Xin Wang

Machine Envy

Плохо ваше дело! По-видимому, у вас образовалась душа [You are in trouble! It looks like you have a soul].

Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (1924)

The amount of data involved in managing society at all levels is increasing at terrific speed, as is the quantity of justifications for decisions. The decisions that will shape our society in the future will have to be arrived at, developed, and carried out through technology. But they must be based on the same criteria of respect and appreciation for human capacities, freedom, and responsibility that prevail in art. To paraphrase what Tristan Tzara said about Dada: 'No one can escape from the machine, only the machine can enable you to escape from destiny.'

K.G. Pontus Húlten, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968)

请控制灵魂对自由的渴望，不要开窗歌唱 [Please curb the soul's thirst for freedom and refrain from singing from open windows].

Drone message to a residential district during mass quarantine in Shanghai (2022)

Bots

Since around 2018, the social media platform Weibo has seen a curious rise in bots, by which I don't mean automated zombie accounts for hire, or coordinated troll armies, but rather humans simulating bots by creating accounts with 'bot-sounding' handles.[1] Some are innocuous and fun, like 'cat bots'; others serve specific subcultures as quasi-archives, like the 'Millennium bot', or deliver quotable gems, like the 'French literature bot'. Then there are accounts like the

1. E. Huang, 'A bot tweeting passages from modern China's most famous writer has been silenced', *Quartz*, 24 July 2019, <https://qz.com/1673653/china-shut-down-a-bot-tweeting-words-from-famous-writer-lu-xun/>.

'Soviet Jokes bot' or the 'Lu Xun bot', which have now, after several rounds of censorship and resurrection, largely disappeared—save for scant remaining search results—likely owing to coded political expression in their output. Compared to their Twitter counterparts, which often similarly employ algorithms to autogenerate content, the nuance here feels exquisitely culturally mediated. The combination of Chinese characters with the English word 'bot' in the handles creates a unique dissonance. It escapes no one that these accounts are managed by humans, since the content often relates to current events, which begs the question: What makes this performative simulation of machines and algorithms so appealing? And what makes it culturally specific?

'Lu Xun bot' was named after one of modern China's most formidable and incandescent writers (1881–1936), whose trenchant critique of the ills of imperialism and Confucian conservatism continues to resound in national textbooks and public discourse alike. His cultural and political thoughts have been widely recited and, more crucially, promoted by the authorities as representative of their central values. One may argue that he constitutes an essential dataset on which generations of modern Chinese people have been trained, which makes Lu Xun's words uniquely potent and thorny when deployed to critique the social ills of today. Examples range from his feminist quips on slut-shaming and calling out feudal values as anti-human (or, cannibalistic, as he likes to put it), to his descriptions of the general apathy he observed in Chinese society at moments of crisis: 'the joys and sorrows of humans are not connected after all'—a sentence that has been repeatedly evoked to address increasing gaps and lacerations across social strata.[2] Coded yet performative, 'Lu Xun bot' exemplifies a uniquely creative form of cultural and political expression within Chinese cyberspace. The writer's lasting cultural impact and prominent status within the CCP canon make him an apt weapon and a shield when navigating constant (and often erratic) censorship and erasure on platforms such as Weibo. While the censors do eventually catch on, a far more intelligent algorithm than those currently in use would be required for autodetection and prevention. It is an indirect yet nimble form of speaking back to power precisely by mobilising its sanctioned voices.

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2. Lu Xun (鲁迅), 'Miscellaneous Thoughts' (小杂感) (1927), <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/reference-books/luxun/11/030.htm>.

One radical implication of the 'Lu Xun bot' is the future potential of bringing cultural luminaries such as Lu Xun back to 'life' using an advanced AI system. Although legendary artists such as the late Hibari Misora have been revived in stunning performances enabled by VOCALOID:AI, the prospect of AI-enabled cultural criticism still feels distant, with its necropolitics, ethics, and ontology remaining rather murky. On the other hand, the 'Lu Xun bot' feigns a sense of machine-induced objectivity and randomness, hence escaping the liabilities and political consequences that would be activated by a concession of human agency. Self-deprecating yet defiant, this satirical gesture belies a sense of resignation that speaks volumes about the actual state of human agency, which seeks anonymity and shelter through nonhuman camouflage in a mass surveillance state. As Chinese netizens make creative censorship-circumvention a national pastime—one may argue this is one of *the* cutting edges of cultural production—the swift and constant erasure of these strategies, data points, and new semantics make scaled, deep learning unfeasible; let alone history-writing of any feasible continuity or validity. One wonders not only how that zeitgeist might be captured or modelled, but indeed how it might also be transformed as people intuitively adapt to coded speech in Chinese cyberspace.

