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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/4409>

DOI: 10.4000/ambiances.4409

ISSN: 2266-839X

**Publisher:**

Direction Générale des Patrimoines - DAPA - MCC, UMR 1563 - Ambiances Architectures Urbanités (AAU)

**Electronic reference**

Marijn Nieuwenhuis, "The politics of subterranean atmospheres in China: a study of contemporary chinese mining art", *Ambiances* [Online], 8 | 2022, Online since 16 November 2022, connection on 17 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/4409> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.4409>

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# The politics of subterranean atmospheres in China: a study of contemporary chinese mining art

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## Introduction

- 1 A few years ago, I visited a mining exhibition, called the “Mining Art Gallery,” in the town of Bishop Auckland in England’s Northeast. The curators of the exhibition, which featured paintings drawn by the miners themselves, intended to convey feelings of “what it felt like to work in the coalmines and shed light on why some miners felt it necessary to paint the dark, claustrophobic world, otherwise hidden from those aboveground” (Auckland Project website, 2019). Exploring the exhibition, surrounded by images of sweating male bodies covered in dust and soot, I sensed an ambient darkness taking hold that I, as an inhabitant of the world above, only know as a detached observer. The paintings seemed to reflect a submerged ecology of masculine comradery, mutual dependence and solidarity that speaks to imaginations of collective hopefulness and working-class aspiration. Although coal mining was central to Britain’s Industrial Revolution, fuelling the “pumping heart” of the “most important invention in the creation of the modern world” (Freese, 2006, p. 44), the exhibition is only the first dedicated mining gallery in the UK. This neglect speaks to a broader legacy of loss and erasure that continues to haunt post-Thatcherite Britain (see also Beynon & Hudson, 2021). The forgotten paintings, some of which were in danger of being lost, help unearth what geographers of affect describe as the entangled “emotional” and “felt” relationship between the working bodies of the miners and the specific material environment (Pini et al., 2010; Ey et al., 2016; Rohse et al., 2020).
- 2 Besides the immersive affects evoked by the paintings’ subterranean atmospherics, what I found most intriguing are the ways in which the “underground” connects to, but also seems detached from, the “aboveground.” The two geological strata, separated by

an interfacing “ground,” constitute seemingly independent and distinct yet unequal and exclusionary sensory atmospheres. The two worlds never seem to meet, or, at least, they occupy different domains, separate geographic imaginaries, as if comprising distinct binary realities. Having said that, their materialities, and the bodies that move in between these two worlds, meet in and through an intricate infrastructure of highly regulated “portals” (mines, caves, tunnels, shafts, etc.). These gateways, if you like, remain “foundational” to the global political economy and, indeed, ultimately, the modern world. It is this strange paradox, this tension in the relationship between the overly visible and felt aboveground, constitutive of *the* world, and the unseen but knowable and known existence of the underground, to which I want to draw attention in this contribution.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as geographers have recently started to wonder, “[h]ow are we to address subsurface issues, if our cultural and social tropes remain on the surface?” (Melo Zurita et al., 2018, p. 5). In my own geological critique, I will be focusing on the work of two contemporary Chinese artists, the filmmaker Zhao Liang and the painter Yang Shaobin, both of whom focus on the lived and embodied experiences of miners.

- 3 I choose to focus on the aesthetic expression because I believe it provides a distinctive set of methodological freedoms that may help challenge the authority of geological dividing lines. In fact, the drawing and redrawing of lines takes on a specific historical importance in the arts, which, in contrast, seems devalued in expectations from and approaches to writing. In his *Lines: A Brief History*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007) describes how line-making in modern Western traditions of writing – once considered an art, now treated as a technology of language – has been demoted to the authority of semantic content and the conformity of typography. In contrast to writing, which today primarily serves the purpose of verbal composition and description, artistic expressions like painting remain committed to the inscription and affectivity of lines. From palaeolithic cave art to Rothko’s colour field abstractionism, inscribing lines to make new worlds and challenge old ones has been crucial for imagining and realising the potential for creation and subversion. It is for this and other reasons, on which I will touch shortly, that I draw inspiration from Zhao and Yang’s underground aesthetics in my critique of a politically visible aboveground and invisible underground.
- 4 I would go so far as to argue that the origins of this geological divide can be traced to an imaginary first aesthetic act that inscribed and enabled a world that knows an above and a below. The separating horizontal line, often drawn as if perfectly straight and solid, constitutes, together with the vanishing point, the modern foundation for a linear and rational perspective through which, functioning as if it is a “window,” we create a “picture” of the world (Panofsky, 1991, pp. 27, 28). This aesthetic divide, which is geological as much as it is epistemological and ontological, is drawn and imagined from and by the above. From this ambiguous first moment of *geographic* separation, an infinite number of ethical and political binaries arises: up/down, visible/invisible, normal/uncanny, bright/dark, clean/dirty, alive/dead, biological/geological, self/Other, in/out, etc. These opposites have ideological, cultural and economic ramifications that stretch far beyond the remit of this paper (see Carlisle & Pevzner, 2014). What I propose to do instead is develop a strategic mode of “excavation” that blurs the lines between a distinct above and below, a *biopolitical* and a *geopolitical*, by drawing on the aesthetic work of Chinese mining art.

