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Inbuilt Errans

What Is and Is Not ‘Radical Indifference’

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ABSTRACT: ‘Inbuilt *errans*’ points to the core of the concept, namely the semantic entanglement of errantry and error. Errans as the erroneous wandering or the drifting error complicates the celebration of movement, fluidity, flexibility, or even ‘queering’. The rigid or stubborn aspect of *errans*, its erroneousness on the other hand not only accompanies but also enables its errancy. The ‘rigidity’ (as rigidity in flux) requires scare quotes in order to mark the ways in which these qualities might collapse when a question of ‘to whom?’ is posed. Through an eclectic errantry through a personal anecdote, a meme video, an ethnographic note, as well as medical history and queer theory, this text theorizes, with the help of the ‘inbuilt errans’ of the human body, that is, its orifices, a ‘radical indifference’ that points to an unplanned, ambiguous, and weak while at the same time strategic, rigid, and powerful form of resistance.

KEYWORDS: Radical Indifference; Misunderstanding; Errors; Penis; Medicine, Chinese; Shanzhai; Branding (Marketing)—Social Aspects—China; Product Counterfeiting—China; Interpellation; Weak Resistance

Inbuilt Errans

What Is and Is Not ‘Radical Indifference’

ZAIRONG XIANG

This ‘inbuilt errans’ points to the two entangled semantic levels, that is, errantry and error.¹ Errans as the erroneous wandering or the drifting error complicates the celebration of movement, fluidity, or ‘queering’ (at least, queer in its impoverished sense of the flexible gender/sexuality, flirting dangerously with neoliberalism). The rigid or stubborn aspect of *errans*, its erroneousness not only accompanies but also enables its errancy. This ‘rigidity’ requires scare quotes in order to mark the ways in which these qualities might collapse when a question of ‘to whom?’ is posed. Similarly, if indifference suggests a strong intention, *radical* indifference points to something else, something unplanned, ambiguous, and weak while at the same time strategic, rigid, and powerful.

SNAPSHOTS

¿Tienes Pluma?

One insignificant moment in those early days of discovering the mesmerizing world of online dating when I was pursuing a master’s degree

1 Errans: Latin gerund that assembles two interrelated notions: errantry and error.

in Granada, Spain: a Granada local started chatting with me in a popular gay dating website *Bakala*. My interlocutor was quite amazed to find himself talking with someone from China. His knowledge of China was as sparse as my knowledge of Spain/Spanish even though I had been living there for some months. Now the conversation started, we asked each other our preferences, sexual fantasies and fetishisms. One message from him arrived abruptly and really confused me: ‘¿tienes pluma?’

With my very limited knowledge of the Spanish language back then, I did not understand immediately what he meant because I didn’t (even) know the word ‘pluma.’ I looked it up in the dictionary. One of the many meanings of ‘pluma’ is feather or fountain pen. Feather? Pen? It is very unlikely that he was making a mad-woman-in-the-attic pun on pen and penis, nor was I aware of the ‘sounding’ practice, namely inserting something into the urethra, be it a fountain pen or a feather. My ignorance of the Spanish expression combined with a misconception that a definition standing alone in the dictionary could provide access to the real meaning of any language, made me courageously opt for a quick interpretation: ‘tienes pluma?’ could mean, ‘do you have feather?’. But what would ‘do you have feather?’ mean? He wants to be tickled?

Why would he want to know if I have a feather or a fountain-pen? None of the direct translations made much sense. I therefore rushed to interpret the phrase ‘tienes pluma’ — do you have feather — as ‘are you hairy?’. Without much hesitation, I answered somewhat proudly, ‘cómo voy a tener pluma, soy Chino!’ thinking that it meant: ‘how could I be hairy? I am Chinese!’. Now, much better versed in Spanish, I can imagine the confused face of my interlocutor: why does being ethnically Chinese guarantee that he does not *tiene pluma*? ‘Cómo voy a tener pluma’ was articulated with pride and to the ears/eyes of my interlocutor, it must have sounded particularly strange, as strange as the question ‘tienes pluma’ had sounded to me two minutes earlier.