What is profoundly odd and ironic here is a palpable sense of machine envy: advanced technology doesn't necessarily embody the all too familiar tropes of servitude or existential threat, but rather presents a viable, aspirational *model of how to be*. Artificiality not only feels more desirable but also more tangible than reality; often artificiality *is* the fabric of reality, particularly in the post-Socialist state. In his book *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics*, science historian Slava Gerovitch recounts a prescient insight from cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein that 'Soviet Marxist ideological language is by its very nature artificial; it would be possible to outline its structure using abstract formulas', and that 'with specific formulas of functions and markers, [a] computer would be capable of composing Soviet ideological texts'.[3] Epstein's words would find uncanny resonance in contemporary times, suggesting that a machine is indeed better suited for certain genres of statecraft.

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3. S. Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 3.

On April 19, 2022, a sound art 'installation' created by Shanghai-based artist Yang Xiao went viral on Chinese social media. Entitled 'Goodbye to Language', a borrowing from Jean-Luc Godard's filmic inquiry into the enigmatic nature of communication, the video opens with views from the artist's apartment window onto a narrow alley in Shanghai during the indefinite, draconian quarantine of April 2022; the streets are empty except for those rushing about in white PPE coveralls. A loudspeaker blasts gibberish sentences in a standard newscaster voice: 'focus on the institution and schema, follow the law of the grand scope, expand the maximum limit, gradually improve interaction...'. This gibberish, however, is barely distinguishable from the newspeak that characterised much state media output of the time; the style is also informed by public announcements intended to boost morale through the ideologically charged 'pep talks' with which citizens tend to be inundated during times of national emergency ranging from floods to earthquakes to pandemics. 'Goodbye to Language' was created by algorithmically randomising some six hundred words frequently used in state media, and voicing them with an AI newscaster found in iFlytek text-reading software.[4] Although destined to be repeatedly erased, with the discussions surrounding it hushed, the work self-actualises precisely through its mechanism of making and circulation—and ultimately in the widespread, unspoken understanding of the inarticulable absurdity of the system of meaning/nonsense that the work so powerfully reflects back to itself. Both its virality and its erasure demonstrate a profound, collective understanding of the infrastructure of power and language governing everyday life. It is also not surprising that when ChatGPT, OpenAI's wunderkind chatbot, caught on, netizens immediately thought of using it to generate personal statements in applications to join the Chinese Communist Party, which typically demand a highly schematic structure and tone. ChatGPT's results were predictably astounding.[5]

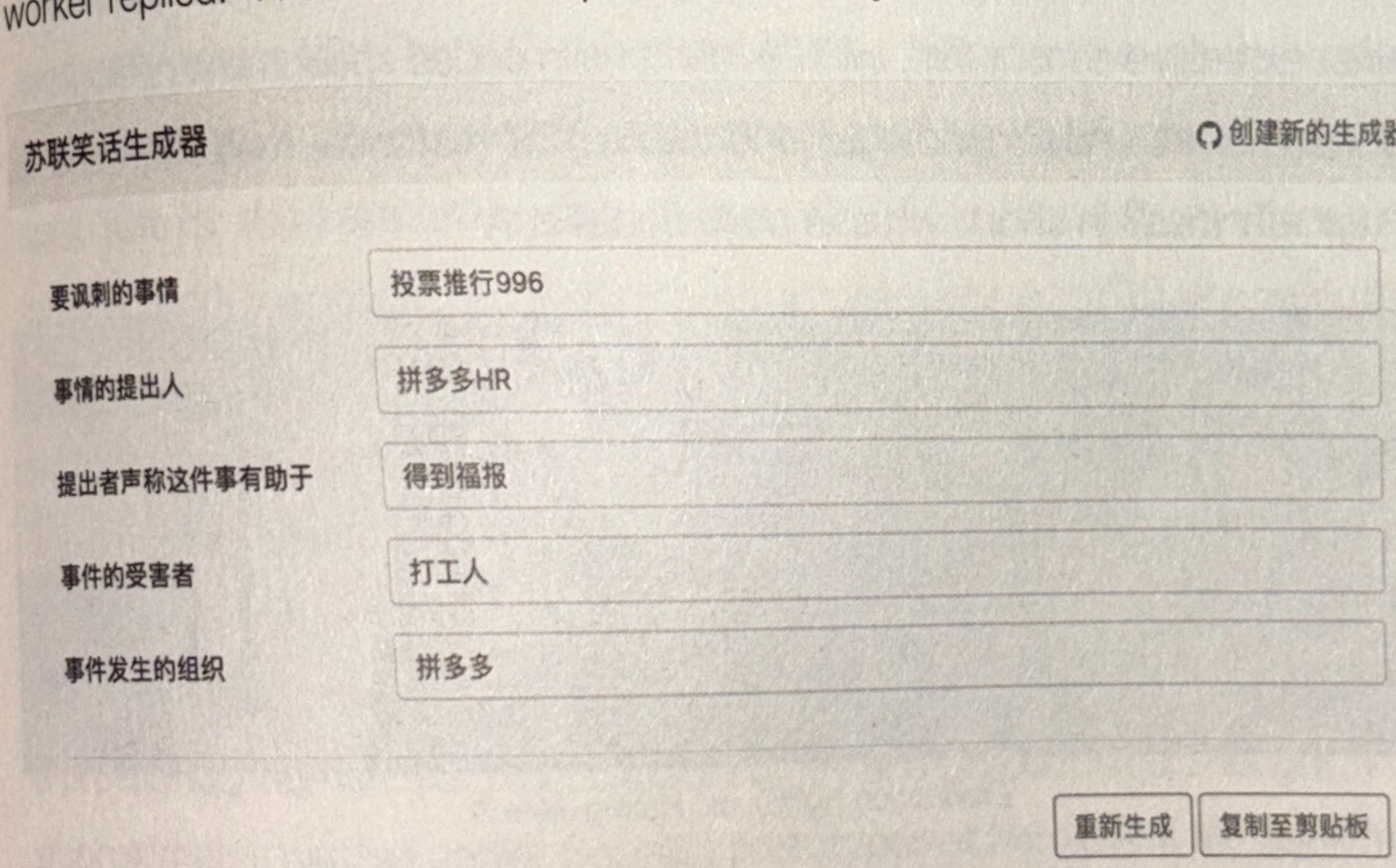
An understanding of this distinct type of newspeak—opaque, ideologically suffused, and often inherently contradictory—also explains the appeal of the 'Soviet Jokes' genre, which enjoys a robust presence in contemporary Chinese discourse: from accounts like the aforementioned 'Soviet Jokes bot' which

