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THE MALLEABILITY OF MEMORIES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PAST:
AN ANALYSIS OF ZHANG XIAOGANG'S "BLOODLINE" SERIES AND ITS
CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

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Upon first glance, the black-and-white portraits that comprise Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline" series appear to be stoic family photographs of alien life forms. The passive, elongated faces and the unemotional, almond-shaped eyes of the figures stiffly assembled in each frame peer blankly at the viewers who gaze intently at the artist's smooth brushwork and careful distribution of highly saturated color.

Drawing upon personal experiences from his childhood and formative years, Zhang Xiaogang uses the concept of the ever-changing nature of memory¹ to explore the intersection of two previously distinct concepts: the individual and the collective unit.² Although initially created as a commentary on the emotional scars left behind by the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline" series, centered on the theme of family, has contemporary implications. Indeed, the emphasis on interconnectivity of society as a whole — often at the expense of individuality — can still be seen in governmental initiatives today, such as the Two Child Policy.

Sowing the Seeds of Inspiration: The Early Years

Zhang Xiaogang was born in 1958 in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, located in southwest China. From an early age, Zhang was connected to the military, as both his parents were government officials who had served in the military until 1949.³ However, it wasn't until Zhang was eight years old when he witnessed firsthand the

¹ Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu, *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2015), 9.

² "Zhang Xiaogang Exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery," *SaatchiGallery.com*, accessed April 19, 2016, http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/zhang_xiaogang.htm.

³ Fineberg and Xu, 17.

extent of government control over personal lives.⁴ Living with his family — made up of his mother, father and three brothers⁵ — in Chengdu, Zhang watched as Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution. His family was split apart when his father and mother were sent away to separate “re-education” camps, leaving the children to fend for themselves.⁶ In a *Wall Street Journal* article published in July 2012, Zhang recalled that, before she left, his mother gave the children pencils and paper and told them to use the supplies to draw “whenever they felt bored or tempted to roam outside.”⁷

The early days of the Cultural Revolution left an indelible impact on Zhang. As the artist explains in an interview included in the book *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories* by Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu:

For me, the Cultural Revolution is a psychological state, not a historical fact. It has a very strict connection with my childhood, and I think there are many things linking the psychology of the Chinese people today with the psychology of the Chinese people back then.⁸

The Cultural Revolution further disrupted Zhang’s life when he was sent to the Yunnan countryside as a young student. There, like other “sent-down youth,” he worked on farms, but was selected for the “Art Classes for Peasants,” which provided him with a creative outlet.⁹ Zhang’s time in the countryside was cut short, however, by the death of

⁴ Kelly Crow, “An Art Star’s Creative Crisis,” *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified July 13, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304898704577482560576471408>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fineberg and Xu, 82.

⁹ Ibid, 23.

Mao Zedong in September 1976, after which Zhang enrolled in the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts to continue his artistic training.¹⁰

Although the trauma of the Cultural Revolution is a theme that unites Zhang's work, he also drew upon personal memories from within his family. Looking back on his childhood, Zhang reflects that, "from as early as (he) can remember ... (he) felt (his) family was not normal."¹¹ Fineberg and Xu write of the hardships faced in Zhang's life in their introduction of *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*:

In Zhang's art, everything passes through this theatre of memory as, increasingly, he becomes the subject of his painting ... The poverty and deprivations of a childhood that left a residue of unanswered questions.¹²

From Zhang's early acknowledgement of his mother's mental illness — "Although she was always so very nice to me, as a child, I found it terrifying," Zhang says¹³ — to when his father hit him as punishment for stealing a 20-cent bill from his wallet — a memory that Fineberg and Xu said "still arouses feelings of shame and guilt and expresses the austerity that characterized his relationship with his father"¹⁴ — childhood memories are dredged up and displayed in the artwork Zhang creates.

Mirroring Memories: The Formation of Artistic Style

Zhang does not only view the Cultural Revolution as a catalyst for the thematic content of his work; he also acknowledges the role this time period had in the formation of his distinctive artistic style. "The loneliness of the Cultural Revolution produced a

¹⁰ Fineberg and Xu, 23.

