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Pillars of Fat: The Corporeal Aesthetics of Civilization (*Wenming*) in Contemporary Art

Ros Holmes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines a work of contemporary art by the artist duo Sun Yuan (b. 1972) and Peng Yu (b. 1974). Entitled *Wenming zhu* (Civilization Pillar), in form the work resembles a classical stone column, but it is in fact entirely composed of layers of congealed, gleaming human fat. While the work has previously been read in relation to the emergence of *zhenhan yishu* or “Shock Art” in the late 1990s, I argue that it provides an important mirror on the corporeal aesthetics of the *wenming* discourse. In Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s Civilization Pillar, flesh is fetishized as a site for the accumulation of *wenming* as a by-product of the hedonism and decadence of the 21st century. *Wenming* is thus defined as the corporeal surplus of burgeoning consumerism, a means by which both to figure and to counter the destabilizing forces of sociopolitical transformation.

We’ve been civilized for 4,000 years now; we’re embarrassed to be civilized any longer.

—Wang Shuo, “An Attitude”

A towering pillar of human fat is not necessarily the first thing that one would associate with the concept of civilization or civility (*wenming* 文明), and yet this is the sight that greeted visitors to the 2001 Yokohama Triennale, where the artist duo Sun Yuan (孫原, b. 1972) and Peng Yu (彭禹, b. 1974) first displayed their work “Civilization Pillar” (*Wenming zhu* 文明柱 [Figure 1]). While in form the work resembles a classical stone column, it is composed entirely of layers of congealed, gleaming human fat. The fat was collected from cosmetic surgery clinics in Beijing and sculpted around a metal base after being liquefied on the artists’ kitchen stove (Figure 2).

Over a decade after its production, Civilization Pillar is widely regarded as a canonical work of “Shock Art”, an artistic movement that flourished in the late 1990s and early 2000s and was characterized by its use of highly controversial

Figure 1. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Wenming zhu* (Civilization Pillar) 2001

Human fat, metal supports; 400cm tall, 60cm diameter ©Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. Reprinted by permission. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

Figure 2. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Civilization Pillar*: documentary photographs
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materials, including body parts, cadavers and live animals.¹ The movement was said to have arisen as a deliberately antagonistic stand against what was perceived by many artists as the overt commercialization of Chinese art in the dominant styles of Political Pop and Cynical Realism.² The term itself first emerged as a response to several works featured in the 1999 exhibition “Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion” (*Hou ganxing: yixing yu wangxiang* 后感性: 异形与妄想), co-curated by the artist Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰, b. 1969) and the critic Wu Meichun (吴美纯, b. 1969).³ Subsequent “Shock Art” exhibitions included “Food as Art” (*Yishu dacan* 艺术大餐, Beijing, 2000), “Obsession with Harm” (*Dui shanghai de milian* 对伤害的迷恋, Beijing, Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2000) and the unofficial satellite exhibition “An Uncooperative Approach” (*Bu hezuo fangshi* 不合作方式), held to coincide with the 2000 Shanghai Biennial and creatively titled in English “Fuck Off” by co-curators Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957) and Feng Boyi (冯博一, b. 1960).

1. Gao Lin, “Gei ni yige zhenhan” (We Will Shock You), *Wenhua yuekan* (Culture Monthly) (January 2000), <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-WHYK2000Z1017.htm>, last accessed 28 October 2011.

2. Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun, “Hou ganxing: yixing yu wangxiang” (Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion), catalogue preface, reprinted in Wu Hung (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p. 271.

3. Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Publishers, 2006), p. 114.

The “taboo” nature of “Shock Art” generated much artistic and public debate within China and also received widespread international media attention.⁴ Within China, most works were almost universally condemned as provocative, amoral and confrontational, their uncompromising aesthetics inspiring reactions of both disgust and lurid fascination.⁵ Some foreign critics interpreted the movement as representing a strident critique of the economic and cultural transformations which had engendered their production, while others were quick to point out the often deliberate sensationalization of works to satisfy the needs of an (often foreign) audience and their appetite for works of “controversial” Chinese art.⁶

Scholarship too, both within China and abroad, has predominantly focused on the controversial nature of these artworks, querying whether they were created independent of any concern for market forces or instead intentionally exploited their controversial status as a means of increasing their circulation, exhibition and, ultimately, their commercial value.⁷ Exceptions are Thomas Berghuis and Meiling Cheng,⁸ who provide detailed documentation of many of these works’ processes of production and exhibition history. Research on the relationship between this genre of art and narratives of cultural identity, however, is completely absent. In this report, I begin such an analysis by interpreting Civilization Pillar in relation to the complex and multi-headed discourse of civilization in China.

