

Episteme of Multiple Histories¹

Accounts of the West's unilateral "influence" of modern art on East Asia have resulted in profound critical re-examinations under the imperative of twenty-first century transdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies. The much outdated notion of vanguard art emanating from centres in Europe and North America and disseminating to so-called peripheral regions has been contested and challenged in scholarship such as Ming Tiampo's reassessment of the transnational impact of the Japanese contemporary art group Gutai, Partha Mitter's revisionist examination of modernism in Indian art during the period 1922–1947, and Joan Kee's insightful study situating Korean monochrome artists in the context of global contemporary art.²

As these scholars prove, important heuristic rewritings of art history do not merely contend that cultural and artistic exchanges took place across geographical and ideological borders, but reflect Michel Foucault's philosophical program of "archaeology," a method of examining cognitive structures according to their own terms.³ This process has served as a sharp axe in splintering the unwarranted master narrative of modernism. The dual solo exhibitions *Relics*, with work by Maryn Varbanov (1932–89), and *Divine Ruse*, with work by Jin Shan (b. 1977), at BANK, Shanghai, held from November 20, 2015, to January 6, 2016, continue the Foucauldian approach of archaeology to excavate and cast light on fragments of art history to reveal the conditions of China's multiple histories.

History's Fragments: Maryn Varbanov

Maryn Varbanov's work in *Relics* is presented in a small side gallery at BANK in the manner of an archival project with hand-rendered studies and small-scale plasticine models that were produced in the 1970s. The artifacts poignantly reveal the conceptual monumentality of Varbanov's realized and unrealized fiber-based soft sculptural projects. Each visual element is encased in a long glass cabinet with the displayed objects enveloped in ethereal light seeming to emit a sacred aura. The linear case is flanked by white walls affixed with photos and texts that mark the important dates and events of Varbanov's life.

According to BANK founder and director Mathieu Borysevicz, "*Relics* is the first of a series of exhibitions where we are taking the overlooked phenomena of the past in order to bring it forward for re-examination. This is the first of the installments—an exploration of looking back into the beginnings of

Maryn Varbanov, exhibition view of *Relics*, 2015. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.



the work.”⁴ The small mockups and models extend the definition of art by revealing their dual identity as historical traces. Borysevicz explains, “Each artifact is curious and enigmatic. They are charged little objects, which have been unearthed as interesting relics of the past.”⁵ Undoubtedly, these small fragments serve as evidence to redress an important aspect of understudied transnationalism that occurred in the mid to late 1980s in China. Moreover, they strive to shed light on its creator, Maryn Varbanov, a Bulgarian textile artist who was better known in Beijing and Hangzhou as Wanman (万曼) but remains relatively little known elsewhere.



Maryn Varbanov, exhibition view of *Relics*, 2015. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.

Born Maryn Ivanov on September 20, 1932 in Oryahovo, Bulgaria, the artist could not have known that he would later take on contingent identities. After losing both his parents at the age of two, Maryn was adopted by a blacksmith with the surname Vurbanov. In 1950, he departed for Sofia where, in the following year, he was admitted to the Sculpture Department of the Academy of Art Nikolai Pavlovich.⁶ Changing the spelling of his surname from Vurbanov to Varbanov, he shifted his gaze outward beyond the confines of his native country. In September 1953, Varbanov arrived in Beijing to study Chinese language at Peking University, where he received the name Wanman from his Chinese teacher. After gaining acceptance to the preparatory class of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing to study painting and art history, Varbanov transferred in 1955 to the newly established Central Academy of Arts and Design to study textile design, dyeing, and weaving under Chai Fei (柴扉, 1903–1972). Chai Fei played an instrumental role in setting up the Textile Department in 1956 at the



Maryn Varbanov, exhibition view of archival photographs, *Relics*, 2015. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.



Academy where he taught creative techniques for textile-based art such as wax-coating wall hangings. In 1958, Varbanov graduated from the Academy and returned to Sofia with his classmate Song Huaikuei, whom he had wed in 1956.⁷

With the exception of short visits in 1960 and 1975, over twenty-five years had lapsed before Varbanov returned to Beijing with Song Huai-Kuei and their two children. In the interim, he had been preoccupied with trying to establish the Tapestry Department at the Academy of Art Nikolai Pavlovich in Sofia, teaching courses, designing installations in fiber art, and participating in soft sculpture exhibitions in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, and the United States. In 1984, an artistic exchange between France and China was initiated, and Varbanov co-organized the first *Soft Sculpture Exhibition*, which took place in November 1985 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. Varbanov's creations as well as those by Mu Guang, Han Meihun, and Zhao Bowei were shown in the exhibition. According to artist Shi Hui and curator Gao Shiming, "[Varbanov's] creations, and those completed under his guidance, break away from the traditional plane surface concept and play an enlightening and stimulating role for China's contemporary art tapestry and China's modern art in general."⁸ They further affirm, "the exhibition [of] 1985 is considered a defining moment for contemporary Chinese art."⁹

Invited in 1986 to teach at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art), Varbanov became solidly established in Hangzhou, where he chaired the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov (IATV), co-founded by the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and the Zhejiang Carpet Factory on September 20, 1986.¹⁰ For three years, Varbanov dedicated his life to teaching students at the institute, creating fiber-based art, collaborating with artists, and organizing exhibitions of soft sculpture until his untimely death to cancer on July 10, 1989. After Varbanov's death, the institute was carried on by his students, Lu Rulai and others, and continues today under the same name (now translated as Maryn Varbanov Tapestry Research Institute or Maryn Varbanov Tapestry Research Centre) at the China Academy of Art. Subsequently, two of his female students, Shi Hui and Zhu Wei, whom Varbanov supervised, have taken their own rightful places in contemporary Chinese art as experimental "avant-garde" artists exploring the materiality of wool, silk, and fiber. Two alumni of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Gu Wenda and Liang Shaoji, having collaborated with Varbanov, went on to achieve international fame and commercial success in China and abroad for their respective installations involving uniquely woven and threaded works of art. Curator Hou Hanru claims, "I think [Varbanov] succeeded in opening up a new setting for art in China. The Chinese Avant-Garde back then was highly politicized. But Varbanov opened up an entirely new space from another perspective, with different depth. . . . He had a direct impact on the birth of installation art in China."¹¹

Yet, despite Varbanov's pioneering contributions during a critical phase of contemporary Chinese art and his cross-cultural exchange initiatives



Top: Maryn Varbanov, *MV24*, n.d., plasticine, mixed media, paint, 21 x 39.5 cm. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.

