfies human biological need and presents social-

ity and conviviality also implies the human desire that built up the cities and then destroyed the relationship between humans and the environment and finally destroyed people's lives.¹²

Tofu has a history of over 2,000 years in China. In 2011, CCTV made a well-known documentary series, *A Bite of China (She jian shang de zhong guo, 舌尖上的中国)*. In the third episode of Season 1, *Inspiration for Change (Zhuan hua de ling gan, 舌尖上的中国)*, tofu was described as a great invention of the ancient Chinese.¹³ It is widely known that China became an agrarian civilization very early; the limited arable land available combined with a large population prohibited the development of cattle and sheep husbandry and thus hampered Chinese people's consumption of milk and meat as the main resource for animal protein. Tofu became a smart way to get vegetable protein as a cheap replacement for animal protein, and in that way became a typical example of Chinese cuisine initially developed from privation, showing how human beings adapting to and maximally exploiting their living environment. For thousands of years, tofu has become the most important source of pro-

tein in the Chinese diet. The magic process of making tofu is an artistic expression of the material transformation through intensive labor. During the process, the soybean, that is hard to digest, changes into the white, soft, digestible and easily absorbed bean curd. Chinese people cook tofu in various foods. After tofu was invented, it found its way into other Asian countries and became a welcomed food in Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore. In addition, following the footprint of Chinese emigrants to Europe, North America, South America and Oceania in the past centuries, tofu gradually became a worldwide food.

In China, the surname carries abundant cultural connotations and associations, such as the origin and evolution of the surname, the deeds of celebrated holders of the surname, the historic relics related to the surname, the family tree, the ancestral hall, the name associated with particular generations, the family precept, and the esteem for the ancestors and affection for the ancestral land. The surname often serves as a spiritual bond connecting the members who hold the same surname. Chinese people summarize the numerous Chinese surnames into "A



Hundred Surnames”, even though the actual number is beyond that.^{14 15} The history of Chinese surnames can date back at least 3,000 years. The earliest Chinese surnames were created by two tribal alliance leaders Huang Di and Yan Di, so the descendants of Yan and Huang have become a synonym for the Chinese people. As the history of the surname represents the origin of Chinese culture, and political, social, economic, cultural and custom development and change at different historical stages, it does not merely define one’s kinship and ancestry, but also forms the very identity of the Chinese nation. Further, surnames are also associated with an individual’s ethnic background. Many existing Chinese surnames, though not all, have historical connections to Muslim, Korean and Manchurian ancestries because many Muslims and Manchurian people adopted Chinese surnames. However, the bond between surnames and ancestry is not so accurate due to the thousands of years of ethnic integration and exchange with other countries. The evolution of Chinese surnames tells the complex history of migration and cultural acculturation, amalgamation and assimilation and implies the hybrid nature of Chinese

culture formed in the long sweep of history. Therefore, as a cultural symbol that displays one’s kinship and ancestry, the surname is situated at the centre of identities, forming a series of concentric circles: the individual, the clan, the communal, the ethnic and the national. On the one hand, it implies the constancy of cultural identity; on the other, it is the ever-changing nature of cultural identity.

Tofu and Surnames: Revealing the Identity Crisis Caused by Urbanization

How did tofu and the surname first enter Chen’s view? In an interview, the artist recalled that when she noticed a lot of young lovers in Chengdu feverishly talking about the approaching Valentine’s Day and hearing some people joking “Eat tofu” (*Chi Dou Fu*), a sexually-suggestive slang in Chinese language, she decided to make a work based on tofu and Valentine’s Day. Tofu is a traditional Chinese food while the Valentine’s Day is a Western festival for romantic love. For Chen, “Eat Tofu” alludes to the temptation of the westernized way of living for the urban young Chinese.¹⁶

Traditional Chinese society was an agricultural society. A whole set of ethics, religions,

and cultures built around traditional rural society and agricultural production activities have been the basis of Chinese identity for generations. The rapid urban expansion and population growth in Chinese cities started in the 1980s and greatly accelerated after 2001, so it has been going on for more than three decades and is still developing apace. According to a study by sinologist Robin Visser, a central-government policy is stimulating the building of four hundred new cities with populations of nearly one million or more by the year 2020, at the rate of about twenty cities per year.¹⁷ A 2017 study concludes that between 2015 and 2030, China’s population will reach 1.445 billion and 70.12% of the total population will live in cities.¹⁸

Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the two curators of an influential exhibition in 1997, *Cities on the move: Contemporary Asian Art on the turn of the 21st century*, pointed that in many Asian countries, the process of modernization “has ironically been accompanied by a general deconstruction and disintegration of established values and cultural modes.”¹⁹ As art scholar Meiqin Wang articulated, urbanism, as China’s new national character, has deeply affected “the



way Chinese people see and express themselves or are represented.”²⁰ She points out that as mass urbanization has broken the association with the “countryside, tradition and nature” that defined traditional Chinese culture and art, contemporary artists must take their living environment in the cities as the foundation for concept and expression:

Either troubled by the often chaotic and fragmented urban living situation or excited by the opportunities available there, they have turned their attention to the city and its problems. Hence urbanism has become the primary condition of art making in contemporary China.²¹

Born in the mid 1970s, Chen witnessed the colossal power of mass urbanization and globalization — the two in China were obviously synchronised — that changed ordinary people’s lives. Chen and her contemporaries, though embracing the prosperity and convenience brought about by urbanization, have experienced all kinds of negative consequences of urban development. For example, the rampant expansion of cities, accompanied by demolition and relocation, weakened the neighbourhood and communities and destroyed the bonds with the environment and with heritage,

which unavoidable led to the “disintegration and liquefaction of the self”.²² The sense of loss, anxiety and uncertainty, intertwined with hope and dream, was expressed in a more narrative way in her *Migration* series. For example, in *Rhapsody on Farewell* (*Bie fu*, 别赋, 2002), the ancient farewell scene and the modern demolition scene were integrated in a whole, showing the same hopelessness and sadness but under the different historical backgrounds. In *The Garden* (*Hua yuan*, 花园, 2007), the migrating peasants holding beautiful artificial peonies and huge porcelain vases and walking aimlessly along alleys and streets reflect Chen’s “self” and her dream. She recollected in an interview: “They were another me and I was one of them. After graduation, I tried to settle down in a big city and begin the new life; this work reminded me of all confusion, anxiety and hope I had in those days.”²³ Chen appeared in her seven-screen video, *The Empty City* (*Kong de cheng*, 空的城, 2012), as a faceless alien silently witnessing the people living in the new city. She knew that she will either leave or make a compromise with this new city that had nothing to do with her past life. In *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames*,

her complex and conflicting emotions in the urban life were expressed through more abstract and implicit artistic language.

Chen has more interest in engaging with things that undergo change with the passage of time. For example, she has made lots of experiments with waste paper since 2008. She collected the textbooks used by those students who had been victims of the earthquake on 12th May 2008, mixed them with her own old textbooks and remade them into pulp. She then made a number of pulp sculptures within which a group of seven busts of herself entitled “*My Thirty Years*” displays her different stages of growth in her life. The contradiction between the lightness of paper and the weight of life becomes an unbearable lightness of being. Pulp alludes to the history of paper, and old textbooks relate to those young victims’ life experiences which suddenly stopped in the earthquake as well as to her own past. The earthquake victims, the viewers and the artist’s past and present become intertwined, conveying complex meanings, and making her work an “anti-monument” series. Her sensitivity to materiality, specifically to the temporality and fluidity of materials, guided her to try out new



materials and mediums. Tofu is not merely one of the oldest and most commonly used culinary ingredients in Chinese cooking; its inherent relation to material transformation through human labour becomes a metaphor for fluidity and change.

The Chinese language attaches special importance to eating. In China people used to greet each other by asking “Have you had your repast?” as an alternative to “How are you?” However, eating in Chinese culture is also understood as “eradicate” or “eliminate”. Similar to Song Dong’s *Eating the City*, people gathering together and eating surnames carved out of tofu thus turns into a ritual that carries multifold contradictory meanings — a nostalgic recollection of the vanishing hometown and the decline of traditional culture and life style, mixed with an aspiration for the opportunities in urban life, and a sense of uncertainty about the future.

