Staying with the Trouble:
Unraveling Power Relations through the Lens of Care

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this inquiry delves into the intensifying power dynamics between individuals and the state, shedding light on the imperative to address the evolving tension between personal subjectivity and state authority. Rooted in first-hand experiences during the pandemic in China, the research employs care as the lens to view the complex state-individual relationships and tease open an understanding of the complex relations of power and how they operate in society – between people and the state, through the discourse of self. Donna Haraway has gifted a resonant and active phrase that I embrace in my work – 'staying with the trouble' which for me encapsulates the commitment to confront challenges, fostering a compassionate understanding of contemporary complexities, and cultivating fresh perspectives on potential resistance. The research findings are presented through an exhibition that features installations and photography, designed to engage the audience haptically in a meaningful dialogue. This innovative approach goes beyond traditional academic formats, offering an immersive experience that encourages reflection on the nuanced interplay of power, care, and resistance in times of crisis, transcending borders and offering a universal perspective on the subject.

Acknowledgment

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Preface

I am not only quarantined in a Fangcang Hospital
where I fed myself with buns that fell onto the ground.

I am also at Dongxing, Guangxi
where the population dropped from 100,000 to 30,000 after nine months of lockdown.

I am in Xinjiang
where snowboarders were forced to be quarantined in accommodations, and sent back on the plane, right after they arrived.

I am in Shanghai where anti-COVID staff broke into my room to disinfect my vegetables in the fridge.

I am in the emergency room at Xi An Hospital
where a pregnant woman couldn't "prove" herself COVID-free and had a miscarriage sitting in her chair.

I am in Beijing
where laws based on COVID-19 protocols were established to enforce authority in Tiananmen Square.

Last, I am in the 404 errors witnessing the opening celebrations of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

Introduction

In our contemporary society, power works invisibly; it subtly dictates our actions and choices, manifesting through both overt and covert dynamics that shape every aspect of our lives. The COVID-19 pandemic, under China's zero-COVID policy, has starkly revealed the underlying tensions and dynamics of power relations, highlighting the urgent necessity for a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of power. This period has showcased how state mandates, public compliance, and resistance intersect, shedding light on the intricate balance between governmental authority and individual freedoms. The enforcement of stringent measures to control the virus's spread has been not only a public health initiative but also a reflection of the power structures at play, necessitating a deeper investigation into the multifaceted interactions between the state and its citizens.

Power extends beyond governmental authority, and permeates our lives through social norms, cultural trends, and collective behaviors. It is an abstract social force that governs our decisions and behaviors, highlighting how societal expectation serves as a power mechanism by enforcing compliance with social "rules." The essence of power is relational and dynamic, constantly evolving through the interactions and relationships within society. It emerges from the interplay of various factors, including laws, religions, or what is deemed socially acceptable/trendy, underscoring how power is both enforced by and negotiable within the community. This complexity reveals power's fluid nature, existing only within the web of social connections, and highlights the importance of understanding how these power relations influence collective behavior and societal structures.

This research seeks to delve into the invisible mechanisms of power that significantly impact our collective existence and interactions, especially in times of conflict. It culminates in the critical research question: How are we related to the power around us? Without these relations, does power still exist?

In examining the intricate interplay between state power and individual autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, I engaged with the insightful analysis provided by Habich-Sobiegalla, Sabrina, and Plümmer in their 2023 study, "Topologies of power in China's grid-style social management during the COVID-19 pandemic." They proposed that "Freedom of circulation and control through structure exist simultaneously and must constantly be

negotiated". For perspectives of broader scholarly discussions on power relations, many have applied Foucault's conceptual framework to dissect the interactions between citizens and the state. Key contributions in this area include works by Tamboukou; Venn and Terranova; Barratt; and Munro, each exploring the nuanced manifestations of power as theorized by Foucault. Furthermore, a distinct strand of research delves into the specific mechanisms and strategies employed by the Chinese government to exert its influence, highlighting the unique political apparatus at play (Habich-Sobiegalla, and Plümmer; Dutton). This literature review underscores the necessity of a multifaceted analysis to understand the complex power dynamics between the Chinese state and its citizens, especially under the extraordinary conditions imposed by the pandemic.

Focusing on China during the COVID-19 crisis, this study explores the underexamined aspects of power dynamics, particularly through the lens of care. As noted by Clinical psychologist and researcher, Ofra Mayseless, "Care is like the air we breathe, we cannot live without it, but it is often invisible and unacknowledged except when it is lacking." (23). It is specifically in the context of the lack of adequate care from the state and feeling unable to care for myself during the pandemic that it became visible and apparent for me to look at power relations through the lens of care. This led me to the key research questions:

· Why was care delivered by the Chinese government during COVID-19 now troubling to me?
· How did care emerge as an important tool for me to use to unwind complex power relations?
· What new perspectives and understanding of power relations can I gain when viewing this phenomenon through the lens of care?
· How can we feel more empowered or find a new strategy and better way to resist when using the lens of care?

In this research, I define care as diligence, careful and persistent work or effort, and responsibility. Care is a warm and compassionate way of understanding oneself and the situation that one is in. It provides me with the perfect viewpoint to unpack the troubled feelings that I've had during the pandemic. The issue I hope to unravel in this study is the complex, tangled web of

power relations between the state and the individual using care as the lens for analyzing the complex power relations operating in society during the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

Drawing on the profound insights of Donna Haraway and Michel Foucault, my research is deeply informed by Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble" and Foucault's nuanced understanding of power dynamics and resistance. Haraway's encouragement to actively engage with our complex realities, and Foucault's exploration of power's evolution from overt dominance to subtle discipline, provide a critical theoretical backdrop for this investigation. These theoretical perspectives set the stage for a deeply personal exploration of the dynamics of power and resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. It is within this conceptual framework that my study adopts an autotheoretical approach, aiming to navigate and articulate the nuanced interplay between individual agency and systemic control through the intimate lens of my own experiences.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge the gap between the abstract theories of power and the tangible realities of living through the COVID-19 pandemic in China. By using my own body and personal experiences as the primary site of investigation, I endeavor to unravel the paradoxical power relations that have come to define this period. This methodology allows not only for a rich narrative exploration of what it means to confront the challenges of our time, but also enables the discovery of diverse perspectives and forms of knowledge in navigating the complex power systems we find ourselves in. Thus, the study embarks on an intimate journey through the lens and practices of care, offering detailed narrative descriptions and interpretations that capture the essence of being a Chinese citizen during the pandemic.