Right: Maryn Varbanov, *MV14*, n.d., plasticine, clay, cardboard, 34.5 x 19.5 cm. Photo: Kerstin Brandes. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.



involving conceptual ideas and artistic practices from Sofia and Paris to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, we find hardly any mention of his name, if at all, within important contemporary texts about art in China. In the English translation of Lu Peng's encyclopedic tome *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China* (2010), no mention of Varbanov (or Wanman) can be located within the 1,284 pages that chronicle prodigious achievements by artists, artist groups, and artistic movements. Varbanov's name also remains absent in Gao Minglu's 409-page English-language art historical survey *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011). The omission is

rather puzzling because Hou Hanru had included a chapter on Varbanov's influences in Gao Minglu's earlier book *Zhongguo Dengdai Meishushi 1985–1986*, published in 1991.¹² A brief paragraph about Varbanov could only be located in *The Art of Modern China* (2012) by Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, and in Michael Sullivan's 1996 survey *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*.¹³

The exact reasons for Varbanov's caesura cannot be easily ascertained. Perhaps the main justification lies in the art historical prejudice that textile-based art falls under the rubric of craft or applied art rather than fine arts. While slowly materializing, there is still a dearth of significant scholarship on tapestry as a contemporary art form, which is believed to have gained prominence with the French artist Jean Lurçat (1892–1966).¹⁴ The lack of scholarship about Varbanov also alerts us to the broader polemics in the general field of art history in which nationalistic discourse often discounts a more holistic narrative. Curator and critic Sun Zhenhua also points out

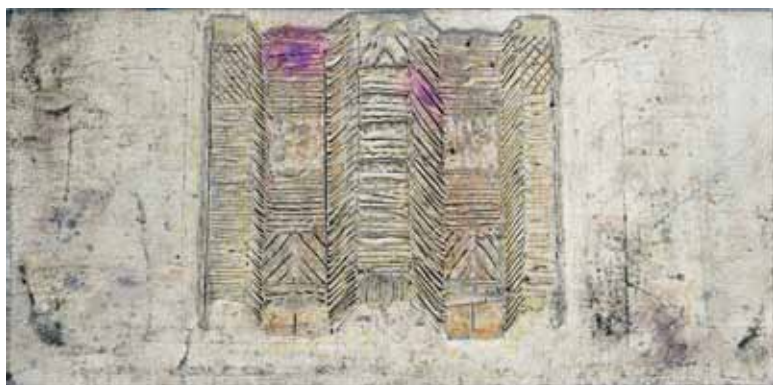
that in order to properly assess Varbanov's contributions, we can stand to gain a better understanding through historical circumstances, especially regarding how modernism was mediated between the Eastern Bloc and China. He notes, "the reality is such that our understanding of Maryn Varbanov is far from complete" and therefore should not be explained or understood as a reductive case of Western art being imported into China.¹⁵ Sun Zhenhua reviews several "crucial pieces of information" that are worth consideration.¹⁶ First, without a clearer understanding of Varbanov's relationship with the West as a member of the Eastern bloc, Sun Zhenhua asks, how does "the relationship between Eastern European socialist states in Cold War . . . [with] the West and Western art differ from the Chinese case?"¹⁷ He posits, "Varbanov's first knowledge of 'the West' and his decision to make [tapestry] a life's work all took place in China," rather than in Bulgaria. Sun Zhenhua cites *Maryn Varbanov* (compiled by Song Huaikuei and published in the bilingual format of Chinese and French by China Art Academy Press in 2001), which states "in May [1957], Varbanov was inspired by the exhibition of Jean Lurçat, the French tapestry artist, held at the Exhibition Hall of China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and decided to work in tapestry."¹⁸ Second, Sun Zhenhua alludes to another anomaly that occurred in 1959. After graduation and his return to Sofia, Varbanov submitted a report to the Academy of Art Nikolai Pavlovich suggesting the establishment of a tapestry workshop. Rather than being sent to Paris or other urban centres of Western Europe, Varbanov was financed and sent by his academy in Sofia back to China for a month in 1960 with a directive to return with a syllabus and teaching plan.¹⁹ Sun Zhenhua asks the critical question, "Did Varbanov belong to 'the East' or 'the West'? Was he the importer or the imported, or was he both? If we locate Varbanov in a crisscross structure, things will be far more complicated than we would like to make them."²⁰ Thus he proposes, "Research into these questions requires us to start with the most basic task of collecting [the] primary context of the twentieth century in order to examine our subject from a variety of angles in a comprehensive way. At the moment, we have to satisfy ourselves with a prognosis from the very limited material available."²¹

Without sufficient resources and scholarship available in English or Chinese that could provide a clearer understanding of modernism in the Eastern Bloc during the years of the Cold War, it is indeed difficult to locate answers to the many questions about Varbanov's role in the development of fiber art. Moreover, what of Varbanov's own teacher Chai Fei? Where did Chai Fei derive his understanding of fiber based woven art? Also of importance, who were the forces and what was their reasoning for bringing Jean Lurçat's 1957 exhibition to Beijing? Further research awaits about how people and events converged to affect the present state of fiber art and soft sculpture in China. Yet, in the interim, attempts to redress his omission from Chinese contemporary art history, Varbanov's pupils and his daughter Boriana have worked tirelessly to excavate the traces of Varbanov's life and work. Twenty years after his death, a large retrospective entitled *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s: An Archival and Educational Exhibition* was held at the Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, from September 9 to 16,

