

After Communism and Capitalism: On Jen Liu's Political Economy of Matter

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The Red Detachment of Women (1964) is one of the eight so-called Model Operas created during the Cultural Revolution by Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (江青): a series of productions that espoused Communist values and ideals. The ballet was adapted from the screenplay of a popular 1961 film of the same name, and was famously performed for US President Richard Nixon during his historic 1972 visit to China.¹ The narrative loosely follows the true story of a slave girl who led a guerrilla army of peasants and workers against some unscrupulous landlords on Hainan Island in 1931,² with the guerrillas dramatized as an all-woman contingent of Red Army fighters.

As Communist propaganda, both the ballet and the film versions of *The Red Detachment of Women* are replete with technicolour, affect, and drama. The latter is a distinctive and highly stylized mash-up of martial propaganda and classical dance. In both productions, clear battle lines are visually drawn. To quote Anna Chen (陳安娜) on the film version, “Heroes looked like heroes with rouged faces, Kohl-lined eyes, and great hair, while villains were easily identified by their sneaky demeanour and bad moustaches.”³

With that in mind, artist Jen Liu (劉艾真) considers whether “such a fraught archival document” could “be re-motivated, beyond kitsch” in *The Pink Detachment* (2015–16), a single-channel HD video that distills the plot of *The Red Detachment of Women* further by organizing the narrative arc around the theme of production.⁴ That is, the production of a revolution for the masses, advertised and packaged as popular entertainment designed to reinvigorate the Communist struggle and remind the Chinese people of what they were and *are* fighting for.

Liu states that her twenty-first-century update of the model opera centres around “the color equation, Red + White = Pink, from which multiple parallel meanings emerge.”⁵ Liu points out three key meanings in particular: the term “pinko,” which means “watered-down Communism, or a liberal with uncommitted Red sympathies”; the pink slime that functions as “a proposal to solve future crises in meat supply by revaluating hot dog and sausage production as a solution, by integrating ‘undesirable’ portions of pig with the ‘desirable’ portions”; and “pink as femininity—not as a ‘natural’ fleshy softness, but rather a synthetic, engineered (and potentially violent) hybridity.”⁶

That (potentially violent) hybridity is expressed across *The Pink Detachment* in minimalist, distilled form. In focus are two women. One is dressed in butcher's whites in a white-tiled room and is tasked with cutting raw meat. The other is a ballerina, modelled after an army leader, who performs choreography

drawn from the original ballet to cuts from the original soundtrack in a pink room that is bare save for a filament-shaped neon light. At points, the ballerina enters the white-tiled room and leaves tools for the meat worker to grind meat and bone. In one scene, the camera focuses on her black ballet shoes as she crushes bones to dust *en pointe*, as a female narrator with a corporate-authoritarian voice describes a “rejoicing” in “the pale white period” for “fiscal austerity, privatization, and market liberalization” before recounting a woman’s harrowing death in battle.



When all that’s left is dust, the powdery mound is mixed with a soft red lump to create sausages, the factory’s product. This is Liu’s metaphor for the replacement of what she describes as “military overthrow (Red) ... by manufactured equivalence (Pink)”⁷—a statement that tracks the move from communist revolution to the establishment of a communist state, in this case China, and all the transformations that would follow in the decades to come. Herein lies that violent hybridity:



“revolution” flattened, synthesized, and reduced to a consumable fleshy and phallic log. (To quote the voiceover, “We buy the minimalist view.”) But it is a contradictory violence: a softening rather than a hardening, or so it seems.

with the dust of bones—which appears like a metaphor for ash in relation to the story of the dying revolutionary narrated over the bone pulverization scene—feels like a metaphor for the dead mixing with the living. The scene seems to invoke the skeletons of the past that compose the bodies of the present who themselves mix back, in turn, with history, once they’re dead and buried, only for that cycle of mixing to repeat once again. In this light, the dilution of a red revolution into a pink composition of its reconstituted by-products could be seen as a natural development in the *longue*—or in actual fact, relatively short—*durée* of China’s communist history, in which mutation, indeed dilution, is a logical development. All of this relates to the question that underlies the work. To quote Liu: “Is continuity between the unfulfilled fantasy of the past and the economic ideologies of the present realizable—particularly when the interstice has been ruptured by large-scale social trauma, such as the Cultural Revolution?”⁸

