CHAPTER 4

Still Life

RECOVERING (CHINESE) ETHNICITY IN THE *BODY WORLDS* AND BEYOND

The souvenir still bears a trace of use value in its instrumentality, but the collection represents the total aestheticization of use value.
—Susan Stewart, *On Longing*

It is in the arena of global public health that the neoliberal promise of a surplus of life is most visibly predicated on a corresponding devaluation of life.
—Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus*

So far I have outlined a transition in representations of corporeality from a "composite" body to a more diasporic figure, along a spectrum of increasingly accessible genres ranging from early modern Chinese political allegory with roots in the translated concept of Frankenstein, to contemporary fiction featuring tropes of transfusion and dissection, to experimental art using cadavers as medium, and finally to films deploying transplant as both plot device and critical method: a progressive series of "hyperrealist" objects arranged on a scaffold of popular media to explore how diverse representations of the medically commodified body relate to advancements in biotech, acts of witness, and biopolitical dynamics at large. A cornerstone

4.1 A portrait-style view of the face of a plastinated cadaver in the *Body Worlds* exhibit. Without the skin, viewers are left to extrapolate information about the body's identity through other means.

of this work has been the reminder that aesthetics do not merely illustrate biopolitical dynamics but actively contribute to, and even generate or partner with, these dynamics. Biopolitical aesthetics in turn allows us to update our understanding of the relationship between art and the body to account for changes in biotech and communication.

Now we arrive at what is perhaps the ultimate popular modality of the aestheticized cadaver: the *Body Worlds* exhibits, those traveling anatomical shows of "plastinated" human bodies, whole or in parts, arranged in dioramas or posed in isolation, and exhibited in venues ranging from a converted abattoir to the unintentionally redundant space of a shopping mall. If the experimental artists of the Cadaver Group produced "live" performances using dead bodies, then the plastinated cadaver shows produce "still lives"—"dead" works frozen in an imitation of life. Presented as aestheticized "edutainment," plastinated body exhibits have reached record numbers of viewers across the United States, throughout Western Europe, in the major cities of Australia, and in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and beyond. (According to Gunther von Hagens, the creator of the "original" *Body Worlds*, his exhibits alone—that is, not including the

works of other plastinators—have been viewed by more than forty-four million visitors in a hundred and fifteen cities around the world.[1]) The exhibits have proven to be highly lucrative for (almost) everyone concerned.[2]

Yet as I pointed out in the introduction, the success of the plastinated cadaver exhibits has depended partly on the suppression of the bodies' provenance (and in particular the bodies' Chinese roots and the postcolonial dynamics that enabled their "production" as objects of spectacle) in the name of presenting more "universal" or "human" anatomical specimens. At the same time, the allegation that the cadavers come from executed Chinese prisoners triggered a cascade of media attention that folds the plastination industry seamlessly into existing templates for human rights critiques of Chinese labor practices, prison systems, dispensation of capital punishment, and even copyright enforcement. The contrast between the negative publicity around sourcing and the exhibits' proactive marketing of the bodies as universally "human" has complicated the experience of many viewers because Chinese provenance in this context becomes a kind of open secret, hanging in the air even as the exact relationship of exhibition to source material is suppressed.

The resulting tension, I would suggest, becomes part of the show itself: more than two decades after the first exhibit opened in Tokyo in 1995, many visitors still enter an exhibition space expecting to encounter the bodies of executed Chinese prisoners, scrutinizing specimens for symptoms of Chinese identity in the same way they do for lung disease or congestive heart failure.[3] Thus while exhibition organizers go to ever-greater lengths to deny or deflect any connection to China, popular associations of the plastinated bodies with Chinese identity (or imagined "Chineseness") persist, preserved in the bodies' conceptual architecture as effectively as any organic structure.[4] In this sense, the relationship of audience to exhibit has something in common with that of *Tipu's Tiger* in nineteenth-century London, where the unprecedented appeal of the life-sized mechanical tiger also drew on curiosity about the spectacle's tacit ulterior subject: the uncooperative "other" (Muslim, Indian, and, of course, "Oriental"), now safely subjugated. Given the popularity of the plastinated body exhibits worldwide, the fact that they reproduce not only a genealogically colonial claim to "universal" humanity but what is essentially an Orientalist message about Chinese corporeality as a renewable resource (a kind of corporeal surplus made possible by what has been constructed as the intolerable abjection of its own origin) is especially troubling.

In this chapter I show how the plastinated bodies of the traveling *Body Worlds* exhibits, as aesthetic objects with "Chinese characteristics," fit into the progression of biopolitical modernity from the composite figure to the diasporic body and beyond. I suggest that plastinated bodies collapse the boundaries between what counts as real and what counts as representation not just because of the way they are produced but because of how they *re*-produce (and capitalize on) popular understandings of Chinese identity in global biopolitics. Diverging from quasi-formulaic critiques of the *Body Worlds* as illustrative of "Chinese human rights violation" narratives, this chapter looks instead at reactions to the exhibits at "home," for example, in media from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, aiming to draw out the suppressed discourses of race and culture that continue to inform the exhibits' reception worldwide. In this chapter I therefore do not directly address the truth or falsehood of claims about the use of Chinese prisoners as "sources" for the plastinated human body exhibits but suggest that a critical reassessment of Western-language human rights discourse in light of Chinese-language discussions of the same exhibits can clarify our understanding of both the nature of the "human" and the nature of "Chineseness" in contemporary biopolitical life.