Carving surnames by using tofu, Chen has installed herself among a number of contemporary artists who play with Chinese characters. Because Chinese characters constitute the oldest continuously used writing system in the world, they could be considered to be a very significant cultural sign. Many

contemporary artists have included Chinese characters in their work; among them Xu Bing and Gu Wenda have been widely noted. Both of them invented “fake characters” using components of characters as a way to divorce “form” from “content”.²⁴ In both Xu Bing and Gu Wenda’s works with Chinese characters, the absurdity and incomprehensibility contrast starkly with the feeling of solemnity created by their monumental style. Different from Xu Bing and Gu Wenda’s work in which Chinese characters were displayed as a grand static monumental object, in *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames*, Chinese characters are presented in a temporal and quotidian style and with a humble appearance, making her work distinctive among Chinese artists who worked with traditional cultural symbols.

As noted by Wang, Chinese artists who focus on urban themes often freely migrate among various mediums and art forms, such as painting, sculpture, photography, installation, video, performance and multi-media, often employing multiple ones simultaneously.²⁵ In Chen’s case, a quotidian culinary material combined with video, ephemeral installation and performance became the most

suitable medium for recording the vanishing process and for recalling fading memories through which she could counterbalance the fragmentation and disintegration of identity. Meanwhile, as suggested by Hou and Obrist, the cultural (re-)construction of and in the city in the process of mass modernization and urbanization values highly motion, displacement, and transformation. The evanescence and instability in her mediums provoke the new cultural identities that are “open, unstable, ever-changing, hybrid, and transgressive of established boundaries.”²⁶

Fluidity of Cultural Identity under Global Migration

Since 2014, *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* journeyed to Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. In the following paragraphs, I will take Chen’s creation and exhibition of this series in Australia as an example that reveals the artist’s perception of the complexity of cultural identity against the background of global migration.

Having been commissioned by Sydney’s 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, she decided to make a new piece which on one hand shows the continuity with this series,



and on the other hand relates to the Chinese community in Australia. In Chen's conversation with Mikala Tai, the director of the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney, she recalled her short encounter with two Chinese immigrants. One was a middle-aged female owner of a Chinese restaurant in Brisbane whose family had moved from south China 20 years ago, the other a new migrant, a well-educated Chinese woman who provided a lot of help to Chen when she first arrived in Brisbane. She met them by chance in a foreign land, and then they walked out of her life. Her memory is filled with moments of faint melancholy. That was her initial experience with Chinese immigrants in Australia and it triggered her interest in exploring their world.²⁷

Despite her initial personal experience with Chinese immigrants, her knowledge mostly came from her study of historical documents and researches into Chinese immigrants. Behind the conception and making of *One Hundred Names for Kwong Wah Chong* was a vast cooperative work with the Chinese community in Sydney. Chinese students studying in Sydney helped Chen to gather information about early Chinese immigrants. She found

that there were 31 Chinese surnames related to the early Chinese immigrants in Sydney.²⁸ Then she noticed that 16 surnames had never appeared in her previously made *One Hundred Surnames in Tofu* video. The artist had a great deal of communication with the Chinese community in Sydney in order to enrol the descendants of the 16 surnames to participate in this project and finally 15 people representing 15 surnames were enrolled. She interviewed the 15 people and recorded their interviews. She also found and interviewed people in Chengdu who have the same 15 surnames. The artist cooked different tofu meals with interviewees, exchanged ideas about their favourite food, ancestry land and family traditions. It took Chen and her team a whole year to complete all the preparatory work.