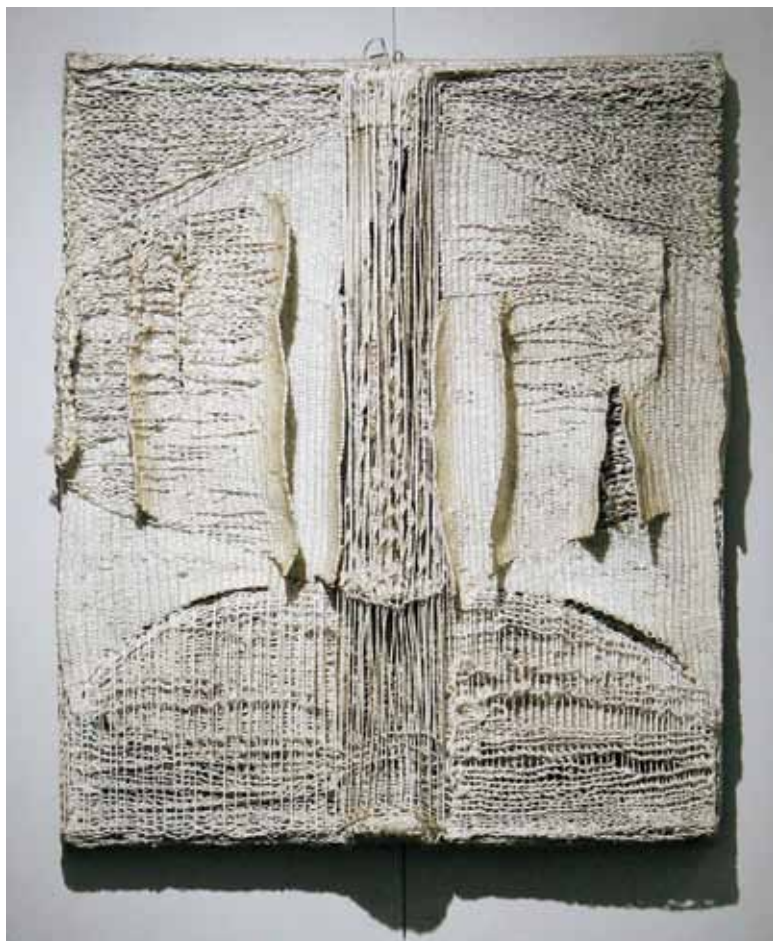
2009. Many of Varbanov's works, including paintings, installations, and sketch studies were on view with his tapestry works and soft sculptures, as well as supplemental works produced by his collaborators, former students, and current students of the Fiber and Space Art Studio (established in October 2003 by one of Varbanov's students, Shi Hui). According to the curator of the exhibition, Gao Shiming, Varbanov "thoroughly re-organized the Chinese cultural legacy in terms of materials, symbols, and spirit, making the legacy of forms and ideas once again a source for artistic experimentation. By creation of contemporary art pieces, he reactivated Chinese tradition."²² A half-day seminar was held on September 10th in conjunction with the exhibition in which Chinese scholars and the artist's former students gathered to discuss their viewpoints on Varbanov and pay tribute. From this endeavour, a two-volume proceeding in the bilingual format of Chinese and English, *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, was published in 2011.

It was another four years after Varbanov's retrospective in Hangzhou when Gao Shiming included Varbanov in the 2013 homage to 85 artists in the exhibition *'85 and an Art Academy* also held at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou.²³ Two years later, in 2015, the evidence of Varbanov's conceptual models and sketches has resurfaced once again, this time at BANK, a gallery in Shanghai, to recommence the dialogue and inquiry. The current exhibition seeks to reinforce Varbanov's artistic magnitude and his uniquely innovative practice of conflating Eastern and Western weaving techniques and materials. The first page of the BANK exhibition catalogue, *Relics: Maryn Varbanov*, introduces the artist: "[Varbanov] pioneered the genre of 'soft-sculpture'—now known as 'fiber art'—by subversively re-appropriating the decorative art of tapestry and interrogating its underlying architectonic structure. Underscoring the identity of tapestry as an imported good, the artist drew from both Chinese and Eastern European trade histories. He interlaced Hellenic, Slavic, and Ottoman knitting sensibilities with traditional Chinese silk and wool weaving and inadvertently helped to lay the foundation for installation as an art form in China."²⁴

Whether it was intentional or not, the significant aspect of Varbanov's contribution to early contemporary Chinese art was that he sought to expand the semantics of what constituted "fine art." Varbanov generated the awareness for local artists to re-conceptualize the paradigm of painting and sculpture by introducing the new genre of mixed-media art and installation. While nascent performance art was gaining attention and being explored by the members of the '85 New Wave Movement, led by the graduates of Zhejiang Academy of Art such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, and Zha Li and in Xiamen by members of the Xiamen Dada led by Huang Yongping as well as throughout China in underground collectives, officially sanctioned visual art for institutional displays were nonetheless relegated to traditional formats. Painting was confined to the two-dimensional construct of ink on paper or oil on canvas, and sculpture continued to adhere to the mandates of a socialist realist style that had



Maryn Varbanov, *MV 11*, n. d., plasticine, clay, cardboard, 10.5 x 21.5 cm. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.



Maryn Varbanov, *Untitled—Frame Series*, 1982, mixed media, modeling paste, and paint. Courtesy of the Estate of Maryn Varbanov and BANK, Shanghai.

been the enforced aesthetic program since 1949. Even in the early to mid-1980s, sculpture in China's public spaces functioned largely as markers for politically endorsed messages, and creative expression in materiality, subject matter, or even size remained under tight control.²⁵

With tapestry, Varbanov introduced the novel invention of mixed-media to China that re-mediated the picture plane as a textural surface. He also subverted the position of sculpture by privileging the form, rather than the didactic subject matter, as its own monumental edifice. Furthermore, by taking the woven tapestry off the wall and situating it in space as a three-dimensional construct, Varbanov made mobile the immobile position of sculpture. The dense threads of fiber that Varbanov had woven into their final form were just as pliant yet enduring as the clay that could be molded

or wood that could be carved. Varbanov's single wall hanging at BANK, *Untitled—Frame Series* (1982), affirms the supple organic quality of the texture despite the solid and tenacious nature of its materiality. The knots and loops of its thick, coarse threads appear to vacillate in motion like cascades of dripping stroke from an ink brush.