I begin by clarifying certain complex programmatic aspects of the exhibits (who mounted them, where they were sourced, how they were promoted), and then comment briefly on debates about the "reality" of the bodies themselves, and their reception.[5] Next, I provide an overview of responses to plastinated cadaver exhibits across Chinese-language platforms ranging from news reports, online journalism, radio journalism, interviews, and government publications from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Here I survey more than four hundred reports from Sinophone sources through about 2009 focusing not on the human rights critiques of the ethics of body exhibition itself—critiques that have basically saturated, if not overdetermined, Western-language discourse about the exhibits—but rather on ideas related to Chinese race and ethnicity as they inform both production and reception. Ultimately, this brief survey of Sinophone media sets the stage for a discussion, in this volume's epilogue, of some of the larger implications of ongoing disputes over intellectual property rights related to the plastinated body that began on the battlefield of Taiwan. In their language and scope, these skirmishes reveal the extent to which the increasing commodification of the body, and especially Chinese, "third world," and other disenfran-

chised bodies, undergirds paradoxical claims to the "human" on the one hand, and a more uniquely commodified Chinese (or subaltern) identity on the other: a central paradox of biopolitical aesthetics in contemporary life.[6]

Will the Real Plastinated Body Exhibit Please Stand Up?

The specifics of the plastinated cadaver exhibits can be confusing. For although it may sound surreal, there are a number of different exhibits of perfectly preserved cadavers and cadaverous parts circulating the globe at any given time, each with distinct histories and pathways to production. Plastination has, for example, proven popular with medical schools and museums, where detailed, indestructible models make for excellent teaching tools (the University of Michigan Plastination Lab produces specimens "in house," and a description of the lab's process for plastinating a human heart can be easily found online). A sort of "cottage industry" of plastination in China also supplies institutional consumers in China and abroad.[7] But the most infamous of plastinated cadaver exhibits—as well as the first to draw fire for using the bodies of executed Chinese prisoners—is still the first one: the *Body Worlds* series created by the eccentric German showman and trained anatomist Gunther von Hagens. It was von Hagens who discovered that a certain combination of polymers could be used to "preserve" anatomical specimens indefinitely by substituting organic fluids with liquid plastic and curing them in a process reminiscent of perimineralization, the fossilization process that yields petrified wood.[8] Eventually perfecting a technique that allowed him to plastinate whole bodies, von Hagens literalized certain conventions of European anatomical illustration by arranging plastinates in a sort of gymnastic topiary of exposed muscle (a tennis player, a runner, a horse and rider), controversial anatomical phenomena (a pregnant woman, conjoined twins), and even refigured works of art (Rodin's *Thinker*, a Vesalian figure), a formula for exhibiting "real" human bodies that proved highly successful with popular audiences as well.[9]

By 1997, von Hagens's popular enterprise expanded enough that he began to collaborate with the Chinese anatomist Sui Hongjin (隋鸿锦) to open a plastination facility in China. Sui helped von Hagens set up the Institute for Plastination in Dalian, where the collaborators could afford to employ trained anatomists—mostly medical school students—to embalm, dissect, carve, plastinate, position, cast, and cure specimens from start to

finish.[10] Von Hagens's first plastinate shows used Chinese "specimens," but after a scandal suggesting that some of the bodies belonged to executed prisoners (some of the bodies bore marks such as bullet wounds to the head), von Hagens declared he would never use Chinese bodies again.[11] Von Hagens's claim notwithstanding, the *Body Worlds* enterprise retains links to China not only because the shows' public image is still "haunted" by the specter of the original controversy but because von Hagens continues to use the factory in Dalian to process the bodies of animals as well as "imported" human specimens. Any exhibits that use *Body Worlds* in the title (or *Le Monde du Corps* and *Körperwelten*), including the *Body Worlds* series I–IV, belong to the von Hagens family of exhibits.

After a falling out with von Hagens, however, Sui began collaborating in 2000 with Premier Exhibitions, an American company famous for its exhibits of the wreck of the *Titanic*. Premier provided the capital for Sui to set up a plastination plant of his own using the infrastructure that he had developed while working with von Hagens.[12] Exhibits that are the product of collaboration between Premier and Sui include *Bodies . . . The Exhibition* and *Our Body: The Universe Within* in the United States, *Bodies Revealed* in England, *Body Exploration* in Taiwan, *Mysteries of the Human Body* in South Korea, *Jintai Plastomic: Mysteries of the Human Body* in Japan, *Cuerpos entrañables* in Spain, and others. The literature associated with Premier's shows typically avoids references to von Hagens, referring instead to the plastination process as "polymer preservation," while von Hagens's marketing materials now highlight the "originality" and "authenticity" of the *Body Worlds* exhibits over "copycat" exhibits like Premier's.[13] Bodies processed in Sui's facility take the idea of "made in China" to a "meta" level: specimens are sourced "locally" and production takes place in facilities staffed by a continuous supply of affordable skilled labor such as regional medical students. Although claims about provenance from Chinese prisons in both von Hagens's and Sui's exhibits have proven difficult to substantiate, one can still speculate about the demographics of sourcing in general terms. Hsu Hsuan and Martha Lincoln argue in their excellent but all-too-brief discussion of internal labor migration patterns in China, for instance, that young men from poor rural areas who seek work in big cities have a powerful incentive to conceal their identities due to regional residency requirements.[14] Or as Wanning Sun explains in his groundbreaking study of a diversity of rural migrants in China, "Although