As a number of studies suggest, food plays a significant role for migrant communities in the construction of migrants' cultural experiences both as a tool of adapting to their new environment and as a means to maintain cultural continuity with their homeland.²⁹ Moris notes that "food plays an important role in the creation and experience of identity of people on their own soil, as well as

in the exploration and description of another culture."³⁰ Chen found that after several generations, even these Chinese immigrants in Australia can't speak Chinese anymore, they still share similar cooking customs with people in Chengdu. Memory of taste and culinary practices is a significant part of their life story and family history; as a collective memory, it passed from generation to generation. Like a thread, memory of taste and culinary practices has connected people in China and the overseas Chinese, and bridged the history and the present. What Chen discovered is consistent with studies on the role of food and culinary practices in migrant communities. Food as a signifier of origin and identity play as a shared experience in the aesthetics of everyday life in migrant communities; food and culinary memories that recall history and identity also goes to their offspring who did not have personal pre-migration experience with the life and food in original homeland.³¹ Chen also noticed that although the chefs at the Chinese restaurant are the descendants of early Chinese immigrants, resulting from adjusting the cooking method to suit the taste of people in Australia, the food they cooked was totally different from



the original Chinese taste.³² The transformation of their taste in the framework of food memories after their migration shows that taste and culinary practices are also subject to change that suggests the migrants' adoption to their new host community.

During the past decades, instead of erasing cultural identities and creating a global uniformity, globalization has facilitated two competing tendencies in contemporary art. On the one hand, artists all over the world, especially those from non-western countries, have become more aware of their cultural tradition and identity and more inclined to connect their work to their respective indigenous/national histories and cultural origins. On the other hand, art is no longer "a local activity that represents a nation state", nor is the making, dissemination and influence of art confined within national and geographic boundaries.³³ Given geographic and cultural distance, overseas Chinese artists have often introduced their own diasporic experience and their study of overseas Chinese communities into their agenda, while each has dealt with displacement differently.³⁴ In Wu Hung's discussion about overseas Chinese artists, he mentioned that, in order to

observe how these artists develop dialogues between their native and adopted countries, we should consider different geographical and cultural environments as the main sources of their artistic experiences and perspectives and "the key to understanding these artists is to discover how they negotiate such experiences and perspectives through specific works created at specific times and places."³⁵

Melissa Chiu borrowed the concept of transexperience that was coined by the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen as an explanatory model to explain how Chinese artists articulated their diasporic experiences, that is, how they engaged in the construction of different and divergent ideas of being Chinese. According to Chen Zhen, this experiential concept articulates "the complex life experiences of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life." He described Transexperience as "a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation" that connects the past and present experiences, adapts itself to changing circumstances and blends and identifies oneself with others.³⁶ According to Chiu, the essential principle of transexperience is the idea of evolutionary

change which suggests a more complex understanding of migration experiences instead of the dual diasporic experiences based on a static identity of Chineseness.³⁷

Looking into overseas Chinese artists' depictions of diasporic experiences, a huge part of their works embody the hybrid, messy and unstable forms which, according to Chen Zhen, reveals the vitality of art amidst and inspired by "contacts, exchanges, misunderstandings". His installation *Field of Waste* is perhaps his best embodiment of his concept. Its dark, messy and ruined appearance with mixed materials reveal the scars left by history, calling back a traumatic memory of Chinese immigrants to America in the late 19th century and all the hardships that immigrants had experienced over the past century. Liu Hung, a Chinese artist based in the USA, displayed a series of works addressing the history of Chinese immigration to California in her exhibition *Resident Alien* in 1988. The depiction of her own "resident alien" status was juxtaposed with the prostitutes in old Chinatown, the Chinese labourers who built the railroads that crisscrossed the American continent, the abacus and the hand-written list of a



hundred Chinese surnames on the wall in a monumental style.

Looking into the creation and exhibition of *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* in Australia, in addition to the theme of Chinese identity in the diaspora, the hybrid and changeable forms and the mixture and juxtaposition of different elements derived from the past and present experiences imply an inherent intercommunity with what Chiu revealed how overseas Chinese artists explore the past and the present.³⁸ However, Chen's perception and expression of migration is still different from earlier expatriate artists. She belongs to the group of active domestic artists who emerged in the 1990s. Chen never migrated to another country. In the past decade, based in Chengdu and Beijing, she spent a considerable amount of time abroad each year, travelling from one exhibition to the next and staying in different artists-in-residence programmes. Residing in China yet given the mobility that the previous generations of Chinese artists never had to frequently switch between China and the West, without facing the same cultural conflicts and survival predicament those earlier expatriate artists encountered, her work is