- 5 To uncover these geographies, I will focus my attention on the cinematographic work of Zhao Liang (1971) and the visual and installation art of Yang Shaobin (1963). I analyse both Zhao's and Yang's artwork, keeping in mind Harriet Hawkins' (2020a; 2020b) description of a "geopolitical aesthetics of the subterranean." What Hawkins (2020a, p. 215) explores in her work is an aesthetics that "enables a complication of thinking around how it is we know subterranean spaces, their dimensions, dynamics and materialities, all features important to their geopolitical significance." A form of art, in other words, that can help "bring into politics an intensive engagement with the planet's own dynamics" (*ibid.*, p. 229). As I come to show, Zhao's and Yang's work is not limited to providing a topology of the underground and human relationships to it, but also aims to destabilise and subvert the (porous) geopolitical line that divides the Earth into a supposedly clear and distinct above and below.
- 6 Although I explore artwork set in the context of China's large mining industry, I suspect that experiences there also will speak to mining histories and experiences elsewhere. In the case of the modernisation of China, however, an investigation into the geologic politics seems particularly timely. The underground forms an underexplored but crucial component of China's "success story." The image of the country's four decades-long period of upward growth feels overshadowed by the saturated aesthetics of Shenzhen and Shanghai high-rises that dominate and glamorise the stories and book covers of commercial but also academic presses on the economic "miracle." The accumulated kilometres of vertical buildings in China far surpass the skyline of any other country in the world but, and this is no accident, they also tower over the underlit realities of the estimated 6 million miners who work in order for the cities above to continue "rising" (Liu et al., 2007). To be modern, at least in this context, appears to be a story of building into the air above, omitting the fact that the foundations for and on which those structures have been built are assembled by materialities that are buried deep underneath.
- 7 I begin this paper by locating aesthetic interventions of subterranean politics in the broader geography literature on what Yusoff (2013; see also Ellsworth & Kruse, 2013) has termed the "geological turn." The focus of this first section is on situating aesthetic modes of excavation that disclose a geologic political regime responsible for rendering invisible the bodies and materialities that uphold a blind(ing) world above. The second part of the paper applies the developed geological sensitivity to underground aesthetics in the specific context of China's long historical tradition of mining art. Special attention is given to Liu Chunhua's (1967) well-known painting "Chairman Mao goes Anyuan" [*Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan*], which, unlike any other modern artwork, shaped the country's aesthetic sensibilities during and after the Cultural Revolution. The next section then moves on to focus on Zhao Liang's (2015) slow documentary film "Behemoth" [*beixi moshou*]. The artwork, set in China's present, reveals a sense of continuity, specifically in its commitment to a social realist tradition in which the act of mining, the body of the miner and the mining landscape take centre stage. However, with the changes in China's political and cultural economy, which moved from planned and revolutionary to market and consumerist, there is also a degree of radical rupture in the meaning and representation of the mine and the body of the miner. No longer does the underground constitute a geography for a hopeful future, in which miner and materiality co-produce a better tomorrow; instead, the mine now features as the bleak site of an extractive capitalism that hollows out both the miner's body and the mining

landscape. The final section focuses on Yang Shaobin's *Coal Mining Project* (2004–2008), which comprises two works: *800 Meters Under* (2006) and *X-Blind Spot* (2008).<sup>2</sup> The two complementary artworks, I argue, constitute a powerful critique of the geologic politics that separates life below from life above. Yang's art exposes how geological divisions break down, both in the lived experience of the miners' everyday and within the biological interiority of their bodies. The final concluding section returns to the geological location of the political by arguing for a turn to the underground as a site of continuation of and a potential geography of resistance against the politics of the world above.

## Excavation

- 8 When things, people or events vanish from sight as a consequence of natural or social processes, or a combination of them, whether that occurs gradually or quickly, but especially in the case of temporalities that appear slower to the eye, they are always at risk of being left unnoticed, lost or simply forgotten (Nixon, 2011). It is only rarely that we scrutinise events that arrive delayed, or take place hidden from view, beyond what is “witnessed” immediately, and this, perhaps, is even truer for things unfolding beneath our feet. When the underground is a site of analysis, its spaces run the risk of being rendered anomalous, its atmospheres “conceptual, forbidden and even exotic. [T]he foreign territory of the ‘Other’” (Dobraszczyk et al., 2016, p.15).<sup>3</sup> The underground's atmosphere is characterised by a felt material intensity which, in popular imaginations, translates into affective and imaginative geographies of confinement and concealment. McIvor and Johnston (2007, p.275) note how “coal miners frequently have been viewed as a unique community,” living “a life apart.” Drawing on interviews with retired British miners, Beynon and Hudson (2021, p. 191) write that the “most important features of this ‘whole different world’ were that it was underground, and that it was made up of men alone.”
- 9 Things in the ground remain hidden. Until, of course, they are “unearthed” and “brought to light,” rediscovered, recorded and catalogued. The spaces of the underground, in the words of those who “mine” it, can “articulate both lost histories and alternative futures. They are spaces of function and meaning and also spaces of becoming” (Dobraszczyk, Galviz and Garrett, 2015, p. 29). The potential to “retrieve” (as finding *again*) and uncover what was considered “lost” transforms excavation from a practice preoccupied with the past into a potential politics of the future. Archaeology, the field that geologises culture, is not only a study of things buried by the decomposing processes of time and social forgetting, but also a productive act that changes the trajectories of supposedly grounded (and grounding) social histories (Garrett, 2019). It excavates things not yet visible, which, when brought to the surface, can transform knowledge of the present by rewriting histories in and of the world above. “The earth's inner space may no longer be regarded as sacred, but it still is a repository of spiritual value because it is assumed to hold the secrets of lost time” (Williams, 2008, p. 24). The recent archaeological retrieval of Britain's Black Roman past, which has since disrupted the myth of a continuous autochthonous white Britain, provides one example of how a mined fossil always “is incongruent to the present environment” (Yusoff, 2013, p. 789). Squire and Dodds (2020, p. 9) recently remarked that the subterranean functions as “a terrain of and for resistance... From fracking

protests to pipeline protests on indigenous and aboriginal territories around the world, the contested politics of the underground often bring to the fore the very things that might remain invisible to public scrutiny.”