it is not self-evident which groups inhabit the lowest rung of the social ladder, it is widely agreed that China's *hukou* system, a particular form of household registration, plays a crucial discriminating role. Since its implementation in the late 1950s, China's long-standing and deeply ingrained *hukou* system has effectively differentiated the nation along urban-rural lines, with up to 70 percent of the population having rural *hukou*." This system, moreover, shapes "the systematic practice of social exclusion against the rural population," an exclusion that "manifests itself most tangibly in the unequal distribution of a range of social benefits, including health care, education, housing, and employment" and contribute[s] directly to migrant workers' "state of liminality[.]"[15] One might therefore look for a correlation between increases in undocumented migrant labor from China's interior and increases in unclaimed or unidentified bodies in China's urban centers (including prisons), and in turn investigate the relationship of these increases to the disproportionately male and labor-aged cadavers that populate certain plastinated cadaver exhibits.

Brief Overview of Responses to the Plastinated Body Exhibits in the United States, Europe, and Australia

They seemed not like dead people but friendly extraterrestrials.
They were young, good-looking Asians with nothing cadaverous
about them.
—Stephen Dobyns, "So Long, Pals"

Critiques of the plastinated cadaver exhibits did not always default to the language of human rights. Initially, debates about the exhibits in Europe focused more on the ethics of displaying human bodies as anatomical models for popular entertainment on terms familiar from the times of Mondino de Liuzzi to Thomas Eakins and beyond. But the intensity of reactions varied. In a 2006 study, German studies scholar Linda Schulte-Sasse compared American and European reactions to von Hagens's exhibits and found that "the American press, museum curators, theologians and medical professionals for the most part had 'no problem' with Body Worlds," whereas some cities in Europe "tried to ban [*Body Worlds*], and Munich allowed the show only when some of the more controversial plastinates were removed. In England, Body Worlds was challenged by . . . a parents' group that grew out of the Alder Hey hospital scandal, in which

body parts of deceased children had been stored without the knowledge of the families. The British Medical Association (BMA) assailed the show as well, and later condemned the public autopsy that von Hagens conducted in London in 2002 as 'disrespectful sensation mongering.' . . . In Germany, the prestigious weekly *Die Zeit* labeled von Hagens a 'speculator with death . . . prone to 'necromania.'"[16] Finally, following scathing accusations in the German journal *Der Spiegel* in 2004 accusing von Hagens of using the corpses of executed Chinese prisoners, von Hagens stopped exhibiting in Europe until 2008, concentrating instead on the apparently more welcoming markets of the United States and Asia.[17] Schulte-Sasse attributes this warmer welcome among other things to better marketing and more strategic choices of venue. A controversial *Body Worlds* exhibit in Brussels in 2001 was mounted in an old abattoir, but a successful 2005 exhibit in Los Angeles was hosted by the California Science Center.[18]

But the suggestion that the reception of the *Body Worlds* was warmer in the United States than in Europe overlooks objections by Chinese American activists who argued emphatically that not only was the provenance of plastinated cadavers problematic but it was disrespectful of cultural practice around the dead. In 2005, for instance, Fiona Ma, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and later a California State Assemblywoman, expressed doubts that the bodies in a San Francisco plastinated cadaver exhibit (in this case one of the Premier exhibits associated with Sui Hongjin) could have been donated, since "the Chinese are typically very religious, they're spiritual, they're very private, and if they knew that their bodies were being used like this for commercial exploitation purposes, they wouldn't be happy." (Ma later authored a bill that would have required exhibitors to provide evidence of consent for the use of individual bodies in the exhibits.)[19] Likewise, an organizer who works with Seattle Chinese American groups objected to a 2006 exhibit (also by Premier) on the grounds that "from a cultural perspective, especially since a number of the cadavers are from China, it feels like a gross violation. . . . The willful use of putting a body on indefinite display like that condemns the soul to wander the netherworld with no chance to rest."[20] Meanwhile, activist Harry Wu, who had already testified before Congress regarding China's organ trade and allegations of prison harvesting, likewise condemned plastinated human body exhibits for sourcing cadavers from prisons, contributing his voice to protests in Seattle and San Francisco.[21] If Schulte-Sasse empha-

sizes a relative absence of objection to the *Body Worlds* exhibits in the United States compared to Europe in the earlier half of this decade, by the second half a theater of controversy soon reversed the trend, with a *New York Times* feature article in 2006, a piece on National Public Radio, an ABC *20/20* exposé, and a well-publicized injunction by the State of New York against the long-running South Street Seaport installation of *Bodies . . . The Exhibition* requiring Premier to post a disclaimer prominently in the venue and to refund the money of any viewer who attended the exhibits prior to the injunction.[22] This reportage is very easy to find online—so easy, in fact, that one could be forgiven for assuming that audiences who have *not* been exposed to this controversy are the exception rather than the rule.

