The City-Village Drift:
Contemporary Chinese Artists and Rural China（1976-2019）

Inaugural dissertation
for attainting a doctorate from
the Faculty of Philosophy of Heidelberg University
submitted by

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January 19, 2022

Abstract

The urban-rural dichotomy is a prominent issue in modern and contemporary China. With the country's rapidly changing political and social environment, artists' depictions of the countryside and their artistic practices in rural areas have undergone constant changes over time. In this dissertation, from the perspective of geographical movements between urban and rural areas, I follow artists' rurally engaged practices and analyze how their relationship with the countryside and the peasantry changed between the 1980s and 2010s. The bidirectional movement patterns of artists between city and village formed the basis for the structure of the dissertation, which is divided into three chapters. In each chapter, I choose the practices of two artists for in-depth case studies. Through an analysis of artists Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong's practices in the 1980s, the first chapter explores why and how artists, with a *zhiqing* background, went back to the countryside to depict rural scenes as well as research and experiment with folk art in rural regions. An attempt is made here to show how their individual practices were connected with the main trends of thought in 1980s China. By making comparisons, I also investigate how artists' rurally engaged practices and their relationship with the countryside in this period were associated with their predecessors in Mao's period and how these artists in the 1980s deviated from the socialist doctrine. The second chapter provides insight into the 1990s and early 2000s, a period when some artists abandoned stable jobs within the state apparatus and moved to the outskirts of big cities to form artist communities, and peasants rushed into cities to look for jobs known as the "peasant worker rush." In this chapter, my attention is focused on the urban-rural fringe zone,

a peculiar topos on the edge of a city inhabited by peasant workers and artists. With case studies on artists Wu Wenguang and Cao Fei, the discussion focuses on how artists were actively involved in this urban-rural fringe zone and the life of peasant workers via their physical presences and artistic practices. The last chapter deals with changes that have taken place since the advent of the new century. Rural China has been drastically hollowed out by immigration flows into cities, but some artists have voluntarily returned to the countryside to document villagers' traumatic memories and enthusiastically participate in rural reconstruction. Through the practices of two artists, Jin Le and Zhang Mengqi, I discuss how the enactors of these site-specific experiments have interacted with the local environment and people, as well as the various ways in which they deal with the dire economic and cultural crises in rural China.

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Introduction

1. A Historical Overview of the Problem

The rural-urban relationship has been a prominent issue in modern and contemporary China. In previous research on contemporary Chinese art, scholars largely focused on artists' handling of the far-reaching development of urbanization in contemporary China and the problems associated with it.[1] The rural aspect of the contemporary art scene was largely overlooked. Even though major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have always been art centers in which contemporary Chinese art was being made, artists never stopped engaging with rural China and rural-themed practices, such as depicting rural scenes or being involved in site-specific projects in villages. Recently there have been discussions on artists' ongoing rurally engaged projects that have emerged since the beginning of the new millennium.[2] However, there has not been historical research that could situate the prevalent phenomena within a historical structure and narrative. In this dissertation, I follow contemporary Chinese artists' rural-related practices and analyze how the artists' relationships with the countryside and the peasantry have changed from the 1980s to the

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[1] The latest research includes Meiqin Wang's *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, which examines the relationship between urbanization and contemporary artistic practices in China through an in-depth analysis of works of eight contemporary Chinese artists. Also, Jenny Lin's *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* explores the urban transformation of Shanghai through case studies of Shanghai-based contemporary art in the 1990s and 2000s. See Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). A forthcoming special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* includes articles on *Urban Transformations and Contemporary Art in China*.

[2] See the special issue "Whose Rural Reconstruction?" on artists' rural reconstruction projects in *Art Observation* 美术观察, no. 1 (2019), edited by Gou Mengyuan 缑梦媛 and Zhang Yidan 张译丹. This special issue includes ten articles written by artists and organizers of rural projects and critics. An Overview of the trend of artists' recent engagement with the countryside, see Meiqin Wang, "Place-Making for the People: Socially Engaged Art in Rural China," *China Information*, vol, 32, no. 2 (2018): 1-26.

2010s. To investigate the changing relationship between contemporary Chinese artists and the countryside from the 1980s to the 2010s, I structured the dissertation based on changing bidirectional movement patterns between rural and urban areas. Events are arranged chronologically in three chapters. In the 1980s, artists moved from the city to the village (Chapter 1); in the 1990s and early 2000s, artists stayed between the city and the village (Chapter 2); and since the mid-2000s, artists have again moved from the city to the village (Chapter 3). Within this framework, I chose two artists' practices for in-depth case studies in each chapter. The artists featured in the first chapter are Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955) and Lü Shengzhong 吕胜中 (b. 1952); in the second chapter, Wu Wenguang 吴文光 (b. 1956) and Cao Fei 曹斐 (b. 1978); and in the last chapter, Jin Le 靳勒 (1964-2021) and Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇 (b. 1987).