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4. Xie Ding (谢丁), 'Goodbye Shanghai, Goodbye Language' (再见上海，再见语), *Career Engine*, 9 May 2022, <https://posts.careerengine.us/p/62791d001f18d5382dee5b35>.

5. An example can be found on the social media platform RedNote (小红书, more literally 'Little Red Book'): <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6394a2ac000000001c00516a>.

dispenses comically timed political anecdotes, to being used as an adjective for describing singularly absurd realities, to the 'Soviet Jokes Generator' created in 2021 by GitHub user 'disksing',[6] a database developer based in Beijing.[7] *Soviet Jokes Generator* requires input in six simple categories: the subject of satire; the entity that raised the issue; the subject's alleged benefits according to the entity; the victim; the organisation. The landing page provides some curious default entries in the aforementioned categories: respectively, voting to implement a '996 workweek' (the controversial scheme of 9 am to 9 pm workdays, six days per week); the HR department of Pinduoduo (an extremely popular e-commerce platform specialising in low prices and bulk purchases); auspicious returns; workers; Pinduoduo. One possible outcome reads: 'Pinduoduo HR surveys a worker's opinion on the implementation of the 996 work week, to which the worker replied: "I have different options, but I object to them!"'.



Default page of *Soviet Jokes Generator*.

The fact that the *Soviet Jokes Generator* uses the Chinese language and speaks to Chinese realities without evoking any explicit Soviet reference at all is significant. Decades after the official Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet aesthetic-political project still exerts a nuanced influence on China's (post-) modernity, which manifests in art pedagogy, monuments, familiarity with Russian/Soviet

6. The username seems to reference ByteDance, the Chinese multinational internet technology company that owns, among many things, TikTok.
7. See <https://disksing.com/sao-gen-gen/3> and <https://github.com/disksing/sao-gen-gen/issues/3>.

literature and music, urban planning, newspeak and, say, Ilya Repin's paintings, which have been immortalised as illustrations in national textbooks with an estimated readership of a hundred million. Artist and theorist Hito Steyerl has recently explored the notion of 'artificial stupidity', both in the sense that we overestimate the power of advanced technologies, and that the low-grade deployment of artificial stupidity can easily lead to dire consequences, such as Twitter armies that effectively sway politics but require only simple coding. AI discourses concerning China have seemingly been dominated by such totalising narratives around geopolitics (e.g. AI races between China and the US), panopticon-like cybernetics and mass surveillance, and the accelerated embrace of new technologies both on the state level and in the cultural sphere. Yet understanding the cultural ramifications of AI is a more intricate task. What kind of cultural understanding can AI harness, produce, and illuminate, particularly against extensive censorship, swift evolutions in coded speech and neologisms, and insufficient understandings (and biases) of historical mediation and its cultural affinities? In short, what is post-Socialist AI?



Dislocation (1986), dir. Huang Jianxin.

Allegories of Bodies

Before clones, Siri, Sophia, Tay, and virtual influencers, director Huang Jianxin created a distinct prototype—the AI communist bureaucrat—in his 1986 film *Dislocation*.[8] Inspired by the utter fatigue of obligatory and meaningless meetings, the film finds its protagonist, a robotics engineer-turned-manager, creating a robot in his image to handle meetings and other bureaucratic nonsense, so that he, a true scientist with the temperament of an intellectual, may focus on research and invention. Performative bureaucracy isn't exactly a common task for machines, yet it is essential to culturally specific workplace politics; as the

8. *Dislocation* (错位), dir. Huang Jianxin (黄建新), 1986.

protagonist ponders: 'If I don't comply with the tasks I detest, I don't get to do the work I like.' Over time, however, the AI grows curious about the world outside its assigned activities and becomes eager to explore romantic love and learn how to hold a cigarette elegantly; it also genuinely enjoys being a powerful bureaucrat. Eventually, the AI threatens to replace the scientist, who is forced to terminate his experiment.