While we are deprived of the actual spatial experience of engaging with Varbanov's innovative 3D architectural fiber sculptures in the current exhibition, the conceptual renderings encased as archive hint in microcosm the macrocosmic possibilities of the artist's prodigious vision. In their tribute to Varbanov, both Gu Wenda and Zheng Shengtian have remarked that Varbanov was the first person who brought contemporary Chinese art and artists to the international stage in 1987, at the 13th International Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne, Switzerland.²⁶ Post World War I Switzerland was a neutral territory outside the sphere of Cold War influence, serving as an auspicious site for international cultural and artistic exchange. Yet in the most recent, albeit brief, presentation by Giselle Eberhard Cotton, "Lausanne Tapestry Biennial (1962–1995): The Pivotal Role of a Swiss City in the 'New Tapestry' Movement in Eastern Europe After WWII," delivered at the 2012 Textile Society of America's 13th Biennial Symposium in Washington, DC, Cotton asserts the importance of the Lausanne Tapestry Biennial as having achieved "a far reaching and sometimes unexpected impact," citing Varbanov as an example.²⁷ Cotton's inconclusive assessment likely results from the lack of proper information about Varbanov and serves as an urgent reminder of the necessary research regarding the international confluence that occurred at the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale. In encountering the traces of Varbanov's relics at BANK, we are reminded once again that fragments from history patiently require greater articulation.²⁸ So the quest continues with the archeological excavation of the compelling figure of Maryn Varbanov, which promises to situate and assess his proper position in a pivotal juncture in Chinese history, one that was deeply charged with transnational yearnings.

History's Artifice: Jin Shan

Like Varbanov's *Relics*, Jin Shan's sculptural exhibition *Divine Ruse* also investigates the overlapping variations and contingencies embedded in China's self-proclaimed and ordered histories. While Varbanov's traces prompt us to revisit the circumstances of art in mid 1980s China, Jin Shan strives to cast his gaze upon the heterogeneous contradictions of cultural predicaments that critique his present circumstances. Jin Shan's life and art are foregrounded in the very locale where his inspiration is derived—the city of Shanghai where he works and resides. Jin Shan was born in 1977 in Shanghai's neighbouring province of Jiangsu and came to Shanghai in 1996 to study painting at East China Normal University. Finding painting insufficiently challenging, after graduation Jin Shan turned his attention to video art and conceptual installations before immersing himself in sculpture.

Jin Shan spends as much time thinking about the concepts for his art as

he does creating it, which, the artist admits, leaves him hardly any time for much else. When he is not teaching classes on drawing and watercolour painting at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Jin Shan can assuredly be found at work in his studio, which contain the artist's creative impulses as well as the implements for his artistic creation—the large-scale molds for sculpture and oversized tables for his collections of studies, sketches, drafts, and scaled models. Here, in China, where quality not only of consumer products but even costly works of art can fall short of international standards, Jin Shan pays exceeding attention to technical mastery, which he credits as being inspired by his long time life partner, Maya Kramer, an American artist based in Shanghai.

Jin Shan takes pains to reveal the substrate of history that still resonates in today's reality. The structure that currently houses his solo exhibition is a physical exemplification of this paradox. BANK, located on the short and narrow stretch of Xianggang Road, is a monumental edifice, a romantic ruin that once housed an actual bank. The facade of the former financial institution replicates in structure the stronghold complexes of ancient Greek and Roman temples that served as inspiration for neoclassical architecture in parts of Western Europe and North America. Braced with solid columns and ornate capitals supporting the superstructure of the entablature, the building has since eroded physically, with time and history as testament to the glorious yet turbulent era in which it was built. Just a few blocks away, on the major thoroughfare of Zhongshan East 1st Road, known as the Bund or Waitan, the former concession buildings that line this famous riverfront promenade of the Huangpu have all undergone major renovations financed in part by the Shanghai Municipal Government to emerge as symbols of Shanghai's financial and cultural might.²⁹



While in recent decades Shanghai has been the playground for innovative building designers, capturing the global attention of preeminent architects and prestigious architectural firms, a peculiar building practice has been taking place in the development of

Jin Shan, *Retired Pillar*, 2010, latex, synthetic glass, blast blower, timer, 303.2 x 115.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

new commercial and residential structures. About twenty miles northeast of Shanghai, at Taopu, in Putuo district, where Jin Shan used to have his studio, he would daily drive past the eclectic mix of neoclassical buildings that crop up unexpectedly from among modernist structures. The majestic presence of Greco-Roman pillars holding up facades of electronic malls and shopping centres evoke the simulacra of Disneyland or Las Vegas. Perhaps it is the Chinese postmodern taste for disjunctive styles or misunderstood anachronism that intrigues Jin Shan. The artist observes, “So much of the spiritual resonance that was inherent in the original context has now vanished or been diluted. What we are left with is the shell, the outer edifice with the loss of the inner spirit and essence.”³⁰

To visually make concrete the disappearance of spiritual content, Jin Shan

constructed *Retired Pillar* (2010)—an emblem of the iconic architectural support of democratic Greek polis—as a hollow sculpture molded in latex. Immediately after its completion, the pristine white colonnade was laid to rest atop a plain pedestal, where it strived to respire with agonizing difficulty. Its “life” was dependent upon an electrical air pump that simulated as oxygen support. *Retired Pillar* can be read as a poignant allusion to Shanghai’s history of divided concession districts by the British, French, and American powers from 1843 to 1941. Yet, rather than standing erect like the pristinely renovated colonial buildings along the bund, Jin Shan’s pillar struggles for survival. Despite, or perhaps due to, its meteoric economic rise, Shanghai can seem like a desolate and hollow place for many Chinese migrants who come from neighbouring provinces seeking employment. Low-level workers are barely able to sustain their livelihoods in one of the most expensive cities in Asia.³¹ In describing the *Retired Pillar*, Ian Alden Russell, who curated Jin Shan’s 2012 solo exhibition at the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, commented, “Utilizing complex mechanical systems and methods of replicating and producing cast copies . . . Jin Shan’s work critiques the human desires for wealth, prestige, and power indexed by such a symbol—a symbol that, through its excessive replication, has become exhausted.”³² As a city undergoing relentless massive transformations, Jin Shan’s architectural reference serves as a counter-monument to the post-Socialist economic conceit of Shanghai, signifying the process and the consequence of its mutation.