4. *Wenhua bu guanyu jianjue zhizhi yi “yishu” de mingyi biao’yan huo zhanshi xuexing canbao yinhui changmian de tongzhi* (Memorandum Issued by the Bureau of Culture That Resolutely Forbids the Notification of Bloody, Cruel or Obscene Spectacles in the Name, Display or Performance of “Art”) (3 April 2001), http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/cn_law/2004-06/28/content_49708.htm, last accessed 18 June 2013; *Taipei Times*, Online edition, “Baby-Eating Photos Are Part of Chinese Artist’s Performance” (23 March 2001), <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/local/archives/2001/03/23/78704>, last accessed 15 June 2013. Works of “Shock Art” were later presented in a documentary for the Fifth Lyon Biennale broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 in a much-discussed report, entitled “Beijing Swings”, on 2 January 2003.

5. Wang Nanming, “Zenme duidai quanli: ping Zhongguo dangdai yishu zhong de ‘baoli hua’ qingxiang” (How to Deal With Rights: A Criticism of the “Violent Trend” in Contemporary Chinese Art), *Chinese-Art.com*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (2001); see also Chen Lüsheng, “Xingwei yishu de fansi” (Reflections on Performance Art), in Chen Lüsheng, *Yi yishu de mingyi* (In the Name of Art) (Beijing: People’s Fine Art Publishing House, 2002), pp. 45–52.

6. Karen Smith, “Contagious Desire: The Other in Contemporary Chinese Art”, *Art Asia Pacific*, No. 31 (2001), pp. 50–57.

7. Shi Ying, “Shi xingwei yishu haishi huazhong quchong?” (Is It Performance Art or Just Gaining Notoriety With Shocking Statements?), *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing Youth Daily) (23 July 2000); Paul Gladston, “Bloody Animals! Reinterpreting Acts of Sacrificial Violence against Animals as Part of Contemporary Chinese Artistic Practice”, in Lili Hernandez and Sabine Krajewski (eds), *Crossing Cultural Boundaries: Taboo, Bodies and Identities* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 96–105. Richard Vine, “The Report from Shanghai: After Exoticism”, *Art in America*, Vol. 89 (2001), pp. 30–39; He Qian, *La représentation occidentale de la cruauté dans l’art contemporain chinois* (The Western Representation of Cruelty in Contemporary Chinese Art), University of Quebec Dissertation (May 2008), <http://www.archipel.uqam.ca/1026/>, last accessed 20 June 2013; Wu Hung, “Debates Over Using Animals and the Human Body in Making Art”, in Wu Hung (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Art*, p. 270.

8. See Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, and Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Such an analysis both illuminates the relationship between contemporary art and evolving narratives of civilization and culture and steers scholarly discussions of civilization discourse in biopolitical and corporeal directions.

Civilization Pillar resembles the stone columns (*huabiao* 华表) which stand at the entrance to the Forbidden City, opposite Tiananmen Square (Figure 3). These pillars are employed by the state as a recurrent visual motif in their ongoing campaigns to engender a more civilized populace. The visual appropriation by Civilization Pillar of the pillar's iconographic status works to question the CCP's role as the sole architect of contemporary China's societal transformations and highlights instead the contested and ambiguous nature of the current government's civilizational narrative in relation to rapid consumerism and globalization.

"Civilization" itself is not a strictly indigenous term, but one that entered China through transcultural exchange with Japan at the beginning of the 20th century.⁹ While the usage of the term underwent various fluctuations following the founding of the PRC, it experienced a major renewal after Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平) economic reforms and Jiang Zemin's (江泽民) subsequent emphasis on the construction of "spiritual civilization" (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明) in the 1990s.¹⁰ In contemporary China, allusions and references to civilization continue to pervade all levels of Chinese discourse. As Nicholas Dynon notes, "civilization theory finds itself replicated in innumerable, diverse and often spontaneous ways, providing a coding for both prescribing and describing ways of acting, doing and being, from bodily functions to governing the people".¹¹ This diversity allows "civilization" both to function ideologically and to become a cornerstone of modern political and artistic praxis.

