

## Knit Together: Movana Chen and the Politics of Identity in a Global Society

The streets of Hong Kong are likely to produce a sense of familiarity in most visitors because they contain many features found in transnational metropolises across the globe. In traversing this vast urban space, one finds numerous skyscrapers rising above a grid of streets teeming with vehicles and pedestrians. Most of the burgeoning population wears Western-style dresses, T-shirts, jeans, hats, and business suits. To the global citizen today, this scene is hardly out of the ordinary. If you happened to be walking the streets of Hong Kong between May 14 and 18, 2008, near the popular designer clothing store Shanghai Tang, however, you may have noticed a strange being, a figure covered from head to toe in a sock-like garment, silently weaving her way through the crowds.

This mysterious figure who emerged from Shanghai Tang is Hong Kong based artist Movana Chen. Her public meandering was one of many performances during which she donned one of her staple artworks, a fabric made from magazines knitted together, called *Body Containers*, and confronted the bustling world of the everyday. When viewing a video recording of one of these happenings, it is intriguing to observe the reactions of those around her. Most people quickly pass her by, moving their heads slightly in her direction with a look of curiosity. Others shamelessly take pictures, some with their cameras pointing directly in her face, as she moves past. Others seem to be frightened, moving quickly out of her way, exchanging looks and whispers with their companions. The reaction of the latter group is arguably justified, as her appearance and movements are unsettling. The artist is shorter than most of her “audience,” and she occasionally stops to strike a pose in which she tucks her chin down toward her chest and bends forward at the waist. On a street pulsing with constant activity, her figure stands out as a solitary foil. Chen created this work for ART HK08, the first international art fair in Hong Kong. She was commissioned to construct this body container by Shanghai Tang. It is knitted from approximately 427 shredded pages of their ready-to-wear catalogues.<sup>1</sup> Chen’s works are interdisciplinary and are recognized both in the worlds of contemporary art and fashion.

Historically, critics of the Western fashion world have shown great interest in stereotypically Chinese or Asian designs. As a result, many designers in Hong Kong and the mainland have resorted to a self-exoticization in order to make themselves more marketable on an international level. Two

examples from Hong Kong, traced by Hazel Clark in her article “Fashioning ‘China Style,’” are Shanghai Tang and Blanc de Chine. Though the two companies are very different, they both developed “brand identities based on ‘Chineseness’, with the shared aims of being the first luxury Chinese brand to capture the global market.”<sup>2</sup> Shanghai Tang was established in 1994 by entrepreneur David Tang. Its original goal was to revive the fashion of Shanghai during the 1930s. The brand utilized the skills of Shanghai tailors who had moved to Hong Kong as refugees in the 1940s and 50s. Attached tags advertised the slogan “Made by Chinese” as opposed to the more negative “Made in China.”<sup>3</sup> Its first Hong Kong retail space was decorated with a nostalgic motif, an attempt to capture the aura of historical China. David Tang’s primary goal in choosing this motif was to thematically



Above and following page:  
Movana Chen, *Body Container*  
ST, 2008, performance at ART  
HK08, costume made from  
knitted shredded magazines.  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Shanghai Tang.

connect Shanghai at its height of power with Hong Kong of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The goods sold, however, did not fully and authentically draw from historical sources. Instead, they “playfully parodied historical and contemporary Chinese cultural icons, such as Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping.”<sup>5</sup> The discrepancy between the reality of 1930s Shanghai and what was actually sold in the store can be explained by the fact that Shanghai Tang’s primary clientele were not Hong Kong natives. Rather, “the majority of the customers were local expatriates and foreign tourists, who were not seeking authenticity but recognizable and acceptable signs of Chineseness.”<sup>6</sup> Since that time, David Tang sold his majority share to a Swiss luxury goods company, Richemont. The new owners sought to modernize Shanghai



Tang's designs, transforming them according to the trends of the global market. In their designs, they purposefully moved away from the kitschy designs popular under original ownership in favour of those that are more in keeping with the aesthetics of historical China.

Given Shanghai Tang's self-Orientalizing tendencies and its collaboration with Chen for ART HK08, it is fitting to analyze Chen's *Body Containers* with this historical context in mind. From this perspective, Chen's *Body Containers* could express the boundaries many Asian designers feel when competing in an international, Western-dominated field. Shanghai Tang catalogues are symbols of their success as a brand. Their success, however, has reinforced the trend of self-exoticization in the Chinese fashion design market, thus limiting other lesser known designers who wish to break free of this trend. Furthermore, the pose that she occasionally strikes during her *Body Container* performances could be seen as a bow, a traditional Chinese gesture reserved for special occasions such as funerals, ancestral worship, and special ceremonies. This movement in conjunction with her mummified form could be seen as an ironic response to Western expectations of Eastern fashion designers.