¹¹ Ibid, 18.

¹² Ibid, 9.

¹³ Ibid, 18.

¹⁴ Ibid.

unique kind of socialist art,” Zhang said in the interview included in *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*. “I suddenly realized the world was completely different from what I thought.”¹⁵

An early fascination with Western art and philosophy began when Zhang started studying under the direction of Lin Hua, who taught the young artist his style of “realist watercolours,” as well as “an impressive command of the expressive idioms of modern European painting.”¹⁶ Several movements occurring in Europe at the time inspired Zhang, including French Surrealism, Realism and Symbolism. He adds that Impressionists, German Expressionists and several Latin American Modernists, such as Frida Kahlo, also influenced him.¹⁷

As Fineberg and Xu explain in their book, “three decades of censorship drew Zhang all the more passionately towards anything Western.”¹⁸ This included Western psychological ideas, which Zhang encountered as a student at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. Fineberg and Xu argue that this encouraged Zhang to use his art to explore the concepts of memory and history, saying, “memory serves as an analogue for history in Zhang’s art, and examining history, like meditating on the structure of memory, is another of his persistent themes.”¹⁹

After several years of unemployment after graduation and an ongoing struggle with alcoholism,²⁰ Zhang finally found a way to fuse his fascination with Western philosophical ideas with his Chinese heritage. The result was his “Bloodline” series,

¹⁵ Fineberg and Xu, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 34-37.

which incorporated Gerhard Richter's photography-inspired painting style.²¹ Fineberg and Xu say the examination of truth and memory is a theme shared by both Zhang and Richter:

Richter's use of photography as a reference point in his painting drew Zhang's attention to how photography rendered reality. The German artist's questioning of 'truth' in photography furthered Zhang's inquiry into public and personal history ... and his burgeoning examination of truth in memory.²²

Zhang added his own touch to this melding of media by incorporating family photographs he found during a trip back to his hometown.²³ There, he encountered an image of his mother he had never seen before, and was aroused by a "poignant sense of a moment lost in time."²⁴ Zhang reflected on his initial reaction in an interview with *The Times*. "I felt very excited, as if a door had opened," he said. "I could see a way to paint the contradictions between individual and the collective and it was from this that I started really to paint."²⁵

Painting the Past: "Bloodline" as a Criticism of Chinese Society

Zhang's "Bloodline" series examined the conflicts of personal and collective identity, an idea conveyed through the artist's choice of title. On the topic of choosing to name his oil paintings the ambiguous title of "Big Family," Zhang explains:

The way I understand the big family is always associated with the *danwei* [the state-sanctioned work unit] and my own family ... Being a member of a big family is an identity deeply rooted in the Chinese blood ... The phrase 'big

²¹ Fineberg and Xu, 75.

²² Ibid.

²³ Abigail Fitzgibbons, "Zhang Xiaogang: Biography," *Beijing Zhangxiaogang Art Studio*, accessed April 19, 2016, http://zhangxiaogang.org/enArtText_XQ.aspx?TblCollegeClnum=78.

²⁴ Fineberg and Xu, 76.

²⁵ Fitzgibbons.

family’ stemmed from a Maoist slogan, ‘we all live in a big revolutionary family.’ This slogan emphasizes collectivity and conformity, not individuality.²⁶

The shift from large, multi-generational groups living out their private lives to the collectivization of society and the elimination of the nuclear family unit is a trend depicted in Zhang’s “Bloodline” series.