While it is almost impossible to trace the exact origin and formal development of decorative stone pillars, their stylized image is often endowed with allegorical importance; historical accounts frequently create a lineage linking the pillars' evolution to the reign of mythical emperors such as Yao and Shun (c. 2357–2205 BCE).¹² The pillars thus become proud national icons, culturally authentic

9. Liu Wenming, "Ouzhou 'wenming' guannian xiang Riben, Zhongguo de chuanbo jiqi bentu hua: yi Jizuo, Fuzeyuji he Liang Qichao wei zhongxin" (The Localization and Dissemination of the European Concept of "Civilization" to Japan and China: A Case Study of François Guizot, Fukuzawa Yukichi and Liang Qichao), *Lishi yanjiu* (History Research), No. 3 (2011), p. 56.

10. Dai Anlin, "Deng Xiaoping de shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe sixiang" (On Deng Xiaoping's Thinking on the Building of Socialist Spiritual Civilization), *Chongqing shehui kexue* (Chongqing Social Sciences), No. 5 (2010), pp. 5–14; Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

11. Nicholas Dynon, "Four Civilizations' and the Evolution of Post-Mao Chinese Socialist Ideology", *The China Journal*, No. 60 (July 2008), p. 108.

12. Liu Huiqin, "Huabiao shihua" (The History of Huabiao), *Huaxia wenhua* (Chinese Culture), No. 1 (2005), p. 52; Wang Changxin, "Huabiao he feibang" (Huabiao and Feibang), *Yuwen jiaoxue yu yanjiu* (Chinese Teaching and Studies), Vol. 8 (1983), p. 3.

Figure 3. *Huabiao* pillar at the entrance to the Forbidden City
©Ros Holmes. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

Figure 4. Banner designed to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party, Beijing 2011

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emblems of Chinese civilization. Their prominence across a range of visual media, from Socialist artworks to state-produced cigarette packets, attests to their position, not just as culturally loaded totems, but as “symbols of all that is Chinese”¹³ (see below, Figures 5 and 6). The pillars appear in Beijing’s Chaoyang District street-level public service advertisements, in officially produced banners commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party (Figure 4), and even on the front cover of the monthly magazine *Civilization* (*Wenming*), in a special edition produced to complement the “Road to Rejuvenation” (*Fuxing zhi lu* 复兴之路) exhibition at the newly refurbished National Museum of China.

Public visual representation of civilization has become an ongoing facet of the CCP’s desire to police the boundaries of morality and their attendant physical, mental and behavioral qualities. The CCP’s visual manipulation of the pillars indicates clearly how critical it considers culture to be to its legitimacy. This concern underlies the visual role of the pillars both as emblems of Chinese civilization and as signifiers of cultural rectitude, beacons of moral and patriotic behavior.

13. Geremie Barmé, “Totems That Are Poles Apart”, *Beijing Scene*, <http://www.beijingscene.com/v06i003/culture/culture.html>, last accessed 12 November 2011.

Figure 5. Poster from a patriotic education campaign, 1994

Yuhang Chubanshe, Beijing, set no. 780034.22. ©Chinese posters.net. Reprinted by kind permission of the IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

In an insightful examination of propaganda posters produced during the reform era, Stefan Landsberger analyzes a set of images created for a 1994 Patriotic Education Campaign.¹⁴ The first poster, “We have long had it” (*Women yijing yongyou* 我们已经拥有, referring to civilization) dwells on the ancient greatness of China and is dominated by the central element of a pillar (Figure 5). The four small images encircling the pillar show China’s “four great inventions”:

14. Stefan Landsberger, “Propaganda Posters in the Reform Era: Promoting Patriotism or Providing Public Information?”, in Frank Columbus (ed.), *Asian Economic and Political Issues*, Vol. 10 (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2004), pp. 27–57.

Figure 6. Poster from a patriotic education campaign, 1994

Yuhang Chubanshe, Beijing, set no. 780034.22. ©Chinese posters.net. Reprinted by kind permission of the IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

the compass, paper production, movable-type printing and gunpowder. In this poster, the imperial past is invoked to support China's return to a position of importance on the global stage.

The second poster, "How can we forget?" (*Women zen neng wangdiao* 我们怎能忘掉), revolves around the national suffering inflicted by Western nations during the "Century of Humiliation" which started with the Opium Wars. The central visual element depicts the ruins of a column situated in the Yuanmingyuan ("Garden of Perfection and Light" 圆明园 in the Old Summer Palace; Figure 6). Preserved as a memorial to national shame in the pre-Revolutionary era, the

Yuanmingyuan continues to evoke memories of the calamities that have befallen Chinese civilization.¹⁵ Against this fragment of ruin, the four smaller images depict the Opium War, the “Unequal Treaties” imposed on China after the Opium Wars, and two 20th-century conflicts: the march on Beijing by the “Armies of the Eight Allies” in 1900, and the 1937–38 Nanjing Massacre.