It is worth noting that this dissertation only investigates contemporary urban artists and their rurally engaged practices. The word *urban* indicates that these artists were trained in art colleges in the cities, even though some of them were originally born and raised in the countryside. They mostly live in cities, even though their artistic projects involve rural spaces and rural people. Also, their artistic accomplishments are largely recognized in the contemporary art circles in major cities, even though the village-based projects launched by some of the artists I am going to discuss also have involved locals and had an impact on them. Rural artists, who are based in and pursue their artistic careers in the countryside, will not be discussed in this dissertation. Rural artists are those who do not have access to art schools; this means they have not had advanced educational opportunities but are instead self-taught or the inheritors of folk art techniques from older generations. Their works are mainly appreciated and consumed by their fellow country people, though the urban artists I

am going to talk about might owe inspiration to these rural counterparts. The reason why I have limited the scope to urban artists is that I want to focus on the tension in the relationships between urban artists and rural China.

A retrospective look at the modern history of China shows a rootedness of contemporary artists' relations with rural China and the peasantry that can be traced back to the intellectual history of the Republican period. For example, Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), one of China's most celebrated modern writers, reflected on his encounters with the countryside and peasantry in his "The preface of Selected Short Stories (English Version)."[3] Raised in a large family in a small town in southern China, he was deeply influenced from an early age by the traditional elite culture and looked upon peasants (the vulgar mass) with patronizing disdain. It was not until he read 19th-century European and, especially, Russian novels that he realized the value of peasants as independent human beings. It was also at that time that he began to write stories depicting the tragic situation in the countryside. In Lu's works, the depiction of peasants as brainless, ignorant yokels (with their most representative incarnation being the signature protagonist Ah Q) revealed the weaknesses of the national characters. Because peasants had a subordinate status and lacked the ability to articulate their misery, writers, such as Lu Xun, felt obliged to take on this oppressed lower class as a topic. By making the victimization of the peasantry a serious subject for literature, they assaulted the evil social system of the past, which exploited the vulnerable people at the bottom of the social ladder. Writers who chose the countryside and peasants as their main subjects usually had a rural background and had later pursued a career in a major city. Their depictions of rural life showed a decaying world of ignorance and backwardness; at the same time, they

[3] See Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Complete Works of Lu Xu, vol. 7* 鲁迅全集·第七卷 (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2005), 411.

also demonstrated their nostalgic sentiments towards their rural homes and romanticized the virtues of country people.[4]

Apart from reconsidering the value of peasants as independent human beings and appropriate subjects for literary works, some intellectuals also began to reevaluate folk culture, which had long been overshadowed by elite literature of sophisticated writers. Their efforts in this regard were in accordance with the May Fourth New Cultural Movement 五四新文化运动's aim of bridging the gap between the intelligentsia and the common people. The trend of "going to the countryside" 走向民间 became a Folk Literature Movement in the 1920s, inspiring folklorists to go to the countryside to gather songs, legends, children's stories, and proverbs. The reevaluation of folk literature prompted a rewriting of the history of Chinese literature.[5]

Around the same time, intellectuals and social activists, among whom Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) and James Yen 晏阳初 (1890–1990) were particularly notable, launched the Rural Reconstruction Movement, which was influenced by the attempt at enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement.[6] Lu Xun's critique of the Chinese national character finds resonance in James Yen's diagnosis of the four fundamental problems of Chinese peasants, namely, ignorance, poverty, weakness, and selfishness. Yen's negative view of Chinese

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[4] Lu Xu groups these writers as sojourning writers. See Lu Xun 鲁迅. "Preface." In *The Great Series of Chinese New Literature, Volume II of Short Stories*, 中国新文学大系：小说二集, ed. Lu Xun, 1-17. Shanghai: Liangyou Books, 1935. Prasenjit Duara, "Local Worlds: The Poetics and Politics of the Native Place in Modern China," in *Imagining China: Regional and National Unity*, eds. Shu-min Huang and Cheng-kuang Hsu (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 1999), 161-200.

[5] For May Fourth intellectuals' changed attitude toward rural culture and people and their folk literature movement, see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918-1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985)

[6] See Kate Merkel-Hess, *Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

peasants prompted him to put the ideal of enlightening the masses during the May Fourth New Cultural Movement into practice. In the mid-1920s, he established an experimental base in Ding County 定县, Hebei Province 河北省. There, he carried out four fundamental educational efforts to treat the aforementioned four fundamental problems. Education about literature and the arts was the recipe for ignorance; education about substance or how to earn a livelihood was the recipe for poverty; education about sanitation was the recipe for weakness; and education about citizenship was the recipe for selfishness.[7] In contrast with James Yen, Liang Shuming's rural reconstruction was based on a different view of the countryside and its people. Instead of victimizing the peasant class, Liang glorified the virtue of village people. He believed that the countryside preserved the spiritual essence of the nation and was untouched by Western culture, and therefore it would be the basis for bringing about a cultural revival and a new order. Liang's goal was to build an ideal society in which all private ownership of property and class differences would be eliminated. After elimination, a harmonious relationship could be built between the countryside and the city.[8]

In the realm of fine arts, some artists, like their contemporary writers, also made the countryside and its people their major subject matter. For example, one representative would be Zhao Wangyun (1906-1977) 赵望云's travel sketches in rural areas in the early 1930s. As a correspondent for *Dagong bao* 大公报 in Tianjin, Zhao Wangyun traveled to more than ten counties in southern Hebei Province, from whence he originally came. He made more than 100 sketches of rural scenes during his three-month sojourn, and they appeared regularly in

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[7] See Xiaorong Han, *Chinese Discourse on the Peasant, 1900-1949*. (New York: State University of New York Press), 19-72. Charles Hayfold, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

