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The New York Times

ZHANG PEILI *Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th st. Manhattan*

Through Saturday

Zhang Peili was one of the many contemporary Chinese artists to hit New York in the late 1990s. A conceptualist working primarily in video, he was one of the most quiet and subtle of them. He still is, judging by this solo show of recent work, his first in the city in nine years.

The outstanding pieces are two short, looping videos based on clips from films popular during the Cultural Revolution. In one, titled “Happiness” (2006), heroic characters from different films deliver exhortative political speeches to the same audience of frantically applauding, tearfully smiling listeners. In “Last Words” (2003), made up of climactic moments from agitprop melodramas, various martyrs to the revolutionary cause meet death with suspiciously look-alike fortitude.

You don’t need to know Chinese to understand that both pieces are critical demonstrations of how propaganda works through Pavlovian drills of uplift and pathos, equally effective in marketing products and ideologies. China may have perfected the technique, but it certainly has no corner on it.

A video installation called “Lowest Resolution” points to a puritanical streak in Chinese political culture. From across the room you see what looks like a pornographic film playing on a small video screen. As you move in for a more intimate look, the image dissolves into static. Officially, sex is still a no-go zone.

Other work is less obviously topical. Three gorgeous color photographs, for example, show commercial garbage in a close-up view; a multimedia installation of scattered rose petals includes a live video recording their gradual decay. Can you actually see the decay — of the flowers, of Chinese culture — in action? Maybe yes, maybe no. Part of the strength of Mr. Zhang’s work is that it leaves us guessing a little bit. **HOLLAND COTTER**

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