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Dissertation

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Altered Perceptions of Sleep: Performativity, Duration, and Embodied Relationships in
Contemporary Sinophone Art

Abstract

This dissertation examines how contemporary Sinophone artists construct disturbed perceptual states associated with sleep through performance, spatial practice, and photographic staging. I argue that disturbed states of sleep, analyzed through embodied, phenomenological, and culturally embedded dimensions, shift narratives that treat sleep as metaphor or a private symptom into a conversation that recognizes material processes and cultural forces, rendering such states visible and meaningful within contemporary art. Methodologically, the dissertation brings together phenomenological insights, an anthropological perspective, and an account of threshold states, while critically avoiding overreliance on psychoanalysis. Employing a comparative analysis of works by Duan Yingmei, Li Liao, Peng Wu, and Chen Wei, the research does not suggest that the artists are disturbed; rather, the archetypes of sleep anomalies are externalized as symptoms in these artists' works. Through interactions of body, space, and medium, the artists' tactics manipulate duration, embodiment, and environment, constructing a material interpretation of disturbed states of sleep and connecting such states to cultural quagmires. While Western clinical frameworks primarily characterize sleep disturbances as a neurological phenomenon, Sinophone artistic practices offer interpretations that draw on folkloric traditions, embodied memory, and supernatural elements. Across the globe, the art-historical lexicon has adopted a Western dictionary, yet this repertoire cannot easily be placed within the Sinophonic language. Sinophone artists recast sleep disturbances as a culturally meaningful experience, blending symptoms with haunting and connecting individual sensations to collective stories of supernatural encounters. This perspective is supported by research on the prevalence of supernatural explanations for sleep paralysis across cultures.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1: Performing Disturbed States: Duration, Exposure, and the Public Body.....	14
Duration and Spatial Disruption in the Performances of Yingmei Duan.....	14
Stillness, Exposure, and the Public Body in Urban Environments of Li Liao.....	26
Chapter 2: Mediated Disturbance: Environment and Perceptual Disorientation.....	29
Performativity of Bodily Constraint and Endurance by Peng Wu.....	29
Staged Nocturnal Environments in the Photography of Chen Wei.....	34
Comparative Conditions: Between Body and Environment.....	39
Conclusion.....	40
Bibliography.....	50
List of Illustrations.....	62
Illustrations.....	65

Introduction

Sleep disturbances remain one of the most hauntingly unexplored territories in scholarly discourse, specifically pertaining to disturbed states of sleep that occur at the thresholds between consciousness and unconsciousness. These states are frequently described through sensations of perceptual distortion, bodily immobility, and spatial disorientation. Disturbed states of sleep encompass experiences that resist transparent categorization as either waking or dreaming, and instead occupy an unstable interval in which sensory perception, bodily awareness, and environmental orientation are fundamentally altered. Existing scholarship, which is extremely limited in scope, has largely confined sleep disturbances to the frameworks of neuroscience and clinical psychology. This dissertation expands the boundaries of disturbed states of sleep as they are restricted in art history scholarship. The current hypothesis that articulates the shape and meaning of sleep disturbances within a broader framework is confined by society and current associations in scholarship.¹ This dissertation will approach such states through broader methods of examining how contemporary Sinophone artists construct analogous conditions through performativity, employing modes of duration and spatial intervention. Rather than focusing

¹ It is important to note that Chinese and other Asian cultures did not become prominent within the global art historical narrative until the 20th century. [Department of Asian Art, "Traditional Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004] The terminology and language commonly used in art history are rooted in Western frameworks. Due to Western influence, Asian art was incorporated into a broader understanding of art history, but this inclusion comes with significant limitations. For example, when museums in Europe and North America first began collecting Chinese ink paintings, these works were often categorized as "decorative arts" rather than "fine art." [The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Chinese Paintings from the Robert H. Ellsworth Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art," 2001] This classification of "decorative arts" was diminished in status compared to oil paintings from Europe. Similarly, calligraphy, which holds deep cultural significance in many Asian societies, was not traditionally viewed as "art" in the Western sense but rather as an integral, everyday practice. [Asian Studies, "Calligraphy in East Asia: Art, Communication, and Symbolism," Association for Asian Studies, Accessed May 11, 2026] For instance, in China, calligraphy has been regarded as an essential cultural and moral pursuit, closely linked to scholarship and personal cultivation, rather than solely an aesthetic object. [Hung, Ruyu, "Self-Cultivation Through the Art of Calligraphy: From Past to the Future," *Beijing International Review of Education* 4, no. 3 (2022): 396-407, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25902539-04030009>.] The Western framing of Asian art history therefore imposes constraints that can obscure these cultural distinctions, as it tends to prioritize medium and visual appearance over process and meaning. Additionally, while there are numerous medical terms for different sleep conditions, within Sinophone contexts, these terms can be restrictive and challenging to communicate.