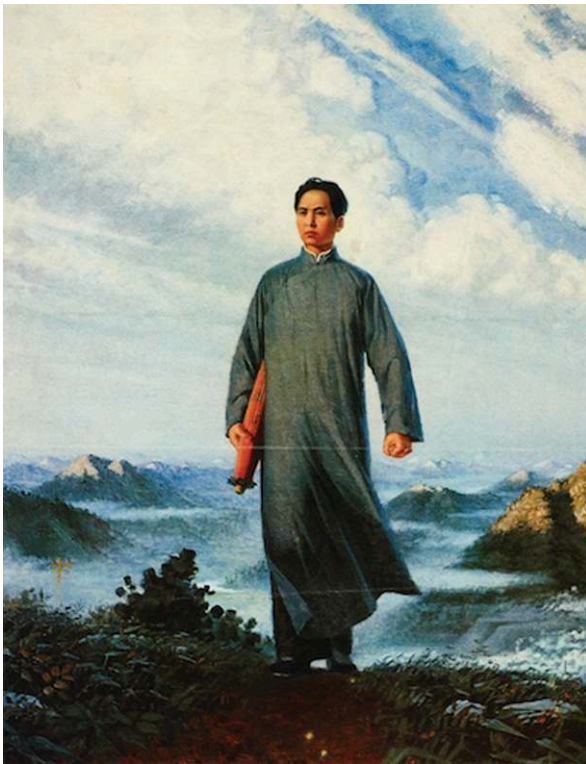
- 10 Excavation is a practice of archaeologists, subterranean explorers and miners, but they are not the only ones digging to transgress the material and social boundaries that separate the world above from the human and non-human archives down below. Sharing a long history of playing with concealment and disclosure, art enjoys a similar subversive aptitude to undermine and overturn overdetermined dividing lines (see also Hawkins, 2020a, 2020b; Perlin et al., 2019). Steve McQueen’s cinematographic *Western Deep* (2002) serves as a powerful example of how art excavates the invisible politics of the underworld. His sensorily immersive and atmospheric video documentary about the embodied lives in the world’s deepest gold mine, the TauTona mines in Carletonville, makes viewers conscious of the otherwise unseen subterranean continuation of racialised labour in postcolonial South Africa. Travelling down, the camera follows the miners’ exhausted bodies and shadowed faces that are unidentifiable in the pit’s dusty darkness. The only discernible sounds here are those of the violent mechanical thundering of drilling machines and the rattling of elevators that move the anonymised Black bodies in shafts that descend for kilometres into the ground, ever farther away from political visibility. McQueen’s haunting aesthetics convey a bleak atmosphere characterised by the monotonous rhythms of a subterranean labour that exhausts Black bodies to beyond the point of their transformation into a “less-than-human” category (Philo, 2016). “In the dark mine shafts, figures are shown as emergent or residual, cast into a blurring of time that is never reduced to a discrete present and that disperses bodies across luminous zones” (Demos, 2005, p. 85). Exploited Black limbs toil in the service of machines that feed a social-material hunger for the country’s largest export “resource” (from Latin *surgere*, “to rise”). Indeed, one should ask, hunger for gold or Black suffering? This vertical manifestation of intersectional class-race capitalism, stretching almost four kilometres in depth, may express itself as a local event, but constitutes a geologic politics that is deeply interwoven in anti-Black and colonial histories buried deep inside the underground (see also Luning & Pijpers, 2017; Yusoff, 2018). Unlike the mining exhibition in England’s Northeast, in which white working-class bodies constitute an entangled ecology of material hardship and solidarity, McQueen’s *Western Deep* subterranean leaves little space for hope, disclosing an altogether negative ambiance of Sisyphean labour and social death.
- 11 Atmospheric interventions like *Western Deep* communicate viscerally and affectively the specific lived experiences of bodies that are otherwise hidden from a modern liberal world unacquainted with, yet benefitting from, those trapped underneath its material foundations. Drawing on Sebastião Salgado’s infamous photos of the Serra Pelada gold mines in Brazil, Stallabrass (1997, p. 133) writes about the “immediate shock” experienced by the post-industrial, neoliberal world when confronted with “scenes of naked exploitation and oppression.” Equipped with the potential to uproot the solidity and fixity of lines which inform modernity’s “surface bias” (Melo Zurita et al., 2018), aesthetic critique extends the location of the political by moving the focus on the world above ground to the geological layers underneath. To be more precise, the art I have in mind is one that challenges and subverts the epistemology of a world carved up into an above that is alive, constituting the self, and a world below relegated to the non-living, the domain of the absolute Other. Atmospheric art of the underground, which pursues

the entangled cartographies of coal, oil and copper, among other “geological media” (Parikka, 2015),<sup>4</sup> evokes and structures feelings, affects and atmospheres that the urban liberal subject of the *superterranean* world may have heard of, but is cut off from.

## Mining Art in China

- <sup>12</sup> Miners have not always lived in anonymity. In China, a country with a long mining history, industrial-scale mining commenced after the colonial encounter with the West (Carlson 1957; Wu, 2015). Bleak atmospherics and ghastly labour conditions provided the aesthetic inspiration and political breeding ground for the birthing of Chinese communism. The mine, and what it stood for and represented, served as the metaphor and reality of capitalist oppression and colonial humiliation. Its embodied materiality and atmospheric specificity offered a rallying point for collective struggle and resistance against colonial capitalism. Shortly after the onset of the infamous 1922 Great Strike at Anyuan in Jiangxi Province, which helped formalise the shape and trajectory of Chinese Communism, mineworkers received cultural visibility and recognition in slogans, popular myths and aesthetic imagery.<sup>5</sup> The mines at Anyuan were transformed into a “paramount centre of the Chinese Communist labour movement” (Perry, 2012, p. 78). Dubbed “Little Moscow” – a name given also to contemporaneous mining towns in Britain – the site received visits from all the major protagonists of the Revolution.<sup>6</sup> To this day, the mines and the events that unfolded there continue to remain crucial to the Party’s contemporary legitimacy. Their political significance, atmospherics and moods are captured in some of the most iconic and enduring images of twentieth-century social realism. The best remembered and probably one of the most reproduced oil paintings (ever) is Liu Chunhua’s influential painting “Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Liu Chunhua, *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan*, [*Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan*], 1967



- 13 Set in the misty Wugong mountain landscape and painted during the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the image portrays a slightly levitating young Mao carrying a simple umbrella. The figure appears to move towards the audience as if arising as the “saviour of proletariat and peasantry alike” (Perry, 2012, p. 200). Celebrated as a model painting by the leaders of the Cultural Revolution, countless versions appeared in memorial halls and museums across the country, making it a “central icon of worship” (*ibid.*, p. 242). The painting’s atmosphere and the historical symbolism of the mines, reproduced in everyday objects including lighters, stamps, sculptures and playing cards, typify the revolutionary aesthetic of the Cultural Revolution. The image, informed by Italian Renaissance classicism, gathers around a well-known socialist realist tradition that focuses on proletarian hardship against the backdrop of an exploitative colonising capitalism. Miners are not depicted with bodies that appear less-than-human, but as healthy, masculine, muscular, heroic and capable. The previously invisible miner’s body is transformed into “the primary symbol of the proletariat” (Wang, 2006, p. 22) – a militant worker.<sup>7</sup>
- 14 In China’s experimental 1980s, a period in which new artistic expressions found their footing, mining imaginary and aesthetics started to change. Older, government-sanctioned expressions of social realism became a target of criticism, cynicism, even ridicule and, soon thereafter, commodification and collector fetishism. Braga (2017, p. 6) explains that Liu Chunhua’s painting “not only greatly [influenced] Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution..., but [that] it was also [used]... to discuss Mao’s position [and legacy].” One example of such an intervention is a work by the renowned contemporary artist Wang Xingwei. Wang’s painting shows a contemporised Mao as a liberal subject dressed in Western attire and equipped with a modern umbrella. Mao appears no longer to be moving towards but walking away from the Anyuan mines, the

viewer and the communist revolution. The formerly weighty atmosphere, characterised by the determined and stern expression on Mao's face amidst a clearing sky, is replaced by a carefree ambiance of forward-looking, middle-class aspiration, leaving behind no trace of the miners, the mines or their histories. *The Eastern Way: The Road to Anyuan* (1995), which is the title given to the painting-cum-advertisement, is situated in a space between critique, pastiche and irony.