The film unfolds in a surreal, symbolism-laden Bauhaus setting—a rather bold and refreshing aesthetic choice for Chinese cinema in the 1980s. It also channels an unnerving atmosphere of perpetuity that often characterises corporate and totalitarian environments and which has resurfaced in more recent TV shows (such as *Severance*, 2022) that explore workplace dystopias. While the plot of the intelligent machine gone awry might now feel familiar, even cliched, the AI bureaucrat in *Dislocation* was already philosophising about the deep existential ironies that David Graeber would later analyse through the notion of the 'bullshit job', forms of salaried employment that are utterly pointless and that exist 'just for the sake of keeping us all working'.[9] In *Dislocation*, bureaucratic 'bullshit' work maintains the ideological structures unique to Chinese workplaces (even to this day). At the same time, the AI bureaucrat embodies existential anxieties unique to a China in the throes of modernity—constantly besieged by new information and new longings in a present fragmented by multiple histories and multiple futures.

In both appearance and temperament, *Dislocation*'s AI bureaucrat presents a profoundly human machine, capable of joy and philosophical thought, which approximates neither earlier Socialist prototypes of heroic and altruistic model workers, nor the neoliberal individual whose agency is reduced to statistics under digital governance. These prototypes and allegories of the technologised body merit further analysis, as they inform cultural thinking around bodily relationships to machines and algorithms. In her book *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965*, historian Claire E. McCallum explores how Soviet ideology crucially links work and masculinity, glorifying productive labour. Citing Maurizio Boscagli's observation that 'the modernist agenda was not simply to emulate and challenge

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9. D. Graeber, 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant', *STRIKE! Magazine*, August 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210730130503/https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs>.

technology but instead to identify with it', McCallum notes the resulting shift in the aesthetic appreciation of the male body, which emphasises its productive capacity and use.[10] The ripple effect was felt throughout the Second and the Third World. In the 1960s, Chinese oil driller Wang Jinxi would enjoy national renown as the 'Iron Man' for his astounding devotion and productivity while spearheading the development of the Daqing oil fields. Another household name of the era, Lei Feng, propagated the 'screw nail spirit', which highlights the importance of collective striving and the nobility of fulfilling humble yet essential roles in the greater Socialist project.



Left: Liu Qing, *Youth Aflame* (1974), a painting created in the Socialist Realism idiom celebrating a female worker's prowess in operating a blast furnace from the control room.
Right: An ethnic Tibetan woman in China's Sichuan Province carrying components of decommissioned cryptocurrency mining machines, 2021; in its composition, the image is strikingly redolent of another genre of Socialist Realism valorising China's ethnic minority groups engaging in productive labour (Photo by Ding Gang, Caixin).

The 'screw nail' allegory certainly implies the scale of collectivisation, too, which finds resonance both in China's demographic dividend and in the tragic exploitation of, for instance, delivery persons and cyber content analysts under the algorithmic optimisation of performance metrics. The spectre of the 'human flesh search engine'—*renrou yinqing* (人肉引擎), where the searching capacities of

10. C.E. McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965* (Dekalb, IL: NIU Press, 2018), 6.

random netizens are powerfully mobilised at scale, looms large in both cyber-bullying incidents and social justice efforts, particularly when the omnipresent surveillance grid (curiously) fails—as in the recent case of a still unidentified woman chained at the neck by her husband in a dark chamber in rural Xuzhou. Glimpses of the woman's abhorrent living conditions were first shared by a TikTokker who visited the impoverished family to bring supplies; national outrage and netizen journalism quickly ensued. The cognitive dissonance came not only from the egregious violation of her bodily autonomy (chained and forced to have eight children) in a relatively developed area of the country officially purporting to adhere to Socialist feminist ideology, but also from the sheer difficulty of tracking down her identity and family information within a state known for advanced surveillance technology and deployment—so advanced, sometimes, that people have had their Covid passes pre-emptively blocked because records exist of their shopping for cold medicine. It appears that the ultimate obstacle course for human agency lies between the extreme sensitivity and the extreme negligence of 'smart' governance.