solely on internal or psychological conditions as they manifest in performative mediums, this study will shift the main narrative from representations of sleep to productions of experiences that destabilize the viewer's relation to time, space, and embodiment.

The historical understanding of disturbed sleep has been interpreted through culturally specific frameworks. In Sinophone contexts, the phenomenon usually referred to as *guǐ yā shēn* (鬼压床, ghost pressing) describes a state in which an individual, while lying between sleep and wakefulness, experiences the inability to move accompanied by a sense of external pressure or presence.² Typically, such interpretations attribute these conditions to supernatural forces; however, they also articulate a broader experiential structure defined by immobility, heightened awareness, and perceptual ambiguity.³ The gap evidenced within Sinophone artists' uses of folklore and cultural memory gives sleep conditions a unique, viscerally embodied form that

² Terms such as *guǐ yā shēn* (鬼压床) ("ghostly" interpretations from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and outside mainland China), "ghost pressing down on the chest" or "ghost pressing," are used within Sinophone contexts. Sleep disturbances within Sinophone culture are seen within a spiritual mode or folkloric narratives rather than a medical phenomena that Western medicine has diagnosed as an REM condition, commonly known as sleep paralysis. This interpretation of ghost pressing is crucial to the dissertation's main themes pertaining to disturbed states of sleep.

³ Sinophone stories such as Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* (2007), Li Ang's "Bloody Sacrifice of the Makeup Face" (1997), and Giddens Ko's *The Legend of Fate Hunters* (Lie ming shi chuanqi 獵命師傳奇) series (2005–2013; twenty volumes in total) masterfully employ ghost narratives to craft a literature that vividly explores the complexities, anxieties, and aspirations of the Chinese diaspora. [Jen-Yi Hsu, "Ghosts in the City: Mourning and Melancholia in Zhu Tianxin's *The Old Capital*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 4 (2004): 546–564, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cls.2005.0006>.] For example, in *The Old Capital* (2007), Chu T'ien-hsin interlaces the spectral presence of lost relatives with scenes where memories of the homeland intrude on the protagonist's daily life, allowing the past to haunt the present in subtle yet powerful ways. Li Ang's "Bloody Sacrifice of the Makeup Face" (1997) uses the motif of a vengeful ghost to echo suppressed female voices and unspoken traumas, with episodes in which the protagonist is visited by a spirit seeking justice for historical wrongs. Similarly, Giddens Ko's *Fate Hunters* (2005–2013) series frequently blends urban fantasy with the ghostly apparitions of ancestors, weaving supernatural confrontations into the characters' struggles with questions of belonging and identity. By weaving these supernatural elements with everyday realities, these authors evoke the lingering presence of history, tradition, and memory in the lives of displaced individuals and communities [Di-Kai Chao, "Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Ghost Narratives and the Contouring of Invisible Realms," *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* 6, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.25365/jeacs.2025.6.2.bai>.] These works highlight broader themes of collective narrative, such as migration, identity formation, and cultural survival, connecting deeply with the social fabric of the human psyche. [Chaoyang Liao, "From Shame to Freedom: Undoing Spectral Identity in Li Ang's *Seeing Ghosts*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199383313.013.37>.] Through these evocative tales, Sinophone folklore not only illuminates the cultural framework discussed in this dissertation but also reveals how Sinophone culture uses modes of the spiritual and the ghostly to articulate both personal traumas and communal bonds, offering a unique lens into the emotional landscapes of diasporic experience. [Chao, "Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," 2025.]