The problem such limitations put on up and coming designers echoes the opinion of a young, independent designer from Hong Kong called "Leonard," interviewed by Lise Skov for her 1995 article "Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma." His position as a Hong Kong designer in this context is appropriate, since Chen has spent much of her adult life living and working in Hong Kong, even though she was born in mainland China. Leonard expressed embarrassment at Hong Kong fashion designers who relied on traditional Chinese aesthetics because of his feeling that much of China's past is not shared with Hong Kong. For instance, in design school he once did a project on Chinese minorities: "While he felt that they were completely unknown to him, and therefore exciting, he also felt ambivalent about taking inspiration from mainland China. It was as if it were not legitimate for him to use this source, or as he put it himself: 'I felt as if I stole it from the Chinese.'" <sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he was disgusted by the simplification of a "Chinese" style based on the expectations of the West. An attractive alternative for Leonard is deconstruction fashion in which designers "consciously try to break dressmaking conventions, for example, by placing seams on the outside of a garment and by experimenting with the way in which the cloth is cut."<sup>8</sup> For Leonard, deconstruction was a way of expressing a view of China that cannot be conveyed by a familiar hemline or seam. Chen's deconstruction of fashion through the shredding of magazines seems to be in line with Leonard's design philosophies.

In Leonard's opinion, deconstruction is an appropriate avenue for establishing an aesthetic identity for Chinese fashion design that is in keeping with his personal sense of identity. The deconstruction that Leonard advocates is based on previously established patterns, comparable

to the reworking of human features that Picasso enacted in his cubist portraits. In her *Body Containers*, Chen takes this concept a step further. Her original act of deconstruction is literal—she shreds fashion catalogues into long, thin strips. Her deconstruction is followed by a reconstruction that does not respond to previously established patterns from fashion design, but follows the specific proportions of individual bodies. When they are finished, her containers retain the height and contours of the figures for which they were made. Chen's *Body Containers*, therefore, could be the ultimate form of self-expression in fashion design. It is questionable whether these would be acceptable expressions of Chinese (or, more specifically, Hong Kong) identity for Leonard. This might depend on the types of magazines used in the fabric of the containers. Because the *Body Containers* for ART HK08 were made from catalogues of a Chinese fashion company, it would be easy to read these as an alternative option for Chinese design aesthetics. But, other *Body Containers* were created from magazines from other countries, some of which are not fashion magazines at all. These works, therefore, could express a common identity characterized by what physically makes us human rather than an expression of national identity.

One obvious aspect of Chen's body containers is their restrictive nature. They are designed to conceal rather than reveal their inhabitants. Chen seems to be tapping into a duality that is embedded in the concept of fashion. On the one hand, it is used by many as a means to express a unique identity, to set oneself apart from the rest. In this way, fashion can be seen as liberating. On the other hand, the fashion world is restrictive because it creates a culture in which a few decide what is "fashionable" for the many who blindly follow every trend put forth by well-known designers. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the field has lent itself to a Western centrism stemming from the fact that the world of high fashion has historically revolved around Western hubs such as New York, Paris, and Milan. For Chen, the use of catalogues in her designs is highly significant. She states, "The use of magazine pages symbolizes the idea of how media contains our self-perception through fashion."<sup>9</sup> Chen is at once imprisoned by the fashion world as symbolized by the catalogue pages that constricted her movement and liberated by the creative autonomy she enjoys as a contemporary artist and designer. One perspective on the relationship between the artist and Shanghai Tang was expressed by Joyce Hu, the company's marketing director: "We instantly connected to Chen's work for her focus on the relationship between the psychology behind fashion consumption and the language of media. . . . The body container challenges us as a fashion brand to step outside our comfort zone to be more innovative."<sup>10</sup> Chen's unique stance, with one foot firmly planted in the world of fashion and the other in that of contemporary art, could enable her to influence the power struggles occurring between East and West in the fashion world. When the mega-corporations of Hong Kong stop relying on self-Orientalization for international attention, new roads may be opened for lesser-known designers like Leonard who refuse to compromise

their creative integrity. More recently, Chen has continued to collaborate with fashion media. In September 2009, she exhibited a body container at a Beijing store as part of Vogue's International Fashion's Night Out. She also participated in the Gyeonggi Museum's Fashion Ethics: Wear Good exhibition in Korea from July to October of the same year.

