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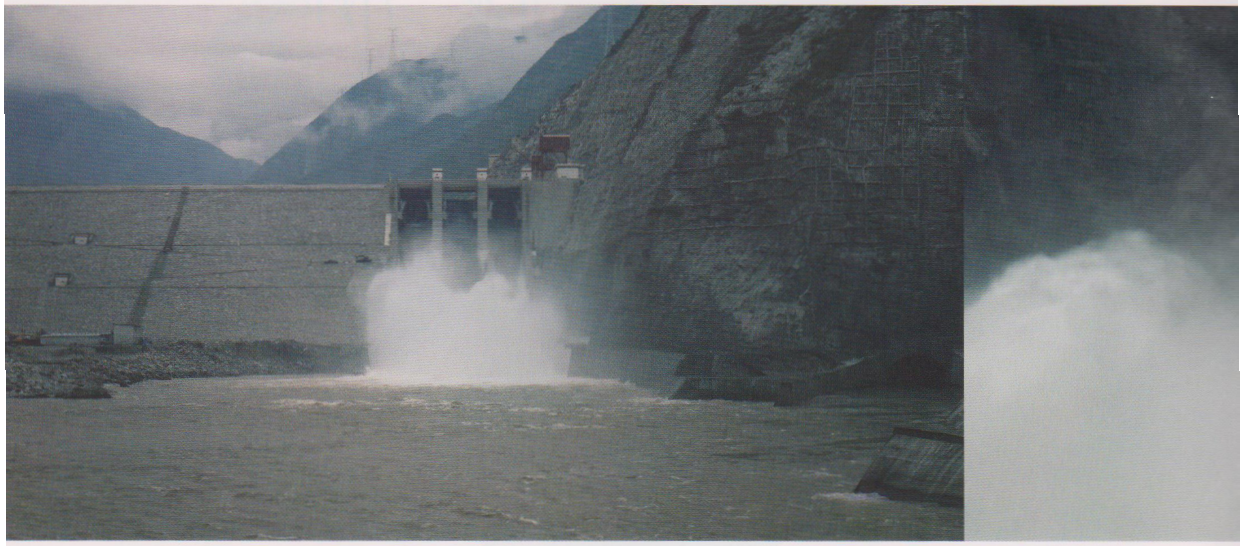
Cannibalise, Colonise



Cannibalised cultures and colonised territories

Liu Chuang, Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities (still), 2018. Courtesy the artist

One of the ways in which we assimilate the new is to insist that it is, in fact, old. Nothing comes from nothing, as the old saying goes. That certainly seems to be the case in Shanghai-based Liu Chuang's three-channel videowork Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities (2018). The work takes the form of found and filmed footage with a voiceover narrative that traces material and immaterial lines of power that have been deployed in China, over the past few thousand years, to conquer people and territories, and to generate material and immaterial profit. The narrative moves from economic inflation triggered in eastern China during the fifth century BCE, when King Jing of Zhou reduced the amount of copper in coins in order to fuel an obsession with creating enormous bronze chime bells, to nomadic bitcoin miners, operating outside any centralised banking system, herding their rigs across present-day China in harmony with the seasonal and regional variations in energy production.

Like many of the works of speculative research that are so in vogue in the artworld right now, Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities has the character of both a shaggy-dog story and an academic thesis, without quite being either. It draws disparate histories and threads of thought together and weaves them into something that we're invited to consider as a length of rope. The inevitable product, you could say, of a culture that creates sentences out of hyperlinks, it cites anthropologists and political scientists alongside sci-fi movies and popular-music references. And at 40-minutes long, it's not aimed at audiences with a short attention span. But isn't that the case with so many attempts to explain the complexities of the world today?

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The film begins with a series of black-and-white photographs of traditional Chinese architecture, instantly recognisable by a focus on the fly-leaf roofs that evolved during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Gradually telephone wires start to appear: first as faint traces in the background of the photographs, then everywhere, behind people protesting, parading or simply going about their business on city streets. Modernity has arrived in China and everything flows from there. Some people notice, some people do not.

