Coincidence, Generations, Curfew

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ARTSHARD: The recent pneumonia epidemic caused by the novel coronavirus[1] has triggered many to contemplate and engage in discussions from various perspectives. A significant social event like this always has an impact on artists' work in the sense that the artists are prompted to reconsider their worldview and values, an example being the AIDS epidemic that began to spread across the United States in 1981, which led many artists to explore the issue in their work. So, from an artist's perspective, what aspects of this epidemic have caught your attention? Can you think of one or a few pieces of work that resonate with your reflections?
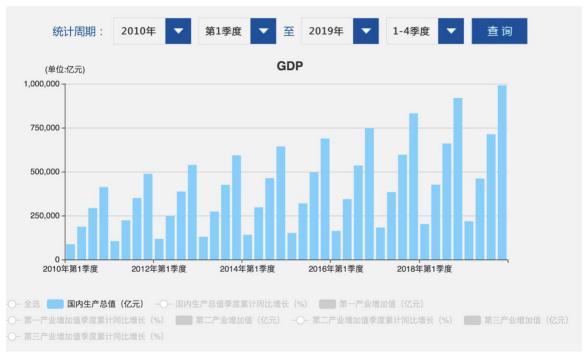
Coincidence

As long as I remember, nothing had ever competed for attention with Chinese New Year during the first month of the lunar year. Coincidentally, the epidemic overlapped with the entirety of the Chinese New Year. The unexpected course of events astonished every member of society. State campaigns against the epidemic repeatedly mobilized people to see the entrenched Chinese New Year customs as risks to their health. The increasingly grim atmosphere rewrote people's perceptions of "the year's pass[2]" as one that has been kept intact from modernity.

Our two calendars might be two psychological temporalities that create a ghosting effect. Every Chinese have taught themselves how to switch in-between and attune to one of the temporalities without a hitch. Even though the statutory Chinese New Year holiday lasts only seven days, it is not difficult to sense that at the end of each year, two or three weeks before the holiday, the society as a whole starts to enter a sort of transition; the same process is to be repeated, only in reverse, when people return to work after the holiday. The two processes are quite similar to the fade-in and fade-out technique commonly used in video editing - the embedded image of New Year is always a myriad twinkling light of a city, enough to appease the minds and bodies worn out by the project of modernity. This cycle is also evident in the economic statistics: China's GDP has always peaked in the fourth quarter of the year, and then in the first quarter contracted by 25% before gradually increasing. Research from a sociological perspective

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[1] The article was written before the official names COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2 were issued (11 February 2020) and the global pandemic was declared (11 March 2020).

[2] Traditionally, at the end of the lunar year, the accounts for the year were settled and those who owed rent and debts saw this period as a difficult time to get through, so the end of the year was also called Nianguan, literally, "the year's pass".

constantly reminds people that the grassroots that keeps this growth-oriented society running have long been generally overworked and that strengthening of mental health facilities and social security coverage is necessary. However, in reality, it is the month-long physical and psychological absence from work that helps. Especially towards the end of the year, winding down and preparing for the transition is a national consensus.

Source: official website of the Chinese government:
http://www.gov.cn/shuju/index.htm

As an administrative system with a large workforce engaged in centralized office work, the civil service system could hardly be immune to this rhythm. Systematic burnout and slacking during this transition between two psychological temporalities is not inconceivable. However, it just so happened that at this moment of transition, the system was forced to react to a threat of which it had limited knowledge. Within the system, there was either determined certainty or complete confusion, or, more likely, a combination of both mental states. Taking into account the government's political self-confidence, early decisions were likely made as they put on a brave face, which was followed by self-doubt. If this delay in response occurred on a large scale, I am afraid that it would have created a vacuum in instructions.

