

## Drawing the number eight

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Between 2005 and 2006, I must have been to the Mainland for more than two dozen times for work. During these border crossings, a palpable energy of enterprise was in the air. It was there—a newly liberalised economic region consisting of a thirty-year old boomtown, a historical metropolis, and an ex-Portuguese colony fervently constructing casinos in the shape of simulacrum of other cities—I met a congregation of artists attracted by the promise of freedom, and opportunity in this southern river delta. Unsurprising, of course, considering the population’s three century-long history in telling and seeking fortune.

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Prompted by my attempt to capture this madcap disposition for chance and prospect across the border in an exhibition, one of the young artists I met, C.Y. responded with a take-away poster work called *Strike!* that appropriated a warrant issued by Department of Public Security of Guangzhou Province (2005 No.98). In this context, the circular of 108 mugshots seemed like a game of existential sweepstakes: the public is rewarded a 5000 RMB pay out per fugitive on this gigantic A5-sized ticket, but if you end up being one of the apprehended individuals, hard luck on you. Revisiting the work 17 years on, it no longer is just a grainy monochrome facsimile of random faces, the data (no crimes were mentioned) on the printout drew up countless imagined life stories. Most of their lives began in tiny villages and remote townships unheard of, and in their search for better odds they found their way into big cities, evidenced by the location of the Public Security Branch that registered their cases.

I circled with my yellow highlighter: two ladies born in 1982 had their warrant run side by side: one (listed with birth year only, no dates) named after a winter flower, another born on New Year’s day after wind and honey, a neighbouring pair of strangers from the same hometown share a July 20 (Cancer-Leo cusp) birthday, a young fellow whose name ironically translates into *Abundant Fortune*, and three guys born on Valentine’s Day.

*Two years and many major international shows down the line, C.Y. was considered at the top of his game. He joined his peers and ventured to the country’s capital and instead started selling vintage clothes with his girlfriend. Uninspired from the frenzied Chinese art market, he withdrew from making art and disappeared from the scene, only to re-emerge a decade later with a solo show invitation that arrived in my inbox.*

As to those on the run, who knows where they are now.

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In the very same show where the draw, the Chinese’s obsession with gambling, the number eight and similar sounding word “riches” and “luck” intersect, video artist Z.T.’s presentation is titled after a clumsier, but more apt translation of a customary Lunar New Year greeting “Gong Xi Fa Cai” (“Wish you wealth and prosperity”). The 2003–2004 satirical video documented him on the streets hawking “business sleeves” that

conceal a once-commonplace practice of bargaining with discreet hand signals. As cultural etiquette dictates, this ensures that trade secrets alongside one's face or prestige is preserved in case of the need to compromise or bad deal. Derived from flowing ancient Chinese sleeves—originally sewn in with secret pockets for gold pieces, medicine, or official seals, you can now dress for success in an oversleeve that comes in a utilitarian shade of Red Army green or in patterned textiles printed with your favourite lucky motifs: a yin-yang symbol, an American flag or even Osama Bin Laden's face to ward off evil.

The next scene transitions to an office with two professionals in absurd lopsided suits furtively hand signalling under their lone lengthened right coat sleeves at the negotiating table. The revival of the ritual is symptomatic of the dog-eat-dog, success-driven mentality rampant in the new breed of *Homo economicus* in contemporary China, with accessories adapting to this new set of body politics. Keeping their non-verbal parley out of sight, the businessmen's impassive faces and the series of clandestine touches, pinches and pressure points that evolved from Buddhist mudras form an outlandish scene:

“Wish you make a pile.”

“May the best hand win.”