I believe understanding the complex power relations between the Chinese government and its people through the lens of care will point us to a deeper understanding of how people react during catastrophic events, enable an active view of power relations, and open the possibility of self-care as resistance to build a foundation for future research. Thus, one is freed from the submission of subjectivity to more active ways of understanding power, on the one hand, to better understand how power relations work in Chinese society during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the other hand, to open oneself to new possibilities of potential resistance. As Foucault scholar, Andrew Barry and colleagues (58) suggested: "The reconfiguring of the subject of government confers obligations and duties at the same time as it opens new spaces of decision and action".

By adopting a care-centered view of "staying with the trouble" and examining power relations, I wish to acknowledge and confront the challenges of our times, and to discuss and enable an empathetic and compassionate way of understanding ourselves and the situation that we are in while fostering new perspectives of potential resistance.

My research findings are presented in the form of a mixed-media exhibition of installations and photographs that invites the audience into a participatory dialogue.

Positionality: Personal and Political Context
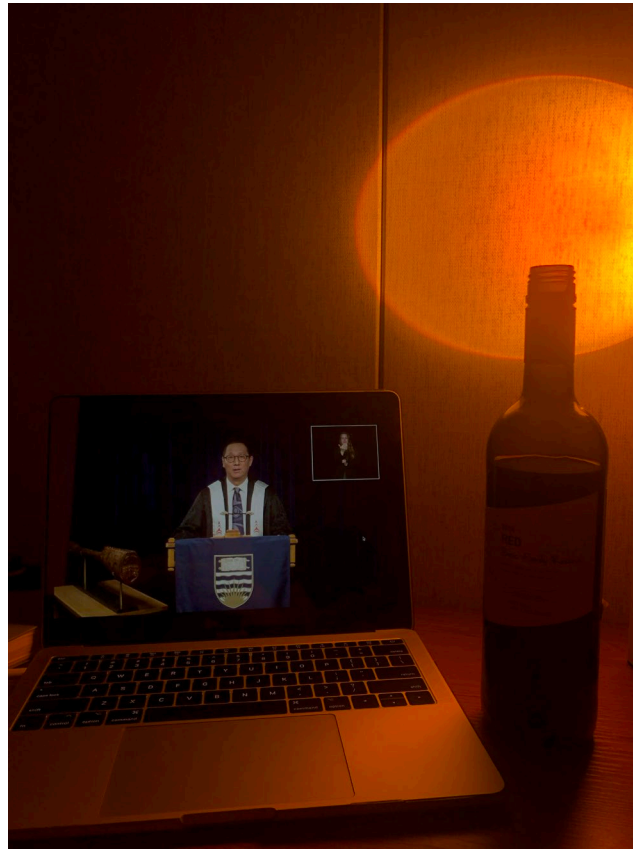
Figure 1 How I celebrated my university graduation online by myself in a quarantine accommodation (June 3, 2021).

The poetry in the preface section was written in November 2022 using news and tragedies from China collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 15 months I was in China, from May 2021 until September 2022, I was detained by the state in quarantine four times, a total of 63 days.

In recent times, the dynamics of power and control have become increasingly evident in China, highlighting a complex relationship between the government and its citizens. As the Chinese government increasingly centralized its power, recent years have witnessed a burgeoning tension between the populace and the state, which culminated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government, with its extensive power network in workplaces, schools, and communities, relentlessly demands "Order! Order! Order!" We are all compelled to comply, to uphold what is framed as the public's health and interest. But at what cost? This so-called care

comes at the expense of privacy, personal freedom, health, and equity, a stark irony that the purported communist party seems oblivious to. How ironic! All this militarization of the public, of the private, and of the people was conducted in the name of the public's health and security. Who truly benefits? It feels as though people are being suffocated under these policies, their rights and voices constricted. In order for the authoritarian government not to lose face, the state asked, no, actually forced you to be quiet, to stay quiet, to stay invisible in the packed oxygen-limited subway train. People detached themselves from the instinctual screaming in their hearts and pretended to have a quiet peaceful life. This suffocation quickly becomes a political reality, as the state's mechanism for maintaining control through surveillance, censorship, and the quelling of dissent translates into a literal suffocation of the spirit and autonomy. In an ultimate act of political practice, the authoritarian regime not only demands silence but enforces it, stripping individuals of their visibility and voice. This is a kidnapping of people under the name of the love of the community. I don't trust the state system.

The authoritarian Chinese government presented neoliberalism as both "out there" and "in here" (Peck and Tickell), realized and constituted within mundane and immediate practices of everyday life (Ong, L.) during its pandemic management. The tension between people and the state continues to spur uprisings. Foucault's writing from decades earlier is still relevant in this discussion of power, subjectivity, and submission. He says "Nowadays, the struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity – is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared. Quite the contrary" (*Discipline* 213). Challenging events like the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the conflicts between the power dynamic of people and the institution (Havelaar et al.; Kuhn and Morlino). These conflicts and power relations are enacted through every detail of our lives. In other words, "it 'does us' – speaks and acts through our language, purposes, decisions, and social relations" (Ball). In a totalitarian state like China, what Foucault might describe as a "disciplined society" during the pandemic, people were suppressed from expressing any opinions marked as "politically incorrect" (202). Without the experience of being a citizen in a totalitarian state, one will probably never understand the fear. Police can detain you just because you express your own opinion. Even your posts online expressing discontent (even "likes" with the government or the leader can get you questioned or arrested).

Once the spark of freedom gets lit in the heart, it can never be extinguished. The people under totalitarian rule were looking for an almost "silent" form of resistance. On March 12, 2022, a video went viral on Twitter. Police in Nizhny Novgorod arrested a demonstrator for protesting with a blank sign. The old Soviet joke came true in Russia in 2022. The white paper was used by Russians opposing the war in Ukraine as a message that "everyone knows".

This devastating event made it impossible for the "docile bodies" as defined by Foucault (1977), the Chinese citizens, who had been silent for so long under totalitarian rule, to remain quiet. For the first time, people's discontent towards the government and the lockdown came out of the Internet and went out on the streets – starting what is now known as "The White Paper Movement." The symbolic act of "holding up white paper" during protests traces its origins to a Soviet-era anecdote, when a man was arrested by the KGB in Red Square for distributing leaflets, which were in fact blank sheets of paper. In a democratic country, people's freedom of speech is guaranteed, and they can exercise their right to assemble, march, and demonstrate when necessary. Their voices can be heard. By stark contrast, in a totalitarian regime, the mere act of expression, or even online engagement such as 'likes,' can lead to interrogation or arrest, a reality foreign to those who have never lived under such repression. The omnipresent fear of detention for merely articulating one's views underscores the vast chasm between the freedoms afforded in democratic versus totalitarian states.