Mutation brought on by relentless replication also fosters impoverished meanings. Jin Shan believes many of the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures as well as original architectural structures were once imbued with a specific sense of purpose at the time of their creation. For example, the Parthenon, as a site of communal worship, was originally invested with a sense of spiritual endowment as people came together during cyclical rituals to pay respects with Panathenaic processions around the base of the temple. “Today, very few Chinese understand the original intent of classical prototypes. Many who now possess the financial means to go on overseas travels to Europe will snap pictures in front of a sacred site without attempting to comprehend its historical and cultural importance. They are impressed with the exterior grandeur of European classicism, and want to emulate these features when building their own homes or commercial offices. The end result, however, is an eclectic mish-mash, as found at Taopu and elsewhere, with a lack of clear understanding of what the mimesis implies.”³³

To explore this paradox instigated by the contradictions in the desecrated form, in 2013, Jin Shan constructed another pillar. Entitled *Kuroshio Current*, this pillar was both a continuum and a departure from his 2010 column. Sharply diverging from the pristine white purity of *Retired Pillar*, *Kuroshio Current* radiates a slick black sheen. Rather than laying on its side, gasping for breath, the newer monolith asserts its verticality like an *axis mundi*, signifying an innate life force. Inevitably, this internal invisible force seems to have imploded on its own dynamic energy, for we witness organic



entrails oozing profusely from its sleek sheath out onto the floor. Composed of a unique material of mixed plastic devised by the artist, Jin Shan attempts to capture the inert tensions that abound in sculpture. He notes, “*Kuroshio* is the name of a current in Japan where warm and cold waters meet. For me, this juncture is the unseen point of friction and interplay.”³⁴

Jin Shan, *Kuroshio Current*, 2013, plastics and mixed media, 787.4 x 114.3 x 114.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

Divine Ruse represents the culmination of a painstaking year’s worth of recent creations that reflects the artist’s concern about a crisis in representation. The strength of the show rests on the unified language of the dissonant sculptures’ unique materiality as well as the artist’s assertion of spiritual embodiment as a crucial *élan vital* belonging to the medium of sculpture. The viewers’ first encounter, as they step through the doors of BANK, is a wall that is aptly named *Stolen Light* (2015). Composed of what appears at first glance to be bricks, the yellow and pinkish blocks made from Jin Shan’s special mix of plastic imitate the quality of human and animal fat. Jin Shan explains, “For me the walls are very important for this current show. They act as a screen, a buffer for the negative energy. The two large pieces of the single wall simultaneously sets the stage as both a prelude and a backdrop. From within the walls there are drops of fluid that seep and drip out, resembling pools of blood from gunshot wounds. I want you to see what you choose to see. From a distance, as you enter the exhibition space, you will know immediately that there is something behind this wall. I wanted to create an ambience as if the entire space was holding a secret which only you did not yet know.”³⁵



Proceeding further into the gallery space after passing by half of the fractured wall, the viewer enters an expansive gallery space, where the other half of the wall for *Stolen Light* is situated surrounded by disparate sculptures standing upon their bases or positioned from the wall, initially appearing like iconic museum

Jin Shan, *Stolen Light*, 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Kerstin Brandes. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

statues. Yet, one instantly recognizes that these vestiges are at odds with their original prototypes. They are violently torn asunder, but not in the way that classical sculptures have been dismantled through the deterioration of time, weather, or even intent. No, each sculpture seems to have imploded, once again from within, and what we are witnessing is the frozen nano-second of its rupture.

Jin Shan comments as he leads me around the exhibition:

The busts of Greek or Roman statues have been a

Jin Shan, *Stolen Light*, 2015,
plastic, steel. Photo: Kerstin
Brandes. Courtesy of the artist
and BANK, Shanghai.



fundamental and foundational element of my life. Not only I, but also many students who study art, have spent hours and hours in front of plaster replicas of famous Greek and Roman sculptures sketching and drawing them in order to refine our technical skills. Yet Chinese students are not as fortunate as art students who live in major European or North American urban cities with access to the real objects at famous museums. It soon dawned on me that I was making copies from copies, meaning I was making studies from replicas, which also were made from the inferior material of plaster and clay. The plaster statue which I was focusing all my attention on was itself an artifice that had been replicated a thousand, ten thousand, perhaps, even over a million times and was much removed in time and distance from the original bust that was sculpted from marble in the ancient Greek or Roman period.