[8] See Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

the newspaper. They were known as the *Sketch Correspondence* 写生通信 and caused a stir among the public. Zhao Wangyun's realistic depictions of southern Hebei villages helped his audience gain a glimpse of everyday rural life in this region. Zhao Wangyun's travel sketches attempted to rebuild his connection with the rural world of his home province. Like his contemporary sojourning literary authors, Zhao Wangyun's nostalgic feelings about the countryside were enhanced by his plain depictions of villagers, livestock, and houses. [9]

As natural disasters caused conditions in the countryside to deteriorate, devastated villagers flocked into the cities. Several floods and droughts in the first half of the 1930s (especially in 1931 and 1935) affected many rural people and raised great public concern. Rural refugees, a motif that can be traced back to the Song Dynasty, became particularly popular among artists in the Nanjing decade. Zhao Wangyun continued his travel sketch series and made pictorial reportage of rural refugees in northern Jiangsu and western Shandong, who were affected by the serious Yihai Flood 乙亥水灾 in the autumn of 1935. The plight of the rural residents was the subject not only of Zhao Wangyun's commissioned pictorial reportage, for which he traveled to disaster areas, but also of the works of many other artists employing different types of media, including artists who were considered as inheritors of traditional Chinese painting. For example, Zhang Shanzi 张善孖 (1882–1940), a Chinese painting specialist created a series of ink paintings of flood refugees waiting for rescue, whose village was submerged by the water. These paintings are almost no different from idyllic landscape paintings featuring the typical mountain-and-water combination by

9 See Lillian Tseng 曾蓝莹, "Pictorial Representation and Historical Writing: Zhao Wangyun′s (1906-1977): Visual Reports on Rural North China for L′Impartial," 图像再现与历史书写：赵望云连载于《大公报》的农村写生书信 in *Visual Representation and Cultural Mapping in Modern China* 画中有画：近代中国的视觉表述与文化构图, ed. Ke-wu Huang 黄克武 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2003), 63-122.

ancient literati scholars except that Zhang added a few refugee-like figures by the water. [10] Nevertheless, it at least indicates that urban artists could not turn their backs on these disastrous events and wanted to show the plight of the disaster victims to the public.

Artists who made experiments with western modernism and were accused of focusing too much on stylistic innovations and being indifferent to social and political concerns also began to turn their attention to the current situation of the peasant, who formed the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population. Pang Xunqin 庞薰琹 (1906–1985), a key member of The Storm Society 决澜社, presented a watercolor entitled *The Son of the Earth* 地之子 at the third annual exhibition of the society. In his memoir, Pang recalled that this work was a reaction to the drought victims in the countryside near Shanghai. For Pang Xunqin, this work was a turning point in his artistic career; he gave up his individualistic and foreign-based approach from then on and began to meet the needs of his country at the time. Pang Xunqin wrote in his memoir that he did not depict these peasants as dressed in rags or starved to skin and bones. On the contrary, he depicted them as thin but healthy because he saw them as "the symbol of the Chinese people."[11] The peasants, though enduring great suffering, are depicted as a promising group for national salvation. They became Pang Xunqin's first subject matter at the time when he turned his attention in the direction of serving the national interest.

Like their contemporaries in literature, educated artists and researchers also began to take

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[10] For example, one of his paintings appeared in a special report of *The Young Companion* covering the great flood in Hunan and Hubei Provinces. The issue had photos of village houses inundated by water, people fleeing their damaged homes, and dead bodies retrieved from the flood zone. The title of the report was "Refugees Swarming Everywhere" 哀鸿处处. See Zhang Shanzi 张善孖 et al., "Refugees Swarming Everywhere"哀鸿处处, *The Young Companion* 良友, no. 109 (1935): 5.

[11] Pang Xunqin 庞薰琹, *It Went Exactly that Way* 就是这样走过来的 (Beijing: Sanlian Book Store, 2005), 141.

folk art seriously, though their collecting and research practices were put into place much later than the practices of their literary counterparts. The interest in folk art emerged in the early 1930s, and it was driven by the similar appeal of the folk literature movement. The goal was to reevaluate folk art and see it as an alternative to the decadence of elite art and culture, so that it might provide resources for building a new national culture. Simultaneously, leftist artists who were active in the New Woodcut Movement 新兴木刻运动 were drawn to printmaking. Because prints can be easily reproduced, printmaking was the perfect medium for popularizing images. Prints of traditional woodcuts, or *nianhua* 年画 (New Year's prints), are some of the major embodiments of folk art and are still popular among ordinary people, both urban and rural.[12] They provided references for young woodcutters, who wanted to make reproducible woodcut prints for use as propaganda. Artists at the Modern Print Association 现代版画会 based in Guangzhou in the 1930s were some of the first artists to appropriate aesthetic elements of the local folk art tradition for images that would convey propaganda. However, it was not until the Sino-Japanese War that an intensive reference was made to folk art in the service of creating new art forms that would appeal to a wider audience.[13]

It is worth noting that Chinese artists' attitudes towards folk art during this time period were ambivalent. On the one hand, as mentioned above, they considered folk art a resource for building a new national art because, in contrast to the traditional works of the literati, folk art was seen as pure and genuine. The natural connection of folk art with ordinary people, the

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[12] See James A. Flath, *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2004)

[13] Regarding how folk art was transformed during the Republican period, see Felicity Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

majority of whom were peasants, drew the attention of artists who were eager to popularize their works for the general public. However, on the other hand, the association of folk art with popular religious ideas and rituals also made those artists hesitant to reference it, because popular religious practices were officially attacked by the Nationalist government and labeled as superstitious, backward, and improper for a modernized society and new life.[14] This ambivalent attitude continuously resonated in artists' references to folk art in a later time period.