The fire that broke out in Urumqi on the evening of November 24 made it impossible for the Chinese, who had been silent for so long under the totalitarian rule, to remain silent.

Figure 2 The past and present of the A4 Revolution. (@a4revolutiondeutschland)

The day after the fires in Urumqi, November 25th, 2024, a young man in Shanghai, alone, held up a sign to protest. The front of the sign read, "You know what I'm talking about." The back of the sign reads, "We can do more!" Almost at the same time, a student from the Communication University of China, Nanjing (CUCN) held up a white paper and stood on the campus. After the white paper in her hand was taken away by officials, she maintained this pose and continued standing there. Soon, however, a large number of students gathered around her and held up white papers. That night, Shanghai citizens went to Urumqi Middle Road to mourn spontaneously, and the number kept growing. Some of the people who participated in the rally held up white papers. Later on, white paper was handed out to participants to hold up as an expression of their anger and discontent.

The white paper became the symbol of this movement. In just one or two days, following the Shanghai incident, protesters gathered in major cities across China to protest, and "The White Paper Movement" spread everywhere. The movement happened not only on the streets of big cities. Students from universities and colleges across the country voluntarily held up or posted white papers to protest. However, some masses of protestors swiftly scattered upon the arrival of the police, while others remained protesting. The police responded by deploying many officers dispersing into the crowd and arresting the protesters.

Figure 3 The protest scene on Urumqi Middle Road in Shanghai, in November, 2022. (Retamal)

Figure 4 The past and present of the A4 Revolution. (@a4revolutiondeutschland)

Figure 5 Protests against zero-COVID policy in Shanghai in November, 2022 (Retamal).

The government, initially caught off guard, reacted quickly to suppress the situation. Nonetheless, the "White Paper Movement" spread nationally and internationally and grew into the largest-scale protest that has happened in China ever since 1989 (Yang; Ong, L.).

Approach and Methodology

The specific knowledge production or approach in this study is based on Arts-Based Research (ABR) and Autotheory. Many scholars have recognized the value of Arts-Based Research (ABR). It is "research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, and represent human action and experience" (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 1). Some researchers like Visse et al. believe that ABR provokes different ways of thinking about how art relates to knowledge in research. Natalie Loveless discusses creative practices and the role of art in times of ecological crisis and societal challenges (Miranda-Texidor). Loveless's book *How to make art at the end of the world: A Manifesto for research-creation* emphasizes the importance of engaging with pressing concerns through artistic expression. Loveless suggests that artists can contribute to addressing these problems by fostering new ways of thinking, connecting with communities, and inspiring social change. By applying ABR in my study, I explored the entangled power relations between people and the state in China through art-making. Specific methods included performance, photography, and installations. These enable me to communicate through a visual form and generate exhibition effects which will foster new ways of understanding power relations better than any statistical research can.

ABR (Arts-Based Research) increasingly engaged with more profound scholarly territories through the adoption of Autotheory, which merges autobiography with critical theory to scrutinize personal experiences within theoretical contexts, as explained by McKenzie Wark and Lauren Fournier, Autotheory as a methodological approach weaves together personal narrative and theoretical inquiry, allowing for an introspective examination of individual experiences through a critical, theoretical lens. Lauren Fournier in her book *Autotheory as feminist practice* argues that the autotheoretical turn signals the tenuousness of illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self-divisions long blurred by feminist artists and scholars. Autotheory challenges dominant approaches to philosophizing and theorizing while enabling new ways for artists and writers to reflect on their lives. Autotheory is presented as transmedia, drawing from contemporary art, conceptual art, video, film, performance, and experimental writing, among others. It operates in liminal spaces between genres and disciplines, revealing the entanglement of research and creation (Loveless). By positioning Autotheory across a spectrum of media, including contemporary and conceptual art, video, film, performance, and experimental writing, Fournier highlights its role in navigating the

interstitial spaces between genres and disciplines, thereby underscoring the inseparability of research and creative endeavor.

Within the framework of my research, Autotheory emerged as a pivotal instrument, empowering me to leverage my bodily experience as the site in which I can articulate paradoxical power relations through the lens and practices of care while providing rich narrative descriptions and interpretations of what it meant to be a Chinese citizen living in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Autotheory offers a platform for crafting a narrative that is both intensely personal and critically reflective, effectively capturing the significance of navigating the challenges of being a Chinese citizen during such transformative times. This methodology enables me to stay with the trouble, to confront the challenges of our time while engaging with a variety of perspectives and forms of knowledge. This methodological choice facilitates a deeper understanding of the intricate and challenging power structures that define our contemporary reality.

This study integrates Arts-Based Research (ABR) and Autotheory as its core methodologies to explore the nuanced interplay of power dynamics in China, particularly through the lens of care during the COVID-19 pandemic. ABR, recognized for its capacity to probe and represent human experience and action through artistic mediums, sets the stage for a deep, experiential investigation into the state-citizen relationship. It leverages artistic expressions like performance, photography, and installations to transcend traditional research boundaries, offering innovative insights into societal structures. On the other hand, Autotheory, blending autobiographical narratives with critical theory, provides a personalized yet analytically rigorous examination of the individual's place within these dynamics. It challenges conventional separations between art and life, theory and practice, enabling a profound reflection on personal experiences against the backdrop of larger societal issues.

Together, these methodologies not only underscore the complexity of understanding power relations but also highlight the transformative potential of integrating art and personal narrative in academic research. By employing both ABR and Autotheory, this study aims to unveil the layers of power relations in China, offering a rich, multi-dimensional perspective that bridges the gap between individual experiences and theoretical analysis, thereby contributing to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of contemporary social and political realities.

Chapter Preview

The thesis begins with a deeply personal narrative in Chapter 1, "I Felt Troubled." Here, I recount my firsthand experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, feeling the acute tensions between individual agency and state power. This period of crisis led me to embrace Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble" as a guiding principle. This chapter is not just an introduction to the thematic concerns of power and resistance but is a foundation that emphasizes Haraway's influence on my approach to navigating and understanding complex social dynamics.