There’s a lot going on in *The Pink Detachment*, but at its core is a material analysis of time and change whereby the Communist revolution has evolved into an accelerated form of industrial capitalism, or, to interpret Liu’s equation, Communist China (Red) + Western (White) Neoliberalism = accelerated capitalism. At one point, the narrator summarizes the sum as one of “transformation into a uniform, all-embracing monotronics” predicated on extractive capitalism—the result of the conversion of human functions “into abstract uniform units” in which “there are no limits to the amount of power that can be seized, converted and stored.” What follows, says the narrator, is “A power economy moving from manual work into machine work, machine work into paperwork, paperwork into the simulation of work.” In this system, defined by productivity, “There is only one efficient speed: faster. Only one rational destination: farther away. Only one desirable size: bigger. Only one rational quantitative goal: more.”

Liu says that a re-motivation of this history is possible, but only through major revision—which in effect poses an enduring question surrounding the ongoing struggle against capitalism and the perceived failures of communism.⁹ In this regard, quoting curator Lawinia Rate, *The Pink Detachment* is “not a re-enactment but rather a deconstructed ‘de-enactment,’ a performative intervention by the artist in which she rearranges the highly charged archive material, probing the

Embedded into this totalizing macro analysis is an embodied and granular understanding of time’s progression and the material implications of its passage. That mixing of blood-red paste



possibility of re-infusing such material with new political meaning.”¹⁰ That kind of infusive alchemy, in which the past is brought into the present in order to envision new pathways back, through, and forward, relates to the research which underpins *The Pink Detachment*, and which is explored more explicitly in Liu’s *The Red Detachment of Women* (2016). Existing as both a performance and a single-channel video that features performers whose costumes hark back to futurist performances of the Russian avant-garde, the work draws on the issue of pork and beef shortages and ecological decline in China, resulting in a steady intensification of imports every year to meet demand—the country having hit a resource ceiling for beef, Liu explains, sometime in 2016.¹¹

This backdrop offers a different lens through which to view the sausages in *The Pink Detachment*, which references a 2012 ABC news series “exposing” the prevalence of “Lean Finely Textured Beef”—or pink slime—in the US: a product composed of meat trimmings manufactured into a pasty additive for ground beef and beef-based processed meats.¹² As Liu notes, the reports prompted media hysteria and global outrage, despite the fact that, aside from showing images of sausages rather than the actual pellets that constitute the offending meat matter, “pink slime is actually a method to curb food waste.”¹³ That is, “a way to maximize yield given diminishing resources and the ongoing catastrophic environmental consequences of

consumer demand for beef.”¹⁴ Thus, Liu points out, “to be truly environmentally conscious and a beef-eater at the same time, would logically lead to an acceptance of this technology”¹⁵—a double bind that runs through *The Pink Detachment* more generally, as an attempt at revisiting a revolutionary history in order to renegotiate—indeed remotivate—its legacies, rather than critiquing or dismissing it wholesale.

Nothing, after all, is one-sided or straightforward, as demonstrated by the legacy of *The Red Detachment of Women*. Still performed internationally as an exemplary piece of choreography, it is at once a document of a tumultuous, violent moment in Chinese history and a revolutionary work, even today. As writer Raphael Solarsh points out on *Performing ArtsHub*, “It’s not often you can call a well-known ballet ‘feminist’ but the story of a young woman striving to overcome the systemic corruption and injustice of the society she has been born into with no romantic sub-plot passes the Bechdel test with flying colours.”¹⁶ Even more crucial is the fact that the ballet foregrounds female labour—something that Liu says often remains invisible when it comes to the workers powering so much of China’s industries, which Liu’s project *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift* (2019) confronts.

A single-channel video, *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift* opens with a woman in a HAZMAT suit exploring the area around a lake. The sequence recalls the film of Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky,





Stalker (1971), which follows a scientist and a writer into a place called “the Zone,” where they must cross a hazardous path to find a room where all desires are met. In Liu’s video, the Zone becomes the Special Economic Zone: a politically defined region that operates beyond regular state jurisdictions and enables free trade. In the video, the same authoritative voice heard in *The Pink Detachment* describes the Special Economic Zone as a site where workers—“the majority of whom are rural women working under highly exploitative conditions”—“are exposed to the full force of market conditions.” The description connects back to the start of the video, when the same voice introduces the fact that, in general, 98% of DNA is undecipherable, making this “the dark matter genome—the silent majority.” Just like the human labour that is invisible, despite the fact that it surrounds us through the objects that constitute modern, material existence.