'Sadako of the People!'

A meme video went viral among Chinese Internet users.² The ghost or 'vengeful spirit' (怨靈) named Sadako of the famous Japanese horror film *Ring* is sent by the Japanese army to a Chinese village as a 'secret weapon' to kill members of the Chinese anti-Japanese resistance front.³ Upon her iconic arrival, that is, crawling outside of the film screen into 'reality', the communist leader welcomes her as the 'comrade'. Dressed in a long white gown with her face hidden under long dark hair, her signature appearance provokes zero fear but full compassion from the other villagers. An elderly woman laments, 'what a good girl and look how terribly the Japanese have humiliated her!' The party leader shakes her hands that were reached out to strangle him (like most vengeful ghosts would do) and promises her 'comrade, trust us! We will definitely avenge the wrong done to you [by the Japanese]!' A male villager-soldier notices her bare feet and shouts, 'look, she doesn't even have shoes! So awful those Japanese! Take, comrade, wear mine!'

Titled '讓貞子生活在我們抗日的這片沃土上，她的心再冰冷也會融化' [Let Sadako live on our fertile land of anti-Japanese struggle and even her frozen heart can be melted], this meme video combines styles of well-known anti-Japanese and anti-Kuomintang films as well as communist revolutionary songs, such as 'Sing a Mountain Song to the [Communist] Party' and 'The Red Detachment of Women'. Wholeheartedly welcomed by the humble villagers who urge her 'don't live in the well, come live with us', Sadako experiences a successful integration and becomes a communist fighter. After witnessing the Japanese bombing of the Chinese village that kills almost everyone, Sadako reappears (again out of the film screen) in the Japanese military headquarter and is hailed as 'the great secret weapon' by the Japanese invaders and their Chinese collaborator. To everyone's surprise, Sadako tears off her white gown and appears in the Chinese

2 '讓貞子生活在我們抗日的這片沃土上，她的心再冰冷也會融化' (Let Sadako live on our fertile land of anti-Japanese struggle and even her frozen heart can be melted), online meme video, YouTube, n.d., <<https://youtu.be/2gxpTjYRjE>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

3 *Ring*, dir. by Hideo Nakata (Ringu/Rasen Production Committee, 1998).



Figure 1. Bedspread in Guiyang, China, and restaurant toilet in South-Eastern region of China, both photographed by the author.

liberation army outfit, opens fire and kills the enemies. The video ends with Sadako posing in typical revolutionary posture with a passionate voice-over hailing: 'Roar, bullets of justice! Revenge, Sadako of the people!'

iFlush, iSheet

The two photos in Figure 1 were taken by me during a trip back to China. The first one was found on an old bed in my hometown Guiyang. The second one was found in the toilet of a restaurant in the South-Eastern region populated mainly by Miao (Hmog) and Dong people. Both feature the famous logo of the US American electronic company Apple: an apple with a bite taken out of it. While in the first one, the iconic logo is filled with cross-patterns and used as a decorative motif for the striped bed sheet, in the second photo, the apple is divided in two and serves as the flush buttons of the toilet. These iSheets and iFlushes belong to a big family of the so called 'Shanzhai' (山寨), together with 'NOKLA' and 'HiPhone' mobile phones or 'Harry Potter and the Chinese Overseas Students at Hogwarts' novel.

THEORIZATIONS

These story could stop here, sufficiently open for interpretation. What happens from now on might indeed be quite irrelevant to the misunderstanding in Granada, misidentification during the anti-Japanese war, and the misplacement in the Chinese factories that produce both iPhones and HiPhones.