I had an opportunity to visit the Pergamon Museum in Berlin's Museum Island in 2009, where I witnessed for the first time the original busts. Due to the time I had spent with the plaster replicas, I thought I was intimately well versed with each indentation and curvature of those forms. Yet, it wasn't so. When I came face to face with the marble statues, I could actually sense the life force beneath the stone skin. It completely moved me. I am fully aware there are also copies at the Pergamon Museum, and I realize Roman statues are derivative of Greek originals, yet the time lapse between these two ancient civilizations is decisively shorter than the time period that comes between classical Greek



Jin Shan, *Failed Light*, 2015, horse skin, plastic, steel. Photo: Kerstin Brandes. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

antiquity and contemporary China. Despite this prolonged spatio-temporal estrangement, I wanted to somehow capture the essence of life and spiritualism, which I felt were embodied in the original sculpture. They may be inanimate objects, but I believe they possess a soul, for how can they move us so deeply to empathy?”³⁶



Jin Shan, *Nowhere*, 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

Accordingly, the Hegelian notion of spiritualism seems to emanate from Jin Shan’s *Nowhere* (2015), a larger-than-life sculpture that, despite its profound stillness, displays the essence of dynamism found in the fifth-century BCE *Diskobolos* (*Discus Thrower*) or the first-century Hellenistic sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons*. The original form of *Nowhere* is cast from a plaster model of a statue that strongly resembles Polkykleitos’ famed *Doryphoros* (*Spear Bearer*) of fifth-century BCE. Yet Jin Shan has shifted the sculpture’s centre of gravity by tilting it slightly forward such that the *contrapposto* has been intensified to not only suggest,

but to actually depict, a hurried sense of movement. The advantage of Jin Shan’s fluid mixed plastic is that it can be liquefied and condensed, thus allowing the artist to manipulate the mold before it hardens into concrete form. The manual process of pulling and stretching has torn asunder the exterior from the core, wherein we bear witness to the schism through its heightened tension of spontaneous separation. The artist remarks, “I physically deconstruct visual symbols of ideals and power from various

Jin Shan, *Nowhere* (detail), 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Kerstin Brandes. Courtesy of the Maryn Varbanov Estate and BANK, Shanghai.



culture and time periods . . . I melt, compress and augment these signs as a way to question our everyday assumptions and beliefs. As you can see, the sculpture is being pulled away from its core, yet you can still bear witness to the source, which is the core.”³⁷

According to Jin Shan, that source, the core, representing the soul from where spiritualism and empathy flow is also the same locus of the ego’s lust for wealth, power, and fame. Indeed, the sculpture that the artist utilizes to investigate empathetic relations inherently comes heavily loaded with commentaries about power relations. Whether it was during the Greco-Roman period or China’s Cultural Revolution, statues representing heroic figures were situated at strategic sites to propagate an intended message, often disguised under aesthetic mandates.

In a radical departure, yet one that follows the logic of his artistic discourse, Jin Shan recently incorporated the iconic image of the Worker-Soldier-Peasant from the Cultural Revolution into his oeuvre. In his statue *Mistaken* (2015), the artistic style of Soviet socialist realism makes an inexorable comeback from China’s recent history. “Can you see what is on top of his head?” Jin Shan asks. “It is eye goggles worn by many of the steel factory