During the protracted Sino-Japanese War, peasants, who made up the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population, became the main group in the anti-Japanese resistance army. In 1942, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, delivered a speech in Yan'an 延安, the de facto headquarters of the Chinese Communist leadership. In this influential speech, known as the *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* 延安讲话, Mao clarified that literature and art should be made in the service of workers, peasants, and soldiers, who were considered the most progressive social groups in the new era. Writers and artists must blend with, learn from, and gain inspiration from the people. Mao's talk formed the basis of the Party's literary and artistic policies, and it has had a great influence on artistic and literary creation up to the present.[15] In accordance with Mao's guidelines of art popularization, Yan'an artists, most of whom were veterans of the New Woodcut Movement, fused modern woodcut techniques, revolutionary content, and folk art forms such as paper cutting and *nianhua*, which prevailed in the Shaanbei 陕北

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[14] See Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center and Harvard University Press, 2009).

[15] Mao, Tse-tung, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 69-98.

region where Yan'an is located. They tried to meet the demand for a new national form that was to be different from works of the elite culture in metropolitan cities and would appeal to the peasantry, the largest population group of the nation. Yan'an artists were encouraged to produce folk-based propaganda images that would exemplify a spirit of patriotism and resistance among locals. Among these artists, Gu Yuan 古元 (1919–1996) was one of the most celebrated woodcut makers of this period.[16] Just as writer Zhao Shuli 赵树理 (1906–1970) was seen as the representative peasant writer, Gu Yuan was seen as the token peasant artist whose work well interpreted Mao's *Yan'an Talks*: Gu learned the language of the peasants and catered to a peasant audience. Yan'an intellectuals' practices of blending with peasants became associated in people's minds with the "going to the countryside" movement and the Rural Reconstruction Movement in the 1920s and 1930s. However, there is an obvious difference in the practices of the elite intellectuals and Yan'an intellectuals: The intellectual elites aimed to enlighten the peasants, and the Yan'an intellectuals aimed to convey Communist authoritarian precepts. As stated in Mao's *Yan'an Talks,* both popularization (*puji*) and the raising of standards (*tigao*) were based on the needs of the workers, peasants, and soldiers and on the task of learning from them.[17]

Like the Nationalist regime, the Communist authority was also against showing popular religious elements in *nianhua* and paper cuttings. Yan'an artists were encouraged to replace superstitious motifs that might cater to popular tastes with healthy, progressive ones. During the Sino-Japanese War, many intellectuals retreated from the major cities occupied by the

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[16] See Felicity Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Lexington Books, 2016). Francesca Dal Lago, "Between High and Low: Modernism, continuity, and Moral Mission in Chinese Printmaking Practices, 1930-1945" (PhD diss., New York University, 2005).

[17] Mao, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," 80-81.

Japanese to areas far from the frontier. The exodus to the remote southwestern and northwestern regions of China gave intellectuals the chance to investigate vivid folk arts and the arts of ethnic minority groups.[18]

As the Chinese Communist Party seized power, purveyors of revolutionary culture aimed to eradicate remnants of the "bourgeois urban culture" and became mainstream artists, whereas elite intellectuals, seen as spokesmen of "bourgeois culture," were repressed, as was their ideal of enlightening the peasants. At this time, the most popular artistic themes were the strong national achievements in the fields of industry and agriculture and the enthusiasm and creative power of socialist laborers. A socialist-realist manner that originated in the Soviet Union became dominant in China in the mid-1950s; it was characterized by an idealized vision of the greatness of national leaders and the people's prosperity and happiness under Communism. In the early Mao's period, a New *Nianhua* Movement 新年画运动 for propaganda and educational use was launched in the name of the Ministry of Culture and carried out by regional cultural agencies; this can be seen as a continuation of the folk art reform in the Yan'an period. The folk religious and mythological elements in traditional *nianhua*, in earlier times, were considered superstitious and backward and were replaced by the socialistic and nationalistic content of the new era.[19] Also, during the Cultural Revolution, peasant paintings from Hu County, 40 kilometers from Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province, achieved national and international fame. In its early stage, this new village art, which delivered the Party lines, was executed mainly by professional artists who were sent

[18] See Yang Xiao, "Between National Imagination and Social Critique: Female Figurations in Pang Xunqin and Fu Baoshi's Wartime Chinese Painting (1930s-40s)" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2017).