As my journey progresses, Chapter 2, "From binary to complexity–Looking through the lens of care," marks a pivotal shift in my conceptual framework. Initially perceiving power dynamics in binary terms – strictly between the people and the government – my perspective underwent a transformation. Influenced by Michel Foucault's nuanced discussions of power relations, I began to see beyond the binary, recognizing the multifaceted nature of power. This chapter details this evolution in thinking, proposing a more intricate lens of care as a means to dissect and engage with these expanded power dynamics.

Chapter 3 delves into the practical application of these theoretical frameworks, focusing on the thesis exhibition and the artworks it comprises. The character "乞," as both a concept and an element of the exhibition, represents the culmination of my inquiry into the ephemeral and temporal aspects of power relations. This chapter discusses how the artworks not only embody the theoretical discussions from earlier chapters but also interact with and enrich them. Autotheory informs the interplay between theory and practice as most evident, showcasing how art can serve as a powerful medium for exploring and expressing the complexities of power, care, and resistance.

Chapter 1: I Felt Troubled

Facing this tension between the people and the state, I felt troubled.

At the beginning of my thesis research, I found myself at a crossroads of personal experience and theoretical exploration, guided by the profound insights of Donna Haraway and her concept of "staying with the trouble". In her book *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene,* Haraway defined "staying with the trouble" as "to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (1). Living through the COVID-19 pandemic in China, I encountered an array of emotions and realities that were both unsettling and transformative. This period was marked by an omnipresent tension between individual existence and the overarching power of the state, a tension that deeply influenced my perception of the world around me. Each day was enveloped by a palpable sense of fear and uncertainty. The simple act of sleeping carried with it the possibility that the world as I knew it could change overnight. This constant state of vigilance and apprehension was mirrored in the actions of those around me; people hurriedly stockpiled essentials, haunted by the fear of lengthy quarantines, and the looming threat of lockdowns. It was an atmosphere in which personal freedoms were obscured by the shadow of authoritarian control, where voices were stifled, and where the intrinsic human desire to express oneself was continually suppressed.

In this environment, I found myself physically and emotionally overwhelmed. The air was thick with an unspoken anxiety, a collective suffocation under the weight of restrictions we had no power to challenge. It felt as though we were all part of an involuntary performance, acting out roles dictated by a script we never agreed to. This sense of being controlled, of having one's narrative forcefully rewritten by external forces, was both disorienting and enlightening. It is within this context that I turned to Donna Haraway and her compelling notion of "staying with the trouble." Haraway's perspective offers a lens through which to view these experiences, not as isolated incidents of discomfort but as integral parts of a larger, more complex narrative. Haraway contends that it's all too easy for individuals, communities, and societies to disengage, become apathetic, or fall into despair when confronting immense and multifaceted issues. The avoidance approach as a self-defence mechanism is never an effective solution to problems (Ball and Gunaydin). Haraway's theory urges us to engage actively with the challenges we face, to embrace discomfort and uncertainty as catalysts for growth and understanding, rather than

seeking simplistic solutions or turning away from them. This idea of not just enduring but actively engaging with "trouble" has become a guiding principle for my exploration.

"staying with the trouble" is essentially a call to remain actively and responsibly engaged with the problems of our time. As I unpacked the layers of my experiences during this unprecedented time, Haraway's theory serves as a beacon, illuminating the path forward. It encourages me to confront head-on the realities of living under such conditions, to find meaning and agency in the midst of chaos. This thesis, therefore, is not just an academic exercise; it is a personal journey of discovery, and a quest to understand how the events of the pandemic have reshaped my perception of the world and my place within it.

This chapter sets the stage for the exploration that follows, laying the groundwork for a deeper investigation into the art and exhibitions that arose from this period. It is a starting point for a journey that intertwines personal experience with theoretical inquiry, all guided by the ethos of "staying with the trouble."

This troubling feeling and my dedication to staying with it motivated me to produce the first artwork of this series –- "静默 Shredded Truth" (2022). The artwork "静默 Shredded Truth" is my response to the White Paper Movement, a significant protest movement challenging government censorship in China during the post-pandemic reopening phase. This installation symbolizes the traditional power dynamics between the ruling government and the populace, depicting a top-down approach to authority. The core of this piece is a series of Chinese news articles, downloaded and then shredded. These articles, which narrate the harrowing experiences of individuals living under China's stringent Zero-COVID policies, were often censored mere hours after being distributed in November 2022. This period saw the emergence and escalation of the #whitepapermovement, marking the most extensive protests in China in three decades (Yang).

Figure 6 静默 Shredded truth. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi, He. Author's personal collection.

Figure 7 静默 Shredded truth. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by WenWei, Chen. Author's personal collection.

Figure 8 A closeup view of 静默 Shredded Truth. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi, He. Author's personal collection.

"Shredded truth" subverts this narrative through a performative act, where a continuous scroll of pre-censored media posts is methodically destroyed by an automated shredding machine. This act serves both as a mimicry and a critique of governmental censorship, highlighting the struggles and suppressed voices in an overly controlled society. The installation metaphorically positions the shredder as the government, and the news articles as the embodiment of free speech, thereby reflecting the ongoing political strife. This artistic expression stands in opposition to the pervasive control and violence exerted by the state, offering a poignant commentary on the conflict between authority and freedom of speech, as discussed by Walter Benjamin (277-300) in this work on the critique of violence.

Figure 9 Shredded truth. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi, He. Author's personal collection.

As the work 静默 *Shredded Truth* vividly illustrates, living in China under the surveillance of a totalitarian regime, I naturally gained the perspective of the self versus the state, or as Foucault (*Discipline*) describes it, individual subjectivity versus the Institutional actor. As my understanding deepened, I developed a broader perspective on power relations. This evolution in thought was significantly influenced by my reflections on personal experiences in conjunction with my study of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and Walter Benjamin's *Towards the Critique of Violence*. These works provided me with a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between individual agency and institutional structures.

Consequently, I envisioned a two-section exhibition to articulate these concepts. The thesis show's first section, Muted Silence, encapsulates the binary power relationship, stemming from my initial view of the conflict between the people and the state. This segment aimed to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the nature of state-people power dynamics during the COVID-19 era, highlighted by showcasing 静默 *Shredded Truth*.

As my own perspective on power relations changed, the second section of the exhibition, Invisible Interplay, transitioned from this binary perspective to a more complex and profound understanding of power relations. Here, the focus shifted to examining power through the lens of care, a theme that will be elaborated upon in the subsequent chapters. This section represents the evolution of my perception of power, moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy of people versus government to a more nuanced and holistic view.