The theorization would largely betray these instances in which something that I would call ‘radical indifference’ occurs. Yet ‘betray’ is a strong word that betrays the reason behind the textual procession from ‘snapshots’ to ‘theorization.’ In the particular case of ‘radical indifference’ (and other similar instances that are elusive and fleeting), theorization spoils something that, once it’s theorized, is lost. As Lady Bracknell, the aunt who certainly is an aunt-in-drag, of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, succinctly points out: ‘Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.’ Since Lady Bracknell sounds very much in drag, her statement needs to be heard in multiple quotation marks. *The Importance of Being Earnest* brings out, through a dazzling pun inside and outside the play, a constant displacement between name and ‘thing’, that is to say, empties out any certainty of ‘identity’, let alone an ‘earnest’ one. The emptiness that is nevertheless not a *nothing* might resonate with ‘the queer’ in Lee Edelman’s sense. What I want to contemplate here, however, is a more literal hole, which will cause things to crumble and lose their presumed certainty.

~

竅 / Qiao: pronounced as ‘ciao’;
penetrable cave; bodily orifice.

Qiao 1

竅 / Qiao is the word I choose to connote the ‘hole’ that troubles. Etymologically a cave that is penetrable in Chinese, it is the technical word for ‘bodily orifice’, one in which sexual differences collapse



Figure 2. Hexagram Tai.

in a superposing hole. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the human body in its healthy state is often compared to the hexagram Tai (泰卦) of 易經, *I-Ching* or the *Classic of Changes*.⁴ If we let the old English rendering of ‘Yi’ (易), ‘I’ of *I-Ching* fall on the ground, we get the basic component of the hexagrams: a stroke: —, which is also the Chinese word for ‘one’: 一. Lao Tzu, the quasi-mythological founding father of Daoist philosophy, states in *Daodejing*: ‘Dao gives birth to one, one to two, two to three, three to one-thousand things’ [道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物].

One therefore becomes two: there are two kinds of strokes that respectively represent yin and yang, the fundamental propensities of the universe according to Chinese philosophy. Yin is represented by an open line: – – and yang by a full one: —. Yin and yang are in fact the same thing seen from different perspectives. Lao Tzu continues, ‘The ten-thousand things carry yin and embrace yang’ [萬物負陰而抱陽]. While yin suggests the propensity to solidify and concretize (which I call identity-formation), the yang propensity is about the tendency to liquefy and vaporize (which, for lack of better words in English, I would call ‘queering’). Yin is the tendency in which H₂O as water is turning into ice while Yang is water turning into steam and vaporizing. Each hexagram of the *I-Ching* is made of a free combination

4 In 1924, German sinologist Richard Wilhelm published a highly acclaimed translation of the book of changes: *I Ging. Das Buch der Wandlungen*, trans. by Richard Wilhelm, 2 vols (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1924). Produced with the help of his Chinese colleague Lao Naixuan, Wilhelm’s translation was in turn translated into English in 1950 by Cary F. Baynes and accompanied by an equally influential foreword by Carl Gustav Jung: *The I Ching; or, Book of Changes*, trans. by Cary F. Baynes, foreword by C. G. Jung, Bollingen Series, 19 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950).

of two trigrams, which in turn are formed by a free combination of the two basic yinyang strokes. In the case of the Hexagram Tai, we find an all-yin trigram composed entirely of yin strokes on the upper level and the all-yang trigram below on the lower level.

The human body in TCM is known through its nine orifices, which are believed to connect with its five inner organs. In one of the classic texts of TCM, *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon: Simple Questions* [黃帝內經 - 素問], Chapter 4, *Jinkui zhenyan* 金匱真言 (the true words from the golden closet), records Qibo the erudite doctor's answer to the yellow emperor Huandi's question: 'The five depots correspond to the four seasons. Do all of them have [something specific] that they collect and receive?' [五臟應四時，各有收益乎?].⁵ Qibo's explanation revolves around a seasonal correspondences between five inner organs that explains the connectivity and correspondence between the inner organs (五臟) and the nine bodily orifices (竅), which can be summarized in the following schema⁶:

East — Green-Blue — Liver — Eyes
 South — Red — Heart — Ears
 Centre — Yellow — Spleen — Mouth
 West — White — Lung — Noses
 North — Black — Kidney — Two Yin Orifices

The last correspondence in the cardinal point North in particular states:

北方黑色，入通於腎，開竅於二陰，藏精於腎，故病在谿。

The North; black color. Having entered it communicates with the kidneys. It opens an orifice in the two yin [sites]. (Note 49: i.e., the outlets for urine and stool)

It stores essence in the kidneys.

Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the ravines.⁷

5 *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen: An Annotated Translation of Huang Di's Inner Classic — Basic Questions*, ed. by Paul U. Unschuld, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1, Chapter 4: 'Discourse on the True Words in the Golden Chest', pp. 83–94 (p. 91).

6 See *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen*, pp. 91–93.

7 *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen*, p. 93. The editors, Paul U. Unschuld and others, add in note 50, affixed to this passage: 'Su wen 58 has "The large meeting points of flesh are the

This inner-outer connectivity is illustrated using the hexagram Tai of the *I-Ching*. We observe that the upper trigram made of three open and thus yin lines, representing six orifices, that is, three pairs of orifices of the body: namely the eyes, the ears, and the nostrils; whereas the lower trigram consisting of three yang whole lines represents three single orifices of the body: the mouth, the genitalia, and the anus. The philtrum between these two cosmic realms of yin yang is called 人中, the middle point of the human (body). Yang Yu in *Shanju Xinyu* (山居新語) states succinctly ‘人中者，以自此而上，眼、耳、鼻皆雙竅，自此而下，口暨二便皆單竅，成一《泰》卦也’ (quoted in Qian p.25). That is to say, the human body is made sense of through its nine *qiao*-orifices. Penis is considered to be one of them, undifferentiated from vagina. Anatomically speaking, the penis does contain a hollow space. Considering the urethra, the penis is an orifice.

Charlotte Furth calls it the ‘generative body’ based on her reading of *Huangdi Neijing* or *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classics*.⁸ What allows for this in-differentiation or under-differentiation is the bodily orifices (in Chinese, the *qiao*/竅) in which the well-known sexual differences between man and woman are collapsed into a hole. Different from the one-sex model detected by Thomas Laqueur in his history of the Western body, the body-of-orifices is not one based on the model of the male sex.⁹

By representing the human body through its nine orifices, the ancient model announces a radical account of the body that understands that, to quote Paul Beatriz Preciado, ‘el sistema tradicional de la representación sexo/género *se caga*’.¹⁰ ‘Tradicional’, of course, points to a specific tradition. Often only the Western tradition does not feel the

valleys; the small meeting points of flesh are the ravines. It is in the parting of the flesh where the ravines and valley meeting points are located.” 955/35: “谿谷 is the location in the flesh where water flows and stagnates. Hence in case of diseases affecting the spleen, these ‘ravines’ are influenced and edemas develop. Li Nian’e commented: ‘谿 is where the water flows and stagnates.’”

8 Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), in particular Chapter 1: ‘The Yellow Emperor’s Body’, pp. 19–58.

9 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

10 Paul B. Preciado, *Manifiesto contra-sexual. Prácticas subversivas de identidad sexual*, trans. by Julio Díaz and Carolina Meloni (Madrid: Opera Prima, 2002), p. 27.

need to qualify itself as such. And as we can see, one of the most ancient models of the body used in a medicine that also calls itself 'traditional', does not have a 'sex/gender system' that needs to shit on itself. Of course, this is not a celebration of the 'traditional' as stable and unchanging, outside of history in blissful stillness for the Western nostalgia to indulge its orientalism *and* its critique of orientalism.¹¹ Anyone who is familiar with TCM knows that it has a complex regime of gender regulation including *Fuke*, a department that could be translated as gynecology.

Qiao 2

Qiao is pronounced like the Italian word 'ciao', which is used as both 'hi' and 'bye'. This double meaning of salutation and farewell shares an unexpected affinity with 'qiao', apart from having the same pronunciation.

I want to return to that moment of 'blissful ignorance' and try to understand the resistive power that is granted in the very moment of the *failure* of understanding. This points to a fundamentally anti-fundamentalist feature of language: its inbuilt errands. Its floating re-signifying process and its rigidity in meaning. When I say language, I mean languaging, which also takes the complex process of representation, interpellation, identification, and dis-identification into consideration.