[19] See Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

down to the countryside and aimed to popularize and politicize art. Local peasant painters were instructed by visiting professional artists and amateur artists, many of whom were sent-down youth. Later on, the creative efforts of some peasant painters overshadowed those of the professionals sent to instruct them.[20]

The Down to the Countryside Movement during the Cultural Revolution [21] heralded yet another mass migration of intellectuals to the countryside. Doing arduous farm work in the countryside enriched the experiences of educated urban youths and helped them better understand the poverty and backwardness that existed in rural areas. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of Scar Art 伤痕美术 and Rustic Realist Art 乡土美术. In addressing the contemporary artists' relationships with rural China, a discussion of these two forms of art might be a good starting point. Here, my use of the term *contemporary Chinese art* follows that of Wu Hung and should be understood as referring to artistic practices in the era following the Cultural Revolution, the beginning of which was marked by several unofficial art exhibitions in 1979.[22] The majority of these artists, such as Luo Zhongli 罗中立 (b. 1948) and He Duoling 何多苓 (b. 1948), were rusticated educated youths 知青 who

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[20] See Ralph Croizier, "Hu Xian Peasant Painting: From Revolutionary Icon to Market Commodity," in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976*, eds. Richard King et al (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010),136-163.

[21] Mao Zedong wrote in 1968, "it is very necessary for the educated youth to go to the countryside and undergo re-education by poor peasants." Mao sought to relocate the urban students to the countryside also in part to lessen the social disruption caused by the Read Guards at the beginning years of the Cultural Revolution and ease employment pressure in cities. Between 1968 and 1980, some 17 million young urban youth in China were rusticated after graduating from secondary school. According to the policy implemented in 1973, secondary and high school graduates could be admitted to college usually only after two years of rustication. See Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968–1980)*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004).

[22] See Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

returned to cities after years of living and toiling in the countryside.[23] The landmark artwork *Father* (1980) by Luo Zhongli depicts a ragged elderly farmer with a dull, somber look in his eyes. The elderly farmer brings up reminiscences of the criticism of the national character as epitomized in the works of Lu Xun.[24] The figure was rendered in a hyperrealistic manner, which was different from the highly idealized socialist realist manner in the Mao era. Some artists, who were classified as being in the Scar Art group, utilized their art to vent serious complaints about the extreme spiritual and material poverty they suffered in the dreary, desolate countryside. However, when they became aware of the insignificant place their youthful efforts in remote rural areas held within mainstream narratives, some artists resorted to depicting their recollections of the villages. They regarded the countryside, poor yet pure, as their spiritual homeland.

Rustic Realist Art and Scar Art became the new trends among young artists in the early 1980s who had similar rural experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Simultaneously, there were seminal debates on the relations of content and form that were circulated in the most influential Chinese art journals; they were evoked by an article written by the artist Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中 (1919–2010).[25] By emphasizing the essential position of form in artistic creation, Wu challenged socialist realism, which is in most cases a tool for conveying political propaganda. Though Wu Guanzhong and his proponents were accused of deviating

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[23] For Rustic Realist Art, see Yi Ying 易英, "Look Back to Homeland: Retrospect on the Realism of Rustic Realist Art" 回望家园： 乡土现实主义回顾, *Journal of Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts* 美苑, no.1 (1999): 3-8. Bao Dong 鲍栋, "Rustic Realist Art and the Construction of the Humanistic Discourse in the 1980s" 乡土绘画与80年代'人道主义'话语的建构, *Oriental Art* 东方艺术, no. 3 (2012): 62-65.

[24] For an overview of debates over Luo Zhongli's *Father*, see Jane DeBevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014),47-69.

[25]Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, "The Formal Beauty of Painting" 绘画的形式美, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 5 (1979): 33-35, 44.

from Marxist materialistic aesthetics (in which content dictates form), the continuous debate coincided with, and to some extent promoted, the younger generation's experiment with multiple Western modernist styles and their efforts to break free from the bonds of a doctrinal understanding of the art of the previous time. That was the '85 New Wave 八五新潮 (or '85 Art Movement 八五美术运动) in the mid-1980s, when young artists in major cities learned from Western modernist and contemporary art.[26]

Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955), the first artist I chose for a case study in this dissertation, did not belong to the Rustic Realist group and was not a key figure in the '85 New Wave. Although he became well-known for his later experimental works, such as *The Book from the Sky* 天书 （1987–1991）and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990–1991), in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he kept returning to his village and depicted peaceful rural scenes in the early and mid-1980s. Although Xu Bing had rusticated experiences similar to those of artists in the Rustic Realist and Scar Art groups, his depiction of everyday rural scenes is different from theirs; in his early woodcuts, one seldom senses sentimental feelings about lost youth or regrets for time wasted in the countryside. His observation of the simple beauty of rural life associated him with the return of humanism in that era, a seminal trend of thinking among the Chinese intelligentsia following the Cultural Revolution. More importantly, his early rural woodcuts also have a close link with those of woodcut artists in the Yan'an period, especially Gu Yuan, one of the most successful Yan'an woodcutters and later Xu Bing's teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. His association with the art in the Mao era also makes him stand out from his peers, who eagerly experimented with various Western styles

[26] For the '85 New Wave, see Gao Minglu 高名潞 et al., *'85 Art Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* 85美术运动： 80年代的人文前卫 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008).

from impressionism to abstractionism. Compared with works of representative artists of Rustic Realism and Scar Art, Xu Bing's early rural woodcuts were not much noticed by researchers and were overshadowed by his later, more experimental works. However, a detailed analysis of Xu's early woodcuts and a close comparison of his works with works of Gu Yuan reveal how Xu Bing's depiction of rural scenes is indebted to Gu Yuan. At the same time, it also shows how Xu Bing modestly departed from his mentor and socialist aesthetics, so that Xu developed a different relationship with the countryside and its people from that of artists of the previous era. I placed the case study of Xu Bing at the beginning of this dissertation because I think that studies of his work in the 1980s (the post-Mao era) show a connection with artists' relationships with rural China in the Mao era.