In these posters, two “pillars of civilization” are juxtaposed. While one attests to the apparent grandeur, ingenuity and endurance of Chinese civilization, codifying civilization as the act of being continually inclined towards progress, the other poster serves as its visual antithesis, a marker of shame and humiliation, ruin and “backwardness”. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s use of human fat as the primary building material in their pillar of civilization suggests a critique of such monumental constructions of civilization. While Civilization Pillar may recreate the formal qualities of both the decorative pillar and the ruined column, it eschews any visual allusions to coiling imperial dragons or elements imbued with historical gravitas; these are replaced by an illegible surface of solidified fat, a reflective *tabula rasa* of golden grease.

Decorative pillars in the 21st century have come to stand as an emblem of the wealth, status and rejuvenation of Chinese civilization in the light of rapid economic and social transformations, a fact often highlighted by their depiction as golden totems of prosperity (see Figure 7). In this configuration, civilization is not only imbricated in state power and the cultural construction of the nation; it is also increasingly linked to the promotion of economic growth.

The employment of low-angle shots that reaffirm the monumentality of both decorative pillars and the Civilization Pillar further highlights the contrast between the two pillars’ surfaces. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s pillar also suggests the insubstantiality of contemporary prosperity. This insubstantiality reflects the use of decorative pillars as inflatable commercial icons (Figure 8). As Geremie Barmé notes, “the garish kitsch of the columns entwined with the dragon totem of the past is a pronouncement on the fetishes of today, the commerce of signs and the triumphalism of capital”.¹⁶

In the decorative pillar’s dual role as both imperial artifact and commercial chimaera, we can also read an echo of what Børge Bakken refers to as the “Exemplary Society”, as the CCP’s governing and shaping of contemporary Chinese identity frequently involves a deliberate recycling of established, exemplary cultural themes and motifs.¹⁷ The past is reappraised and presented as the foundation from which the reforms in the present have logically developed. China’s historical

15. Wu Hung, “Ruins, Fragmentation and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern”, in GAO Minglu (ed.), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 60.

16. Geremie Barmé, “Totems That Are Poles Apart”.

17. Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Introduction, p. 7.

Figure 7. A state-produced image showing a golden *huabiao* in front of the Forbidden City
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development as told by this civilizational narrative results in the founding of the CCP and the leading role that it plays in society. By appropriating history in this manner, the Party can assert itself as the sole heir to the Chinese tradition. While the government positions the decorative pillar as a static monolith both redolent of imperial grandeur and totemic of contemporary economic prosperity, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's pillar of fat demonstrates that these narratives of cultural (and economic) regeneration are in fact malleable, shaped increasingly by individual agency and collective consumerism.

In July 2011, Sun Yuan told me that the Civilization Pillar is composed of fat collected from over 500 individuals, amassed over a period of five months. The artists undertook daily expeditions to cosmetic surgery clinics and sought permission from those undergoing surgical procedures to incorporate the extracted biomaterial into their work. They produced a series of documentary photographs detailing this process (see Figures 2 and 9), and the methods employed during its production ensured that the Pillar was able to withstand the vagaries of heat and decay.

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's appropriation of the auspicious symbol of the pillar, and their decision to cast it as a column of molded fat, exemplifies a contradiction of civilization. Flesh is fetishized as a site for the accumulation of civilization, as a by-product of the hedonism and decadence of the 21st century. Civilization becomes a redundant, surplus entity, a commodified and disposable

Figure 8. An inflatable, commercial *huabiao*

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consequence of social atrophy. In this privileging of the materiality of civilization over its concomitant claims to govern spiritual or social behavior, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu depict, not the grandeur of Chinese civilization, but its moral excess. As Charles Merewether has argued, while the slogan of reform, “To get rich is glorious”, is the basis on which a fetishism of the commodity is founded, it is also the enabling factor of other forms of fetishistic behavior like pornography, gambling,

Figure 9. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Civilization Pillar*: documentary photographs
 ©Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. Reprinted by permission. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

smuggling and prostitution.¹⁸ The phallic nature of the pillar could also be read this way.