If earlier objections to the plastinated cadaver exhibits centered on longstanding debates about the ethical use of human bodies in medical education versus public display, these more recent critiques bear the unmistakable mark of post-1989 Chinese human rights abuse discourse, a kind of formulaic approach in Western-language popular media to describing almost any exchange involving China and human bodies, labor, literature, politics, economics, and biotechnology.[23] Like certain understandings of evolutionary theory, human rights violation discourse is premised on the idea that what constitutes "rights" (and of course what constitutes the "human") is universally definable, that China routinely violates these rights and engages in cover-up, and that it is morally imperative for guardian nations and cultures first to identify and expose these violations, and then to punish them.[24] In *Asian Biotech*, Aihwa Ong divides Western-language treatments of Asian biotech into three categories: those that "make ethical judgments about particular ethnographic situations; [those that] seek to rectify them according to some universalizing ethical standard; [and those that] link biotech innovations to ethical possibilities of self-validation or enhancement of liberal subjectivity."[25] Most critiques of China in media discourse about provenance in the plastinated body exhibits function narratively and belong to Ong's first and second categories: "ethical judgments" that seek to apply "some universalizing ethical standard."[26]

These narratives are undeniably compelling, but it is important to remember that they are still just that: narratives. As Ong argues: "The ethics-as-moral-criticism approach presupposes a clear-cut division between bad guys (biotech entities and scientists) and good guys ("victims," as they

tend to be characterized by impassioned anthropologists)." But, adds Ong, "while speaking truth to power is laudable, more sensitive analyses of ethical practices will show that in each ethnographic case, the question of 'who gains, who loses' cannot be answered in advance. . . . The nexus between biotech techniques and moral reasoning is highly variable and dynamic, and complex ethical negotiations take place in an assemblage of conflicting logics."[27] Similarly, other scholars have pointed out that leveling unexamined or un-self-reflexive critiques of human rights violation against China risks obscuring China's own rich traditions of homological or analogous rights practice while doing little to advance the cause of a more global, consensus-based human rights agenda.[28] To get a fuller picture of the global phenomenon of the plastinated cadaver exhibits, one must consider not just the *material* circumstances of production but also the *aesthetic* (in this case narrative and historiographic) frameworks that condition them.

Chinese-Language Responses to the Plastinated Human Body Exhibits

Ong suggests that one strategy for managing generalized human rights critiques is to use a "situated ethics," or an ethics that "reaches not for ultimately universal philosophical treatments of practices, but situates ethical processes in specific milieus of politics, culture, and decision making," while "reject[ing] the common assumption that moral reasoning can be simply determined by class location, or reduced to the scale of the isolated individual."[29] According to situated ethics, collective priorities and commercial interests should be factored into any given ethical evaluation. In the case of the plastinated cadavers, focusing exclusively on Western media exposés about Chinese human rights violations makes it easy to forget that the exhibits also toured China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (not to mention Japan and Korea and beyond). Given the paradoxical centrality of Chinese identity to the production of the plastinated cadaver exhibits and the active suppression of this identity to audiences, surprisingly few secondary accounts consider Chinese media responses to the exhibits. If anything, we hear instead a generalization about how "Asians" are uniquely receptive to the plastinated cadaver exhibits. For example, in a catalogue-style volume about the *Body Worlds* produced by von Hagens as part of his enterprise, Angelina Whalley compares reception of an early exhibit in Mannheim to reception of an exhibit in Osaka, arguing that "[w]hile in Japan there were virtually no controversial discussions (as was subsequently also

the case in other Asian exhibition venues)—presumably because of that society's primary emphasis on consensus, in Germany the proponents and opponents of the exhibition have engaged in the most heated debates." She adds moreover that "[v]isitors in Osaka (in 1998) had been comparatively restrained in expressing their opinions; this can probably be explained by the rather typical, conventional shyness of the Japanese to behave demonstrably or to take a decisive position on an issue" [*sic*].[30] Here and elsewhere in Western-language media, one finds almost no discussion of actual Chinese responses to the exhibits, whether in the form of reactions to the use of "Chinese" bodies or to debates about the ethics of putting the human body on display outside of medical and fine arts teaching contexts.[31]

"Perfecting the Regulations": Mainland China

As we have seen in the case of the controversy surrounding the use by members of the Cadaver Group of human bodies in experimental art of the new millennium, in fact there has been no shortage of heated debates in China about the public display of cadaverous materials (debates, one might add, with clear precedents in the early twentieth-century legalization of dissection practice, also outlined in chapter 2), to the extent that some artists were forced to remind critics that using cadavers to learn anatomy is common practice not just in medical schools but in art schools like the China Central Academy of Fine Arts. Indeed, when in 2002 Chen Lüsheng criticized the work of the cadaver artists for being derivative, his concern was not so much that Gunther von Hagens had beaten the Chinese artists to the punch by using corpses in his exhibitions but essentially that the plastinated bodies made poor role models for aspiring artists. "In the so-called breakthrough into the forbidden territory of 'employing corpses,'" wrote Chen, "we can see its origins in the exhibition of corpses . . . by a German surgeon. . . . However, that surgeon intertwines the sciences of art, anatomy, museology, ethics, and law. When Chinese performance artists follow in his footsteps, where is the 'breakthrough'?"[32] Indicating his awareness of the *Body Worlds's* controversial reception in Europe, as well as its success, Chen adds that "the rotted corpses, conjoined fetuses, skinned human bodies of the German doctor's exhibition of corpses . . . spurred great debate in Europe, the media fueled the flames, and this attracted even more viewers, which in turn produced healthy economic benefits. . . . Thus, the similarly extreme exhibitions of Chinese artists have a market,

and beyond a doubt, have economic interests."[33] In his cosmopolitan way, Chen objects to the profit-driven sensationalism of von Hagens's exhibits because it sends the wrong message about art. Meanwhile, a number of journalistic treatments and published personal accounts treat familiar questions of ethics, the convergence of science and art, and the possibility of a pure reading of the plastinated bodies as "sculpture."[34]