Only after spending some more time in Spain and with a better command of Spanish, I understood that 'tener pluma' is a slang among gays in peninsular Spanish. It means: being effeminate, probably closely related to the colorful feathers that drag queens, the 'professional homosexuals' use. 'Tener pluma' refers to a kind of embodiment of faggotry (*mariconada*).

My answer to the Granadino's question now sounds completely absurd. 'Como voy a tener pluma, soy Chino!' If being Chinese and not being hairy might have some logic and empirical ground, although

11 See Zairong Xiang, 'Oracle from 2018: Transdualism, or the A/History of Yin-Yang', *Heichi Magazine*, 23 December 2021 <<http://www.heichimagazine.org/en/articles/1067/oracle-from-2018-zairong-xiang-transdualism-or-the-a-history-of-yin-yang>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

even that can be contested, being Chinese and being effeminate (or for that matter, being hairy and being effeminate) do not have much of a connection. After spending some considerable time in the gay world of the West however, I have been routinely discriminated against, for the sheer ethnic identification as the 'Asian' (although 'Chinese' often stands as a separate racial category and 'Asian' is a very loose category). I have learnt that the Chinese man or, for that matter, the conveniently generalized ethnic 'Asian' man, for the racist gay mainstream in the Western world, is the quintessential embodiment of 'tener pluma', being effeminate. 'Tener pluma', Asian or otherwise, gets on the nerves of the 'straight-acting' gay mainstream.

The Granada moment of misunderstanding strikes me as miraculously innocent, on both side of the absurd conversation. At that particular space and time, there was little knowledge from either side about the other: my anonymous interlocutor in Granada did not immediately assume that since I am Chinese, *tengo pluma*. He checked it first as he would do with any other person. I didn't shun from outing myself as the hair-less Chinese (*tener pluma* or not) without knowing that this could have gotten me nowhere. This trivial instance later struck me as a form of, albeit precarious, resistance: an unplanned and involuntary resistance to racial stereotyping.

Apart from an interest in critical observation of the ethnographical event, the main purpose of online dating for me was to get some good sex. The promise of promiscuity in online dating and casual sexual encounters in general through cruising and other means, however, has grown gradually bitter, and the sole purpose of getting a good fuck has left behind more frustration than satisfaction. The critico-ethnographical wish to observe has gained more power over the years than the wish for sexual satisfaction. The initiation into the racist discourse of the gay mainstream in Western Europe, where I have lived for seven years, has been overall a humiliating experience. Instances of 'No Asians', explicitly stated or not, emerge as not incidental or singular but widely enacted. The representation of the (desirable) gay male in popular media has almost unanimously agreed to exclude any Asian subjects. And for this statement, I refuse to give concrete examples to allow critical nuances. It is neither nuance nor soothing, even if it is the good-intended 'Really? I think you are exaggerating!' — uttered

sometimes with an example of an exception: 'but my friend Joe is really into Asian', or 'well, many Asians are not into Asians themselves', which could suggest that the fact that some of the Asianphobes are Asian themselves (which is empirically grounded) makes the critique of racism invalid or unnecessary.

After these years being interpellated into the racial apartheid in the gay world of the West, I could no longer reply to the gay world with the same degree of innocence and conviction: 'como voy a tener pluma, soy Chino!' No matter how much I try these days, *tener pluma* in that sentence can no longer be unlearned as 'having feather — being hairy'. The 'effeminate gayasian' was stabilized as a stubborn marker in my self-identification and disidentification once I became part of the game, as I participate in it or as I resist it, by for example, proving that Asians are not effeminate, or by appropriating effeminacy as empowering 'turning the master's tool around to dismantle the master's house'.