Here, civilization does not define a “discourse of lack”, that is, the failure of the Chinese people to embody certain standards of modernity, civility or morality.¹⁹ Rather, it defines the corporeal surplus of a burgeoning consumerism, a means

18. Charles Merewether, “The Spectre of Being Human”, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 2 (June 2003), pp. 58–81, p. 72.

19. Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 76; Sara L. Friedman, “Embodying Civility: Civilizing Processes and Symbolic Citizenship in Southeastern China”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (August 2004), pp. 687–718.

both to figure and to counter the destabilizing forces of sociopolitical transformation. This idea of corporeal excess is also reflected in the surface of the pillar itself, which has not been smoothly sculpted into a monolithic façade. The column's outer layer has been plastered thickly to form glistening ridges and overlapping troughs of fused fat (Figure 10). It thus not only bears witness to the "hand(s) of the artist" but also reaffirms the excess materiality of its physical source. In a rural context, the positive connotations of fat suggest productive ability and even beauty²⁰ but, within contemporary urban society, attitudes towards fat mirror increasingly globalized trends in image-consciousness and the desirability of a polished thinness.

As Sun Yuan told me in July, 2011:

Fat itself is a surplus material; it is also a very modern material. In the past it wasn't as abundant, but now it has become a by-product of our contemporary society. Moreover, it is intimately related to people's level of civilization. The greater the level of civilization, the fatter people will be and the greater the desire to excise that excess. On the other hand, with an insufficient level of civilization, the desire to remove this excess material from the body has less effect on people's conceptions of or demands for beauty. In contemporary society many people now wish to have excess fat removed; to me, this entire process is interesting. I want to collect the thing that they have chosen to discard.

John Clark, writing on Chinese art in the late 1990s, examines how artists create works that focus on the "transcendence of the self". Clark writes that in these works "flesh serves as a metaphor . . . for what flows raw, foetic and barbaric beneath the carapace of civilization".²¹ His metaphor could aptly be applied to Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's Civilization Pillar. Just as these layers of excess fat normally remain concealed beneath a thin membrane of skin, their deliberate exhumation and display confronts the audience with the exposed viscera of its own material excess. Sculpted into monumental form, this waxy golden column of fat rises above sensationalist motivations to assume a solidity that both defies and confronts the impermanence of its biological origins.

Civilization Pillar thus becomes a commentary not just on the economic and historical legacy of civilization but on the corporeal politics enfolded within this narrative, pointing to the changing relationship between value and bodies. Contemporary discourse often construes civilization and its sociopolitical correlate, "quality" (*suzhi* 素质), as the "determining foundation of agency in

20. Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 191, n. 6.

21. John Clark (ed.), *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium* (Hong Kong: New Art Media Ltd., 2000), pp. 22–23.

Figure 10. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, Civilization Pillar

On display as part of the 2012 Hayward Gallery exhibition, "Art of Change: New Directions from China". ©Ros Holmes. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

deciding whether or not the Chinese people can reach the goal of development and modernity.”²² In this context, civilization becomes the defining quality of the modern subject, something to be acquired through conscious self-development, a form of technology of the self.²³ As Ann Anagnost argues, “in the movement from a planned to a market economy, the representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation.”²⁴ In their analysis of “manuals of elite civility”, Stephanie Donald and Zheng Yi expand on this point by recounting a story which first appeared in the *China Daily* on International Women’s Day (8 March), 2007: “as a gift for the special day, a man in a provincial capital had paid a great deal of money for his wife to have plastic surgery—not, apparently, because he wanted her to change, but because she had realized that she could not hope to climb any further up the promotions ladder in her workplace unless she became ‘better looking’.”²⁵ Corporeal capital is thus allied with achieving greater civilization and a more advantageous social position.

This social critique also finds articulation in works of contemporary literature. The novelist and curator Hu Fang (胡昉, b. 1970) provides an illustration in his short story, “Cosmetic Surgery and the Center of the World” (*Meirong shi yu shijie zhongxin* 美容室与世界中心):

It is no coincidence that this moment of triumphant global consumerism also marks the moment in which the Chinese have actively chosen to seek modifications to their own flesh. Flesh thus becomes a way of observing ideals amidst changing systems of authority. We can use this to discover other barometers of ideals to follow changes in society more broadly . . . Perhaps this is a new dialogue between the body and the world, built on the premise that bodies and things have all been materialized, and consequently, the pain of transition can be forgotten, as the most important thing becomes the exchange value of the new forms being created, which allow people to find themselves at a new starting line.²⁶

22. Hairong Yan, “Self Development of Migrant Women and the Production of *Suzhi* (Quality) as Surplus Value”, in Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Goldstein (eds), *Everyday Modernity in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 252.