At the same time in the 1980s, there was a counter westernization trend, or so-called root-searching movement, initiated in the realm of literature, during which intellectuals went back to remote areas and the countryside for inspiration and resources, attempting to formulate a new cultural essence of the nation. The root-searching writers and literary theorists laid more emphasis on marginalized customs and cultures, attempting to absorb energy from those cultures that were "outside the norm" and, more importantly, to regenerate a cultural essence and start a march toward the stage of world literature. They highlighted undervalued cultures that were prosperous in the remote past but became overshadowed by the centralizing power of the orthodox Confucian culture, which made the national culture homogeneous and marginalized other cultures. Like their literary counterparts, some of these artists also made their way to remote rural areas that were well-known for their rich folk arts. They learned from local masters and attempted to appropriate folk elements for their own artistic creations.

The renewed attention paid to folk arts was partly because of the revival of traditional culture after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It was also related to the founding of departments devoted to learning about and researching folk arts at art colleges. The most important one was the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, initiated in 1980 by Jiang Feng 江丰 (1910–1982), the then director of this prestigious art college. As a high-ranking cultural official in the Communist regime since the Yan'an period,[27] Jiang was actively engaged in the reform of folk arts (paper cuttings and *nianhua* in particular) in the Yan'an period, as well as in the early Mao era. He was aware that folk art can be transformed into an efficient tool for art popularization and politicization, and this was the initial reason for establishing the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics. However, the encounter with and shock from seeing Western art made Yang Xianrang, the department head, reconsider the direction of the department. In 1986, at the peak of the '85 New Wave, the department was renamed the Department of Folk Art, and its aim became associated more with the counterwesternized root-searching movement than with the folk art reforms carried out in the Yan'an and early Mao periods.

Lü Shengzhong 吕胜中 (b. 1952), the second artist I chose for a case study, is one of the most outstanding folk art researchers and artists in the Department of Folk Art, Central Academy of Fine Arts. He traveled to villages in the north of Shaanxi Province, which were in Communist-controlled territories during the Yan'an period and famous for paper cuttings. There, he researched the visual mechanisms of local folk masters' works, which were different from those of artists trained in the realistic painting techniques one normally receives at an art academy. He attempted to acquire the folk artists' visual mechanism, which

[27] Jiang Feng was purged in the Anti-Rightist Movement 反右运动 and rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution ended.

was new to him, and then apply it to his own artistic practice. Also, folk religious elements and traditional customs that were stigmatized as superstitious and backward under both the Nationalist and Communist regimes were revitalized in Lü Shengzhong's works. In some of his early experiments with paper cutting, he attempted to bring together folk religious elements and orthodox Confucian elements, blurring the boundary between the high and low cultures. What distinguished him from his peers was his ambition to transform folk art into contemporary art; it was first seen in a double solo exhibition of the works of Lü Shengzhong and Xu Bing at the National Art Museum of China. The exhibition, which showed Lü Shengzhong's large paper-cutting installations and Xu Bing's groundbreaking *Book from the Sky*, caused a sensation in the Chinese art community. In the following years, Lü Shengzhong participated in several international exhibitions overseas, bringing his folk-inspired artworks to a global audience.

In the early 1990s, some artists quit their jobs within the state apparatus and flocked together in the suburbs of large cities such as Beijing to set up artists' enclaves. At the same time that the Household Registration System, an institutionally ordained system strictly separating urban areas from rural areas, was gradually loosened, huge numbers of peasants moved to big cities, and most of them became peasant workers 农民工. They became the main group that drove the dramatic urban construction boom, reconfiguring the appearance of entire cities. Without a stable job or a registered residence in a big city, self-exiled artists and migrant workers began to be referred to as *mangliu* 盲流 (literally, blind floaters). In Beijing, the suburban area inhabited by *mangliu* artists and *mangliu* peasant workers was the urban-rural fringe zone 城乡结合部. The most well-known artists enclaves were the Yuanmingyuan Artists Village 圆明园画家村 in the northwestern suburbs of the city and the East Village in

the northeastern suburbs of the city.[28]

The 1990s and early 2000s also saw a boom in documentary and video art in China. Compared with traditional media such as painting and sculpture, which were still the mainstream media in the Chinese art community, documentary and video art, as time-based media, were more suitable for directly narrating and recording the drastic socioeconomic changes during this time period. They were also used to document performance art, which became the prevailing genre in underground art circles in the 1990s. Filmmakers in the so-called New Documentary Movement, which was emerging in the early 1990s, produced documentaries independently; they were different from the state-sanctioned ones, which still formed the vast majority of all documentary productions at that time in China. Some of the artists were filmmakers who had graduated from the Beijing Film Academy and did not want to go back to their hometowns. Others, who worked at local state-run TV stations, went to Beijing and became independent documentarians. They exiled themselves from the state system and lived a floating life as *mangliu* peasant workers. These documentarians attempted to provide an alternative view of reality in China by choosing subjects who were often overlooked by mainstream documentaries and depicting them as they were.[29] The third artist I have discussed in this dissertation, Wu Wenguang 吴文光 (b. 1956), was one of the most

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[28] For activities of *mangliu* artists in the 1990s, see Wang Jifang 汪继芳, *Last Romance of the Twentieth Century: Life of Freelance Artists in Beijing* 二十世纪最后的浪漫——北京自由艺术家生活实录 (Harbin: Northern Art and Literature Press, 1999). Wu Hung, *Rong Rong's East Village* (New York: Chambers Fine Arts, 2003). For an overview of artworks involving peasant workers from the 1990s to the 2010s, see Madeline Eschenburg, "Migrating Subjects: The Problem of the 'Peasant' in Contemporary Chinese Art," (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2018).