While Chen's critique might be framed in nationalistic terms—his support of a better, more original, and less financially motivated body of work by Chinese artists exhibiting internationally—other responses take on more explicitly nationalistic tones. In an article describing the plastination of artifacts such as the contents of Ming and Qing tombs, Neolithic relics, and the remains of sixty-seven formerly missing "Chinese Warriors" (鸦片战争将士) from the First Opium War, for instance, one author praises plastination's potential to fan the fires of patriotism, remarking that the technology can "make valuable contributions to demonstrating the extraordinary span of Chinese history and kindling patriotism among the Chinese" and that plastination of the troops in particular can preserve "a significant piece of the historical memory of the Opium War."[35] Echoing the complaints of medical missionaries a century earlier, meanwhile, an article titled "Body Exhibition: Sense and Sensibility" ("'尸体展': 理性与情感的争论") contrasts traditional reverence for the dead with the scientific priorities of "using dissection to improve the lives of the living" (医学家解剖尸体， 是为了让更多活着的人活得更好). An article in the journal "Chinese Technology News" called simply "Cadaver" ("尸体") praises Sui Hongjin's exhibit at the Natural History Museum in Beijing in 2004 and criticizes China for relying on old-fashioned anatomical education when such advanced technologies are now available.[36]

Relatedly, then, another recurring theme in Mainland trade and academic journals concerns the benefits and drawbacks of using plastination technology in education and industry. A 2002 medical journal article argues that plastination can contribute to the development of medical imaging in China; the article points out that plastination might be used to preserve biopsies with their original morphological traits intact, which could in turn be used in conjunction with CAT and MRI technologies when diagnosing lesser-understood diseases.[37] A different article points out the prevalence of "problem-based learning," or PBL, models for anatomical education in China, weighing the costs and benefits of using expensive

plastinate models in the classroom, where they had been well received by students; while by contrast yet another piece argues against the use of plastinates in anatomical learning, citing their rigidity, the fact that they cannot be dissected in class, and the fact that some aspects of anatomy would be difficult to observe in dehydrated bodies.[38] A significant thread in trade journals also concerns how to improve plastination techniques. These articles feature technical discussions of the merits of the two primary methods for plastinating in China: room-temperature air-tight plastination as practiced in facilities in Nanjing and Cunqing, and low-temperature air-tight methods practiced in Dalian and Qingdao.[39] Dialogues such as these—debates on the didactic merits of plastination and published discussions of the industrial process—suggest the existence of lively "intramural" discussion of the development of plastination technology in China.

When published reports about ethical concerns appear, they tend to fall into one of three categories: a politically complicated discourse linked by only a few degrees of separation to the "religious" group Falun Gong; a kind of "party line" reporting that mediates public fears about body-snatching and the plastination industry with public health and education agendas; and personal critique. Recurring themes in writing connected to the Falun Gong include statements noting the proximity of the plastination facilities in Dalian to labor camps, discussions of the low cost of skilled labor required to keep plastination facilities profitable, and reports of open calls for kidney sales in Shanghai and Liaoning. Falun Gong narratives might feature corpses that are found lacking their vital organs but bearing the telltale marks of surgical incisions, or corrupt police who facilitate the harvesting of usable organs for sale to hospitals and then offer "spare parts" to von Hagens and Sui Hongjin for plastination.[40] Narratives such as these do not offer a journalistic account of actual events; they are impossible to substantiate. (The activist Harry Wu, whom I mentioned earlier for his testimony before Congress about Chinese organ harvesting and his involvement in protests against plastinated cadaver exhibits in Seattle and San Francisco, maintains that the exhibits may use the bodies of executed prisoners, but he has since dismissed the Falun Gong accounts.[41]) Indeed, on deeper investigation, many such narratives turn out to be an ouroboros: direct translations into Chinese of the same speculative (e.g., compelling but still unsubstantiated and sometimes sensationalistic) reporting in German and English that ignited the controversy around the *Body Worlds* exhibits in the first place.[42]

By contrast, a number of public-health-minded discussions of the plastinated cadaver exhibits aim to correct misconceptions and calm fears, encourage organ donation, and address rumors of forced harvesting head-on, emphasizing, for instance, the careful production of individual specimens and the extreme unlikelihood of recognizing anyone individually. An interview from a Dalian radio station addresses controversy related to an incident in which a Liaoning hospital sold body parts to a plastination company and the sale was subsequently declared illegal. The interviewee, a law expert, contends that although people might have heard urban legends about the bodies of relatives being stolen and later discovered without vital organs, they should not be discouraged from donating their bodies to science. To dispel any fears that listeners may have, the legal expert tries to shed light on police procedure when encountering an unclaimed cadaver: rather than handing it directly over to hospitals or plastination factories, he explains, officers first try to identify the body and the cause of death; an unclaimed body would never be "donated" immediately. The expert urges listeners not to fear that a relative's body will be declared unidentified and sold. China's laws are constantly being perfected, he explains, and new regulations regarding donation and dissection of cadavers are springing up all over the country. "Our nation will definitely have perfected regulations in this regard in future" (我们国家以后在这方面肯定有更为完善的规定).[43]