The Granada story is one of ignorance and lack of information. It was not intentional and was entirely unplanned. I couldn't help but miss the point. 'Sadako of the People', however, is a different case, that of a misrecognition. What lets Sadako down in her attempt to scare and strangle the Chinese villagers is, paradoxically, her 'monstrosity'. The villagers clearly see her as one of them, the disfranchised ones who are suffering under the imperialist atrocities committed by the Japanese. Their misrecognition of her monstrosity is based on solidarity, that is to say, on identification, which in turn serves the purpose of community building towards the common struggle if not that of forming a kind of class consciousness to be mobilized against Japanese imperialism, which, as the video later shows, has sent Sadako back as a secret weapon to scare/strangle the Japanese. The first example shows that there is no conscious resistant subjectivity prior to or later than the resistant moment of 'radical indifference'. Ignorance in the first instance, however, cannot be transplanted to the second instance. There is nothing ignorant about the villagers' identification with the ghost, the repressed. 'Radical indifference' is not always based on a model of ignorance.

What links the floating signifier to the fixed error, the infinite potential of misunderstanding to the rigid 'degree zero' of the hole? The rigid or stubborn aspect of *errans* — its erroneousness — not

only accompanies but also enables its errancy. If ‘wrong’ is to stray off course, the straying itself is made possible by a reference point to that which is ‘wrong’. This ‘rigidity’ requires scare quotes in order to mark the ways in which these qualities might collapse when a question of ‘wrong/off course to whom?’ is posed. Similarly, if indifference suggests a strong intention, *radical* indifference points to something else, something unplanned, ambiguous, and weak — while at the same time strategic, rigid, and powerful.

This ‘inbuilt errans’ points to its two entangled semantic levels, that is, errantry and error. Errans as the erroneous wandering or the drifting error complicates any celebration of movement, fluidity, or ‘queering’ (at least, queer in its impoverished sense of the flexible gender/sexuality, flirting dangerously with the demands of neoliberalism).

What makes the incident with the *pluma* in Granada particularly unforgettable is perhaps the unintended subversiveness my misunderstanding and mistranslation of the question ‘tienes pluma?’ entails. Likewise, in the Chinese video meme, the villagers of anti-Japanese struggle completely misrecognize the point of Sadako’s ‘scary’ looks. She is seen as one of them, *disfranchised* and having the same enemy. Misunderstanding in the first instance and misrecognition in the second all depend on a version of what is correct in terms of linguistic signification or visual representation. Yet the dialectics of the mutual dependency between correct and erroneous, rigidity and fluidity is not what interests me here.

ON RADICAL INDIFFERENCE

The particular form of misunderstanding or mishearing I want to analyse here can be rephrased as a kind of indifference, a ‘radical indifference’. However, it cannot be paraphrased as ‘I don’t care’. Resistance is at best its implication and consequence, but not its intention. Radical indifference as resistance is not really a strategy in the sense that it does not follow a conscious and voluntary plan. ‘Resistance’ or even ‘weak resistance’ are almost too heavy in this regard. Radical indifference comes from an error that cannot be corrected: a stubborn taint that

cannot be cleaned and/or an elusive possibility of sullyng that can never been ruled out.

It is worth noting here that ‘radical indifference’ does not heroically resist interpellation. We shall have a quick look at the concept of ‘interpellation’. Rey Chow develops Louis Althusser’s classical notion of interpellation to bear an understanding of the process of racialization. She argues, ‘an ethnic person’s practice of internalizing a cultural stereotype of herself may conveniently be explained by way of [...] interpellation.’¹² Yet, distancing herself with Slavoj Žižek from ‘the usual critical move premised on a resistive subject or individualistic agency’, Chow contends, ‘what the subject always resists is this *terror of complete freedom* rather than the ideological, institutional process of being interpellated.’¹³ Despite the rather unexamined privilege of being afraid of the so-called ‘complete freedom’, what is convincing in Chow as in Žižek’s argument is their critique of the assumption of a subject prior to the resistance against interpellation. What is not convincing and politically dangerous is to assume, reiterate, and therefore reify interpellation’s omnipotence and its intelligibility.