Chapter 2: From binary to complexity — Looking through the lens of care

Through my research, I seek to investigate individual-government power dynamics, in an attempt to better understand my position in this "disciplined society" as defined by Foucault, as well as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the power relations between individual subjectivity and institutional actors through the lens of care.

Michel Foucault, the main theorist guiding my research, in his book *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison,* explores the transformation of punishment and control in society from harsh public executions to more subtle, systematic methods of discipline. The book examines the relationship between knowledge, power, and social order, emphasizing how these systems shape and regulate human behavior in modern society. Specifically, this research adopts his ideas of power, power relations, and resistance to explore how power operated and how power relations appeared during the pandemic in China. It also investigates how potential resistance can be discovered inherently from power's intrinsic trait, rather than being externally produced. Foucault's theory argues that contemporary power structures are less overtly coercive but more insidiously pervasive, aiming to produce docile and obedient citizens, which became the reason why this study tries to demystify and uncover power relations in our daily lives, through my bodily experience as an artist.

Power used to be perceived as a top-down phenomenon, in which it is exercised by the powerful over the not-so-powerful. Power here always operates negatively. Power tells what is allowed and what is forbidden. It punishes us if we transgress the rules, like the real-life example of the #whitepapermovement where people who were leading the protest, going against rules established by the power holder, were being arrested and punished by the state. Foucault argues that the logistics of accountability and individual responsibility become a generalized precept among the general public at large and among the government. An example would be cooperating with the state's order to quarantine at home so that I would be seen with approval in the eyes of others, such as the government, schools, and communities. Power functions through misdirection, causing us to overlook the majority of its workings because we are fixated on a single, narrow understanding of it. In some way, the anger I felt and the troubling feelings I experienced during that critical period of pandemic outbreaks made me want to escape from the unsettling tension. I wished to seek the most accessible ways to identify the power dynamics at

that time. Hence, I chose the binary view of people against the government like many people did in that situation.

However, through reading Foucault's book, I gained a more fundamental understanding of power which broadened my perspective of power and encouraged me to produce artwork with this new perspective in mind for the second section of the exhibition. This section, entitled Invisible Interplay, resonates with Foucault's complex concept of power as relational and everywhere: Foucault argued that power is not just exerted by those in authority over those who are not, it circulates throughout society and is present in all interactions. He views power as omnipresent, woven into the fabric of everyday life and relationships rather than being centralized in institutions or individuals. This concept resonated with my understanding of power and hence, later informed my choice of 气 (air) as the vehicle to produce artwork that can be seen and realized. One might think one can direct power and the flow of power, through structure and order. However, Foucault argues that power is intentional and non-subjective. By "intentional", Foucault means that we make choices as free agents. Although we have intention in the decisions that we make, these choices are steered by non-subjective forces, such as social norms, religions, peer pressure, and so on. This concept brought in more forces and variables that would influence power and its direction like air can be influenced by a car passing by, a baby's cry, or a drop of water.

Besides the traits of power, Foucault also provides insight into power relations. He sees power relations as a kind of hierarchization between different people. Differently situated people want those power relations to end up in such a way that the commanding person/institution comes out on top and their way of doing that becomes a strategy to be employed in the future. Because of this, that power is non-subjective as mentioned before. Power is never so neat that it is always forever just working in one direction. There's always room for reversal/ antagonism/ confrontation.

This last concept that had a significant influence on this study is the relation between power and resistance. Foucault says "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently. This resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (*Discipline* 95). Foucault sees resistance as internal. Resistance is a fundamental part of the power dynamic. If there is no resistance, there is no power. Because this fascinating relationship of power and resistance empowers ordinary people like me, it is possible to change the direction

of power. It is possible to influence power that previously felt so strong and irresistible. Foucault argues that resistance might manifest itself not necessarily in openly oppositional politics against certain institutions/ people/ parties, but in subtle ways that individuals respond that make sense to them, against their own subordination/ subjectification. Hence, by articulating through artwork, ordinary people like me, artists like me can make changes in the complex power relations that we are in.

In contemplating resistance, art critic and theorist Walter Benjamin's skepticism toward replacing one set of laws with another is crucial. Benjamin doubts any attempt to supplant or replace one set of laws with another, in the name of mitigating or reducing violence, as this will only replicate that violence in some respect (*Reflections* 277-300). A non-violent resolution, in Benjamin's words, of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract. He proposed the proletarian general strike, a non-violent protest, to reduce the likelihood that people would set the factories on fire, and to eliminate possible harm to the state. Also, it opposes the law, because it counters the logic of violence. Benjamin views this kind of strike as an embodiment of "divine violence," a concept he advocates. Divine violence is characterized by its law-destroying nature; it is a bloodless form of resistance that seeks to restore order and bring healing to society.

Drawing from Foucault's understanding of power and Benjamin's concept of Divine Violence, my research aims to provide a new perspective of looking at the complex, overwhelming power relations around us, that could form a unique way of resistance, rather than fighting directly against the state with violence, that is more fundamental, more sustainable, more every day – that is through the lens of care. In this context, self-care has gained prominence, especially for those grappling with health issues during the pandemic. Mayseless (2016) remarks on the critical yet often invisible essence of care, akin to the air we breathe— vital but unnoticed until missing. This realization highlights the importance of examining power relations in situations where state care is insufficient and personal care capacity is challenged during the pandemic.

Equipped with Foucault's theory of power and power relations, looking freshly through the lens of care, as an artist, I am using my body and experiences as a medium to investigate these paradoxical power relations, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach intertwines personal experience with the broader socio-political context, seeking to

uncover and challenge the complex dynamics of power through the dual mediums of care and art-making, thereby proposing a unique form of resistance rooted in everyday experience.

Chapter 3 气

In the turbulent wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fundamental act of breathing – inhaling and exhaling – has emerged as a poignant emblem of life's fragility and resilience. My thesis exhibition, deeply rooted in my personal experiences amid the chaos and enforced silence of the pandemic in China, delves into this primal act. It's an exploration that transcends the mere act of breathing, engaging with the concept of 气 (qì) – a symbol of air, breath, and the ethereal essence that connects us all. This journey moves beyond the binary of personal subjectivity and state authority, unveiling a complex network of power relations that envelop us as vital as the air we breathe.

With each breath we take we are making an inter-change with the power relations around us. We are re-relating to the powers around us.