Sui Hongjin himself appears frequently in mainstream media. In an article from 2004, Sui aims to reassure readers that all bodies for plastination are sourced legally from medical schools, that they have died of natural causes, that the bodies are completely dead before being plastinated, and that they are always prepared in such a way that no one could ever identify them individually.[44] Putting a sort of nationalist spin on the question of provenance, in a 2005 piece titled "Plastinated Bodies Can't Scare Shenzhenians" ("人体塑化标本吓不到深圳人"), Sui even emphasizes that—unlike von Hagens's plant in Dalian, which uses bodies imported from abroad—Sui's company uses only "domestically donated cadavers" (国内捐献的遗体).[45] In this same article, however, we find an unusually direct reference to the use of the corpses of executed criminals—a slip of the tongue, an editorial error, a misquote?—but an admission nonetheless: "Von Hagens' company," explains Sui, "is German, and the bodies come from abroad. Only his production facilities are located in Dalian. But the Institute [Sui's own facility] is a publicly funded work unit [事业单位], and the bodies are domesti-

4.2 Photo of a plastinated cadaver executing a flying front kick, a classic martial arts pose. Published in *Renminbao* (*People's Daily*, 人民报), March 17, 2006, with the caption "你不知他是否是你自己失踪的亲人" (You can't tell whether he's your own long-lost kin?).

cally donated cadavers. Of the 11 plastinated bodies (including 2 females) included in the exhibit, *some are those of executed criminals, and some are medical patients who died of disease*" (emphasis mine).[46]

Direct critiques of the exhibits are fewer and farther between. An article from 2006 in the *People's Daily* features the image of a flayed figure performing a kung fu pose; the caption reads "You can't tell whether he's your own long-lost kin?" (see fig. 4.2). The author of this piece suggests that von Hagens initially avoided mounting a plastination exhibit in China because he used Chinese bodies and was afraid that someone might recognize one.

The author cites a "friend" who claims that in von Hagens's exhibits, only German bodies have the skin left intact; Chinese bodies, by contrast, have been flayed, the author observes, making recognition impossible. The author reads the prohibition against taking pictures of the cadavers' faces as a tacit admission of guilt and asks how von Hagens would feel about having his own body flayed and put on display for the whole world to see. He concludes that plastination is "the art of the devil" (这就是魔鬼的'艺术') and that "we must not allow this kind of thing to continue in China!" (不能让这样的事情在中国继续发生了!).[47]

"We Are All Migrant Laborers"

In many ways the various perspectives discussed in the previous section would later come together in the work of the mainland artist Zhang Dali (张大力), who is known among other things for his early advocacy regarding the plight of domestic migrant laborers in China (an advocacy that is now increasingly taken up by migrant laborers themselves).[48] Interestingly, while Zhang had contributed a piece to the 2000 *Fuck Off* exhibit described in chapter 2, the piece did not treat questions of the body directly, reproducing instead what had become his signature graffiti-style profile of a head spray-painted on the bones of a traditional building slated for demolition. Starting around the same time, however, Zhang took off in a new direction, scaling up a series of controversial shows both in China and in Europe that used the figure of the body in ways that resonated at least in terms of medium and modality more directly with the works of the Cadaver Group. In an installation called *Roupidong mingong* (肉皮冻民工, *Laborers in Aspic Jelly*), for example, Zhang crafted heads out of meat-stock gelatin. When these turned out to be too perishable for his project, he began working in resin, starting in 2003 a piece called *Chinese Offspring* (种族) (see fig. 4.3), which consists of multiple full-body casts of migrant laborers suspended from exhibition-space ceilings, the better to reflect (as the art critic Feng Boyi has pointed out) the migrant laborers' "extremely low position in society and the plight of their inverted reality."[49]

But casting people's faces meant that the figures' eyes would always be closed, and the expression of form was still one step removed from the human body itself, contradicting what Zhang saw as an objective of "new sculpture": to reduce the distance between artist and subject, putting the lie to classical

4.3 Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

sculpture's obsession with human form.[50] So when Zhang discovered that, just like medical researchers, he too could commission bodies from Gunther von Hagens for use in his exhibition projects (a moment he referred to as "a turning point,"一个契机),[51] the artist commissioned five bodies—three males and two females, the age of which "couldn't be too old, some with abdomens open, some with chests open"—for a 2008–9 exhibit that he called, simply, *Us* (我们).[52] This modality, Zhang felt, brought him closer to realizing the potential of "new sculpture" to highlight those qualities that do or do not make us human—and in particular to highlight the essential materiality or "thing"-ness of the human body in a highly commodified form. As Zhang remarked in a 2010 interview with Du Xiyun (杜曦云), "When I see the flesh [of the bodies in the plastination factories]

being shifted around and separated and processed, I feel like from birth until death people are just a commodity [商品], perhaps slightly cheaper when alive and slightly more costly when dead due to needing to be processed yet again as part of production." (When Du points out that all of this reminds him of the final scene in Yu Hua's short story "One Kind of Reality"—that lengthy scene of fraternal dissection discussed in chapter 2 of this book—Zhang adds, "That's right. It [the body] is a thing [物件], [a thing] that can be manipulated at any time . . . [and] these 'things' are our mirror. Moreover, what's even weirder is that I am making these 'things' legally. I can pay, get a receipt, and request that the manufacturer produce them by a deadine."[53]) For Zhang, the plastinated cadaver as durable (nonperishable) sculptural modality also allowed him to make the plight of the migrant laborers more explicitly universal, in that he could now treat the project in what are essentially archival terms. With *Us*, in other words, Zhang could finally create works "that Chinese viewers could look at in thirty, forty, fifty or more years," at a time when various factors might have caused changes in the human form, such that the plastinated-bodies-as-sculptural-installation were in effect "the kind of artwork[s] made for history."[54]