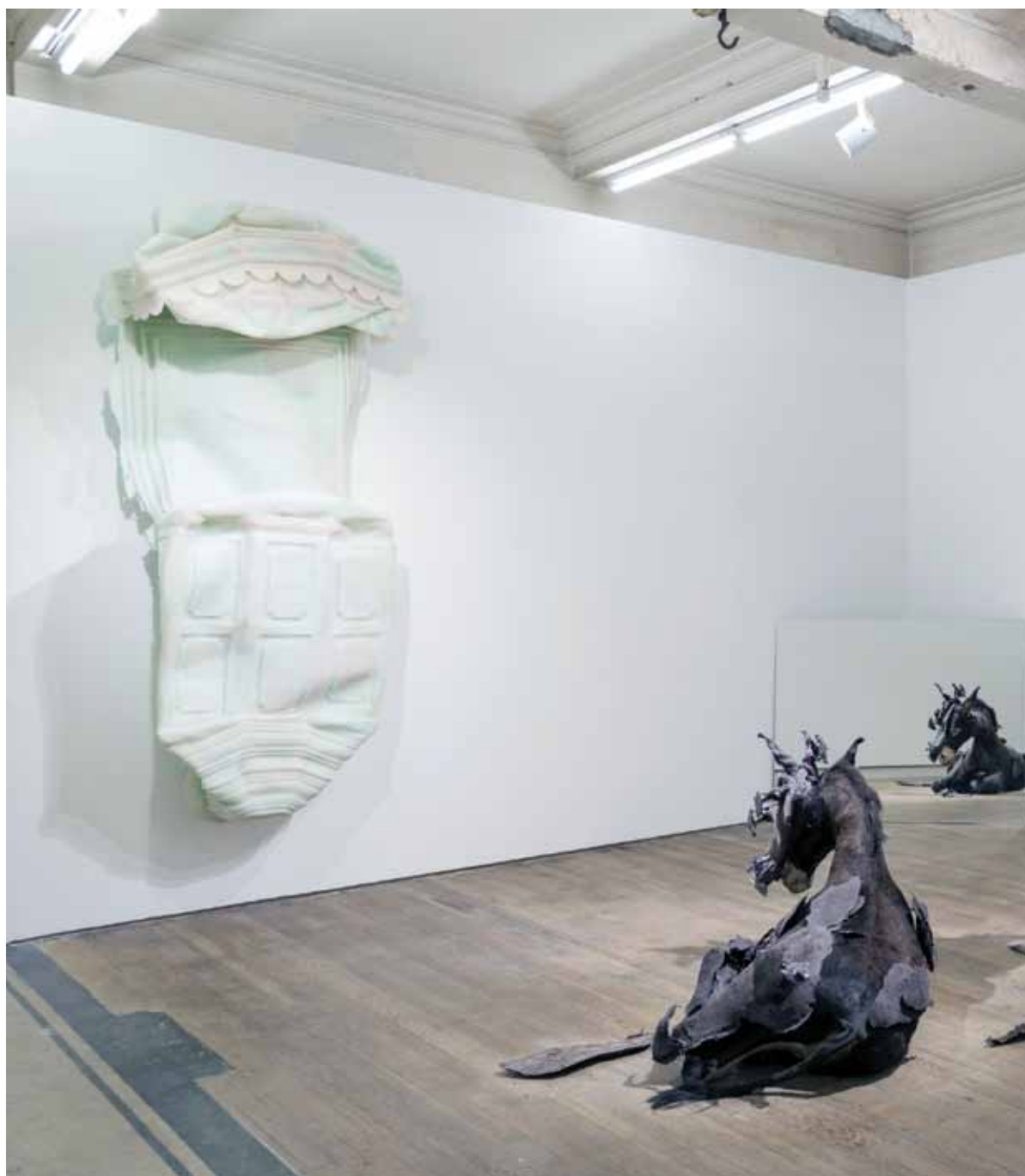


Jin Shan, *Mistaken*, 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

workers during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The main purpose was to protect their eyes. Yet, I wondered at the nonsense of this logic. Why should people's vision be protected when they were not even allowed to witness the circumstances of their own reality?"³⁸ This explains, in part, why there are fists coming out of the statue's eye, face, and head of *Mistaken*. The metaphor of the fist is indicative of physical strength and power as a common iconographic gesture in Cultural Revolution art, yet, here, the fists have also become the source for self-immolation thus underscoring the idiosyncratic nature in hierarchies of power-relations. The entire body of the statue is constructed from splinters of fragmented wooden window frames, mostly from homes built in the 1980s and now demolished, that the artist found and collected near his old studio. The reference to vision and windows brings to mind the familiar expression "the eyes are the window to the soul," as the remnants illustrate how clarity of vision, when ruthlessly shattered, can leave the soul at a loss.

Why did Jin Shan decide to revisit an outmoded visual paragon? He explains: "During the Cultural Revolution, the Worker-Soldier-Peasant comprised the three identities of art. If you did not belong to these categories, you were nothing. It was as if you didn't exist, which was why all the statues from this period have the similar traits. The makers of these sculptures tried to evoke spirituality with a visual rally that proclaimed, 'We can do anything and everything! We can win in anything! We can overcome our enemies!' These ideals expressed, and in some ways still express, the ideals of Chinese nationalism. I feel this sense of collective identity was also strong during the Greco-Roman times, which is why in this main exhibition space, I placed the largest sculpture that evokes the ideals of heroic men in ancient Greek culture together with the heroic emblem of China's socialist realist statue. I believe human history shares similar traits even though it may have occurred at different times."³⁹ In correlating the visual signifiers from China and that from Greco-Roman traditions, Jin Shan's artistic concept aligns with recent scholarship that pays critical attention to comparative analysis of the world's two monumental imperial states in human history—the empires of ancient Rome and Han China.⁴⁰ While these studies direct their gaze to ancient periods, Jin Shan casts a comparative gaze at the sculptural markers as index of power through visual inquiry.

In "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Gilles Deleuze describes Michel Foucault's discourse of discipline as a power construct that "organiz[ed] vast spaces of enclosure" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaching its height at the onset of the twentieth century.⁴¹ Discipline as a mechanism of control was effective as long as it was confined to a "closed system."⁴² Interestingly, in describing the state of crisis resulting from the breakdown of interior environments of enclosure, Deleuze uses terms associated with sculpture: "Enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other."⁴³ Jin Shan's sculptures also reveal in visible form the tensions of transformation that can give rise to ruptures and discontinuities.



Accordingly, the forces that push and pull, as well as separate and converge, are visual representations in Jin Shan's sculptural works. Yet the formal destruction is ultimately unified by the strivings of their inner spiritual essence. The contradictions that are embodied in these sculptures may never be resolved but they, nonetheless, strive for resolution. The message of spiritual atonement is delivered poignantly in the last gallery at BANK, where three disparate sculptures by Jin Shan form a unified triptych brimming with Christian metaphors. Reminiscent of *Retired Pillar*, one piece is a deflated balcony, modeled after the one at the Vatican where the Pope addresses the public. Entitled *Collapsed Icing* (2015), the structure, in all its Easter-egg, pastel-mint glory, hangs pallid on the wall despite its three-hundred pound fortitude. On another wall, the pale-pink stained glass window *Solar Eclipse* (2015) simultaneously embodies the visual characteristics of an impotent

Jin Shan, installation view of *Divine Ruse*, 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.



phallus and a desiccated labia. The male and female reproductive organs appear to have converged and collapsed into each other, not as a symbol of procreative force, but as a degenerated organ. Placed between *Collapsed* and *Solar Eclipse* sits a taxidermy donkey, *Final Rays* (2015), which has also been partially cast so that pieces of the mixed plastic are slowly falling off in chunks as if the beast was molting. It's a complex interplay of signs and metaphors for which there is no easy read. A clue is provided, however. A large mirror is placed directly in front of the donkey on the floor where the corners of two walls converge. There is a faint nod to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), but the icon is no longer elevated in veneration, instead residing on the same terrestrial plane as humans. Jin Shan states, "From a material perspective, doors and windows are transitional spaces, portals that let light, objects and beings enter and exit. However, in a religious



context, church doors and windows take on greater significance, as portals to salvation. To question this idea of a spirit ascending to another world, I cast a pulpit and a gothic style window and compressed them so they no longer function as openings, thus creating a situation for no-exit. Then, I took a taxidermy donkey, whose pose exudes a sense of passivity and sadness, and cast fragments of its body. I then added these fragments to the original taxidermy, animating the form to suggest that the spirit of the animal is exiting its body. Yet, as the passages of the pulpit and window are blocked, the donkey's spirit has no place to go. Additionally, I staged a mirror in the corner of the room, into which the donkey is gazing. The mirror both reflects and amplifies the helplessness of the donkey, and at the same time, as viewers enter the space they see themselves reflected in the mirror alongside the donkey. In this way I implicate the viewer in this existential question of whether or not a spiritual realm exists.”⁴⁴

Jin Shan, installation view of *Divine Ruse*, 2015, plastic, steel. Photo: Alessandro Wang. Courtesy of the artist and BANK, Shanghai.