- 15 Today, visitors to the local Anyuan Railway Workers and Miners' Strike Memorial can purchase miniature statutes of Liu's painting as a souvenir to feed what remains of the country's red nostalgia. Commenting on the work of Yang Shaobin, whose work I will turn to shortly, Papastergiadis (2009, p. 26) writes that "miners were once celebrated and rewarded for their sacrifices and now they are [treated as] disposable commodities."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, however, the mines never shut down. Instead, they continue to be in operation and serve as a frequent site of strikes and protests (Time, 2016). However, unlike their politicisation in previous times, the deplorable working conditions remain for the most part hidden and sealed off from the world above, resembling "a throwback to the pre-revolutionary scene" (Perry, 2012, p. 274).<sup>9</sup> Coverage about underground conditions, including Li Yang's debut film *Blind Shaft* (2008) and Bollendorff and Segretin's *Journey to the End of Coal* (2008), often falls victim to strict censorship controls. On those rare yet potent occasions when miners are on display, their bodies no longer appear heroic or strong, but anxious, frail and exhausted. The atmosphere of the underground appears to have been transformed from a site of struggle and hope to one of felt suffering and despair. Such glimpses into the bleakness of the underworld are usually tightly controlled and regulated by authorities whose very legitimacy rests on (the exclusive visibility of) success aboveground. This, however, does not prevent the longing of a new generation of Chinese artists to revisit the social realism as a powerful critique of Chinese capitalism.

## Zhao Liang's *Behemoth*

- 16 Zhao Liang's recent and internationally praised documentary film *Behemoth* (2015), named after the biblical creature of the underworld, is among the most recent and forceful examples of a body of work that challenges aboveground censorship. The film's disturbing scenes of open-pit mining in Inner Mongolia, narrated by the director with verse inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, evoke feelings of dread and desolation. Metaphors and atmospheres of hell (*Inferno*), which in Western cosmologies shares an underground location, have been used widely by miners to describe their lived experiences in the pit (McIvor & Johnston, 2007). Zhao shows their bodies as if imprinted by the forsaken landscape they themselves have excavated. His film confronts viewers with images of scarred limbs and sooty faces of bodies covered in dust, dirt and sweat. Closing in on a miner's face, Zhao (2015), whose voice narrates the scene, observes: "I stare at his features baked as if by molten iron... soaked in sweat. That distressed visage nonetheless does not keep me from seeing clearly the way he looked before."
- 17 After a long day of hard work, miners return home, often a makeshift one, and try to thoroughly wash their skin clean, but the materiality of the landscape refuses to let go. Dirt and dust intrude and stain the interiority of their bodies, subjugating and sabotaging their anatomical workings from within. Miners' nystagmus – once among

the most common occupational illnesses, but now a forgotten and misunderstood medical condition caused by light deprivation and associated with involuntary eye oscillation, defective vision, headaches and breathlessness – constitutes a powerful reminder of the physiological effects of living in dark atmospheres (McIvor & Johnston, 2007). As the biopolitical fuses with the geological, and material exteriorities permeate and corrode bodily interiors, everything, both inside and outside, is coloured black.

When we drilled holes, dust filled the tunnel. Even people standing almost face-to-face could not see each other. The dust mingles with the air, which you have to inhale, of course, or you can't breathe... We did not wear masks when working (Yang Yaoming in China Daily, 2012).

- 18 In one of the scenes in the film, we see, hear and feel the strained and haunted breathing of a coal miner suffering from incurable pneumoconiosis (from Greek *pneumon*, meaning lung, *conis*, dust and *osis*, disease). Moments of distressed heavy breathing are among the few sounds that bodies can be heard making amidst the roaring of endless rows of queuing trucks, slowly echoing explosions and monotonous machine drilling. The “dust and debris of mining [that] devours the workers’ bodies [render] them the same damaged matter as natural landscapes” (Litzinger & Yang 2020, p. 14). Another scene shows a man in a bed, his pensive mood disturbed by the intermittent pumping of a respirator machine. Other miners, many with respirators, are shown in hospital beds, or filmed outside protesting to seek justice for friends they have lost. “The bodies of coal miners belong to the landscape” (Sorace, 2016, p. 41).
- 19 The film starts with a manmade pit situated in an uneven, sensory bleak extractive terrain and a thick atmosphere of greyness, colossal explosions, intoxicating smoke, bare rocks and dust. “This is a place that has been destroyed [...] Not a blade of grass survived. A land of deathly silence” (Zhao, 2015). Zhao’s miners are as soundless as those in McQueen’s (2002) *Western Deep*. The only sounds bodies can be heard making are those of their coughing and forced breathing. Their lives are reduced to the absolute biological minimum – “bare life” (Agamben, 1998), and their bodies are so absorbed in their geologic surroundings that they “become momentarily alien” (Zheng, 2021, p. 121).
- 20 Zhao’s cinematography contrasts the desolate and dark atmospherics of this barren embodied landscape with impressions from the thousands of newly built empty flats in the infamous “ghost town” of Kangbashi in the prefectural city of Ordos. The manifold increase in the region’s coal and oil extraction, which led to its emergence as an “energy resource frontier”, means that the city is now among the wealthiest in China (Woodworth, 2017).<sup>10</sup> One commentary explains that the expansion helped remote Ordos (from Mongolian “palatial tent”) to become “richer than Beijing or Shanghai” (Wright, 2013, p. 144). The logic of “catching up” with these already vertically established cities inspired local officials “to satisfy a pervasive sense of ‘lateness’ by building the hallmark features of ‘spatial modernity,’ namely the broad boulevards, expansive squares, and tall buildings” (Zhang in Woodworth & Ulfstjerne, 2016, p. 651). Underneath this dystopian vision simmered a vast “underground” speculative bubble, which burst violently in 2011, leaving the future of the city uncertain (see Woodworth and Ulfstjerne 2016). *Behemoth* ends the “‘supply chain’ (*chanye lian*) of urban construction” (Zhao in Sorace, 2016, p. 40) with a scene of one of the city’s lone street sweepers, who, struggling to find enough dirt and dust to collect, embodies the concluding statement of the film: “In paradise everything is clean [...] In Paradise no inhabitants are to be seen” (Zhao, 2015).

- 21 Probably to no-one's surprise, the CCP banned the film immediately upon its release. In fact, Zhao never even bothered to apply for state approval. Behemoth is the "great beast," "the largest monster on Earth" (Zhao, 2015), whose insatiable hunger is fed no longer by thousands of mountains, as the original story goes, but by tens of thousands of human lives whose presence is felt invisibly in the empty Ordos high-rise palaces. Behemoth is the monster of capitalist modernisation and industrial colonialisation that extracts what is underneath to build the architecture above. The two worlds are separated by a simple surface that conceals the intimate relationship shared between the spurned atmosphere of the subterranean and the overlit atmosphere of the superterranean. Zhao makes this line visible, politicising it, undermining and subverting it, exposing the environmental and human cost that results from turning a blind eye to it.