Instead of asking Chow’s set of questions: ‘Does the ethnic have a choice of not responding? What happens when she responds? [...] What happens if she does not respond?’,¹⁴ I insist that the ethnic might not understand or simply mishear the hailing. ‘hey you!’ could be heard as ‘Hey Jude!’. Or she might not even know that she is an ‘ethnic subject’. She might not speak English (well enough) to understand that ‘hey you’ means ‘hey you’ or for that matter, that ‘hé, vous, là-bas!’ means ‘hey you’. The hailing might be heard as, say, ‘嘿呦 (*hei you*)!’ — an exclamation commonly used in Chinese to express surprise and/or pain. For example, the ‘ethnic’ subject might have heard ‘hey you’ as ‘*hei you*’ and thought that the policeman had broken his throat or leg and that the sudden pain provoked him to groan: ‘嘿呦 [*hei you*]!’

If until now it sounds like ‘too much freedom’, in the sense of being terrifying (as Žižek and Chow suggest), a kind of discursive horror vacui, it must be emphasized that the freedom to be indifferent

12 Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 108.

13 Ibid., pp. 109–10.

14 Ibid., p. 110.

is grounded in the material conditions of im/possibility. For example, one does not have a good command of a (foreign) language or is ignorant of relevant information and context. That is to say, radical indifference dwells at a space-time (instant or constant) that is radically *different* in relation to a particular ideological and discursive system that interpellates.

Radical indifference as a strategy for resistance cannot be planned or organized and can hardly be appropriated and commodified as portable, as universally applicable. Erik Bordeleau, via Isabelle Stengers and Gilles Deleuze, astutely articulates a similar model of resistance through the figure of the idiot:

The idiot does not resist for the sake of resisting: as practitioner, she is simply in her element '*à son affaire*', absorbed by her matter of concern in ways that are never reducible to any common good. The idiot is but another way of affirming the radical locality or mattering of practices.¹⁵

The 'radical locality' of the 'idiot' leads me to think about radical indifference as a central feature of 'radical elsewheres'. José Rabasa develops this concept through several works in which he engages with Nahua culture, especially the pictorial writing system *tlacuiloiztli* of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. He argues: 'The Mesoamerican key [...] remains inaccessible to modern scholars even in their hermeneutic willingness to understand the world of the *tlacuilo* [the native painter/writer, Z. X.] in and on her terms.'¹⁶ Rabasa uses '*elsewheres*' to theorize 'a spatio-temporal difference that cannot be conflated with the knowledge we Western-trained academics construe about objects and subjects [...] that remain — in fact, must remain — outside the languages and methods we privilege in our positive knowledge, hermeneutics, or ontological definition of the world.'¹⁷

What I am trying to do in thinking about 'radical indifference', is to push Rabasa's *elsewheres* further (or in fact, *closer*) and envisage a

15 Erik Bordeleau, 'Soulful Sederarity: Tsai Ming-Liang at Home at the Museum', *Studies in European Cinema*, 10.2–3 (2013), pp. 179–94 (p. 186).

16 José Rabasa, *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You: Elsewheres and Ethnocide in the Colonial Mesoamerican World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), p. 204.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

spatio-temporal *elsewhere within*, an irreducible, unconquerable space-time of radical in/difference, of an uncorrectable error within. In this sense, radical in/difference brings about not only the figure of the 'idiot' but also the feminine, the pagan, the queer, the animal, the monstrous, and the Mr. Hyde. Here is where a radical elsewhere resides not radically *elsewhere* but rather *inside*, in-built, *hydden*.

Like *plumas*, words float and wander. An instant of acoustic vibration, the word is (mis)heard, but is already gone. Once the written word is seen as a scribble, as itself, it escapes meaning. 'Radical' misheard or misread as *radicalis*, a root and an origin, secretly resides in the closet of linguistic mastery, threatening to come out and stain its nationalistic, racist, and queer-phobic hygiene. Inside the here and now, the metaphysics of presence, the logos, the phallus, the law, whatever you want to call it, there is always a stubborn and rigid space of indifference to the process of interpellation and signification. 'We are here; we are queer.'