"What's Good for Others Is Good for You": Taiwan

In Taiwan, public discussion of the plastinated human body exhibits exploded after 2004, when both von Hagens's *Body Worlds* (人體奧妙展) and a Taiwanese competitor's show, *Body Exploration* (人體大探索展), reached the island simultaneously, competing head-to-head for ticket sales.[55] Perhaps due to this coincidental oversaturation of plastinated body information, as well as to the well-publicized battles over copyright that ensued, Taiwanese reporting on the plastinated cadaver exhibits seems to be both more self-reflexively neutral and more explicit about questions of commerce than its Mainland counterparts.[56] Taiwanese reporting covers everything from official involvement in the exhibits (for example, as part of public health campaigns that advocated "using the corpse as a teacher" [以屍為師] and organ donation campaigns) to frank comparisons between von Hagens's and Sui's exhibits, to detailed accounts of individual reactions to encounters with the bodies.

As momentum gathered for the von Hagens show at the Taiwan National Science Education Center (台灣科學教育館), for instance, media

chronicled the procedural details of the Ministry of Education's debate about whether to allow children under twelve to attend, describing the chief curator's decision to add cautionary signs near controversial specimens such as the plastinated pregnant woman, optional guided tours, and emergency care units for visitors who found the show too disturbing and needed to recover.[57] A number of articles tracked official endorsements of the production of the plastinated human body exhibits—seen by some as an opportunity to advance various public health initiatives—by well-known doctors, academics, and political figures like the president of the Taipei University of Medicine, the director of the Department of Education in Chiayi City, or an authority from the Traditional Chinese Medicine University Hospital, and the newspaper *Minsheng Bao* initiated a column on "The Wonders of the Dissected Human Body" by respected clinician Zhang Tianjun.[58] News media also helped spread the word that teachers and blood donors would be admitted to the exhibit for free.[59] With both von Hagens's and Sui's exhibits, newspapers chronicled record numbers of visitors, reported optimistically on the increasing number of people registering for organ donation upon seeing the exhibits, and emphasized the unique educational benefits of specimens tailor-made for Chinese markets, specimens demonstrating Taiji, for instance, as well as the effects of SARS and the H1N1 virus.[60] Many references to the plastinated human body exhibits starting from this period refer to individual plastinates as "大體老師," or "body teacher," to emphasize both their educational role and the kind of respect with which they must be treated.

Taiwanese media also chronicled numerous individual reactions to the show, both critical and laudatory.[61] A Buddhist nun compared looking at plastinated human bodies to a visit to the cemetery; she saw both as occasions for contemplating the release of attachment to the flesh.[62] The president of the Fujen Theological Seminary, a Catholic priest, reportedly disapproved of the display of human bodies as commercial artifacts—especially the specimen of the woman with the unborn fetus in situ. The president of the Terminal Care Association, meanwhile, expressed reservations about the effects of the exhibits on public comprehension of death; an anatomist reportedly argued that an exhibition alone can accomplish little in terms of education about life and death; and a noted scholar expressed concern about the ethics of determining where to draw the line between the exhibitable and the unexhibitable.[63] One author recounted in detail her personal

experience of an exhibit, noting that one of the most disturbing things about it was the fact that many specimens were not encased in glass. Visitors could touch them, she noted, which made them seem somehow more alive. She added: "Frankly I couldn't care less about looking at a pile of organs, but seeing a head laid out in a glass cabinet is another story!" (老實說看到一堆器官沒什麼感覺， 可是看到一顆頭放在玻璃櫃裡那是另一回事).[64]

Questions about provenance do appear in Taiwanese media treatments of the exhibits, although generally without referring to the provocative discourse of human rights violations. In announcing the *Body Worlds* exhibition at the Taiwan National Science Education Center, for instance, the *Apple Daily* reported that the show's convener (von Hagens) "claims most of the bodies in display are authorized by the subjects when they were alive," while a discussion of the competing *Body Exploration* notes that the convener has taken pains to describe how the exhibited bodies are all procured legally from medical colleges and hospitals in China and have been certified by China's Ministry of Health.[65] A *Lianhe bao* report praises von Hagens as a great scientist and gives an account of the debates and "fierce arguments from conservatives" in London in 2002; but it mentions only debates about ethics and education rather than questions of Chinese provenance.[66] For a special report in the *People's Life Daily*, the reporter Lin Jinxiu flew to Dalian to observe von Hagens's "human body plastination factory" (人體塑化工廠) in person. While Lin detailed the production process, describing approvingly the advanced training of the factory workers and von Hagens's obvious pride in his work, the report contained no reference to, or speculation about, the origin of the bodies in the plant.[67] Individual references to "rumors" about the bodies' provenance make their way into Taiwanese reporting just the same, however, indicating public awareness of this debate as well; the woman who described a distaste for severed heads in glass cases also referred to viewing three bodies that had been "carved into 200 pieces," including one "rumored to be a criminal" (聽說有一個是囚犯).[68]