As I stand before the triptych, gazing at my own image embedded in the mirror before me, I am reminded of a passage from Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*:

The relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other without connection or proximity: by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these reflections coursing through space are the original images? Which is the reality and which the projection? It is often not possible to say, for emulation is a sort of natural twinship existing in things; it arises from a fold in being, the two sides of which stand immediately opposite to one another. However, emulation does not leave the two reflected figures it has confronted in a merely inert state of

opposition. One may be weaker, and therefore receptive to the stronger influence of the other, which is thus reflected in his passive mirror.⁴⁵

While many contemporary artists have turned their attention to revealing the physical consequences of China's urban landscape resultant from aggressive push for economic expansion, Jin Shan utilizes the historical traces of Shanghai's exterior conditions to comment on the psychological tensions such aggression can engender upon society. Jin Shan holds a "passive mirror," which is anything but, to reveal how power relations govern virtually every crucible of human construction from culture, history, religion, and the arts. Yet, these human constructions are the very artifice that can powerfully reveal the circumstances of the present, including scores of mutations and disruptions.

The city of Shanghai is Jin Shan's starting point, and a challenge requiring thoughtful navigation. He underscores not only the spiritual and physical split, experienced by the Chinese society of which he is a part, but strives patiently to articulate the complicated nuances of the innate human need to locate a place of stability in a morphing world that will not cease to be still.

Notes

1. "Epistemes are conceptual strata underpinning various fields of knowledge and corresponding to different epochs in Western thought; historical analysis must 'unearth' them—hence the archeological model." José Guilherme Merquior, *Foucault* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 36.
2. See Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artist and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); and Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). These are only a few notable examples.
3. This definition of Foucault's "archaeology" comes from Merquior, *Foucault*, 36.
4. Mathieu Borysevicz, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, December 2, 2015.
5. Ibid.
6. Varbanov's biographical information is taken from Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 2 (Hangzhou: Zhong guo meishu xueyuan chu ban she), 158–79.
7. Song Huaikuei had to submit a letter to the then Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zhou Enlai, to seek permission to marry a foreigner. Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 2, 163.
8. Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 2, 177.
9. Ibid.
10. Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 1, (Hangzhou: Zhong guo meishu xue yuan chu ban she, 2011), 247, 265.
11. Lam Chong Man, "An Interview with Hou Hanru (May 27, 2010)," in Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 1, 106.
12. Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo Dengdai Meishushi, 1985–1986* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chu ban she, 1991). This text is in Mandarin and has yet to be translated.
13. Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 215. See also Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 260–61.

14. A search for Jean Lurçat in academic library databases reveals mostly exhibition catalogues from his exhibitions held from the 1950s to the 1980s. Many sources are available, predominantly in French, with a few bilingual editions in French and English. The sole biography on Lurçat found on WorldCat is *Peintres et sculpteurs d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Genève: P. Cailler, 1956), by Claude Roy, which is available only in French.
15. Sun Zhenhua, "Discovering Varbanov: An Ongoing Process," in Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 1, 92.
16. Ibid., 93.
17. Ibid., 92.
18. Ibid., 93.
19. Ibid., 94. This same injunction is located in Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 2, 166.
20. Ibid., 93.
21. Ibid.
22. Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 1, 39.
23. In 2013, the exhibition '85 and an Art Academy traveled from the Museum of Contemporary Art at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou to the National Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing. See Gao Shiming, "The Symphony of Histories, the Emancipation of People," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (March/April 2014), 32–39. For the exhibition at NAMOC in Beijing, see http://www.namoc.org/en/exhibitions/201311/t20131122_271462.htm/.
24. *Relics: Maryn Varbanov*, BANK exhibition catalogue (no imprint), 1.
25. Public sculpture in Shanghai attests to the prominence of Soviet socialist realist style statues from throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Examples include Zhang Yonghao's *Marx and Engels* (1985), located inside Fuxing Park, Zhang Chongren's *Ni Er* (1985), on Huaihai Lu, Yu Jiyong's *Monument Commemorating the May 30th Movement* (1990), at People's Square, and *Monument to the People's Heroes* (ca 1986) and the *Ever Victorious Army Monument* (1986), on the Bund. Julie Chun, "Understanding Public Sculpture in China," a lecture delivered to the Royal Asiatic Society China, Shanghai, February 25, 2014.
26. Ibid., 3. See also Shi Hui and Gao Shiming, eds., *Maryn Varbanov and the Chinese Avant-Garde in the 1980s*, part 1, 296.
27. Giselle Eberhard Cotton, "The Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962–1995): The Pivotal Role of a Swiss City in the 'New Tapestry' Movement in Eastern Europe After World War II," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2012, paper, 670, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1669&context=tsaconf/>.
28. On WorldCat, only three texts come up under a search for Maryn or Marin Varbanov: Maryn Varbanov, *Maryn Varbanov: Wanman* (Hangzhou: Zhongguo mei shu xue yuan che ban she, 2001), in Chinese and French; Ivanov Nezabavka, *Marin Vurbanov, 1932–1989* (Sofia: Borina, 2008), in Bulgarian and French; and Maryn Varbanov, with a preface by Dora Vallier, *Varbanov Tapisseries* (Paris: Dora Vallier, 1978), in French.
29. Regarding the built culture of Shanghai as it relates to financial wealth and political power, see *Shanghai Rising: State Power and Local Transformations in a Global Megacity*, ed. Xiangming Chen with Zhenhua Zhou (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
30. Jin Shan, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, December 2, 2015.
31. Wei Gu, "Shanghai Is Now the Most Expensive City in Asia for Luxury Living," *Wall Street Journal China*, online edition, October 27, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/10/27/shanghai-is-now-the-most-expensive-city-in-asia-for-luxury-living/>.
32. Ian Alden Russell, *Jin Shan: My Dad is Li Gang!*, exhibition brochure (Providence, RI: Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 2012), n. pag.
33. Jin Shan, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, December 2, 2015.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. See Walter Scheidel, *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Fritz-Heiner Mutschers and Achim Mittag, eds., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Sunny Y. Auyang, *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese and Roman Empires* (London and New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2014).
41. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 4.
44. Jin Shan, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, December 2, 2015.
45. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), 22.