Radical indifference is a decolonial response to the 'there is nothing outside of modernity'. 'Como voy a tener pluma, soy Chino' did neither participate in nor resist the racial stereotyping of the Asian. The Granada moment exemplifies the 'radical indifference', especially its resistant power that is grounded in the possibility of misunderstanding, by an error that is inherent to language or any other process of socialization.

Radical Indifference as a political strategy: again, aligning with the indeterminacy of the hole (*trou, tour* — towards destruction/construction), is not only a strategy of the 'subaltern' (although the examples I give might suggest so) but can be misused by governments and the powerful as an excuse of, for example, not providing basic needs, being indifferent to refugees, etc. Hence the 'radicality' of radical indifference. It can never become a planned, conscious strategy, which in turn could be co-opted. That is, much like the subaltern for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the elsewhere in Rabasa, 'radical indifference', once co-opted, categorized, and strategized, loses its radicality. This space of inappropriability, impossible to educate, to colonize, to inscribe a meaning that does not betray the thing described (objectified?) is radically outside, in however fragile a state. This points to the core of language and

linguaging, the process in which that radically indifference space is both lost (representation-sceptic) and retained (precisely because of being lost). The process of losing it pertains to errantry and the process of rigid fixity pertains to errancy (error), the hole without solution.

WHAT 'RADICAL INDIFFERENCE' IS AND IS NOT:

一颗螺丝掉在地上
 A screw fell to the ground
 在这个加班的夜晚
 In this dark night of overtime
 垂直降落，轻轻一响
 Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
 不会引起任何人的注意
 It won't attract anyone's attention
 就像在此之前
 Just like last time
 某个相同的夜晚
 On a similar night
 有个人掉在地上
 When someone plunged to the ground

《一颗螺丝掉在地上》
 'A Screw Fell to the Ground'
 9 January 2014
 by Xu Lizhi 许立志¹⁸

The Foxconn Technology Group, the world's largest provider of electronics manufacturing services, made global headlines in 2001 for the collective suicides among its workforce. The Chinese factory manufacturing the iPhone for Apple was known worldwide. In 2010 alone, 18 young assembly workers attempted suicide, with 14 of them succeeding. The deplorable working condition, unfulfilled promises of benefits, and the psychological blackmailing from exacting managers are among the main reasons behind these suicides. Both Foxconn's and Apple's responses to these unfortunate cases have been jaw-droppingly

18 Text in original Chinese and English translation (with modifications) are all quoted from 'The Poetry and Brief Life of a Foxconn Worker: Xu Lizhi (1990–2014)'; *Nao blog* on *Libcom.org* <<http://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry>> [accessed 4 August 2017].

poor and evasive. Since 2010, Foxconn is reported to have built nets around high-rise buildings in its factories to catch the falling bodies. Steve Jobs was asked to comment on the collective suicides, which he found okay since the number of dead seemed to him much lower than the national average.¹⁹

Xu Lizhi also known as the 'Foxconn poet', who committed suicide in 2014, wrote, not long before his death, the poem 'A Screw Fell to the Ground' quoted above. 'It won't attract anyone's attention', neither the screw that fell from the assembly line to the ground nor the young worker's life that 'plunged to the ground', would attract too much attention from 'anyone'. It was another 'dark night of overtime' with the uneventful falling of the screw that made a light clinking sound. The repetition and its seeming unimportance are reinforced by 'last time/on a night like this'.

If the iSheets, iFlushes and HiPhones could be temporarily theorized as a kind of 'radical indifference' in the practice of counterfeiting/shanzhai, in which the creators freely borrow (a word in Chinese that involves the word for 'fake') signifiers as shared knowledge rather than individual property, the bitter, harsh, and dark surroundings where these almost campy 'radical indifferences' are most common, is not.

19 Brian Merchant, who had managed to sneak into the Foxconn Longhua complex, published his findings in *The One Device: The Secret History of the iPhone* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017); the Guardian published an extract from the book: Merchant, 'Life and Death in Apple's Forbidden City', *Guardian*, 18 June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/18/foxconn-life-death-forbidden-city-longhua-suicide-apple-iphone-brian-merchant-one-device-extract>> [accessed 20 September 2017].

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