The narrative moves on to the first instances of repetitive strain injury (RSI) being discovered in Chinese telegraph operators, at the end of the nineteenth century. Operators would move from using one digit to another as each successively succumbed to the syndrome, until the operators could operate no more. Modernity is inhuman.

Fast-forward a little over a century to Apple's acquisition of FingerWorks in 2005. The latter company had developed touchpads and touchscreens designed to help people with RSI use computers. To the soundtrack of a single, stringed instrument (sounding like a pipa lute), the first of the video's three channels (read left-to-right) features a hand, poised at a train window, that appears to be plucking the passing telephone lines in rhythm to the music; on the third, a hand robotically swipes left on a track pad; which causes more black-and-white images of telephone lines to pass by on the central screen. Human digits are no longer required to fuel the digital revolution.

Three years later the iPhone was born, paving the way for the age of the smartphone and constant connectivity. A tool designed to provide access for those to whom access was restricted becomes a tool through which governments and businesses access audiences they couldn't previously reach. Cannibalise and colonise is the motto of today.

Skip to the present and images and video of workers larking on overhead fibreoptic cables (which have spread from urban to rural areas), recording themselves for China's Kuaishou photosharing app. "Today, everyone is a user," the voiceover says as the imagery switches to a crowded subway carriage in which every passenger is on their phone, service providers are constantly "cashing in on users' time, intelligence and data", and we've all been "Uberised" to "generate profits for one app or another every second of the day". Distinctions between online and offline have been erased. Telephone lines are no longer required. There's nowhere to hide.

When Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities was first screened, as part of Cosmopolis #1.5: Enlarged Intelligence, a collaboration between the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Mao Jihong Arts Foundation in Chengdu at the end of 2018 (which travels to Paris in October; the work has subsequently been shown, earlier this year, as part of Liu Chuang's solo exhibition Earthbound Cosmology at Qiao Space in Shanghai, and the group exhibition China Landscape: Selections from the Taikang Collection in Beijing), the Chinese

telecommunications company Huawei was starting to take centre stage in the ongoing Sino-US trade war, having been accused of facilitating international espionage.

Jump back to the advent of hydroelectric power (HEP) and the relationship between controlling the land, controlling energy and controlling a people. Stalin apparently said that it was wasteful to let water run into the sea. The Hòa Bình Dam in Vietnam (the country's largest hydroelectric dam and the second largest in Southeast Asia) opened in 1994, supported by funds from Russia. It's said that Ho Chi Minh signalled his intention to build it after struggling to cross the Red River during the Vietnam War. An 18m-high, 400-tonne statue of the founder of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam now faces the structure he never lived to see. A sculpture transforms a founding fiction into a fact.

Meanwhile, in most parts of Asia, ethnic minorities lose land to dams in a way that's disproportionate to their share of national populations. Adivasis (tribal people) in India account for eight percent of the population but are estimated to make up 40 to 50 percent of those displaced by the country's development projects. Globally, over ten million people per year are displaced by World Bank development projects (dams and infrastructure projects). In China, resettled minorities tend to be assimilated into the Han Chinese majority, and over time to lose their cultural identities. Dams allow governments to control and police remote populations.

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At this stage Liu Chuang introduces the geographical term 'Zomia' to the narrative, a word that was coined in 2002 by the historian Willem van Schendel to designate a vast area of Southeast and East Asia (spanning parts of Myanmar, Indochina, Thailand and southwest China) characterised by highland population centres that were largely beyond the control of national governments. In The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia (2009), the American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott asserts that such societies were 'barbaric by design'; stigmatised by their remoteness, they evolved to resist state control. Zomia is also a zone in which a high proportion of bitcoin mines are located. Often operated by remote control, the mines are there because of the large number of hydroelectric power plants (many semi-abandoned because of the high cost of maintaining them), which give the miners access to the large amounts of energy they require, because the noise from the power plants conceals the noise from the mining rigs' fans (as the difficulty of mining bitcoins has increased, mines have become louder than train stations), and because the locations are remote and people are unlikely to wander by. Ironically, a decentralised currency is generated thanks to a centralised power system, which in turn follows previous networks of railway and telephone infrastructures. This symbiotic relationship, Liu's narrative postulates, mirrors that between minority communities and ancient empires. It's unclear who is cannibalising and colonising whom. Moreover, many miners operate like traditional bee farmers, moving their rigs around