In the introduction to the book *The Revolution Continues: New Art From China*, Zhang Jiehong writes that family photos used by Zhang Xiaogang represent the eradication of the notion of privacy championed during the Cultural Revolution. “Family photos, a private medium, would be taken according to a formula that satisfied an official sense of public aesthetics, so presenting an idealistic social model,” Zhang Jiehong says, adding that the paintings’ subjects have a “mono-appearance” and are identified “entirely by the force of collectivization.”²⁷

The formulaic erosion of personal identity is further emphasized throughout Zhang Xiaogang’s reiterations of the original “Bloodline” theme. Indeed, in the later years of the series, the artist began to render the figures — described on the Saatchi Gallery website as “an endless genealogy of imagined forebears and progenitors, each unnervingly similar” and possessing “dream-like distortions”²⁸ — as increasingly more androgynous. Zhang defended this stylistic progression, saying, “Whether the face is of a man or of a woman, it’s not important ... I hope to condense many feelings into one face, which should be both symbolic and recognizable.”²⁹

²⁶ Fineberg and Xu, 83.

²⁷ The Saatchi Gallery, *The Revolution Continues: New Art From China* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2008), 89.

²⁸ “Zhang Xiaogang Exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery.”

²⁹ Fineberg and Xu, 87.

Few identifying features remain in Zhang's chilling portraits; however, those that do serve to comment on the legacy of governmental policies that endures in Chinese society. The use of bright coloration on the younger children can be seen as a call to action for a new generation to take control while the older parents fade into monochromatic obscurity. Achieved by applying "a mist of colour and shading ... like a whisper,"³⁰ the radioactive hues used to accent the children in the portraits immediately draw viewers' attention, similar to how a graffiti artist's signature mars an otherwise pristine brick wall. This perceived act of vandalism — the defacing of a Cultural Revolution-style family photograph — is in line with a sense of rebellion that pervades contemporary Chinese art as "an extension of Mao's legacy of rebellion," according to Zhang Jiehong in *The Revolution Continues: New Art From China*.

Randomized splotches of light and other splashes of color also decorate the images, which could represent the lingering aspects of individuality that were unable to be masked by Zhang's carefully layered oil paints. In a way, the decision to include these aberrations is another act of rebellion — a persisting reminder that human uniqueness is resilient. As the Saatchi Gallery website explains, "The occasional splotches of colour which interrupt (Zhang's) images create aberrant demarcations."³¹ Reminiscent of birthmarks or aged film³², these mysterious features interrupt the otherwise polished execution of Zhang's technical skill with brushes and paints — created by the repetitive action of painting thin layers — and show how the narrative of the past is not necessarily absolute.

³⁰ Fineberg and Xu, 88.

³¹ "Zhang Xiaogang Exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery."

³² Ibid.

Finally, the namesake features of the series are the thin red lines that snake across the darkened background. The use of the color red is associated with “revolutionary excitement,” according to Zhang Jiehong³³; however, the connection of the lines through various parts of the figures’ bodies harkens back to a more primitive, natural connection between the family members. These thin veins, called bloodlines, are indicative of umbilical cords, and this comparison, when combined with the “similarity in physiognomy between parent and child” described by Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen in *Art of Modern China*, emphasize the biological connection that binds the figures into one familial unit.³⁴ However, they add, it seems as if the individuals are solely linked through genetics, saying there is “no hint of their emotional bond ... in this highly conventionalized studio-photo composition.”³⁵

The fragility of the bloodline strokes alludes to the deeper message Zhang tries to convey in his series. They appear delicately drawn, and are hard to discern from the characters’ dark clothing and hair. Perhaps these meandering fine lines are meant to show how the oppressive Communist government has drained the lifeblood that flows between kin, or they show the lack of emotional connection shared within the somber family Zhang painted on the canvas.

“Bloodline” in Contemporary Culture: Application to China’s Two Child Policy

The relevance of Zhang’s “Bloodline” series has been a topic of contention among many in the art world. Some, such as Budi Tek, an Indonesian farming tycoon and

³³ The Saatchi Gallery, 37.

³⁴ Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 264.

³⁵ Ibid.

art collector who has paid more than \$6 million for Zhang's work, worry that the series no longer carries with it a message compatible with the changes seen in the China of today. "He should slow down on the 'Bloodlines' because they're not as relevant anymore," Tek said during an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*.³⁶ In the same article, Zhang himself expressed worry about the future success of his artwork. "Mr. Zhang said some of his stress has come from his attempts to find his next big idea," writes journalist Kelly Crow.