In consumer capitalism, “Each object is a disaster—human and ecological,” Liu explains.¹⁷ “Each one arrives as a mass quantity of invisible human labor: work that is under-compensated, precarious and enforced by immigration and economic policies that create pockets of brutal exclusion.”¹⁸ In *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift*, that brutality comes through in stories from the female workforce in southern China, those who populate the technology and e-waste industry,¹⁹ falling victim to work-related illnesses only for their employers to completely reject any responsibility for their ailments. For instance, in a computer-animated portion of the video that opens with a pile of consumer goods falling into a sea of liquid metal, we see a mass of shiny gold balls attached to a face—recalling the blister-covered polycystic kidneys of an e-waste worker.²⁰

In this particular chapter, gold becomes the pure abstraction of the seductive consumerist promise, in which a global system of labour and supply chains fashions the objects that define—and make desirable—modern life. This gold motif also appears in Liu’s 2014 video *The Machinist’s Lament*, which portrays female factory workers as an ever-present historical and contemporary constant. But the concept of “gold biolistics” introduced in *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift* has a double entendre. Biolistics is a method for modifying genetic material by coating gold microparticles with DNA and shooting them into cells. Known as the “gene gun” method, this process procures a large amount of its gold particles from e-waste, according to Liu.²¹

In the video, “gold biolistics” is projected as a future remedy so effective that a sick worker decides not to heed the doctor’s advice. Then the metaphor expands, as Liu employs the gold symbolism as a means of exploring a speculative dialectic, whereby resistance might emerge from within an oppressive system through the method of infiltration. At points in the video, a woman injects petri dishes filled with red slime in a pink room. While referring to “advancements in meat agriculture, namely in vitro stem cell-originated beef”—which Liu says, “surely contains a material more truly resembling the name ‘pink slime’”—the action speaks to the speculative potential of such interferences to become acts of confrontation.²² Because of its mode of production, in-vitro meat needs to be checked often for pathogens and for cell mutations. Liu speculates that this might allow for technological interventions in the process, like inserting nonpathogenic code—non-infectious organisms, for instance—into genetic material that could become transmissible data: say, messages of, or instructions for, resistance.²³ To test the possibility, Liu worked with a lab to see how such modified cells could be made visible for a worker to identify them; a cell was inserted with a bioluminescence marker so that it would glow yellow, using the method of gold biolistics as a means of sabotage.²⁴

“This is where things start to go circular,” says Liu. And this is where the artist’s video *PSCS: Gold Loop* (2020) departs from *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift*.²⁵ Where *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift* considers gold as a symbol of a speculative future whereby genetic modification might become part and parcel of capitalist desire or subverted by the laborers of capitalism for revolutionary ends, *Gold Loop* grounds the symbolism of a gold ball in its material reality—as matter recovered by hand, whether from mining, manufacturing, or recovery from electronic waste. Currently, Liu says, e-waste is the main source for gold recovery, but both extraction and manufacturing processes result in the leaching of toxins into bodies and the environment. As Liu has noted, the toxic cycle of producing electronics and recovering their components once discarded, while expansive in its global reach, tends to meet back at the same point—that is, among communities of labourers who work in hazardous and precarious conditions.²⁶ It is this loop—a circular economy—that *Gold Loop* foregrounds.

Gold Loop moves between clean, modern architecture in and around Birmingham and Shanghai’s Dishui Lake, also known as Nanhui New City—a

ghost town that was created to support the Yangshan Deep Water Port free trade zone nearby. These deserted sites are dotted with large gold spheres: enlarged versions of those that emerge from a corporate manager, who constantly discovers tiny gold balls in her mouth—while brushing her teeth, eating breakfast, and while leading a meeting. This conflation of body and machine is extended further when office workers appear to move to the sounds of crushing glass, sometimes with iPhones as props, contorting their bodies to mirror the intricate cracks and breaks that echo a chorus of machinic destruction. That intersection of consumption, breakdown, and extraction is made more explicit in one scene where a worker scrolls on a phone whose screen opens up to a game-like world where clusters of gold balls hurtle into DNA double helixes, smashing them to pieces. Narrating the images, a voice describes a woman’s “chromosomal damage and genomic instability” caused by the dangerous work of chemically extracting gold from discarded electronics, “leav[ing] only the ghost of cells.”