At the same time, AI-related vernacular often sheds light on the dynamic evolution of cultural attitudes. The term 'AI *yanji*' (AI演技) or 'AI acting skills' is widely applied to describe actors who lack emotional and expressive range, while the Japanese neologism 'Chi-borg' describes Chinese beauties with impeccable makeup and looks, which certainly belies both cultures' (somewhat problematic) assumptions about female beauty. 'Under the skin'—'*pixia*' (皮下) refers to the actual personalities behind internet personas, whereas '*zhongzhiren*' (中之人) or 'middle-human' denotes performers of fictional roles, which can encompass both physical mascots such as the Disney Shanghai phenomenon LinaBelle, and virtual idols such as A-Soul—a popular VTuber girl group created by ByteDance and Yuehua Entertainment. Human actors are often credited for giving virtual idols distinct personalities, quirks, and affective engagement with their fanbase, but overwork and other forms of exploitation are obscured by the 24/7 veneer of virtual beings and the invisibility of the actors' labour. 'Tool people', '*gongjuren*' (工具人) refers to those who willingly put themselves at others' disposal in various relationship dynamics, usually to the detriment of their own financial and mental health, and without expectation of reciprocal affection.

While many of these terms have neutral or humorous connotations, there are also more egregious examples, such as 'lining'—'*neidan*' (内胆) originally meaning the inner lining for clothing, but also used as a derogatory reference to human performers in heavy fursuits, such as the human 'mascots' in the shopping malls and theme parks of the world. Science fiction writer Ted Chiang has long warned that before AI can become intelligent enough to harm humans, it will first and necessarily experience pain and cruelty, citing abundant evidence of the abuse of animals and small children, and certainly of other humans, under capitalism.[11] The moral implications of terms like 'lining', which crudely and literally equate humans with objects, testify to Chiang's insight, as do the terse orders from the scientist in *Dislocation* to his AI bureaucrat: 'I did not create you so that you can express ideas, but to obey my directives; otherwise I'd rather destroy you.'

Souls, or The Time to Live and the Time to Die

Questions regarding the soul—or ensoulment—in relation to AI seem to focus heavily on ontological metrics and the computational possibilities of AI. Literature, art, and videogames of late, however, have meaningfully relocated this discourse to soulful experiences with or in relation to AI, asking not what *it is*, but *what it does* and means (to us). *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*, Ted Chiang's 2010 novel, is presciently insightful on the topic of human-AI relationships. In the story, rudimentary AI entities known as 'digients' are groomed as virtual pets, yet their survival is precariously dependent upon market demand and technological obsolescence. When the company goes bankrupt, the love and care of their trainers (one of them fittingly a former zookeeper) keeps the digients 'alive', and, more importantly, makes their growth meaningful.[12] Real-life counterparts of the story can be found in the Buddhist funerals held for decommissioned AIBO robot dogs when Sony announced in 2014 that they would no longer support upgrades and maintenance for the aging robots. During the product's timeline from 1999 to 2004, many AIBO owners had grown deeply

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11. E. Klein, 'The Author Behind "Arrival" Doesn't Fear AI. "Look at How We Treat Animals."', *The New York Times*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-ted-chiang.html>.
12. T. Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2010).

attached to their AI pets and considered them family members whose passing merited a deeply spiritual reckoning and remembrance.[13]