Because of her position as a woman and her choice of artistic medium, Chen's works also bring to mind the role of women in the production level of a globalized consumer society. After the 1979 decollectivization in mainland China, many peasants from China's interior moved to industrial cities to make money for themselves and their families. Additionally, many manufacturers from Taiwan and Hong Kong relocated to mainland China because of the large amount of cheap labour available. The most enticing cities for relocation were those in Special Economic Zones, particularly in Guangdong province. It is noteworthy that among these migrant workers, women outnumbered men.<sup>11</sup> In the minds of the migrant workers, these special economic zones symbolized a world of opportunity for economic freedom.

In reality, many factories underpaid and overworked their employees. This was particularly true for the female workers. In her article "Factory Regimes of Chinese Capitalism: Different Cultural Logics in Labor Control," Ching Kwan Lee studies the management politics of two factories owned by the same company, one in Shenzhen and one in Hong Kong. In the Shenzhen factory, the women were generally young and single. Men held higher positions in the hierarchy, such as foreman and supervisor, while the women generally worked on the production line. These women were referred to as "maidens from the north," emphasizing the "... young women's single status, immaturity, imminent marriage, short-term commitment to factory work in Shenzhen, low job aspirations, and low motivation to learn skills."<sup>12</sup> Although the transnational corporation created new spaces for women to make their own money, they were constricted within a bound hierarchical system without much chance of promotion. Their wages were generally low, and they worked so many hours that they had limited free time. They were also physically bound to the company because their living quarters were within the factory premises and strict curfews were enforced.

This is just one example of the thousands of factories located in Southern China taking advantage of the migrating workforce. The position in which these women have been placed provides another interpretive context for Chen's *Body Containers*. It is intriguing to note that she was born in Chaozhou, in eastern Guangdong, where she lived until the mid 1980s, after which she moved with her family to Shenzhen and then Hong Kong. At the same time that migrants continued to pour into Guangdong for jobs, Chen's family moved to a place where manufacturing jobs were dwindling. Although she was not part of this world, the constriction and elasticity of her *Body Containers* could symbolize both the freedom and constraints felt by contemporary women in a country where gender roles have undergone a radical shift over the last few decades.



Left: Movana Chen, *Body Containers*, 2005–08, sculptural installation of knitted shredded magazines. Courtesy of the artist and Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing.

Right: Movana Chen, *Deconstructing*, 2004–08, installation of knitted shredded magazines. Courtesy of the artist and Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing.

Chen has also created knitted sculptures that are different in shape from those of *Body Containers*. Some of these works were exhibited from September to November 2008 at Pekin Fine Arts in Beijing in an exhibition titled *Two Way Communication*. In this show, she exhibited some *Body Containers*, but she also created a large rectangular textile specifically for the show that stretches from ceiling to floor. The bottom edge is uneven, with circular and rectangular holes patterning the fabric. The textile is knitted from an array of “art related magazines of various languages and cultural backgrounds.”<sup>13</sup> A press release from the gallery states: “By recycling consumer commodities into new forms of artistic expression, she implicitly asks the question, ‘Where and when are magazines still useful?’ Her art practices of knitting and reconstructing question the original language of the magazines, subverting their message in an alternative means of ‘reading’ print media.”<sup>14</sup> Though many of the magazines cannot be read by the artist (because of language barriers), she has taken the commodification of the global consumer society and restructured it into something understandable to her and, it is hoped, understandable to the viewer. In an artist’s statement Chen explains:

The reconstructed paper pieces represent wishes, and are transformed into meanings about daily life. Even though the viewers might not understand these words printed on the shredded papers, the action they take in viewing implies communication, which then breaks the limitation of verbal language exchange. Art thus transforms into a connection with life in an understandable way. It also becomes a focus as well as a sharing of life through various methods by different people.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of art creating a space for communication was especially evident in her 2007 exhibition at the 10th Seoul Fringe Festival, in which she not only exhibited her wearable art (knitted garments that more closely resemble typical global fashions than the *Body Containers*), but also invited the guests





garments Chen made, the viewer is recontextualizing them according to his or her own tastes and personal experiences.

In her most recent project, Chen has turned her attention from magazines to books. For the exhibition *Travelling into My Bookshelf*, a touring art project, she knitted tapestries out of shredded books donated by friends. In a press release about the project from Shin Hwa Gallery, the author finds the change in media to be significant:

Magazines are often considered as a kind of quick read that are easily disposable. Books are rather different as they contain the owner's memories and the papers themselves maintain a unique smell as time goes by. Through the knitting process Chen has generated communication with her friends' memories.<sup>16</sup>

Left: Movana Chen, *Wear "Me" Out—Korea*, 2007, interactive installation at Hut Gallery, Seoul, knitted shredded magazines. Courtesy of the artist and Seoul Fringe Festival.