## Yang Shaobin's *Coal Mining Project*

- 22 Another Chinese artist eager to revive the idea of "art as social intervention" is the renowned painter and sculptor Yang Shaobin (Wang in Guo, 2010, p. 17; Yang in Li, 2010). Growing up in close proximity to the Kailuan mine near the town of Tangshan in Hebei, Yang is the creator of a two-fold series of immersive installations that are based on an extensive number of ethnographic field visits to coalmining communities in mineral-rich Hebei, Shanxi, Liaoning and Inner Mongolia. His revivalist social realist work, which comprises paintings, sculptures and video installations, expresses and comments on the effects that coalmining has on both the landscape and the emotional and embodied lives of miners and their families. His *800 Meters Under* (*zhongshen 800 mi*, 2006), set in the mines at Kailuan (Hebei province), comprises a series of paintings, a colour video, an installation of a worker's dwelling and two connected video documentaries, entitled "Aboveground" and "Underground".
- 23 The two videos present two juxtaposed geologic politics. "Underground," which is filmed in colour, revolves around work conditions in the mine, while "Aboveground" depicts the everyday life of the miners and is shot in black and white. The former follows the coal from the moment of the drilling that separates it from the earth to its conveyor belts and sorting machines. It is then transported through the tunnels to the lifts and trucks that propel it into the economic and political world above. Liang's focus, however, stays with the miners. "Aboveground" depicts the affect and effects coalmining has on their and their families' everyday lives. A cloudless, grey atmosphere, makeshift dwellings and a dry and dusty landscape act as the austere scenery foregrounding the miners and their impoverished living conditions. As the Kailuan mine is state-controlled and provides for basic housing, which contrasts sharply with conditions in privately owned mines, they are among the more "fortunate" ones. Most of the miners share a rural registration status (*hukou*), which forces them into a continuous pursuit of precarious work.<sup>11</sup> Their migratory existence is "spurred by the exhaustion of resources and the continuous shift of worker peasant status as they move from farmer to miner to farmer again" (Long March, 2009, p. 75). The path of a miner's horizontal migration and his vertical journey are both movements shaped and determined by the geological rhythms of an extractive resource capitalism.

- 24 Liang's two video documentaries centre around the mine, which functions as a portal between different political realities and temporal modalities: work/life, toil/hope and present/future. Lu Jie, the astute curator of the project, and the initiator of the Long March Project, writes:
- “[The] coalmines are a nexus between history and today, – they are the intersection between traditional society and modernity, it is the point of contention between socialist utopianism, the logic of capitalism, and the dream of futurism [...] [I]t is both a historical problem as well as a prescient [issue]. What we are searching for in the ruins of industrialism is not a memory, but a linkage with history” (Lu, 2009, p. 8).
- 25 Another perceptive commentary on Liang's work observes that mines are perhaps “the site of the greatest conflict between the historical imagery of a proletarian paradise and the reality of an exploitative industry where ordinary lives are of no account” (Irish Times, 2006). The reference to a workers' “paradise” serves as a subtle reminder of the historical link that exists between mining art and the radical politics of an earlier generation of Chinese artists. Yang (in *ibid.*) remarks that miners used to be promoted in the propaganda as heroes to be emulated. Now outsiders seldom go there, and the miners seldom come out. There is a sense of isolation and neglect that is made worse by the lingering memory of the previous image.
- 26 The persistent myth of a workers' paradise, which Yang (in *ibid.*) describes as a “fake realism,” finds its neoliberal mirror image in the surrealistic city of Ordos in Zhao Liang's (2015) *Behemoth*. Anonymous workers are shown excavating the raw materials and iron for making steel to build the houses and cities they are taught to work towards and aspire to but, given their meagre wage, they will never be able to afford or live in. Things underground, including atmospheres, materialities and bodies, appear erased or coded over by political interests and historical cultural imaginations that privilege sky over soil. The defining characteristic of this imagination is that it reduces the subterranean environment to a world that exists only to serve what is above.
- 27 Yang Shaobin's work subverts this line, undermining the authority that it has. Many of the paintings in his *800 Meters Under* series depict everyday landscapes overlaid with the faces and bodies of miners (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The work leaves audiences guessing and searching for the liminal channels or portals through which the workers travel. The superimposition of the underground world, which is persistently and deliberately made invisible and silenced in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities of vertical success, helps Yang to address and politicise the arbitrary division that separates the two worlds. Miners are foregrounded in an amplified and disproportional manner with bodies rising heroically as skyscrapers on the horizon. They appear victorious, often depicted as laughing and proud, as if emerging from the landscape itself. Yang's vertical transgressions help him to redraw the surface on which everything relevant is said to be visible. Not too dissimilar from the artistic depictions of miners in England's Northeast, whose history also is interwoven with that of class struggle, the celebration of Yang's mining art in the prestigious art galleries in China's high-rise cities means that the deep underworld of the coal miners is made visible to those whose lives normally unfold above ground. Yang's miners, covered in sweat, soot, dust and dirt, compel audiences to engage and reflect on their own geological complicity.

Figure 2: Yang Shaobin, *800 Meters Under No. 1*



Oil on canvas, 210×350cm, 2006

Figure 3: Yang Shaobin, *800 Meters Under No. 4*



Oil on canvas, 210×350cm, 2006

- 28 Sometimes, however, it is not necessary to dig very deep to excavate, lay bare and connect the geopolitics of the underground with the biopolitics of the world above. The second instalment of Yang's coalmining project, entitled *X-Blind Spot* (*X hou shi mang qu*, Yang, 2008), consists of a four-channel video installation, oil paintings, sculptures and other media. Situated in the open-pit mines in the Northern provinces, the artwork expands on the embodied politics of the first phase of the coalmine project. The term "Blind Spot" refers to the 50 metre-large "blind spot in the rear-view mirror of the 'Komatsu 170,' those giant trucks used to transport coal" (Guo, 2010, p. 18). "Within the boundaries of this 'blind spot' is plausible potential ruin" (Long March, 2008). The

reference is technical and metaphorical at the same time. It is dedicated to a geography of things uncovered, unseen, unsaid, unearthed and excluded, but which, at the same time, is immense. The blind spot refers to the invisible bodies of miners, their stories, labour, emotions, the minerals that have turned into “inert, dead and manipulable matter” (Shiva, 1994, p. 130), but it also includes the ruins that are left behind after the machines have done their work. “The physical repercussions of such blindness... lie in stark contrast to the immensity of [the] mining environment and to the visible risk of labour” (Long March, 2009, p. 71). By inhabiting this blind spot, Yang’s close-up photography and videography compel audiences to confront their involvement in the lived experience of miners. They who normally remain unseen produce, as one commentator reminds us, “the most fundamental materials of our everyday existence” (Papastergiadis, 2009, p. 26). Inspired by the artist’s visits to a local hospital specialising in pulmonary diseases, four extraordinary large canvases (*X-Blind Spot No. 1, 2, 3, 4*) depict containers with the dead lungs of victims of black lung disease preserved in formaldehyde. The dark liquid and the diseased tissue are all that remain of the miners’ bodies.<sup>12</sup> “The miners themselves are no longer the focal point; they have departed or are ‘hidden’ from view” (Long March, 2009, p. 76). To use Lewontin and Levin’s (2007) terminology, what remains of them is their “proletarian lung.”