One could dismiss Mainland Chinese media for having an investment in minimizing questions about the sourcing of bodies in state prisons, just as one could accuse Taiwanese media of having an interest in minimizing human rights critiques in order to avoid damaging delicate cross-Strait relations at a time when Taiwanese-run factories were being established in Southern China at a feverish pace, and when there was increased momen-

tum toward direct transit and commerce (not to mention political shifts in Taiwan government toward less separatist policies). Yet other key aspects of the two regional medias should not be discounted. If one notes, for example, that Mainland Chinese media I've described treat the plastinated body exhibits as a means of expressing a certain kind of qualified nationalism, of supporting public education about science, or of improving public health literacy, then the Taiwanese media portray the exhibits from the point of view of a national (if not a Nationalist) public health agenda—that is, as an opportunity for promoting anatomical education, encouraging organ and blood donation, and improving public awareness of health and body concerns.

A 2004 report in the *People's Life Daily* epitomizes this ideal of civic-mindedness when it outlines the standards that members of the public need to aspire to when contemplating becoming body donors for a plastinated body exhibit. Using the term *body teacher* to refer respectfully to plastinated human bodies, the article reminds potential donors that to qualify as a "body teacher" one must meet several important criteria. Donors must not have had major organs removed, the article notes, nor have any contagious diseases. They must not have a body mass index outside the normal range, and the cause of death must not be accident or suicide. "If you are determined to become a body teacher," the article concludes, "then you must be sound of body and mind; and thus what's good for others is good for you" (要立志當個大體老師， 必須擁有健康的身心， 才 "利人又利己").[69] In Taiwanese media characterizations, in other words, a model donor is a model citizen.

Dead Serious: Hong Kong

If published responses to plastinated human body exhibits in Mainland China emphasize a certain nationalism, pragmatism, and concern with public education, and if reporting from Taiwan leans toward a certain civic-mindedness combined with sober public discussion of institutional concerns, then the media treatments of plastinated human body exhibits I reviewed from Hong Kong incorporate all these elements—while adding a more explicitly commercial focus and the occasional moment of comedy into the mix. Like the transparency of accounts of debates in Taiwanese media, the Hong Kong newspapers I surveyed also chronicled the lengthy deliberations in 2003 among the Hong Kong Medical Association, the Hong Kong Red Cross, and the Hong Kong Association for Mathematics

and Science Education about whether to endorse a plastinated human body exhibit introduced from Japan by Interchina Agents Ltd.[70] The announcement for a new version of von Hagens's *Wonders of the Body* exhibit (人體奧妙展) shown two years previously in Taiwan emphasizes the newer exhibit's technological improvements and increased number of "hands on" exhibits, referring directly to reports from Taiwan media that were clearly meant to prime the Hong Kong market; the announcement also reassures viewers that the bodies are "unclaimed corpses from the interior" (內地無人認領的尸體), indicating the existence of mainstream discourse about questions of provenance.[71] Like Taiwanese and Chinese media sources before them, Hong Kong reports also emphasize the educational value of the exhibits, adopting the term *body teacher* (大體老師) and including accounts of individual reactions to the exhibits, such as one woman who described feeling deeply disturbed by the exhibits.[72]

My small sample of Hong Kong media responses to the plastinated cadavers also exhibits something else relatively rare in Western-language media: an irreverent sense of humor.[73] A 2005 article in *Da gong bao* refers to a certain plastinated figure displayed in a "parliamentary" diorama and wearing a pale blue bowtie, an apparent reference to the then chief executive and head of Hong Kong government, Donald Tsang Yam-Kuen, and concludes that the exhibit demonstrates how "nobody is immortal, regardless of status."[74] An issue of the Cantonese-language "infotainment" magazine *East Touch* (東 *Touch*) from the same year reports on how the "new, improved" *Body Worlds* exhibit has inspired a new line of "egg capsule" toys imported from Japan.[75] And a month later, the same magazine featured a discussion of the challenges facing a Discovery Channel program that aimed to use "appropriate imaging techniques" (適當的顯像技術) to illustrate heterosexual reproduction. One way of dealing with the representational dilemma of illustrating orgasms, the author mischievously suggests, might be to use plastination technology: "If you get turned on by watching a heap of translucent red dangly people having an orgasm, you need a doctor!" (如果你見到一堆紅當當的半透明人性高潮都嗌興奮的話， 你應該去睇醫生).[76] Little could the author know that von Hagens would make a similar argument only a few years later concerning one of his latest controversial plastinate models: a pair of cadavers engaged in (hetero)sexual intercourse. The anatomist argued that the specimen was not meant to be sexually stimulating and that it was made with the consent of both donors,

victims of lung cancer who did not know each other in life.[77] Part of a series that von Hagens called "The Cycle of Life," the provocative figure went on to be displayed in venues from Berlin to Zurich to Capetown.[78] But when it reached Taipei, representatives from the National Taiwan Science Education Center met to discuss whether that particular specimen should be allowed in the exhibit. The results of their deliberations were headline news: the answer was no.[79]