not laden with any heavy and scarred feeling. She tends to look at global migration and cultural differences in a more relaxed way. She relies more on the intuitive impressions she obtained from a short-term stay. Chen's work as a travelling artist is quite consistent with what Rita Vargas revealed in her survey of the everyday lives of artists-in-residence. Describing mobility as "part of a social and cultural nomadic practice, in which artists participate as cultural actors", Vargas defines artists-in-residence as new nomads who physically and psychologically move from one artistic residency to another, and work in unsettled and temporary conditions.³⁹ They culturally engage in a local community based on "voluntary displacement" which makes their motivation differ from that of other migrants who aim at settlement and are often vulnerable and subordinate in society.⁴⁰ She depicts travelling artists' encounters with distant cultures and otherness as "open, curious, and motivated to transform his or her displacement into something creative, or to make it visible."⁴¹ Although there is to date no systematic study of the global mobility of Chinese artists, Vargas' study

offers an inspiring perspective from which to observe how global travel across geopolitical borders has greatly influenced the young generation of Chinese artists' perceptions of their dynamic cross-cultural experiences, and how they have integrated these experiences into their own cultural heritage and concerns.

Chen has displayed an awareness of the cross-cultural perception and communicative potential of her art. She believes that visitors bearing different life experiences will have different perceptions of her art and the differences in their understanding of her work can generate more possibilities. In 2014, she had her solo exhibition "*The Empty City*" at Honolulu Museum of Art. She recalled how her work had evoked emotions in audiences from different cultural backgrounds:

There were nearly no Chinese in that museum - almost all visitors were non-Chinese. The visitors wrote their stories on pieces of notes which soon covered all the space on a wall outside the exhibition hall. There were too many stories, such as memories about homeland, parents, some people, some events, and memories about China when they visited there and etc. So I thought I was just doing work to trigger all these to happen. In this way I thought that the artist's role is as a catalyst, a poser of questions, rather than as the provider of clear answers.⁴²



Therefore her very personal experience of displacement, transition, loss, and re-imagining became a universal human experience crossing the boundary of nation and culture. Her work built up a platform

on which the audience could share and exchange their memories, through which individuals can acquire new ways of thinking about themselves and their connective identities.



Figure 4: Chen Qiulin, *One Hundred Names for Kwong Wah Chong*, 2016, multi-channel video installation, dimensions variable, *One Hundred Names* exhibition at the Shepparton Art Museum, Australia, 2016. © the artist and SAM. Courtesy of the artist.

The evolution of concept and form of *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* reveals how the artist's cross-cultural experience, her encounter with specific time, space and people, built up internal relationships between her work and the locale, and more significantly, led to a new understanding that cultural identity is constantly being renegotiated and challenged through intercultural communication. The surnames carved with Tofu here evolve into a fragile but unbroken linkage between Chinese immigrants and their cultural roots. The combination of multiple mediums including multi-screen video, performance, interview, cuisine and banquet made the work a hotchpotch of stories of different individuals and families and a metaphor for different identities and mixtures of identities from which migrants can construct new hybrid identities.

Conclusion

The contemporaneity of art counterbalances concepts of fixed and immutable identity. Instead it regards identity as drifting and unstable, being constantly subjected to challenge and change. *Tofu and One Hundred Surnames* is still an on-going project. Quite



possibly it will soon travel to other corners of the world and engage with audiences from other cultural backgrounds. A review of its subject matter, materials, formal properties and modes of display has revealed how the artist has transformed tofu and Chinese surnames into a metaphor and in doing so has questioned the complexity and instability of identity altered by urbanization and global migration. Wu once mentioned the “intensity of creative energy” in contemporary Chinese art, which means that this art doesn’t merely present China’s amazing transformation, but more significantly, reveals the artists’ “internalization of the sweeping changes around them” which provokes a feeling of speed, anxiety and theatricality.⁴³ In the past decade, a number of the younger generation of domestic Chinese artists — Chen as one of them — have attracted considerable attention from international curators, critics, art dealers and collectors. These artists and their work deserve more attention in future studies. Their personalized concepts and approaches for interrogating the identity issue in the urban and global age bear significance in the study of socio-political perspectives of Chinese contemporary art.