- 29 The letter “X” in the title of Yang’s work refers to the X-ray imaging technology that “opened up the *living* human body as an object... [for] new [anatomical] knowledge” (Pasveer, 2006, p. 42, original emphasis). It is also referring to figurative claims to a truth (“X”) and to the universal symbol for centrality and negation (“X”). X-rays map the borders of shadows that bring into vision body parts *in vivo*. The invention of imaging technology in 1895, which documents the living body from within, meant that medical diagnoses no longer strictly had to depend on a patient’s “subjective” feeling, smell, touch or narrative. X-rays opened up a new “objective” anatomical epoch of supposedly unmediated photographic representation and evidence. “Every image,” a commentator of Yang’s artwork writes,

starts in a negative light, [revealing] a truth that is there in the centre of our vision but to which we have become habitually blind... Perhaps the most disturbing inversion is the collapse of the boundary between inside and the outside. As these images switch between negative and positive light, they expose the confusion of the sensorial world. States which are normally kept distinct from each other are shown to have been folded together (Papastergiadis, 2009, p. 23, 25).

- 30 Elizabeth Povinelli (2016, p. 42) asks: “[w]here is the human body if it is viewed from within the lung?” X-ray photography transcends the boundaries that separate materiality from corporality, which may explain why it has been used so obsessively to document, compare and interpret the human lung. The lung, after all, is the respiratory location where boundaries between inside and outside collapse. It is among the organs that most radically and intimately fuse our bodies with the atmosphere.

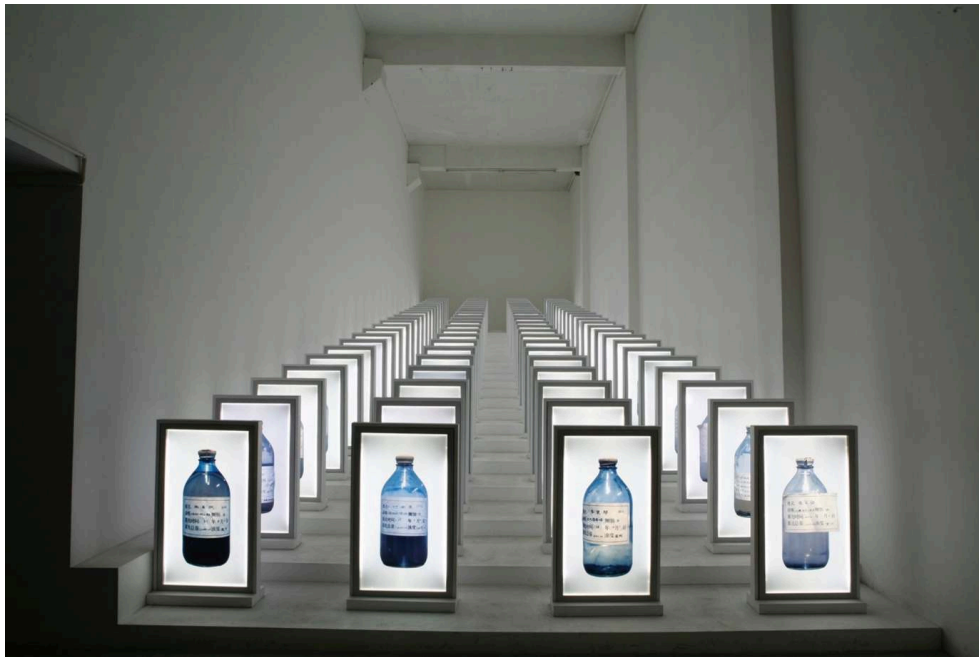
With every exchange of air, every gesture of breathing in and breathing out, we find ourselves woven into the currents of an atmosphere, an encompassing presence, in fact, from which we are inseparable, and without which it would be impossible for us to survive (Kleinberg-Levin, 2018, p. 10).

- 31 X-ray technology offered the first visually unmediated representation of individual organs inside the abstract body (Pasveer, 2006). The radiography exposes to the miners’ eyes what the claustrophobic feeling of their obstructed breathing already knows – the size of the concrete that their bodies carry deep inside. Photographic shadows visualise

a once exterior materiality that now resides within, as “a relic of the landscape” (Bennett, 2013, p. 115). The corporeal border, which supposedly was said to stabilise and protect the inside from the outside, down and under, is exposed as myth by the lung, which inhales and exhales atmospheres of dust. Now, however, it appears and feels as black and rigid as the scorched landscape itself. Yang writes in his notebook:

Coal miner, black person, black bird, black flower, black car, black shoe, black building, black hat, black feet, black hands, black sky, black fingernail, black tyre, black teeth, black chimney (Yang in Long March, 2009, p. 76).

- 32 Yang’s exhibitory and unearthing artwork documents the geological traces of the unequal and violent politics that divides the Earth into a world above and a “black hell” below. Polluted by fleeting dust, which travels with and within the atmospheric bodies, the miners’ lungs remain hardly recognisable as (biological) organs. All difference appears reduced to shades of dust’s deadly blackness, which, for that reason, makes X-ray radiography the principal method for making the miners’ world visible (McIvor & Johnston 2007). Once dust enters a miner’s lungs, it stays there invisibly and unnoticed. Their bodies gradually less able to breathe, as dust settles to accumulate and a violent geologic politics forces their respiration into a painful and protracted chokehold, consumed by a subterranean atmosphere.
- 33 Few Chinese miners get the opportunity to view their injuries and scars from the inside. Ma Weishan, a gold miner from Qinghai province, explains: “I’ve been longing for the operation for six years, I really want to see what’s in my lungs” (Ma in China Daily, 2012). The Hebei Coal Mine Workers Beidaihe Sanatorium was recently set up as China’s first black lung disease rehabilitation centre. It is one of the last vestiges of hope for the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, who suffer from black lung disease. The scale of the disease is of such a magnitude that entire villages are dubbed “pneumoconiosis villages” [*chenfei cun* or *chenfei bing cun*] (Fan & Ng, 2008, p. 197). Those that are fortunate enough to find a way to finance the expensive treatment go through a process of what is called “lung lavage.” The practice “cleanses” and “flushes out” the lungs by ventilating them with oxygen and pouring large quantities of saline (sodium chloride solution) through a catheter. During the treatment, which can take 10 to 25 days, air and water enter the body while dust exits it. The dirt is collected in dozens of glass bottles filled with black bronchoalveolar fluids dubbed “black spit” by English miners: pieces of undigested subterranean atmosphere brought to visibility by tired and expiring bodies.