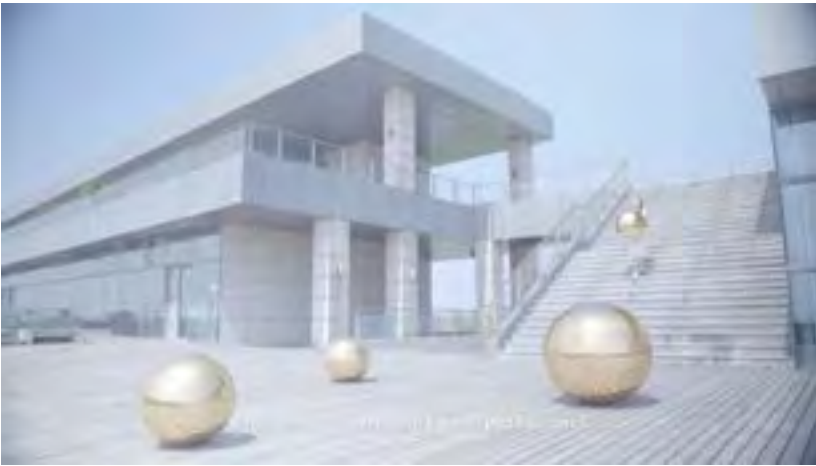
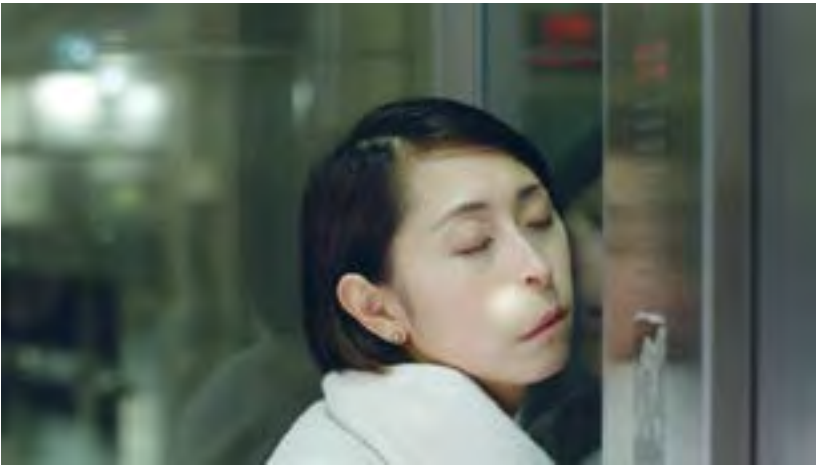
In another sequence, machinic and biological degradation is extended to the environment, with a voice describing large piles of e-waste being burned by the river, only to be followed by animated images of a fleshy orb taking over a body that disintegrates—a haunting visualisation of, in the words of the video voiceover, “a circular economy” where “waste does not exist” because “it is designed out.” Liu’s visuals make clear that

the worker in this system is also designed out—a concept depicted in an animated scene of a glittering city held up by murky, fluid foundations concealed by a bright façade: of crushed glass, metal, and human labour. Yet, paradoxically, within *Gold Loop*’s conflation of human bodies with gold forms, the worker is also held up as the gold standard—“a safe haven” that “may be a valuable, tactical asset,” says one narrator, “During periods of crisis or fundamental change.”

This whole picture of dissolution (and potential revolution) comes through again in a moment where the story of women swimming at sea converges with the narrator’s description of nitric acid dissolving all parts of a device without harming the coveted gold bits. A digital visualization of the sea turns from black to fleshy pink as a voice describes the emergence of “sticky shapeless gleaming lumps of indescribable colour” amid the swell. “In the beginning, they were huddled against each other,” the narrator continues, referring back to the women swimming together, as a hand floats amid pink waves and hoops. “They open their mouths, but no sound emerges. A zero, a circle.” In this circular economy, the loop is the mouth that cannot speak—a silence that one segment of *Gold Loop*, set in a boardroom, makes explicit by outlining the corporate tactics of stifling or preventing resistance using visual slides.