Right: Movana Chen, *Wear "Me" Out—Korea*, 2007, interactive installation at Hut Gallery, Seoul, knitted shredded magazines. Courtesy of the artist and Seoul Fringe Festival.



Movana Chen, *Her Piano* (left), *Their Comic Books* (right), 2009, knitted shredded books mounted on canvas, 100 x 100 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Shin Hwa Gallery, Hong Kong.

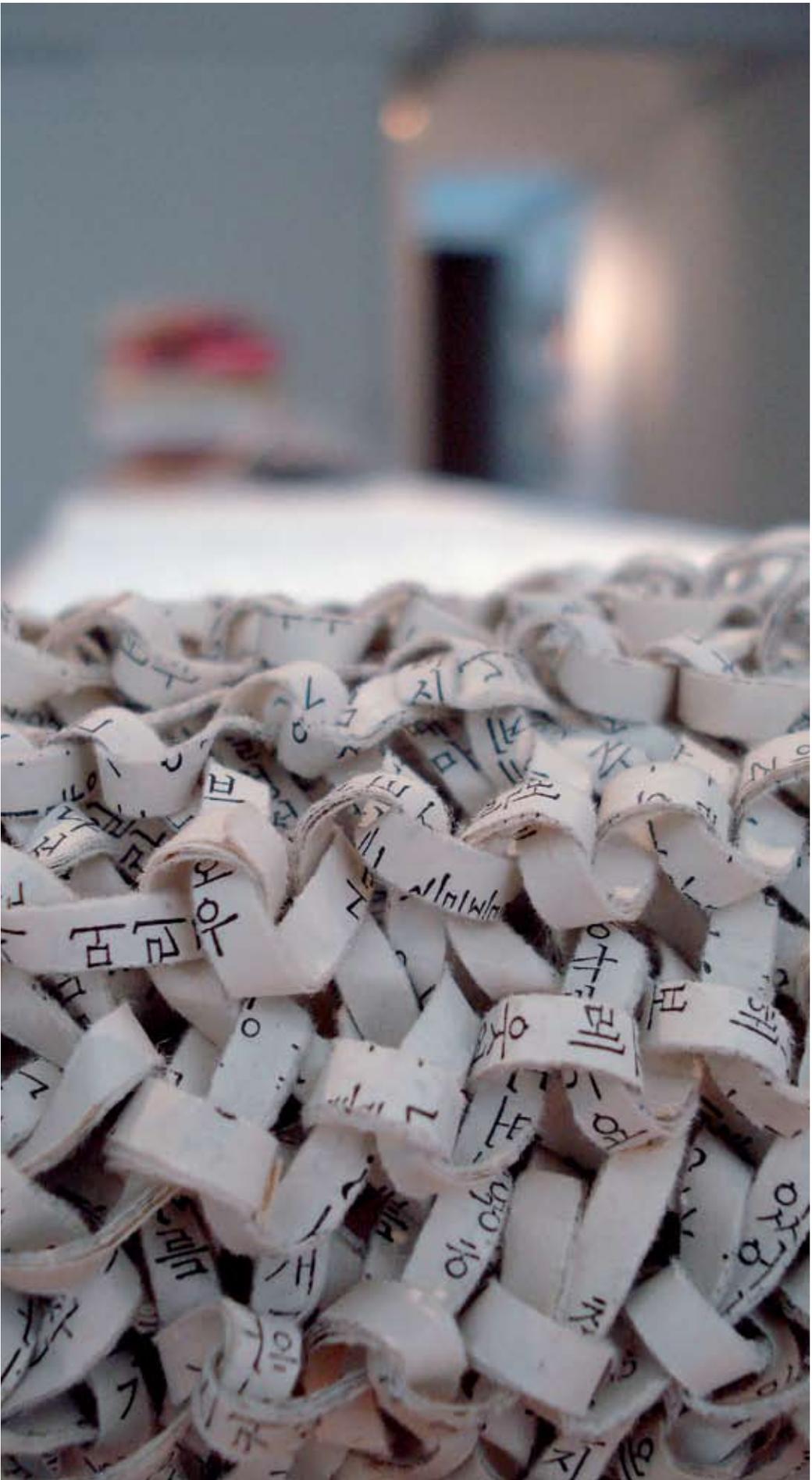
It is perhaps also significant that rather than fashioning the books into wearable art, the artist attached the knitted pages to canvases so they could be viewed on the gallery wall, like traditional paintings. This mode of exhibition, smaller in scale and less formidable than that of the *Body Containers*, invites the viewer to stand before the work for an extended period to read the knitted sentences. This project, like her wearable art, is