After considering Foucault's theory that power is omnipresent and relational, and power changes due to non-subjective forces, I chose the concept of 气 (qì) to thread through each artwork in the Invisible Interplay section of the exhibition. The character 气 (qì) represents not just the air we breathe, but also the anger and emotions we harbor, embodying temporality and ephemerality. It is provisional, ever-changing, like life and the power relations that we are in. This medium serves to deconstruct the complex interplay of power, especially through the politics of breathing, in a world still grappling with the echoes of a pandemic.

Expanding from the conventional binary power relation as addressed in the first section of the exhibition, Muted Silence, the second section of this exhibition, Invisible Interplay, features the artworks *Ephemeral Pops*, *静默的呼吸 Governed Breath*, *Respire to Rise*, and *Performing Care – 5241*. Together, they articulate a broad and intricate perspective on power relations, moving beyond conventional binaries of control to explore the nuanced interdependencies between state authority and individual subjectivity. Through looking at the power relations between the state and people, I can discuss how government institutions borrowed from neoliberal ideology and expanded it into other institutions such as universities and corporate companies. Here, I aim to provide a new perspective looking at care in the space between the people and state, through physically staying with the trouble, through my bodily engagement in relation to the society at large.

This exploration is further enriched by applying Foucault's theories of immune power, force relations, subjectivity, resistance, and the care of the self. My aim is to broaden the

audience's perspective in understanding power relations and to illustrate how staying with the trouble looked, through everyday elements that every one of us is living with – 气 (qì). I aim to engage the audience in a conversation that challenges their perception of the relationship between the state and the individual, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. My goal is to move beyond a simplistic view that sees this relationship merely as a conflict between the powerful (government) and the less powerful (people), encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.


Figure 10 Photograph of the exhibition 气 (qì) overview. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Yitong, Wang. Author's personal collection

Figure 11 He, Jingxi. The exhibition 氣 (qì). March 12, 2024. Photo by OCADU graduate school. Author's personal collection.

In essence, my thesis exhibition not only captures the ephemeral quality of 氣 (*qì*) but also serves as a meditative reflection on the intricate power dynamics that define our contemporary era. By proposing care as a means to navigate these complex relationships, my goal is to empower viewers to confront and unveil the invisible forces shaping our existence, fostering a shared space of reflection and connection that resonates deeply with the act of breathing itself. This foundational philosophy paves the way for a closer examination of each artwork within the exhibition, where the intangible essence of 氣 *(qì)* is given form through diverse mediums and expressions. In the following sections, I will be expanding on these artworks in detail.

Respire to Rise
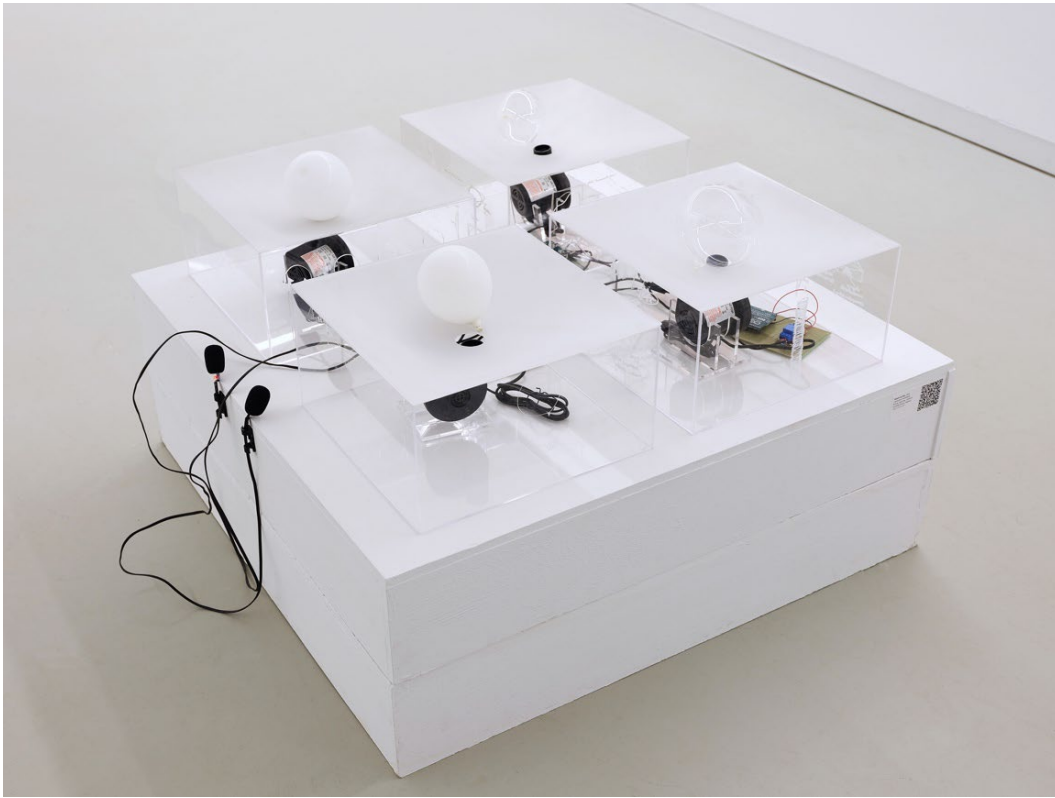
Figure 12 Artwork Respire to Rise. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

