



'The people's conference hall' from the series 'Power', 2006
chromogenic print

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Feng Yan.
Photo: Jia De

Photographer Feng Yan captures the microscopic details of the mundane to ruminate on the monumental political implications embedded within them. In this photograph, *The people's conference hall* (2006), Feng focuses his camera on a single architectural feature, an empty red staircase. As a large-scale print, the imposing and vertiginous effects of the stairs engulf the viewer. The glint of gold and the saturation of intense, pigmented red are alluring. We are positioned, with Feng, at the base of the stairs, perpetually looking upward with the marble handrail tempting us to ascend.

The title tells us that this is a staircase in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, a government building used for significant legislative and ceremonial activities. The Great Hall is the political hub of Beijing, home of the National People's Congress, the highest organ of state power in the People's Republic of China. This context charges the photograph with political resonance and the emptiness of the stairs becomes suggestive of erasure and censorship.

Considering the other works in Feng Yan's *Power* series, this photograph may be understood as an interrogation of the construction of authority. The series includes other photographs of a political inflection such as a close-up of a police car, security-check tape demarcating authorised areas and the bullet holes in the side of a car that was once owned by Mao Zedong. Throughout the series, the scenes are empty, as people have been erased, subject to the violence of authoritarian control.

Soo-Min Shim, 2022