Yet the themes of selective memory and society's focus on the collective group over the individual can be seen in modern issues facing China, such as the Two Child Policy. Announced in October 2015 as a response to China's aging population, the policy allows couples to have two children.³⁷ However, even this relaxation of the decades-old One Child Policy does not take away from the emotional scars suffered by families forced apart by the government. A March 2016 article by Jenna Cook on *ForeignPolicy.com* stated that, according to one estimate, almost 139,700 Chinese children were given up for international adoption between 1992 and 2013. Additionally, the Chinese government says more than 494,600 children were domestically adopted within China from 2000 to 2013.³⁸

³⁶ Crow.

³⁷ Steven Jiang, Paul Armstrong and Susannah Cullinane, "China unveils two-child policy," *CNN.com*, last modified December 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/27/asia/china-two-child-policy/>.

³⁸ Jenna Cook, "A 'Lost' Daughter Speaks, and All of China Listens," *ForeignPolicy.com*, last modified March 30, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/a-lost-daughter-speaks-and-all-of-china-listens-adoption/>.

Cook's article, a personal narrative of her journey to Wuhan in search of her birth parents, highlights the stories of birth families forced to give up their child. Reflecting on the families she met during her journey, Cook writes:

The encounters made me question to what extent birth parents 'abandoned' their daughters in the traditional sense of the word ... Many parents left (their daughters) with notes and special clothes in the hope that these tokens would help them find her later ... Another family named their child after the parents' two hometowns in the hope she would grow up knowing where to find them.³⁹

These desperate efforts to reach out to a lost child symbolically resemble the bloodlines that connect Zhang's divergent families. In fact, the imagery of a red thread connecting family members across emotional, temporal and geographic distances is often linked to the adoption metaphor, as explained by author Ann Hood, who wrote *The Red Thread*, a national bestselling novel about adoptive families. She summarizes the Chinese belief that inspired the book's title and theme on her website:

There exists a silken red thread of destiny. It is said that this magical cord may tangle or stretch but never break. When a child is born, that invisible red thread connects it to all the people — past, present, and future — who will play a part in that child's life.⁴⁰

In describing Zhang's "Bloodline" series, Fineberg and Xu explain how the "ambiguity between private space of personal relations" connects "one person to another and (to) the public sphere, where the family stands in for the collectivity of China."⁴¹ Until China's society changes to eradicate policies that place the wellbeing of the collective group over that of the individual, Zhang's series is at very little risk of fading into irrelevance.

³⁹ Cook.

⁴⁰ "The Red Thread," *AnnHood.us*, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.annhood.us/#!books/cnec>.

⁴¹ Fineberg and Xu, 12.

