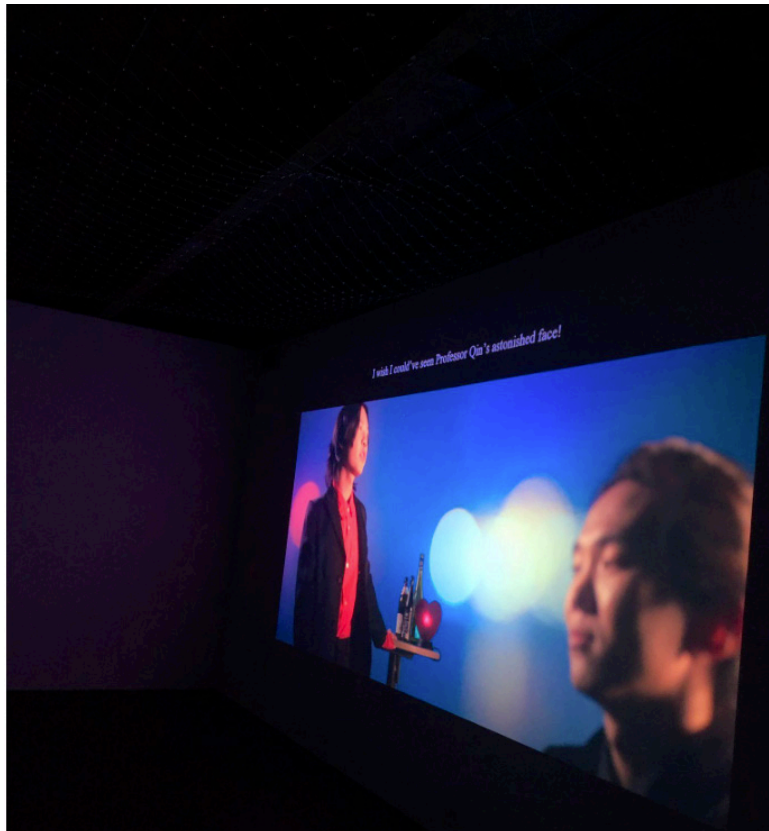


# CULTBYTES

## A Performance That is Caught Between the Sky and the Ground

Anna Ting Möller  
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Zishi Han and Wei Yang. "Hairpin Beneath," 2023–25 at SculptureCenter. Photograph courtesy of the writer.

On the opening night of *Hairpin Beneath* as part of *In Practice: Zishi Han and Wei Yang*, the audience steps into a darkened room on the main floor of SculptureCenter. A fishnet structure is suspended from the ceiling and slightly off-center lies a white circular sculpture resembling a gong adorned with ribbons made of papier-mâché. Together these objects reference a Chinese idiom about being caught between the sky and the ground—a metaphor for entrapment or inescapable duality. A projection flickers on the back wall, casting light across the space where approximately twenty to thirty people sit directly on the cold concrete floor. The sculpture suggests a fragile yet weighted presence, quietly anchoring the performance.

Frankfurt am Main-based artist duo Zishi Han and Wei Yang's performance references the historical existence of queer histories in China and the Chinese diaspora. Drawing from a Ming Dynasty anthology of homoerotic stories 弁而釵 (Biàn ér chāi)—specifically, an affair between an academic and a student—it opens with a video projection, showing an establishing shot of a character standing in the center of another concrete room with high pillars, and dressed in a draped garment over one shoulder. The figure's visual symmetry and careful framing evoke the staging of a Greek tragedy. A faint sparking sound reverberates throughout the space, heightening the melodramatic atmosphere and subtly mirroring the physical environment in real-time. There are echoes of Greek mythology—perhaps the fallen angel or the love triangle of Aphrodite—but these references remain only suggestive. The anthology's Chinese title references the action of a man removing his ceremonial headgear and donning a woman's hairpin.



Zishi Han and Wei Yang. "Hairpin Beneath," 2023-25. Video still. Courtesy of the artists and SculptureCenter.

The linguistic barrier adds distance for non-Mandarin speakers, like myself, leaving some of the work's subtleties elusive. However, many visual details enhance the narrative, the main performer wears a t-shirt with glittering rhinestone letters spelling "LOVE"—a gesture of a millennial's heartache, perhaps. The artists' talk at Asia Art Archive on February 21, provided further context, revealing how the artist duo would work with New York-based collaborators to expand their ongoing collaborative research and performance project for SculptureCenter. Pieced together and compressing time and style, it has developed further at each new venue.

Unfolding as an immersive and, at times, overwhelming experience, a monologue is happening on screen alongside a live dialogue between performers, both in Mandarin. The live performer is a doubling of the character in the opening scene from the video projection. Additionally, two ghostly figures, similarly dressed in white, linger in the room. Their multi-mirrored presence suggests a duality of present and absence where the live dialogue adopts a posture of authority, seemingly controlling the narrative's progression. However, the layering of voices and visuals spins me into confusion.

On the projection screen, two additional faces appear—dressed in black and connected to the live performers. Their mouths move in synchrony, though no sound escapes, reinforcing a disjointed dynamic between image and presence. This interplay between physical and virtual realities, coupled with the relentless multiplication of figures, creates a sense of excess. Throughout the piece, the notion of multiplicity surfaces repeatedly. The commanding voice-over intensifies this proliferation of simulacra, rendering the experience fragmented. This aesthetic layering seems to deliberately obscure meaning, offering stories within stories that resist a singular interpretation. The use of analog techniques alongside digital projections further complicates this narrative, creating a collage of textures and periods.

In a tonal shift, the performance concludes on a humorous note. The main character lists a series of ingredients and dishes—"tofu, chili, Sichuan pepper"—in what appears to be a playful yet poignant invocation of culinary longing. This gesture suggests a desire for cultural connection through the familiar language of food. Though it undercuts the preceding narrative, raising questions about the coherence of the work's emotional register. The oscillation between the profound and the comic seems to gesture toward a deliberate fragmentation, the work leaves the audience in a state of interpretive suspension—caught, much like the idiom it references, between two opposing forces.