Figure 4: Yang Shaobin, *X-Blind Spot NO.15*

Light box installation, 100 × 75 cm (88pc), 2008

- 34 Yang's *X-Blind Spot No. 15* (Figure 4) displays 88 photos of individual bottles of embodied blackness. It is difficult to think of a better example of an embodied atmosphere than this archive of "deadly dust" (Rosner & Markowitz, 2006). The bottles act as a midway point, a place where the geological and the biological intersect and the border between the geopolitical and the biopolitical collapses. Earth no longer features as a grounding surface, which, after all, it never was, but is shown as a dynamic geological materiality that exists alongside, inside and with the porously biological body. The bottles reveal the uneven intensity of the contact that Othered bodies have with Earth's open-ended geology. The Western colonial myth of a universal "man," a dated category by all accounts, is invalidated by the gross differences in the levels of corporeal intimacy with geological life.

## Conclusion

- 35 This paper explores the myth of a line that geopolitically separates above from below ground by studying the bodies that travel through the portals, holes and gateways between these two separate worlds. Bridge (2013) addresses the tension of an underground world that, on the one hand, is imagined "radically different" but, on the other hand, is tied into and linked with the political and economic interests of the world above the surface. The underground seems invisible and unfelt in the geologically alienated everyday life of residents of the modern city. It is only in rare "moments of intrusion" – a leaking underground gas tank, a damaged oil pipeline – that the "illusion of an autonomous society, an illusion made entirely possible by the dependence on fossil fuels," shatters and breaks down in short-lived moments of awareness (Bridge, 2009, p. 8). All that separates these two worlds is the thin line that constitutes Earth's surface. This skin, not solid but porous, not fixed but open and open-ended, seems as holey and unstable as that of the bodies that travel through it.

How, then, and through which methods, are we to address and stick with the issue of the relationship between conditions under and above the surface at a time when eyes are pointed at the sky?

- 36 There always is a certain difficulty in making the invisible visible, or in unearthing the interred. It requires a degree of imagination and illumination. Hawkins (2020b, p. 4, 5) invites us to turn attention to the historical reputation of the “underground’s imaginative force” to feel inspired by “the material and deep time intimacies and sensualities of human bodies with/in millennia-old rocky bodies, recent plastic ones and mineralogical deposits that are merely months old.” This article takes up Hawkins’ call for “creative collaborative geographies” by drawing on the work of two artists whose sensitivities for the significance of drawing and subverting lines appear more attuned than those of writers like myself. It is through the work of Zhao (2015) and Yang (2004–2008) that I have argued for a turn to underground atmospheres, not as existing independently, but rather as a constitutive part and product of a political geography determined from and shaped by the above. Their artwork not only helps render underground spaces visible, legible and controllable, as Hawkins (2020a) suggests, but their interventions also make explicit the violence of a geographic regime that divides the Earth into a distinct above and below. What their work on Chinese miners reveals is a shared but complicated intimacy with the geological materialities and atmospheres of the underground. Miners are not just shown as the mere transporters of materialities which make the modern world, but their artwork illuminates how their (and their families’) bodies carry within them the underground. This means that the very location of the underground and its atmospheres are thrown into question.
- 37 Geographers have challenged epistemological and ontological approaches to the Earth’s soil as a static, fixed and solid surface (Clark, 2011; Peters et al. 2018). A new body of geographic literature has opened the doors to recognising and engaging with the unique properties, qualities and relationalities of Earth’s materialities. Steinberg and Peters (2015, p. 255), whose well-cited work focuses on oceanic water, argue for less of a geological and more of a geophysical approach that “configures a world that is open, porous, mobile, and changing, but concurrently one that can stabilise temporarily.” Indeed, elemental experimentalists and thinkers have argued similarly for greater porosity and entanglement between materiality and body (Adey 2016; Nieuwenhuis & Nassar, 2018; Engelmann and McCormack 2011; Szerszynski 2021). Engelmann (2020, p. 3, original emphasis) reminds her readers that “to be affected by air, to be a *breather*, is to be in common with other breathing bodies and to register a medium that ties the body to the city, the region and the planet.” Every material relation between body and materiality, however, also merits acknowledging the political specificity, historicity and context that determines the degree and quality of this intimate entanglement shared with the Earth. After all, as I hope Zhou and Liang’s aesthetic interventions show, there “is not biography (life-descriptions) on the one side and geography (nonlife-descriptions) on the other” (Povinelli in Yusoff & Coleman, p. 2014, para. 9).
- 38 Earlier, in my discussion on Liang’s use of X-ray technology, I borrowed Povinelli’s question “Where is the human body if it is viewed from within the lung?” (Povinelli, 2016, p. 42). Too often, perhaps, the answer is sought in the air above, forgetting that Earth’s atmosphere is inseparable from the social-material conditions down below. Lungs appear at the mediating interface where, and through which, the geopolitical

meets the biopolitical, but, as Covid has recently reminded us, they are also entangled with political geographies, both near and far away. Lungs remind us of human inseparability, as philosophers of atmospheres have argued (Lenart & Berndtson 2018), but they also carry within them traces, records, or, indeed, an archive of lived “geological life” (Yusoff, 2013). Lungs, therefore, are not wholly within or of the body, but are the spongy, air-filled organs that are in constant interplay with and affected by historical social-material exteriorities. Understanding lungs as shaped by class, race and gender displaces their deeply intimate place within the body, as a medium for breath and speech, to a collective social, historical and environmental concern. The same, however, can be said of the underground atmospheres I discussed in this article, which, I hope to have shown, appear no longer as merely “existing” underneath. Using Liang and Zhou “underground’s imaginative force” helps unearth and illuminate underground atmospheres as historically and materially embodied geological entanglements that blur the lines that separate inside from outside, and above from below.