Generations

The bad news had been spreading since late January. Aware of the virus' relatively random human-to-human transmission, I began to worry about my family's New Year get-togethers. Unlike previous years, I started relaying to the elders in my family the current affairs being spread on social media. Whether knowledge or experience takes

precedence in the face of risk may be a cultural issue. As I tried to negotiate using a language of knowledge with my parents' view of an experientialist world, it became clear that all my endeavors were met with counteractions. From the perspective of the elders, the only thing that mattered during the festive season was that all the family members gather together regardless of the urgency of the situation. It was only on New Year's Eve that the atmosphere changed as family members of the same generation called, alerting them in a way that was compatible with their language system. While the elders, lamenting the lack of festive spirit the youngsters, also hastily withdrew from the silent New Year's Eve dinner.
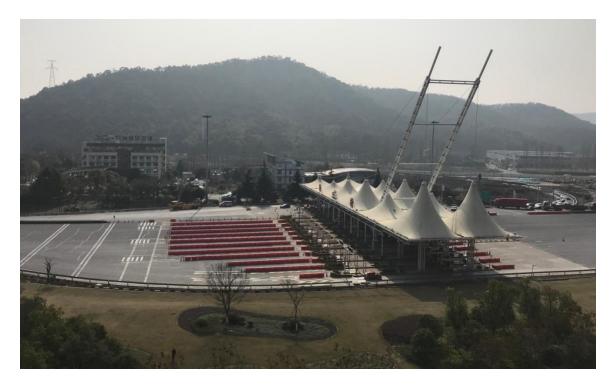

The frustration that people experienced under the circumstances led me to think that the order of filialness and respect for seniority within families might resonate as the most challenging factor of social change. Namely, in our cultural consensus, what deemed as identifiers of different communities - most likely different generations, regions and places of origin - all encouraged distinctions and hierarchies. A community of shared values based on the pursuit of equality has been a cultural experience thanks to the emergence of online communities. Our carefully selected "friend circles" are to a great extent composed of peers who received modern education, are aesthetically sophisticated, and, ideally, embrace an open society. And these "friends", of course, would not approve of the rationale of the severe lockdown and the coercive measures that followed. However, it is clear that the elder members of the society, albeit related by blood, do not share the same perception towards risks as the younger generation.

They are driven by historical experience to think differently, for example, that the most feasible (and the least expensive) way of governance is certainly the best one.

Curfew

While the elders gradually realized how serious it was, my psychological time whispered to me: "time to get back to the city". A familiar directive was triggered as soon as I proposed to leave: "No way. We are responsible for your safety." Although I quickly compared in my mind the problems I would encounter with each of the two options of leaving and staying, I resisted the urge to argue. When the responsible subject in family relations is reinforced, the corresponding role that emerges is that of the protected child. Such decisions must be made based on soundness and the assumption that the child recognizes the many safeguards accessible within this structure. If the management structure were universal, the curfew might be a more socially conscious decision. Fortunately, during the Chinese New Year, most families were well stocked, and family members needed to be with each other in the harsh times. It seemed reasonable to continue living as if the Chinese New Year was extended.

As for the world that I yearn for that simultaneously makes me nervous, the presence of the pandemic might be a kind of ecological time. When millions, or even hundreds of millions of people stay at home for weeks on end, our breathless cities are laid bare with a long-lost appearance. The streets are quiet and the traffic has thinned out. Pedestrians pass by occasionally but are reserved, without speaking a word. Some of the wildlife has regained new territories for living...I recall the nights outside of the 5th ring in Beijing and my wanderings in Kangbashi District. Perhaps it is precisely the lifeless scenes that

allow me to imagine what an ideal society would be.

Last night my family received a notice from shequ[3]: starting this morning, quarantine at home will be mandatory and each household is required to assign one person to do grocery shopping twice a week. But I'm still thinking about Alibaba's City Brain project located in various cities. They must have been running, as usual, every day and night, analyzing all sorts of monitoring data and innumerable images taken by surveillance cameras. The pandemic, which is still not nearing the end, is rendering the municipal governance to be somewhat closer to art: for as long as the alert has not been lifted, the governance system that pervades the public space is left objectless, useless, thus generating a sense of existential aesthetic. The sense of detachment brought forth by curfews has created a perception paralleled to modernity. No wonder that these days my parents have repeatedly reminded me of the art of mediation: no words, no thoughts, no distinctions, no attachments. This remedy, taken with the extraordinary physical reality, might resolve many of my frustrations.

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-- Translated by Dakota Guo

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[3] Shequ refers to the community of residents, the lowest administrative unit in the urban areas of China.