

OPPONENT'S ASSESSMENT OF A Master's PROJECT

Project title: Strangers, Sang for Me

Project author: Tianrui Pan

Programme of study: Art in Context

Programme type: Master's

Definition of objectives and their fulfilment:

In her project, Tianrui aims at capturing the “shifting, mediated, and often contradictory” representation of ethnic minorities in contemporary China, especially their commodification, and their presence in popular culture. Her approach to the notion of minority draws on a good range of local resources to analyse its aspects as “a visual, performative, and commodified category—continuously produced for external consumption”. Added to this general intention, the project is rooted in her personal inquiry into the Shui, a lesser-known ethnic minority that she is part of but whose culture, and tradition she knows only as it has been mediated through official channels. The sense of dissonance between the tradition she is meant to be part of, and her life experience, has provided the key methodology for the project. This intention has been engaged across several layers of the project, from the written statement to the materials used – including field recordings, found footage, and an assortment of accessories linked to the Shui tradition but often mass produced and fabricated for consumption. The Shui language, previously unknown to the student, has provided an especially interesting element to the project and the basis for the sound installation that is meant to bring to life the tension of not understanding what is meant to be one's most intimate cultural context. Rather than resolving this tension, the project proposes that this intimacy can be revived through a certain “poetics of uncertainty”, where instead of insisting on authenticity, belonging is activated through a sense of confusion, longing, and distance, through fragments that explore the feeling of emotional resonance.

The objectives of the project have all been addressed successfully in the elements of the installation and the accompanying written statement, although the student's approach would have benefitted from engaging a comparative methodological and conceptual framework, and from dialogue with creative and theoretical sources from outside China.

Contribution and relevance of the project in the context of contemporary creation:

Tianrui's project sits comfortably within the contemporary art's exploration and critique of identity politics, engaging with the production of ethnicity as a less obvious aspect of national and global politics and culture, nonetheless, one that vitally affects how communities remember and honour their past and how this in/ability affects a

community's and an individual's sense of continuity and identity. In questioning a certain production of ethnicity in modern China, the project both seeks to discover elements of what is left of the Shui community's traditional folklore, and allows its contaminated, mass-produced, commodified aspects to coexist freely with any remaining authentic fragments of that tradition. The entanglement and cacophony of these two realities of folklore are re/marked in the found footage, and in the field recordings, seemingly carelessly, as if to suggest that the process of commodification has already made any careful discernment of tradition and commodification impossible. The project thus articulates a certain auto-ethnographic approach to art practice and does so from a place of genuine curiosity. It also introduces the strange world of contemporary digital folklore which is another interesting field for artists to explore.

Evaluator's overall summary:

I appreciated the strange visuals and soundscapes of the found footage and the field recordings, where traditional language, rituals, and songs are already fully entwined with contemporary life with its cheap, mass produced artefacts and globalised forms of entertainment, and infused with noises of traffic, of vendors, of a city life. I have not been able to experience fully the actual installation of the work as it was still in process when I last visited the library at AVU, where the project is being installed. The location of the library felt well chosen, and the sound installation was ambitiously envisioned, yet I was not able to really sense the connection of the chosen materials and arrangements to the core themes of the project. This would have been easier if there had existed a requirement for process documentation to be kept throughout and made available to the opponent.

Recommendation of the project for the oral defence: Yes

Recommended grade: very good (2)

Date of elaboration of this assessment: 9 June 2025

Name of the MA project opponent

Dr Branislava Kuburović, PhD

Branislava Kuburovic

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(date and signature)