*I am very grateful to the artist Yang Shaobin and Lu Jie, the initiator of Long March Project, for being so kind as to allow me to reproduce Yang’s artwork. I also would like to thank researcher and project manager Shen Jun for her generous help and time in my contact with the Long March Space. Finally, my thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers who provided constructive feedback on an earlier version of this article.*

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## NOTES

1. These ramifications of dividing the world into an above and a below have been explored in the reflections of English miners. The most famous example, at least in the western world, is Coombes' (2002) autobiographical mining account set in Wales.
2. Yang Shaobin worked together with the curator Lu Jie on the project. Lu's concern with China's development and pursuit of (an alternative) modernity helped frame the coal-mining project.
3. This is a theme that finds its echo in literary works. A famous example is Orwell's (1895) *The Time Machine: An Invention*, in which a futuristic class struggle finds expression in a geological form.

4. For instance, see the *Subterranean* exhibition in Amos Rex (<https://amosrex.fi/en/exhibitions/subterranean/>); the Ursula Biemann *Becoming Earth* project (<https://becomingearth.unal.edu.co/home>); and the chapters in the edited volume *Making the Geologic Now* (Ellsworth & Kruse, 2013).
5. The 1922 strike, put down by colonial British marine forces, constituted a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Chinese Labour Movement and the development of class consciousness (see Chesneaux, 1968; Howlett, 2016).
6. It is no accident that around the same time, mining towns in England's Northeast, among them Chopwell in Gateshead Borough, received similar names.
7. Examples include Hou Yimin's *Chairman Mao and the Anyuan Coalminers* (1968) and Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan Coal Miners (1959). According to Lu Jie (2009), an art historian, curator and friend of Yang Shaobin, artists often worked in collaboration with the miners. A famous example of this collaboration was the 1967 exhibition *Mao Zedong's Thought Illuminates the Anyuan Worker's Movement* in the Museum of Revolutionary History on Tiananmen Square. Although less celebrated and drawn mostly by men, female miners were also painted. Examples include Yang Zhiguang's *Newcomer to the Coal Mine* (1971) and Yan Shen's *Female Coalminer* (Kao, 2010; Lu, 2009).
8. In another, more vulgar anticipation of the rise of Mao pop culture, artists such as the Icelandic Erró, decontextualised Mao further by placing him altogether away from the Anyuan mines, in Italian Venice (*L'ultima visita di Mao a Venetia*, 2003). In Yue Minjun's 2003 rendition entitled *Liu Chunhua-Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, Mao's presence has been removed entirely from the painting, leaving only the original landscape drawn in shades of black and white.
9. Liu's painting continues to be invoked as a critique. A recent example is an anonymous rendition entitled *Qian Yunhui Petitioning* that was distributed and shared on popular online platforms such as *weibo*. The artist replaced the head of Mao with that of the local party cadre Qian Yunhui who, known for his activism, was run over and killed by a truck. The truck features in the background of the painting. Qian Yunhui's controversial death is the subject of the 2012 documentary film by the renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.
10. Woodworth (2017, p. 137) writes that "[c]oal output in Ordos grew spectacularly in the 2000s from 22.9 million tons in 2000 to 630 million tons in 2013," making it the largest supplier of coal in the country.
11. They are referred to as "peasant workers" (*nongmingong*), which often carries derogatory associations.
12. McIvor and Johnston (2007, p. 317) describe how the effects of black lung disease, including physical impairment and damaged self-esteem, emasculated British miners in the twentieth century. "Working in the pits toughened miners up, made them 'hard men,' and honed the physically fit and powerful body, whilst also ironically holding the potential to erode and undermine their masculinity."

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## ABSTRACTS

Every five seconds someone dies prematurely from air pollution (UN, 2019). Environmental degradation, however, is not limited to the air above alone, but also affects the conditions of life underneath the surface. Black lung disease (*pneumoconiosis*), a respiratory condition, is by far the most common occupational illness in China today. Official reports suggest that over half a million people, almost exclusively rural migrants, live with the incurable disease. The real number could

be 10 times as high (SCMP, 2021). The respiratory condition is a powerful reminder of the shared geological intimacy that exists between the bodies of miners and the materiality that constitutes the enveloping atmospheres of the underworld.

Inspired by Hawkins' (2020b, p. 4) idea of the "underground's imaginative force" and the so-called "geologic turn" (Ellsworth & Kruse, 2013), this paper explores the politics of subterranean atmospheres in China by problematising the relationship between the ground above and the ground below. I analyse this "geologic politics" (Clark, 2013) through the artwork of filmmaker Zhao Liang and the painter Yang Shaobin, both contemporary artists working on subterranean lives, bodies, emotions and atmospheres. Through their art of the subterranean, its environment, lived experience, embodiment and the specificity and intimacy of its materiality, I capture a politics that challenges false binaries of a separate above and below.

Toutes les cinq secondes une personne meurt prématurément à cause de la pollution atmosphérique (ONU, 2019). Cependant, la dégradation de l'environnement ne se limite pas à l'air ambiant, elle affecte également les conditions de vie sous la surface terrestre. La maladie du poumon noir (pneumoconiose), une affection respiratoire, est actuellement la première maladie professionnelle en Chine. Selon les rapports officiels, plus d'un demi-million de personnes, presque exclusivement des migrants des zones rurales, vivent avec cette maladie incurable. En réalité, le nombre réel pourrait être dix fois plus élevé (SCMP, 2021). La « condition respiratoire » est un rappel puissant de l'intimité géologique partagée qui existe entre les corps des mineurs et la matérialité qui constitue les atmosphères enveloppantes du monde souterrain.

Inspiré par les idées de la « force imaginative du sous-sol » (Hawkins 2020b, p. 4) et du surnommé « tournant géologique » (Ellsworth & Kruse, 2013), cet article explore la politique des atmosphères souterraines en Chine au travers une problématisation des la relation entre le sol au-dessus et le sol au-dessous. J'analyse cette « politique géologique » (Clark, 2013) à travers les œuvres du cinéaste Zhao Liang et du peintre Yang Shaobin, deux artistes contemporains qui travaillent sur les vies, les corps, les émotions et les atmosphères souterraines. À travers leur art du souterrain, de son environnement, de l'expérience vécue, de l'incarnation et de la spécificité et de l'intimité de sa matérialité, je saisis une politique qui défie l'interprétation binaire d'un dessus et d'un dessous séparés.

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Dr Marijn Nieuwenhuis is an Assistant Professor in Human Geography at Durham University. His work is driven by a curiosity for conceptual art, disregarded things and elemental experiments. He has written on holes, weather, air, breathing, skin, dust and sand. He discusses these elemental matters in the context of different geographies (China, the UK and wherever else he can and may).