Respire to Rise is a set of four sculptural installations. Each box in the set features carved drawings of the artist's initial sketches, symbolizing the creative process. Each of these boxes is topped with frosted, curved acrylic, vacuum-formed into a soft shape. This design not only aesthetically pleases, but also gently guides the balloons back to the center of the box. A key interactive element of this artwork is audience participation. Each box has a sensor that activates an internal air pump, causing a small balloon to float. At the side of each box, the sensor is on a stand waiting to be picked up by the audience. This sensor is triggered by the breath of a participant, emphasizing the initiative and bodily participation of the audience. The four boxes interact with each other, creating a playful air dance with the balloons moving in a seemingly improvised symphony.
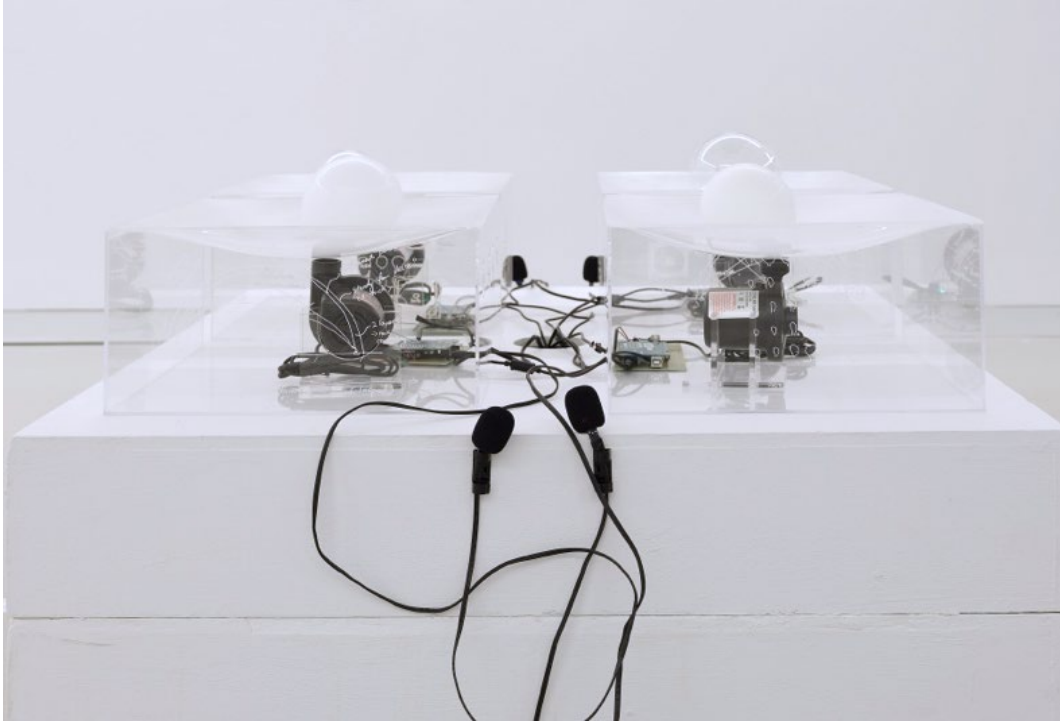
Figure 13 . Artwork Respire to Rise. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.
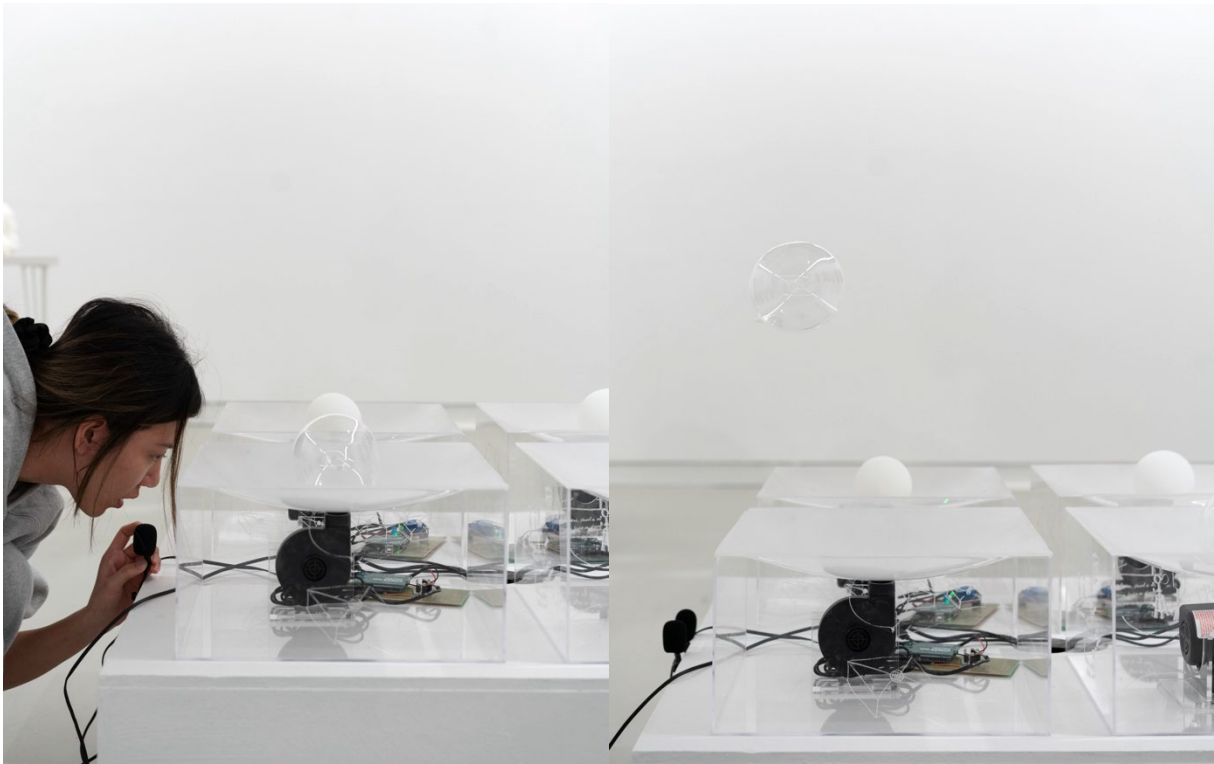
Figure 14 Artwork Respire to Rise. He, Jingxi March 12, 2024. Photo by Yitong Wang. Author's personal collection.

Figure 15 Artwork Respire to Rise. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. . Photo by Yitong Wang. Author's personal collection.

Positioned at the beginning of the exhibition's second section, Invisible Interplay, *Respire to Rise* serves as an introduction, to make visitors aware of their breath and adds metaphorical significance to the context for the subsequent artworks. The piece resonates with Foucault's concepts of power, highlighting its omnipresence and the way it can be influenced by subtle, non-subjective forces, much like the balloons' flight paths are altered by minor disturbances. Collectively, these boxes symbolize the power of community. Through audience interaction, the artwork conveys that everyone has the ability to take part in and influence the dynamics of power. It can be an act as natural and integral as breathing.

Ephemeral Pops

The *Ephemeral Pops* photography series captures the fleeting interplay between breath and bubble gum through a sequence of photographic stills. Each image chronicles the ephemeral state when my breath expands the gum, creating a delicate tension. Achieving larger bubbles demands increased effort and precision in the act of blowing. This tension is a dance of forces: the more air infused, the greater the resistance felt by my mouth. Foucault views resistance as an essential component within the power dynamics framework, suggesting it is a natural part of the interactions and structures of power. He posits that resistance is essential to the very concept of power, implying that without the presence of resistance, the notion of power becomes non-existent.