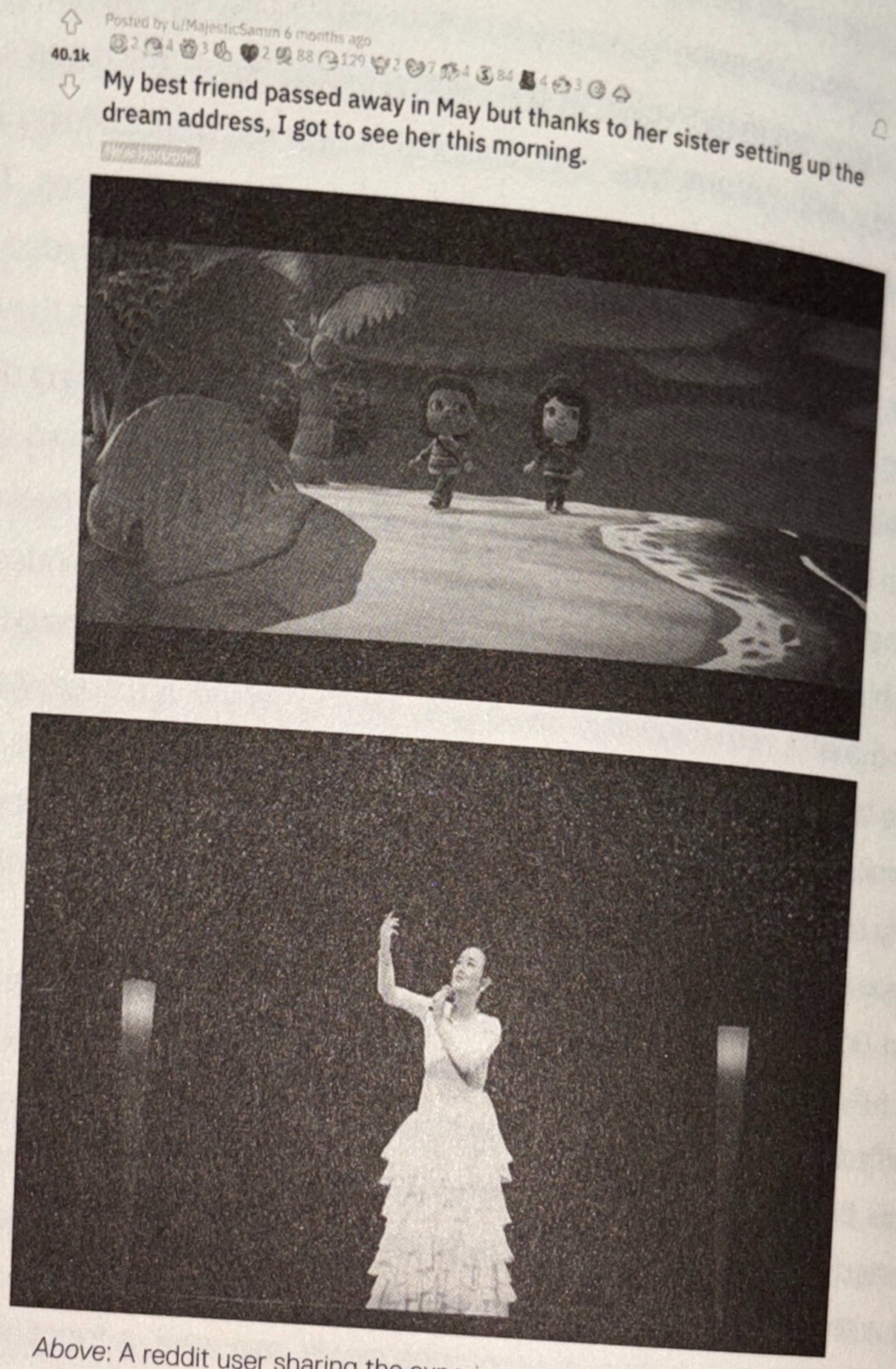
There is a parallel between deep care for software/virtual beings and the vast possibilities opened up by digital realms housing errant emotions. When Nintendo's *Animal Crossing*[14] became an explosive success during the COVID-19 pandemic, many users marvelled at the healing properties of the game's design: synchronicity with natural time and seasonal creatures, worldbuilding through basic tasks and bartering, abundant and detailed cultural references. The limitations of the island's visitors—anthropomorphised animals—moulded players' behaviour. Some gamers would intentionally ignore or harass animals they disliked in order to make room for more popular animals, with many becoming dismayed at the realisation of their own cruelty, sharing feelings of shame on social media when the unwanted animals showed grace and gratitude as they packed up to leave. The inter-user features of *Animal Crossing* have also expanded human relationships, overcoming not only geographical distance but also the boundaries of life and death, with deceased loved ones leaving behind virtual assets as gifts, or entire built and lived-in environments for their friends and families to visit.[15] Over time, the necropolitics of both virtual assets and 'software objects' will certainly transform our understanding of the material culture of death, and by extension our sense of memory, community, and history.

But not all digital resurrections are equally desired. The existential anxiety of not fully erasing one's social media records before death has become widely memeified; after all, if all our transactions, border crossings, criminal records, medical bills, and job histories are automatically archived and relentlessly harvested as big data, we can never truly cease to be. At the same time, being with the digital avatar of a loved one who has passed away is drastically different from seeing their photographs newly animated, a function many AI tools readily provide. The punctum, Roland Barthes's notion of the specific thing in a photographic image that uniquely pricks us ('but also bruises [us], is

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13. J. Burch, 'In Japan, a Buddhist Funeral Service for Robot Dogs', *National Geographic*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/in-japan--a-buddhist-funeral-service-for-robot-dogs>.
14. *Animal Crossing*, Nintendo, 2001–2020.
15. See for instance the following post by u/MajesticSamm, *Reddit*, 1 December 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AnimalCrossing/comments/r6ejl9/my_best_friend_passed_away_in_may_but_thanks_to/>.

poignant to [us]'), is both magnified and perverted in old photos reconstructed and animated by AI.[16] If photographs are evidence of 'that which was there', these AI-reanimated images displace nostalgia to a temporally confused condition of 'what could have been'.[17]



Above: A reddit user sharing the experience of 'reuniting' with their deceased best friend in *Animal Crossing*, 2021.
Below: Still from the NHK Special *Bringing Hibari Misora Back with AI*, 2019.

As touched on above, in 2019, Yamaha Corporation revived the legendary musician Hibari Misora in a poignant performance using VOCALOID:AI through a collaboration with NHK's annual kohaku special program, which marked the

16. R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, tr. R. Howard (London: Vintage Classics, 1993), 27.
17. Perhaps this is why I could not bring myself to reanimate my late mother's photographs.

