

# My Slippery Minds



*Ran Zhang's narrator lives in the year 2123 and is the descendent of an ancient East Asian grey-zoner. She sits in an armchair, resting on a regular afternoon, analyzing things around her in the middle of the known and unknown, and letting her mind drift between awake criticism, cognitive self-doubt, pseudo-rationality and illusive absurdity. The text is written as a response to experiencing the mental states of citizens in authoritarian societies.*

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“Tzu”<sup>1</sup> was the name given to the teenage weed-pipe of a Berlin friend by her Chinese friend in 2023, precisely 100 years ago. It was a brilliant name for them because in none of their own linguistic or cultural contexts could they conceive a meaning for the word. Still, at the same time, they both felt there was an unexplainable preciseness to the German-East Asian hybrid, a crystal clear sense of something familiar and novel, and beyond. Today Tzu sounds even more ancient but also more contemporary. Just like everything else nowadays, extremely bipolar, severely exploited, universal and unique at the same time, normal and special, known and unknown. We are living in a world of vivid entropy that has been favorably initiated by primitive internationalization, antique hedonic technocracy and primordial internet training, all of which has burst into the tangible reality of a mere grey zone, a pot of shapeless soup that contains and evens out everything.

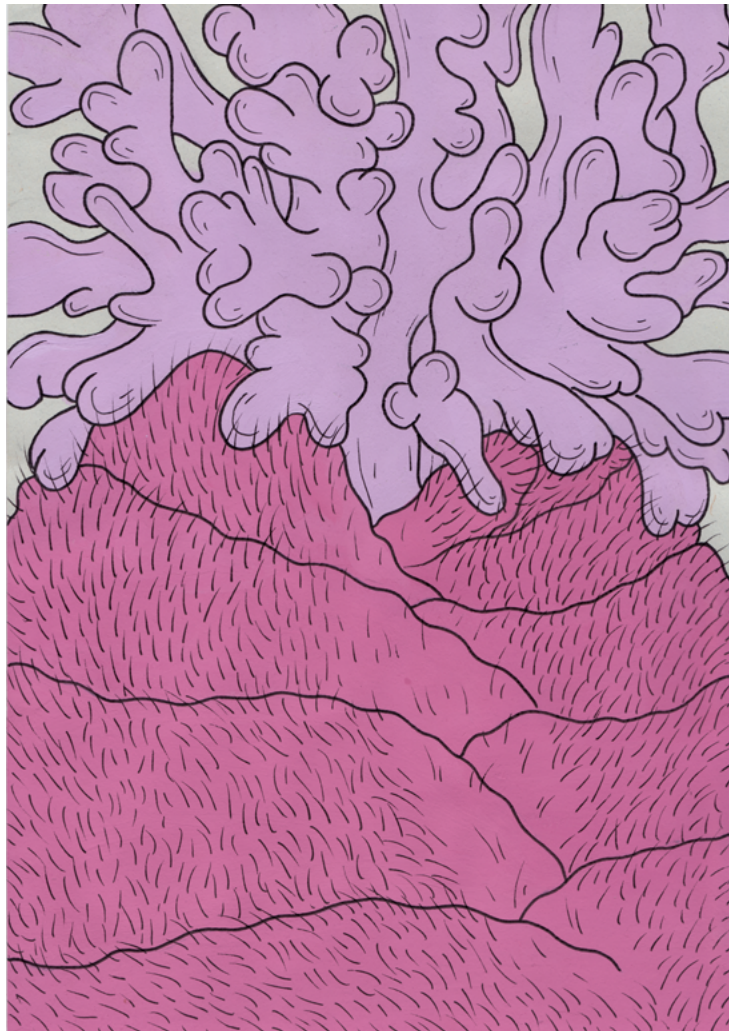
A grey zone used to be a side effect, a “leftover” and a never-exploited genuine domain. It was caused by two or more social/cultural positions colliding into a surface value while forming a newly constructed conventional common ground. What was left was an undefined sphere that immigrants, third world citizens and off-center cultures from 100 years ago often found themselves situated in, stuck between someone else’s process of reclaiming the familiar homeostasis and their process of maybe becoming something new, a sort of “glitch” in the eyes of my great-grandmother. But a grey zone was in many ways amazing, precisely because of its undefinedness, which, she said, upheld an idea to be something else. But I don’t know what it can point to today. As the gap between the increase in the population living in the grey zones, and the decrease of the types of grey zones widened, the grey zone of that time just flipped and became the proper reality of today, an alteration of quantity, but not quality, or what we should just simply call normalcy: a highly diluted essence, a dense mixture of everything. But how

1. Tzu is a Chinese word shaped by the Western language and for Western societies, meaning “ancestor.” In the Chinese (Mandarin) linguistic logic, it cannot exist. Tzu is a foreign sound to my ears, but it has an approachable familiarity if I imagine what it wants to indicate. It is the same for my German friend who had never come across Asian cultures, but whose linguistic sense points the sound of the word to her own mother tongue. We both have some kind of “foreign” sense with which to position this word within our own familiar linguistic systems, or the other way around. So Tzu evokes a feeling of the known and unknown..



can something so bipolar and so sharp result in a mass of blur? It seems a high-pressure barrier can erupt and all its divisions can become one point-spreading hyper mass. Then I wonder, do we want to open our eyes and zoom into a momentarily blazing gradient, and see how the fractions of life evolve in this world, and where the critical knowledge and experience are that are overshadowed by the beauty of the macro gradient?