Figure 16 Ephemeral Pops. 2024. He, Jingxi.

Figure 17 Artwork Ephemeral Pops in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

Each photograph in the *Ephemeral Pops* series symbolizes a moment of equilibrium between the air within the bubble and that within my mouth, with the exception of the bursting point. This continual exchange and balancing act mirror the power relations inherent in human interactions, be they with the state, societal norms, or established rules. Like these power relations, the state of the bubble is often in a precarious balance, vulnerable, and transient.

The stability of each bubble, although seemingly constant, is inherently fragile. Both internal and external influences can disrupt this balance, leading to significant consequences. The act of blowing bubbles, much like navigating the complex web of power relations, is an exercise in finesse, requiring acute awareness, care, caution, patience, and a sense of responsibility. This series invites viewers to reflect on the subtleties of power and the transient nature of balance in our lives.

静默的呼吸 Governed Breath

Figure 18 Artwork 静默的呼吸 Governed Breath in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. Photo by Jingxi He.March 12, 2024. Author's personal collection.

Figure 19 Artwork 静默的呼吸 Governed Breath in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

Figure 20 Artwork 静默的呼吸 Governed Breath in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. March 12, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath* serves as both the initial inspiration and the focal tension for this exhibition. This work is intricately constructed, featuring a robust wooden box foundation, which serves as a stark contrast to the delicate architecture above. Crowning this foundation is a crystal-clear acrylic dome, an embodiment of both visibility and barrier. Encased within this

transparent yet confining dome is a solitary balloon. This balloon, ever in motion, engages in a rhythmic dance of expansion and contraction. Its movements are evocative of gentle breathing, symbolizing the essence of life and flow of a living being.

The balloon, vibrant and dynamic, represents an organic entity, almost creature-like in its behavior. Its movement within the dome creates a powerful juxtaposition with the rigid and unyielding structure that encapsulates it. The dome, while transparent and seemingly inconspicuous, is a potent symbol of an established, overarching system. It presents an illusion of openness and freedom, yet it exerts an unspoken control over the balloon, dictating the limits of its movements and existence.

This interplay between the balloon and the dome is a poignant metaphor for the nuanced and often tangled power dynamics at play between individuals and the state, especially resonant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The artwork reflects the unpredictable shifts in autonomy and control experienced during this time, mirroring the political climate and the state's influence over its people. Moreover, it seeks to capture the artist's personal turmoil experienced under such a power dynamic. The work 静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath* thus stands as a multifaceted symbol, a confluence of political commentary and personal expression, encapsulating a moment in history through the lens of artistic interpretation.

Performing Care – 5241

Figure 21 Artwork Performing Care — 5241 in the exhibition. March 8, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

Figure 22Photograph of artwork Performing Care — 5241 in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. March 8, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

Figure 23 Photograph of artwork Performing Care — 5241 in the exhibition. He, Jingxi. March 8, 2024. Photo by Jingxi He. Author's personal collection.

In the immersive performance artwork *Performing Care – 5241*, the artist undertakes a solemn act of remembrance and resistance through the meticulous folding, sewing, and hanging of 5,241 pieces of tissue paper. Each piece symbolizes an individual life lost to COVID-19 in China, embodying a gesture of care and respect towards those who departed in the pandemic's shadow. This act, performed for one hour each day, transcends mere memorialization, allowing me as the artist to engage deeply with the concept of "staying with the trouble" as articulated by Donna Haraway, and explored within a broader socio-political critique of power dynamics in contemporary China.

Rooted in Autotheory and Art-Based Research (ABR), this piece interweaves the artist's personal narrative with a critical examination of state-individual relationships, offering a poignant critique of the state's management and the societal implications of such crises. Through the lens of care, the artist not only navigates the intricacies of power and resistance but also invites the audience into a shared space of reflection, empathy, and understanding. *Performing Care –5241* is a testament to the transformative potential of art in challenging times, embodying the act of caring as both a personal and political act that resists the invisibility of power relations and fosters a collective consciousness of the realities of life and death during the pandemic.

By situating the artwork within this theoretical and methodological framework, *Performing Care – 5241* becomes a dynamic space where personal and collective grief, care, and the quest for understanding and resistance are performed and interrogated, offering insights into the complex fabric of human relations in the face of adversity.

Each piece, while distinct in its approach, contributes to a cohesive narrative that interrogates and illuminates the complex interplay between individual agency and systemic authority, all through the lens of 气 *(qi)*. Together, they form a compelling invitation to viewers, urging them to navigate the nuanced landscapes of power, care, and resistance in their own lives.

Result & Critical Reflection

Power, power relations, and resistance feel like synonyms. If there are no relations, there is no power; if there is no power there is no resistance. In my thesis journey, I have traversed the intricate landscape of power dynamics, care, and resistance within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. I chose to discuss this topic because, living in the personal/social/political context, I felt troubled. These contexts informed my research, so that my narratives blended critically with theory to provide a point of view that is subjective rather than objective. Rather than separating theory from practice and our daily experiences, it naturally follows to engage in discussion, as the theories are deeply ingrained in my psyche and existence. The personal is political. My exploration, rooted in Art-Based Research and Autotheory, has illuminated the nuanced interplay between state mechanisms and individual agency, revealing care as both a critical analytical lens and a potent form of resistance. Through installations and photography, I've sought to materialize the theoretical frameworks I engaged with, inviting my audience into a profound dialogue about power's nature and the seeds of change it contains.

I believe in art's power to critique and dismantle structures of oppression. As my project highlights art's transformative potential in addressing social and political issues, it offers fresh perspectives on understanding and challenging dominant binary narratives about power relations. My thesis extends this dialogue, showcasing how personal narratives and artistic practice can converge to expose and question the dynamics of power and care.

Embracing Donna Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble," my work embodies a dedication to grappling with complex social realities. It emphasizes the significance of care as both a theoretical and practical approach to confronting and navigating power dynamics. This research not only opens new pathways for investigating how art and personal narrative can be formidable forces for social critique, but also reaffirms the belief that deep engagement with contemporary challenges can unveil new modes of understanding and forms of resistance. This conclusion encapsulates my journey and contributions to the discourse on power, care, and resistance, marking both an end and a beginning to further inquiry and action.

Looking Forward

This exploration, while not yet examining care as a form of resistance, lays the groundwork for future studies to investigate this possibility. It combines personal narratives with broader socio-political themes, aiming to illuminate and challenge the complex power relations through art, setting the stage for subsequent research to explore the intersection of care and resistance.

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