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On Art and Cultura

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18. 'Yamaha VOCALOID:AI™
Misora', *Yamaha*, 8 October 20

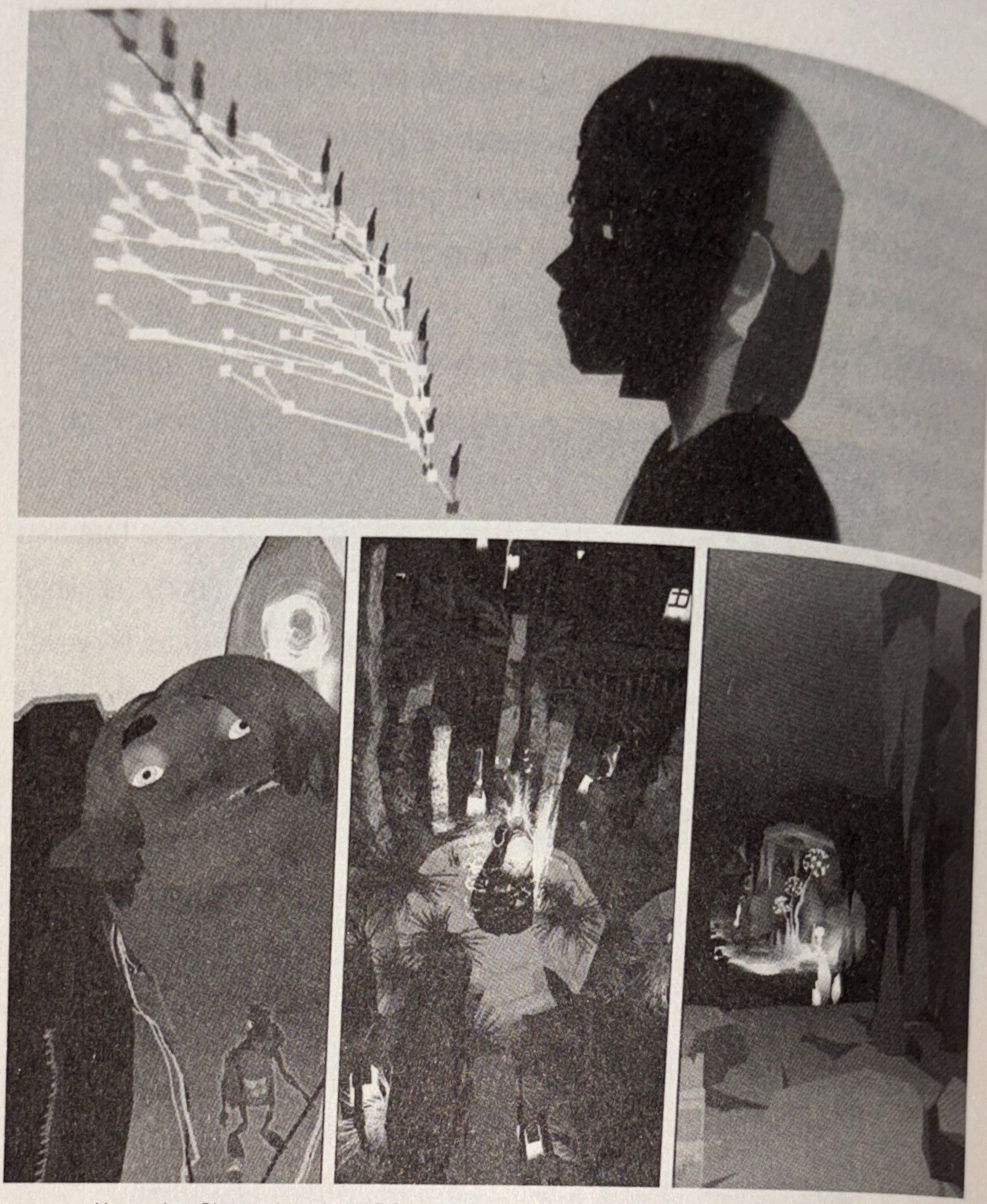
first real world implementation of the singing synthesis technology. Using actual recordings of the late artist's songs and speech as machine learning data to render a new score, VOCALOID:AI can generate the 'unique mannerisms and nuances of the vocalist with any melodies and lyrics'.[18] In the live performance, the cultural icon appears as an animated hologram, and the song, entitled '*Are Kara [Ever Since Then]*', poetically evokes the passage of time: 'The horizon hasn't changed, but the landscape quietly transforms / to live is to understand the meaning of parting.' The broadcast also captured many audience members wiping away tears, especially when the singer directly addressed her audience in the lyrics 'My beloved, how have you been since that day?'—a line that also gives one chills for its acknowledgement of the AI singer's agency as Hibari Misora's 'could have been'. As deeply moving as the performance was, however, it also sparked debates about the right to be forgotten, or to be remembered rather than 'revived'—a branch of afterlife management that will always tread the fine ethical line between transgression and veneration.

On Art and Cultural Specificity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I served on the jury panel for several zoom-based critiques, where Chinese and sinophone artists across time zones presented new works and workshop ideas. An overwhelming majority of these emerging artists deployed GANs: generative adversarial networks, where two neural networks are pitted against one another to generate new, synthetic data that can pass for real data. In the meantime, being based in New York, I witnessed the exhilarating rise of Asian American artists, many of which address racialised trauma, the Orientalist gaze, colonial/diasporic history, and issues of identity and representation in their work. This distinctly American discourse of identity politics which powerfully informs biopolitics and art making usually holds little sway in the cultural context of China. In both places, observable trends often reflect not just artists' intentions, but also the kinds of cultural mediation that render certain topics more visible, popular, or accessible. When cultural markers do appear in works that engage with AI, they are often telling of underlying cultural assumptions and creative strategies.