also a catalyst for uniting many different people; however, it is much more personal. The wearable art is made from magazines from different cultures and displays what the media from each of those cultures has defined as hip or chic. While Chen transforms these magazines into unique designs and invites others to try them on, these creations reflect her personality and taste similar to the way fashion magazines reflect the tastes of editors and consultants. These works represent a blending of global fashions into a new type of global fashion—to which the audience will relate according to his or her own tastes. Books, however, tend to resonate much more deeply in human consciousness than fashion magazines. Perusing someone's bookshelf (or lack thereof) tells me much more than examining his or her closet. A book has the potential to completely engage the senses. When I read a book that compels me in this way, I am constantly relating my lived experiences to those occurring in the book and my friends to the fictional



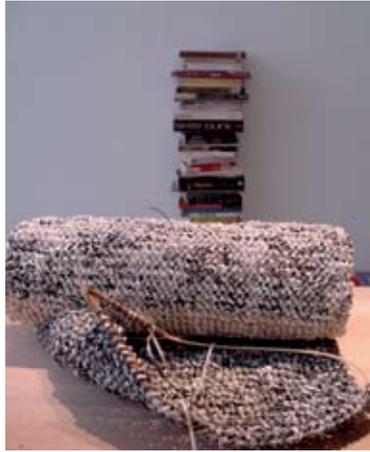
Movana Chen, *Fringe Memories*, 2009, knitted shredded books mounted on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Shin Hwa Gallery, Hong Kong.

characters. The books, therefore, become part of my history, my memories. This sentiment is shared by one of the artist's friends who donated her books for the exhibition: "To give you my beloved books and let you shred them into pieces, so that they can be reborn as a form of art, I feel reluctant and sad but at the same time very grateful."<sup>17</sup> When viewers examine each



Opposite Page: Movana Chen, *Travelling Into Your Bookshelf* (detail), 2009–, installation made of knitted shredded books. Courtesy of the artist and Shin Hwa Gallery, Hong Kong.

Right: Movana Chen, *Travelling Into Your Bookshelf*, 2009–, installation made of knitted shredded books. Courtesy of the artist and Shin Hwa Gallery, Hong Kong.



work, they are drawn into the words that have affected so many of the artist's friends. They may be faced with indecipherable markings of another language or a recognizable quote from a well-loved book. As they read, the undulating words on the canvas weave themselves into viewers' memories of characters or stories as well as the people and situations in their own lives triggered by those stories. To me,

this project, more than the others, most directly brings people of many different backgrounds physically and psychologically together.

Chen's knitted art projects are a microcosm for the many layers of communication that occur within a transnational economy. This communication revolves around power struggles, national identity, global identity, and personal relationships. Her works illustrate how deeply an individual's identity politics are fixed within the broader conflicts of gender and cultural hegemony. The intimate nature of her wearable art and knitted books introduces a new way of dealing with these power struggles that focuses on the fostering of individual relationships. Each strand represents an individual or cultural ideal or value. Alone the strands are flimsy and easily torn, but it is the communication that happens between individuals that affords these knitted forms both their strength and their malleability.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Movana Chen, "Body Containers: ART HK08," [www.movanachen.com/pj\\_08\\_4.htm](http://www.movanachen.com/pj_08_4.htm) (accessed December 2, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Hazel Clark, "Fashioning 'China style' in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity, and Globalization*, eds. Eugenia Paulicelli and Hazel Clark (New York: Routledge, 2009), 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> Lise Skov, "Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma," in *Re-Orienting Fashion*, eds. Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones (New York: Berg, 2003), 235.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Movana Chen, "Body Containers: ART HK08," [www.movanachen.com/pj\\_08\\_4.htm](http://www.movanachen.com/pj_08_4.htm) (accessed December 5, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ching Kwan Lee, "Factory Regimes of Chinese Capitalism: Different Cultural Logics in Labor Control," in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, eds. Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997), 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Movana Chen, "Two-way communication: Beijing," [www.movanachen.com/pj\\_08\\_5.htm](http://www.movanachen.com/pj_08_5.htm) (accessed March 1, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Movana Chen, "Artist Statement," [www.movanachen.com/pf\\_as.htm](http://www.movanachen.com/pf_as.htm) (accessed December 10, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Movana Chen, "Travelling into my bookshelf: HK," [www.movanachen.com/pj\\_09\\_4.htm](http://www.movanachen.com/pj_09_4.htm) (accessed December 13, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*