reveals the layers of experience that clinical language cannot capture.⁴ Even though this clinical language strips the experience of its terror and its texture, Western medical discourse categorizes these experiences as neurological events associated often with hallucinations.⁵ What one culture dismisses as a misfiring brain, another recognizes as something ancient and insistent.⁶ These descriptions, while resonating with clinical accounts of hypnagogia, differ in their attributions towards agency and meaning.⁷ Instead of treating these frameworks as explanatory models to be

⁴ Sleep narratives are seen throughout Sinophone culture in different ways. An example of this can be seen in depictions of Mao Zedong. Most often, he is seen sleeping within modes of artistic expression, as he was and still is a controversial topic in historical discourse. Mao Zedong is an important figure in Sinophone culture as well as discussed in global histories. Mao Zedong is most notable for leading China from the PRC's establishment in 1949 until his death in 1976. His main recognition is for his role as the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Zedong was known for having an irregular sleep schedule as well as is depicted in contemporary post-Cultural Revolution art as sleeping in order to strip away his deified, omnipotent status. [Jesse Hamlin, "Chinese Artist Sui Jianguo Puts Mao to Rest in Colorful Metaphor," 2005, <https://lalouver.com/html/gallery-history-images/other-resources/SJ-SFGate-Hamlin-2005.pdf>.]

⁵ Clinical explanations attribute sleep disturbances such as the condition of sleep paralysis to REM atonia, in which the body remains physiologically paralyzed while the mind claws its way back into consciousness, straining against an invisible restraint it cannot name and cannot lift. [Maheen Farooq and Fatima Anjum, "Sleep Paralysis," *StatPearls* (Treasure Island, FL: StatPearls Publishing, 2023), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK562322/>] These models effectively describe the neurophysiological mechanisms underlying this condition and clarify its association with REM sleep. This enables clinicians to differentiate it from other sleep disorders, thereby offering explanatory power with direct implications for diagnosis and treatment. The precision with which biomedical accounts trace the neural and bodily, which correlates to sleep paralysis, has expanded our capacity to recognize its prevalence, understand its triggers, and devise interventions that alleviate somatic suffering. Within this framework, however, the experience is often flattened into something coldly neurological and presumed universal, its visual and sensory disturbances reduced to misfirings of the brain, aberrations to be cataloged and corrected. Yet such interpretations are not only insufficient; they are an intent act of erasure. Scientific accounts strip the experience of its full, terrifying weight, its cultural density, its historical depth. They refuse to reckon with the fact that sleep paralysis is not a biological event alone; moreover, it is also a culturally saturated encounter, one shaped by centuries of belief, by the very grammar of the languages through which it is named and narrated, and by historically specific understandings of what lies beyond the edge of the visible world.

⁶ There are many different folkloric references relating to sleep disturbances. *guǐ yā shēn* (鬼压床) is used because of its importance to the dissertation's central argument, but there are other terms such as *jiangshi* (僵尸 or 殭屍) known as "Chinese hopping zombies" which is another folkloric Sinophone topic related to sleep disturbances.

⁷ Hypnagogia refers to the transitional, "threshold consciousness" state between wakefulness and sleep, in which the brain is not fully conscious, but is partially aware or attuned to its consciousness, while the body begins to shut down. This state often associates with vivid, involuntary sensory experiences. Such as hallucinations, lucid thoughts, muscle jerks, or sleep paralysis. According to Daniel Yetman's article, *What is Hypnagogia, the State between Wakefulness and Sleep?* as well as in Romain Ghibellini's and Beat Meir's 2023 study, *Hypnagogic states are quite common: Self-reported prevalence, modalities, and gendered differences*, this state is experienced by about 70 percent of people as they fall asleep. [Daniel Yetman, "What Is Hypnagogia, the State between Wakefulness and Sleep?" Healthline Media, 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health/hypnagogia#inducing-hypnagogia>.] [Ghibellini Romain and Beat Meir, "Hypnagogic States Are Quite Common: Self-Reported Prevalence, Modalities, and Gender Differences," *Consciousness and Cognition* 115, 103582 (2023): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2023.103582>.]