Figure 5: *The Tofu Banquet at the Yiche Modern Asian Cuisine, Mooroopna.* The Tofu Banquet is part of the opening celebration of Chen’s exhibition *One Hundred Names* at the Shepparton Art Museum, Australia, 2016. Cooperation with the Goulburn Valley Chinese Association and the Yiche Modern Asian Cuisine. © the artist and SAM. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Diana Spriggs.



Notes

1 For the titles of Chinese artworks mentioned in this paper, I have adopted an English translation of the titles, followed by marking the artworks' original Chinese titles in Pinyin and in Chinese characters at their first appearance in the text. I have followed the most widely adopted English titles of these Chinese artworks as translated by previous critics and researchers, though some titles differ from those used by some earlier researchers. For Chinese names, I have followed the local convention of listing the surname first. This paper contains some cited passages translated from Chinese; unless otherwise stated, all cited in-text passages are from my own translation.

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3 Rodriguez 2011, 316.

4 Durrant, Sam & Lord, Catherine M. 2007. "Introduction: Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-making". In *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-making*. Eds. Sam Durrant & Catherine M. Lord. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 11.

5 Meyer, Richard 2003. "Identity". In *Critical Terms for Art History (2nd edition)*. Eds. Robert S Nelson & Richard Shiff. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 345.

6 Meyer 2003, 345.

7 Robertson, Jean & McDaniel, Craig 2013. *Themes of contemporary art: Visual art after 1980 (3rd edition)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 44.

8 The five video works are *Rhapsody on Farewell* (Bie fu, 别赋, 2002), *River River* (Jiang he shui, 江河水, 2005), *Colour Line* (Cai tiao, 彩条, 2006), *The*

Garden (Hua yuan, 花园, 2007) and *The Empty City* (*Kong de cheng*, 空的城, 2012).

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11 Robertson & McDaniel 2013, 157.

12 Song Dong – *Eating the City – Kunsthall Aarhus 2017*. <https://vimeo.com/232884086> (retrieved 1.2.2018). See also Wong, Mimi 2017. A Bite of Everywhere: Song Dong's Eating the City. *Art Asia Pacific*. <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/ABiteOfEverywhereSongDongEatingTheCity>. (Retrieved 1.2.2018).

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Cambridge: The MIT Press 2011, 142.

20 Wang, Meiqin 2016. *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York: Routledge, 29.

21 Wang 2016, 43.

22 Hou & Obrist 1997, 142.

23 Chen Qiulin, interview with the author, Chengdu, November 2016.

24 Wu, Hung 2014. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)*. London: Thames Hudson, 99.

25 Wang 2016, 57.

26 Hou & Obrist 1997, 146.

27 Chen Qiulin's Conversation with Mikala Tai, 2016. The original Chinese text and English translation was provided by A Thousand Plateaus Art Space.

28 The 31 surnames of early Chinese migration to Sydney include *Chong* (昌), *Chang* (张), *Chou* (周), *Lee* (李), *Sun* (孙), *Mei* (梅), *Yu* (余), *Lei* (雷), *Kuo* (郭), *Wang* (王), *Fan* (潘), *Weng* (翁), *Mai* (麦), *Chen* (陈), *Yu* (尤), *Fang* (方), *Shen* (沈), *Su* (苏), *Cheng* (郑), *Liang* (梁), *Liu* (刘), *Kuang* (邝), *Huang* (黄), *Pang* (庞), *Lo* (罗), *Yang* (杨), *Ho* (何), *Sung* (宋), *Chung* (钟), *Hsu* (徐) and *Chai* (蔡).

29 To see for example Imilan, Walter A. 2015: Performing national identity through Peruvian food migration in Santiago de Chile. *Fennia* 193:2, 227–241; Özdemir Saliha. 2016: Sharing Turkish tastes in Ghent: Aesthetic narratives of food, migration and memory. *Omer-taa, Journal of applied anthropology*, 628–643; and Janowski, Monica 2012: Introduction: Consuming Memories of Home in Constructing the Present and Imagining the Future. *Food and Foodways* 20(3–4), 175–186.

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40 Vargas 2016, 143.

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