

Wang Min'an, *On Domestic Electronic Objects*

At the very end of his excellent book, *On Domestic Electronic Objects*, Wang Min'an suggests that his focus on appliances may, perhaps, seem somewhat perverse to the average reader. The reason he chose this topic, he tells the reader, is deceptively simple. One of the privileges of academic life, he notes, is that he gets to spend a lot of time at home! There, in the domestic space in which he lived and felt comfortable, Wang was surrounded by a plethora of modern devices that controlled the temperature in which he lived, refrigerated and thereby elongated the life of the plants and animals he desired to eat, and through a range of communication devices, networked his domestic life-space, rhizome-like, into lives well beyond the domestic enclosure. Being a person who grew up in China in the 'eighties, Wang Min'an knows all too well, that there is nothing 'natural' about this domestic space in which he now feels so comfortable. Rather than tell of this experience anecdotally or even historically, Wang turns, to ethics.

The domestic space, he notes, has always been a precondition of family life in any understandings of family ethics, yet it has, historically, only ever been considered a 'subsidiary framework' (附屬框架). Not any more! From the 1980s onwards in the big city's of China, domestic space suddenly become commercialised space. As Wang puts it, it became a commodity that individuals could actually occupy.

It was a space that was no longer a subsidiary framework to domestic familial ethical production, but was a 'space' that produced its own ethics. Structural relations between the family space and family ethics was turned on its head as spatial relations replaced ethical relations to become, what Wang concludes to be "the biggest consideration of family and life." [189]. The book doesn't explain how this happened historically, but instead shows how a number of contemporary technologies of the domestic space produce sensory and ontological effects. It explains how the television set creates a particular spacial layout within the home producing a static relationship between the person, the television and the couch, or, in contrast, how the radio allows movement but creates a relationship between the ear and sound, or how washing machine establishes a domestic rhythm and so forth. It is in this way that electronic objects of everyday domestic life come to be understood as micro-level machines enabling domestic space to produce a transformation of the ethical domain.

One may not always agree with Wang Min'an's reading of things or (more accurately in my case), wonder whether the sheer novelty of his argument has not resulted in a slight 'bending of the stick'? I wondered, for example, whether one would go so far as to say that domestic space has actually replaced family ethics when vapour trails of past forms, albeit morphed into different and unfamiliar shapes, still haunt the contemporary domestic landscape? I was also not sure that life is quite so singularly ordered by these machine. After all, machines always leak, breakdown or function poorly, and, I suspect, so too would the affective productions of Wang's objects. Nevertheless, what I can say is that whatever I or others might think of the various micro-level arguments within this book, one cannot ignore the freshness and novelty, originality and brilliance of an approach to material objects that really does capture something new. The forensic detail not to mention the diagnostic qualities this book brings to the fore turns any objections to parts of Wang's argument into mere quibbles.

This work brings a new sensibility to bear on objects of modern everyday life. Who would have thought, for instance, of freezer storage being like a dam of water, in so far as it stores and elongates the life of meat & vegetables? Who would have thought of the washing machines as being more than a utility and actually carving onto the surface of everyday life a certain patterning or rhythm? That the theatre of clothes, from dirty to clean, would take place on a stage behind the glass door of the front-end loader. Such forms of analysis come out of left field, partly, I suspect, because they come out of China.

Any book, Paul de Man once said is always in part autobiographical and while Wang Min'an does not mention this, he lived through the tumultuous 80s and 90s of the economic reform period in China and lived the complete transformation of domestic life. This was a time when in the large cities, at least, household commodity items appeared almost overnight in the shops and in people's homes. In terms of modern urban Chinese family life, people didn't just move into new apartments, they moved into new modes of living which involved new ways of relating to the world. Neighbours would become strangers and material desires would grow exponentially. In the early 'eighties, Chinese people would speak of their desire for the 'three wheels' or *sanlun* — a bicycle, a sewing machine and a watch. By the end of the 'eighties, no one spoke in such modest language anymore. By the 90s, commodity desire had pretty much saturated everything. This is, however, only the backstory to Wang's text for the book itself deals with this transition only in passing or only as an aside. Instead, what this text offers is something far more imaginative, creative and theoretically interesting, He offers pathways to a new understanding of the relationship between household goods and the disciplining of the body that comes about because of his gaze being firmly fixed on what were, at the time in China, hallmarks of a modern life. Here, one sees the Foucauldian influence, inflected by a Benjaminesque moment of awakening. The result is a highly unique work that is quite unlike that classic Foucauldian text on families by Donzelot (*The Disciplining of Families*). Where that work focused on the enunciative site of the mother, Wang's book centres on the assemblage of household machines that create the space of contemporary domesticity. He is interested in how each come to operate and collectively reinforce habit —the layout of the refrigerator resembling the supermarket selves etc. This is not the Foucault who traces changes in the management of populations but the Foucault who follows a line of flight from the disciplining of bodies into the bio-political technologies of the everyday. In Wang's case, I suspect, it is this bio-political connection inflected through the Deleuzian control society that dominates his line of flight. As passwords replaces watchwords; as mechanical items are replaced by digital ones, a coded set of movements, buttons, instructions, rhythms' sounds and visions set the everyday habits of thought. These in turn, are reinforced daily, hourly and by the minute (to steal a line from Lenin) by the remorseless use of everyday machines within that very modern form of 'enclosure' called the family. I thought that this was a wonderful, original and creative book, that more or less choreographs life through the electronic household goods that dominate modern life. This is, then, not a 'China book' but rather a work marked profoundly by China. It is, to my mind, one of the most interesting and exciting works to have come out of this profound transformation. It is a work of unique scholarly talents and one I would not hesitate to translate and publish.