[29] For an overview of the new documentary in the 1990s and the development of video art in the 1990s, see Chris Berry, "Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism" 面对现实：中国的纪录片，中国的后社会主义，121–131. Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 and Wu Meichun 吴美纯, "The Rise of Video Art and Media Art" 录像艺术的兴起和发展与新媒体艺术的成熟, in *The First Guangzhou Triennial- Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)* 首届广州当代艺术三年展/重新解读：中国实验艺术十年 (1990-2000), eds. Wu Hung 巫鸿, Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, and Feng Boyi 冯博一 (Macau: Macau Press, 2002), 52-60.

important figures in the New Documentary Movement. Today he is considered the father of the Chinese independent documentary. Originally from Yunnan in southwestern China, he was self-identified as a *mangliu* in Beijing and had to deal with living conditions as shabby as those of migrant workers. His *mangliu* artist peers and peasant worker peers, both of whom lived on the periphery of the city like he did, naturally became the first subjects in his documentaries. What is more, Wu Wenguang was deeply indebted to the theories of cinematic realism of the French film theorist André Bazin (1918–1958) and works by leading documentary makers around the world, such as Shinsuke Ogawa (1935–1992) and Frederick Wiseman (b. 1930). All of their ideas were also taken as guiding principles by exponents of the New Documentary Movement. Wu emphasized "being on the scene" (*xianchang* 现场) while filming his *mangliu* subjects in order to capture their lives in progress. This differentiated him from those who used conventional methods of making TV documentaries at official TV stations; they usually asked protagonists to "pose" for them.

The suburban areas of big cities inhabited by peasant workers and other citizens of the underclass also caught the attention of artists who were native to these cities. The early 2000s saw the emergence of a new generation of artists who were born after the implementation of the reform and opening-up policies. The environment in which these artists were immersed since childhood was epitomized by fast-growing commercialization and mass media technologies. Their way of viewing the peasant worker community was different from that of the *mangliu* artists such as Wu Wenguang in the 1990s. Cao Fei (b. 1978), the fourth artist I am going to discuss, is one of the most prominent artists working in multimedia in the new generation. She focused on the village-in-the-city 城中村 in her home city of Guangzhou, which has been known for its foreign trade and labor-intensive industries since the reform

and opening-up policies were put into place. Cao Fei had a different life and visual experiences from Wu Wenguang, and therefore her observations of the enclave between city and village were distinct from Wu Wenguang's aesthetics of *xianchang*. She intentionally distanced herself from the New Documentary Movement and the linear process of the realistic theory of documentation; she was inclined to the other linear process of the documentary tradition in observing the cityscape and the symphonies of the city in films in the early 20th century. Pioneering filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann were obsessive about conveying novel cityscapes shaped by fast urbanization through the "Kino Eye," but Cao Fei, as an outsider, was sensually attracted to the chaotic and hybrid nature of the village-in-the-city.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, and in light of the increasing hollowing out of villages, overcrowding of cities, and collapsing of the society's value system, some artists have been driven by intense nostalgia and have decided to return to the countryside and launch rural reconstruction projects. For those artists, the initiative to return to the countryside can also be seen as an expansion of the scope of their artistic practices. Some examples are the Bishan Project 碧山计划 co-organized by Ou Ning 欧宁 (b. 1969) and Zuo Jing 左靖 (b. 1970) in Anhui Province, the Paddy Film Project 稻电影 initiated by filmmaker Mao Chenyu 毛晨雨 (b. 1976) in Hunan Province, the Xu Village Project 许村计划 launched by photographer Qu Yan 渠岩 (b. 1955) in Shanxi Province, and the Yangdeng Art Collective 羊蹬艺术合作社 organized by Jiao Xingtao 焦兴涛 (b. 1970) and his colleagues at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Among these artist-organized rural reconstruction projects, Ou Ning and Zuo Jing's Bishan Project is probably the one most known domestically and

overseas. The two organizers have taken Bishan, an ancient village in Anhui Province, as their field of experiment. The aim is to use art to make contributions to rural reconstruction, continue the pursuit of the goals of the Rural Reconstruction Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and rebuild the social and cultural features of communities.[30] The first artist I chose for this chapter is Jin Le 靳勒 (1966–2021). His natural connection with the village in which he conducted his rurally engaged project made him stand out among the other artists mentioned above. Shijiezi Village 石节子村, with which Jin Le chose to be engaged, was actually where he was born and raised. It is an impoverished village in northwestern China. Jin returned to his home village and turned his entire village into an art museum after having lived and worked in the provincial capital for years. Nominated as village head, Jin Le not only engaged in the micropolitics of the village but also made attempts to bring together contemporary art and artists with his fellow villagers. The collaborative works created by the invited artists and villagers reveal different layers of the engagement of contemporary artists with rural spaces and their people.