As Liu has said, “*Gold Loop* is, if nothing, an exploration of the idea of disappearance...





particularly in light of these hyper-developed discourses of corporate and media assimilation of the spectacle, of protest.” But as with *The Pink Detachment*, the artist does not let the exploration settle, probing further in order to speculate on ways of modifying the distribution networks that define current labour conditions, in the hopes of rerouting them toward a more equitable and sustainable common goal. Liu is careful to avoid making work that reinforces what she calls an “insufferable, catastrophic, unrecoverable, apocalyptic victimhood”; rather, she attempts “to think through ways of still being able to present possibilities of autonomy and empowerment.”²⁷ This connects to Liu’s intentions in her broader practice: to “deflate the abstraction built around traditionally leftist approaches, embracing materialism in exaggeratedly tangible images, gestures, and objects—in order to find ways to more directly see and feel complex issues without oversimplification.”²⁸

The abstraction that Liu seeks to deflate comes through at both ends of *Gold Loop*, which is somewhat bookended by the sound and presence of flies in predominately white frames. The façade of cool, white buildings or corporate spaces echo the white water that drowns the final frames of *Pink Slime: Caesar Shift*, narrated by a haunting loop of people describing dreams of drowning taken from *The Dreams*, a 1960s collaboration between composer Delia Derbyshire and playwright Barry Bermange for the BBC, which collaged people’s recollections of their reveries. To drown in whiteness, perhaps, is to be lost in

abstractions. A violence that Liu alludes to in *The Machinist’s Lament*, punctuated by the invocation of the violence that arises from whiteness, ultimately a homogenous abstraction, which is in turn grounded in *Gold Loop*’s visualization of the “all-embracing monotronics” that converts human functions “into abstract uniform units.”

Then there is the violence of the gold ball—at once a symbol of a system predicated on material accumulation, exploitation, and expropriation—yet at the same time, a proposal for subversion, and an actual object handled by actual people that has real and devastating effects. From this dynamic perspectival spectrum, which oscillates between minimalist and maximalist views, an all-encompassing, granular observation emerges, in which the violence of the abstract is tempered by its potential as a point of departure in the real world. “Is it possible to speculate a different model of protest that arises from the necessity of protest,” Liu asks, “in a climate where protest is practically an impossibility?”²⁹ The only way to know is to enter the frame.

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- 2 D. L. Michalk, "Hainan Island: A Brief Historical Sketch," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26 (1986), 126.
- 3 Anna Chen, "Madam Mao's Chinese Model Operas Make a Comeback," BBC, July 17, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-18826565>.
- 4 See the artist's statement on *The Pink Detachment* and watch video on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/144532087>
- 5 "Jen Liu, Artist Statement: *The Pink Detachment*, Film Screening and Solo Exhibition," *SomoS*, August 16–27, 2016, <https://www.somos-arts.org/jen-liu-pink-detachment>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Jen Liu, description of *The Pink Detachment* (2015) on the artist's Vimeo page, <https://vimeo.com/144532087>, also stated in Jen Liu: Introduction, published online by Upstream Gallery on June 23, 2018, <https://issuu.com/upstreamgallery/docs/jl-2018-introduction>.
- 8 "Jen Liu: *The Pink Detachment*, Film Screening and Solo exhibition."
- 9 Jen Liu, description of *The Pink Detachment* (2015) on the artist's Vimeo page.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 "GOLD LOOP (TRIAD)—JEN LIU—Artist Talk and Discussion: Part 1," video, The Qualcomm Institute, October 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6kBuCpEB8E>.
- 12 Joel Ferree, "Pink Slime Caesar Shift: A Conversation with Jen Liu—Part 1," *Unframed*, October 14, 2019, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2019/10/14/pink-slime-caesar-shift-conversation-jen-liu-part-1>.
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- 14 Ibid.
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- 16 Raphael Solarsh, "Propaganda as Art: The Red Detachment of Women," *Performing ArtsHub*, February 20, 2017, <https://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/reviews/performing-arts/raphael-solarsh/propaganda-as-art-the-red-detachment-of-women-253193>.
- 17 As quoted in Zoë Lescaze, "12 Artists On: The Financial Crisis," *New York Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/t-magazine/art-financial-crisis.html>.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 "GOLD LOOP (TRIAD)—JEN LIU—Artist Talk and Discussion: Part 1."
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Joel Ferree, "Pink Slime Caesar Shift: A Conversation with Jen Liu—Part 1."
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 "GOLD LOOP (TRIAD)—JEN LIU—Artist Talk and Discussion: Part 1."
- 26 In conversation with the author, February 11, 2021.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 As stated by the artist in Soleil David, "CalArtians Named 2017 Guggenheim Fellows," *24700, News From California Institute Of The Arts*, April 7, 2017, <https://blog.calarts.edu/2017/04/07/calartians-named-2017-guggenheim-fellows/>
- 29 "GOLD LOOP (TRIAD)—JEN LIU—Artist Talk and Discussion: Part 1."