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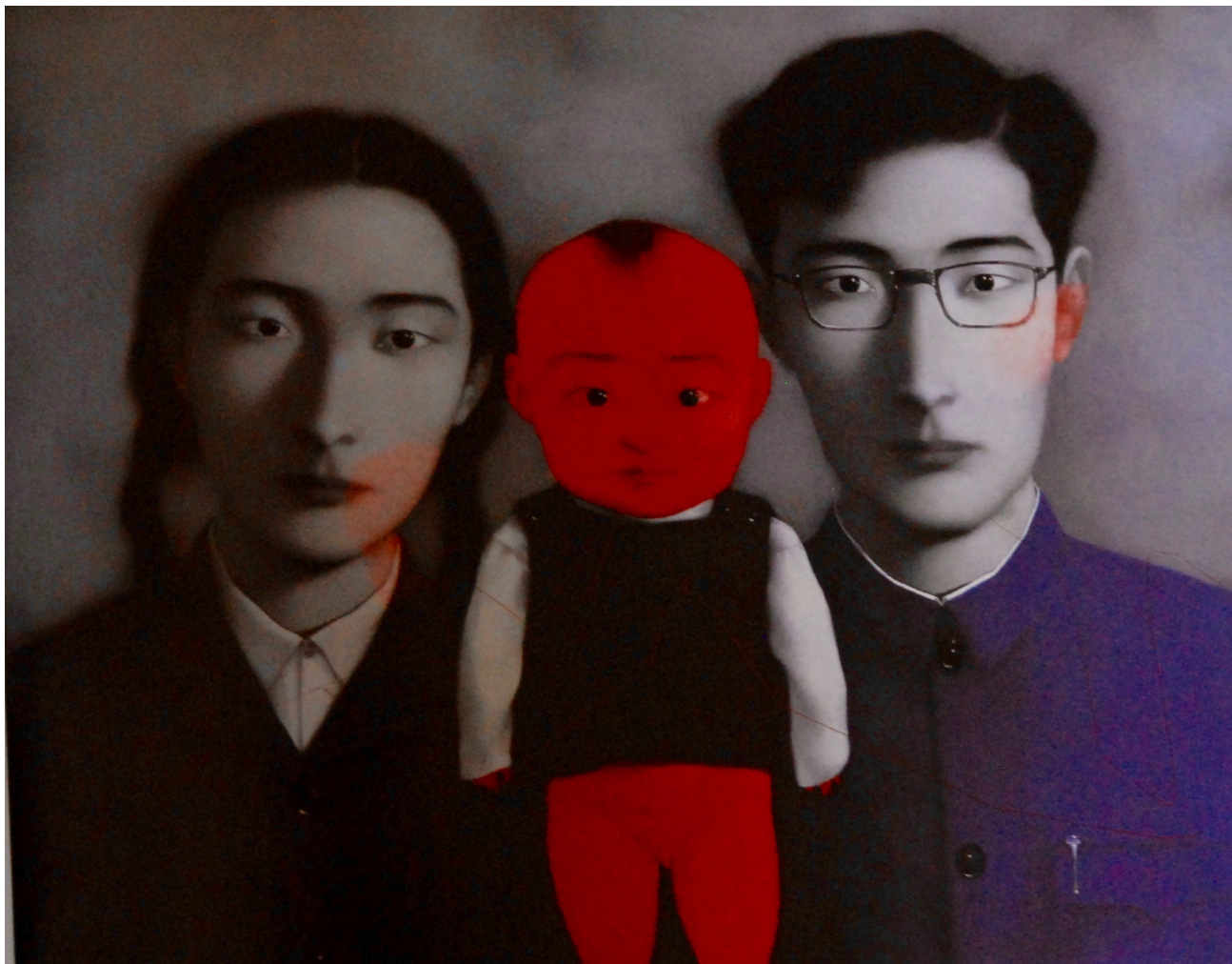


Figure 1

Zhang Xiaogang

Bloodline – Big Family No. 1

1996

Oil on canvas

Collection unknown

Source of reproduction: *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*

150 x 190 cm



Figure 2

Zhang Xiaogang
Bloodline – Big Family No. 2
1995

Oil on canvas
Collection unknown

Source of reproduction: *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*
180 x 230 cm



Figure 3

Zhang Xiaogang
Bloodline – Big Family No. 3
1995

Oil on canvas
Collection unknown

Source of reproduction: *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*
180 x 230 cm



Figure 4

Zhang Xiaogang

Big Family

1995

Oil on canvas

Collection unknown

Source of reproduction: *The Revolution Continues: New Art from China*

179 x 229 cm

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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304898704577482560576471408>.
- Figure 1. Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline – Big Family No. 1*. 1996, Oil on canvas, 150 x 190 cm. Collection unknown. From Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu. *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2015. Fig. 65.
- Figure 2. Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline – Big Family No. 2*. 1995, Oil on canvas, 180 x 230 cm. Collection unknown. From Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu. *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2015. Fig. 60.
- Figure 3. Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline – Big Family No. 3*. 1995, Oil on canvas, 180 x 230 cm. Collection unknown. From Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu. *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2015. Fig. 64.
- Figure 4. Zhang Xiaogang, *Big Family*. 1995, Oil on canvas, 179 x 220 cm. Collection unknown. From The Saatchi Gallery. *The Revolution Continues: New Art From China*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2008. Page 92.
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