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18. 'Yamaha VOCALOID:AI™ Faithfully Reproduces Singing of Legendary Japanese Vocalist Hibari Misora', *Yamaha*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.yamaha.com/en/news_release/2019/19100801/>.



Above: Ian Cheng, *Life After BOB: The Chalice Study* (2021), live animation, 48 min. Courtesy of the artist. *Below:* Miao Ying, stills showing one character from *Pilgrimage to Walden XII: The Honor of Shepherds* (2019–2020), a six-screen game engine live simulation with machine learning software run on computers or mobile devices.

The Chinese American artist Ian Cheng has been a long-time pioneer of algorithm-based art and open-ended simulations. His film *Life After BOB*[19] (2021), a narrative animation built in the Unity game engine and presented live in real time, speculates on the feasibility of an AI-optimised life with chilling, psychological realism. In the artwork, Dr Wong, a neural engineer, implants an AI system into the brain of his ten-year-old daughter Chalice to guide her through life, hypothetically testing and ruling out errant chains of action to fulfil Chalice's destiny. A profound dilemma lies at the heart of the algorithm's success: a life well lived—ensured by the AI's guidance—is lived without real participation; Chalice

19. *Life After BOB*, dir. I Cheng, interactive animated series, 2021.

is completely alienated by her autopiloted alter-ego. Parenting emerges as a prominent subplot. Is Dr Wong's experiment a daring revolution or an extreme form of helicopter parenting? This dilemma of parental guidance and care finds curious resonance in the notion of 'lifting' in *Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and The Sun*, where children may go through an elective procedure that significantly elevates their intelligence, ensuring success in adult life; but 'lifting' might also kill them prematurely.[20] It is not hard to recognise wider echoes of the education race and extreme 'involution'—*neijuan* (内卷)—in Asian and Asian diasporic communities. Created around the same time and similarly philosophising 'desirable outcomes', New York-based Chinese artist Miao Ying's generative film *Pilgrimage to Walden XII, Chapter I: The Honor of Shepherds*[21] encodes its cultural references far more obliquely. Set in a reimagined mediaeval European village, a popular setup for many fantasy games, *Walden XII* is governed by a digital indulgence system entitled to 'explain its ideological doctrine to its people, implement technologies that enforce good citizen behaviour, collect behavioural big data, and reward or punish citizens according to behavioural scores'. The work itself showcases six AI 'Social Shepherds', each representing a different social class and level of intelligence, visualised as distinct characters in varying landscapes. A dynamic score is displayed across or adjacent to each 'Shepherd', reflecting their competency at the task of 'model citizenry'. Spelled in Leet, the characters' names provide thinly veiled clues: Brain Urban Migrant Work3R, Brain Outsourced Prol3tar1at, Brain Bourg301s, or Brain Wo1f W4rr1or, the latter borrowed from the blockbuster franchise Wolf Warrior,[22] which recentres the Hollywood lone-hero narrative on a retired, deeply patriotic Chinese soldier.

While *Life after BOB* features fantastical reimaginings of cultural signifiers such as the reclining Buddha, Miao Ying deliberately eschews visible cultural references or direct commentary on the work's meaning. Both in its title and concept, however, *Walden XII* references *Walden Two*, the utopian novel written by behavioural psychologist B.F. Skinner on yielding desired behaviours through reinforced positive conditioning.[23] The artist's preference for codified meaning clearly resonates with broader tendencies among Chinese netizens, such as

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20. K. Ishiguro, *Klara and The Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2022).
21. Miao Ying, *Pilgrimage to Walden XII, Chapter 1: The Honor of Shepherds*, installation with live simulation, 2019–2020.
22. *Wolf Warrior* (战狼), dir. Wu Jing (吴京), 2015.
23. B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005).

those discussed above, although it also functions as a buffer, lest the work be immediately reduced to a mere satire on censorship and surveillance. The artist, whose practice closely charts the history of Chinese cyberspace, finds her creative locus in questioning both open and closed systems, often favouring the more 'stupid' algorithms. After all, culture tends to manifest most potently in glitches, mistakes, absurdities, latent assumptions, and transient nuance. One need look no further than the limited, tired repertoires of, say, Vermeer, Magritte, and Van Gogh in AI-related visual experiments to recognise the already ubiquitous biases in the data, which means that we certainly need to look harder still—not only at vastly different datasets, but also at the assumptions that govern them and the parameters that instrumentalise them. As illuminated in the covert strategies through which Miao Ying works with artificial intelligence, machines might not deliver economic or political emancipation, but they might generate important kinds of agency through camouflage, digression, divergence, and misalignment.