Being one of the descendants of the ancient grey-zoners, the (East) Asianness I carry in me is vague in today's context, but clear in the context of the past. Its current effect, if there is any other than identity tracing, is like a cool art piece, so contained, well defined, meaningful, but only representative and parallel. I have learned that the (East) Asians lived in a ghostly reality for two centuries. A post-post-colonial normality had worn away criticism in many daily matters 100 years ago. For example, people had to wear the so-called suits to fulfill a common sense



of being elegant and “civilized” on formal occasions, their necks and arms were rigid from unconsciously copying the gestures they saw in Western movies, but no one knew why they had to do that. Or, they had to be good at mathematical calculation to convert their own calendar systems to one based on a story of a man called Jesus; who is Jesus anyway, many asked, but no one really cared. Or, the official names of their local plants were



named in Latin, and an evoked sense of dizziness came from not being able to pronounce the Latin terminologies, and from disassociating with the meanings naturally perceived from the original local names. On the other hand, when the (East) Asians appeared to have choices in their private lives, many would send their children to learn ballet and the piano at as young an age as five. Or, they would dine in Western restaurants in order to show taste and impress. Or, millions of women would chose to prioritize their social status by practicing the fashion trick that created the illusion of having long legs. People frequently performed nameless exotic behaviors when dealing with the most mundane aspects of their daily lives, as if several different ghosts appeared, disappeared and reappeared eternally within every single body. Biological beauty and intrinsic connections initiated by birth became a choice, when facing exotic options in every aspect of life that were always unconditionally superior, but did they really have a choice? People had to learn that being born was a particular contextual matter, but living was a different kind of particular contextual matter. There was neither pure joy nor pure repression. There was always a duality of half-on-half, synched with the irreversible direction of time, towards: life just continues.

For another century time has passed, fortunately or unfortunately, intentionally or unintentionally, reality as it was persisted. Thus a superficial monochrome in every sense of human life occupies all spaces, surprisingly without any provocation; even wars are “tolerated.” Anything meaningful is nostalgic, either about the past or the future, a future that is mounted over an illusion of what has already happened. I do not know what being Asian means anymore or what Asianness means for the world. Instead of finding out what it means to be who I am today, I am fixated on the idea of why this might be a question that makes me potentially look for an answer. Metaphysical mental travel is so much fun! Last year, the UN department the Institute of Cult and Cultivation had an annual conference on the classical neuroscience of self-care, pointing out that pure metaphysical exercise is crucial for existential health. This mental travel increases the ion inflows on the cell membrane, creating an extra barrier catalysis between the inside of the cell and the outside plasma. It has been proven as an effective methodology to increase the percentage of being alive. So metaphysical mental travel has to be kept absolutely pure at all costs. I find myself suspended in the mantra of flowing thoughts, extra healthy, and it is no doubt beautiful.

But meaning; I can only find any meaning when I imagine being put in the context of the past. This way, I see our world no longer engaging with the spontaneity of everyone’s immediate surroundings, nor even remotely looking outwards for a distant comparison to make people feel they are doing better, because there is only one measurement for everything, that one ought to compare or look up to. There is no need to waste energy on



searching for an alternative, because it has all been done for us. It is guaranteed that human life has one motion only, and that is sustained precisely between efficiency and satisfaction. It is not sad. It is not repressed. It is also not happy. But there is no longer a duality as there was 100 years ago. Our reality is omnipotent to the core. The meaning of all ancient political terms that are close to describing the world we live in now—internationalism, authoritarianism, social democracy, socialism or world peace—are way too simplified and one-sided.

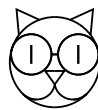
It comes to mind now that chopsticks are no longer specifically an (East) Asian thing, and kimchi has become the most basic side dish in every household, just like how the world in 2023 treated paper, a material with a sense and meaning that became utterly irrelevant. It's like what many know today as an urban myth: that the Neanderthals did not become extinct; their genomes were merely diluted by the continuous mixing with modern humans who had moved out of Africa en masse. Their “disappearance” was caused by sex and partnership. Eating kimchi with chopsticks is a very human thing to do, nothing more, nothing less, and that is fine. There is no backdoor irony in this sentence. It is a genuine statement of the most common fact in our world. It is just that people stopped being curious. When we are detached for so long, perhaps we become abstract.

But I feel that when moving images have been form-shifters for 200 years, and only now start to become unconditionally pukey, and when the high-tech/low-tech textures are becoming deadly ancient, the eyes are still hungry to kiss a novel surface... The color pink in the eyes evolves from Asian symbolic naturalism, outdated exotic kitsch, dictatorship sisterhood and hometown plasticity. There has been a void for a very long time, and there have always been new voids forming, merging with the previous one/ones, colliding, cancelling, no pain, no reward, morphing and morphing again.



## BIO

Ran Zhang is a Rotterdam and Berlin based artist. In her practice, she combines the experience of her distant industrial metropolitan childhood and the experience of her current daily life into a synthesized language, in order to search for the emotive drive between imaging and knowledge gaining. Her recent exhibitions include *Enantiomers* and *Traces* at Galeria Plan B in Berlin and *Jiggly Motions* at Frac Montpellier.



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