23. Judith Farquhar, “Biopolitical Beijing: Pleasure, Sovereignty, and Self-Cultivation in China’s Capital”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2005), pp. 303–27.

24. Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality”, *Public Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 2004), p. 194.

25. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and ZHENG Yi, “A Taste of Class: Manuals for Becoming Woman”, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 2009), p. 515. See also Zheng Biqiang, “Chengshi nüxing bailing zhengrong shishang xiaofei de shehui xue jiedu” (A Social Analysis of the Plastic Surgery Fashion of Female White-Collar Workers), *Anhui nongye daxue xuebao* (Journal of Anhui Agricultural University), Vol. 18, No. 5 (2009), pp. 73–79.

26. Hu Fang, “Meirong shi yu shijie zhongxin” (Cosmetic Surgery and the Center of the World), in *Xin renjian cihua* (New Arcades [Survival Club, Sensation Fair and Cool *Shanshui*]) (Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers, 2006), p. 58.

Figure 11. Advertisement from a Beijing cosmetic surgery hospital, showing “before” and “after” shots of an eyelid surgery procedure

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Hu’s point is underscored by the fact that one of the most popular cosmetic procedures in contemporary China is not liposuction or lipoplasty but eyelid surgery. Rather than an autochthonous appeal to ideals of beauty, the goal of this surgery is to create rounder, fuller eyelids that are seen as distinctly more “Western” (Figure 11).²⁷

Statist imagery of civilization repeats and duplicates symbols like the decorative pillar to create a coercive, homogeneous visual language. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s *Civilization Pillar* subverts this formation by showing that any claim to modernity is multiple, contradictory and unresolved. Sun and Peng’s *Pillar* can be read as a locus of resistance to the “ownership of meanings”, questioning the politics of what anthropologist Walter D. Mignolo calls the “locus of enunciation”, the place from which power exerts its rule, imposes its narrative and asserts the ownership of meanings.²⁸ Sun and Peng thus challenge the government’s ability to police the borders of the civilizational narrative.

27. Jie Yang, “Nennu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter 2011), pp. 333–57.

28. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

The pillar also satirizes the government's emphasis on getting rich and "consuming wealth".²⁹ As Anna Lora-Wainright has noted, equating fatness and well-being serves "as a critique of both the excesses of the present and the deficiencies of the past, a moral commentary on the shifts of the reform period".³⁰ I argue that within the layers of fat of the Civilization Pillar is a layering of representation which expresses the ambivalent temporality of civilization as being constantly caught between its desire to display the bright promises of modernization that a civilized society has already conferred and a projection of the future. As Dynon argues, whereas civilization once carried connotations of Western superiority, within contemporary China "it now speaks to the aspirations and assertiveness of the inhabitants of a modern Chinese state".³¹

Sun and Peng's critical and metaphorical reification of the contemporary Chinese body, its processes and products, points simultaneously towards an understanding of the CCP's failure to command control over the rapidly commercialized sphere of contemporary culture, as well as the product of these contemporary bodies as a consumable object. The extracted fat, liquefied, solidified and sculpted into monumental form, becomes the perfect metaphor for the bodied and disembodied nature of the civilization discourse: its instantiation as fully incorporated raw material, and its violent expulsion as commodity. The artists illuminate a cycle of consumption within which civilization is ultimately implicated: a constant reprocessing, repackaging and re-consuming, *ad infinitum*.

29. For a detailed study of changes in the Chinese diet in relation to the increased wealth of urban residents, see Feng Zhiming and Shi Dengfeng, "Jin ershi nian lai Zhongguo shiwu xiaofei bianhua yu shanshi yingyang zhuangkuang pingjia" (Chinese Food Consumption and Nourishment in the Last 20 Years), *Ziyuan kexue* (Resources Science), Vol. 28, No. 1 (2006), pp. 2–8.

30. Anna Lora-Wainright, "Fatness and Well-Being in Contemporary China", in Bryan S. Turner and ZHENG Yangwen (eds), *The Body in Asia* (New York, Oxford, 2009), p. 126.

31. Nicholas Dynon, "Four Civilizations", p. 109.