according to the seasons: during the droughts in Sichuan they move them to the wind farms of Xinjiang (one of seven areas in China designated for wind farming – China has the largest installed capacity of any nation); in the spring they shift to the coal-fired power stations of Inner Mongolia; from there it's back to Sichuan (the province generates 20 percent of the nation's hydropower). Thus, bitcoin miners have reclaimed a transhumance lifestyle once associated with the highland peoples of Zomia. A twenty-first-century barbarism. Nothing is new.

It's here, in one of the bigger jumps in the narrative, that King Jing and his chime bells pop up. Liu Chuang's narrator describes how the largest of the bells was named Dalin and was supposed to provide heavy bass notes that would echo the frequencies of natural phenomena such as earthquakes and thunder. The court musician Lingzhoujiu apparently argued against its construction because a smaller instrument would be more harmonious. Rumbling bass notes, Liu Chuang argues, are the soundtrack of modernity, from atomic bombs to the rumble of cities, infrastructure and HEP stations. We've invented noise-cancelling technologies to make these networks less visible. And, in China's highlands, similar technologies are employed in multimedia shanzai entertainment systems, with flashing disco lights (originally added, in an echo of the FingerWorks narrative, to help deaf people engage with the music), introduced during the early twenty-first century. Such entertainment systems, the narrative suggests were produced in factories across Zomia and marketed in an effort to 'digitise' the nervous systems of minority outsiders, introducing them to every form of digital media, entertainment and connection: television, radio, DVD, EVD, karaoke, Bluetooth, WiFi and more. What was happening, the video suggests, was akin to earthlings trying to communicate with aliens via echoes of sound and light in Steven Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1979). As minority ethnic groups were introduced to the latest musical fads via digitised media, their own voices, in the form of traditional songs, were introduced into museums and archives in the form of field recordings made by anthropologists, which, according to the late American folksinger Pete Seeger (himself the son of a prominent musicologist), meant that these traditions had simply been moved from 'from one grave to another'. As we watch a plane of saffron-robed Indian devotees (it's unclear of what or whom) chanting "Aaya Re! Aaya" ('He has come' in Hindi) at the heavens, in a passage from Spielberg's movie supposedly set in Dharamshala (but actually shot just outside Mumbai), it seems possible that the afterlife of these doomed pasts and fringe histories may be in sci-fi.

From there it's backwards to Andrei Tarkovsky's Solaris (1972), and the lead character's encounters with his dead wife, who has been rematerialised, perhaps as a means of communication, by the sentient planet Solaris. The familiar becomes a way of introducing the unfamiliar, the old becomes a way of introducing the new. "Consider yourself lucky," says Kris Kelvin's colleague Dr Snout as they discuss the problem. "After all she's a part of your past. What if it had been something you had never seen before, but something you had thought or imagined?" As the video ends, with vintage images of women in traditional Mongolian wedding dress morphing into Padmé Amidala wearing a similar costume

in Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999), distinctions between coloniser and colonised, past and present, fact and fiction blur into one. The question of whether or not new systems of social organisation can be thought or imagined remains hanging in the air.

Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities is on show at Protocinema, Istanbul, through 26 October, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, 23 October – 23 December. Work by Liu Chuang will also be included in the Ural Biennale, Ekaterinburg, 12 September
– 1 December, the Asian Art Biennial, Taichung, 30 September–25 February, and the Dhaka
Art Summit, 2020