The trend of going back to the countryside has also involved the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, known as the post-80s and post-90s generation. Wu Wenguang, who documented the *mangliu* community in the 1990s and early 2000s, initiated the Folk Memory Project 民间记忆计划 in 2010. He has mobilized young documentary filmmakers to return to their hometowns and record the fates of the common taciturn villagers, which were imperceptible in larger historical narratives. Most of these young documentary filmmakers were born and raised in the city and had no rural experience before joining the project. Each

30 For a comprehensive investigation of the Bishan Project, see Mai Corlin, *The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

of them chose a village and documented it through interviews with elderly residents. They talked about their personal experiences of historical and political events such as the Great Famine (1959–1961) that had seldom been recorded in official history books. For the filmmakers, the documenting process was, first, an opportunity to learn about a dark time through oral history. The young filmmakers also launched a series of small projects for collective memory materialization, environmental protection, library construction, and charity for the elderly, most of which targeted the children in the villages. In this sense, the Folk Memory Project was pedagogical for both the participating young filmmakers and the villagers. The return of the young urban generation to the countryside is somehow comparable to the sending down of educated youth during the Down to the Countryside Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, because the young participants acted not only as the reeducated but also as educators. Among the participating young filmmakers of the Folk Memory Project, Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇 (b. 1987) was chosen for the last case study in this dissertation. It is because she has been a key member who has been active since the project was initiated and produced the most well-known documentaries among her peers. Diaoyutai 钓鱼台, Zhang Mengqi's chosen village in Hubei Province, is where Zhang Mengqi's grandfather lived and where her father was born. Her ongoing returns to Diaoyutai have allowed Zhang Mengqi to reconnect with her roots in the countryside and rediscover her history. Her relocation from city to village and back during the past ten years also exemplifies the artist's role in rurally engaged projects and the problems that can arise in site-specific projects, which are prevailing in Chinese rural spaces.

2. Methodology and Structure of the Dissertation

I used several methods to generate the case studies. The method of biographical interpretation was used in all three chapters. Based on a close reading of each artist's own statements, interviews, and memoirs, I put special emphasis on the biographical features that were significant in the artist's relationship with the countryside and also pay special attention to the paradox between artists' textual statements and their visual expressions.

Because the artworks I dealt with throughout the dissertation were created in different forms, I used different methods in each chapter to explore them. In the first chapter, the artworks I investigated were largely traditional forms. Xu Bing made woodcuts and sketches. Lü Shengzhong made paper cuttings, oil paintings, and installations of paper cuttings. A combination of formal analysis and iconographical interpretation was employed to make comparative studies between the two artists featured in this chapter and other relevant artists and artworks. In the second and third chapters, which feature videos, performance art, and site-specific art, critical theory and the theory of socially engaged art were also applied. In order to obtain firsthand information, especially for the ongoing site-specific projects discussed in the third chapter, I took several field trips to the places in which the projects were being made or had been made. There I did interviews with the featured artists, as well as the participating villagers.

As I mentioned above, I took the bidirectional movement patterns between urban and rural areas since the end of the Cultural Revolution as the point of departure, and this approach lent itself to the formation of three chapters for the dissertation. In each chapter, I chose the practices of two artists that were relevant to the rural scene for in-depth case studies:

Chapter 1

In the first chapter, I discussed the practices of Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955) and Lü Shengzhong 吕胜中 (b. 1952) in the 1980s and investigated the relationship between each artist and the countryside in this time period. The artists moved from the city to the countryside. Even though both Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong became renowned avant-garde artists in the late 1980s, neither of them was a key figure in the '85 Art Movement, which took place in major cities. Xu Bing was one of the millions of urban youths who were sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution but returned to the city after the Cultural Revolution ended. He chose to go back to the countryside many times and made woodcuts and sketches of rural scenes. I first analyzed how Xu Bing's depiction of rural scenes differed from depictions in the Rustic Realist Art 乡土美术. Then, by making comparisons between Xu Bing's woodcuts and the works of his two favorite artists, the 19th-century French painter Millet (1814–1875) and the 20th-century Chinese printmaker Gu Yuan (1919–1996), who was active in the Yan'an period, I explored how Xu Bing's view of the countryside was associated with and deviated from that of his mentors. The artist Lü Shengzhong, the subject of my second case study, made his way to the countryside in Shaanbei 陕北, a region in northwestern China that is rich in folk culture. By situating Lü in the root-searching movement, a countermovement that was a response to the trend toward the westernization of culture in 1980s China, I investigated his experiments with paper cutting in the Shaanbei region and his attempts to transform folk art into contemporary art. By putting Lü Shengzhong in a broader historical context, I explored how his folk art experiments were associated with the folk art reform of Mao's period and how he deviated from the socialist doctrine by reviving folk religious elements in Shaanbei folk art.

Chapter 2

With the loosened Household Registration Policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, peasants flocked to major cities and became peasant workers. Meanwhile, some provincial artists moved to the art capital of Beijing to pursue their artistic careers. The two different social groups shared the designation of *mangliu* because of their similar amorphous or floating lifestyles. The two artists featured in the second chapter are Wu Wenguang, a pioneering figure in the New Documentary Movement in the 1990s, and Cao Fei, a representative of the new video artists born after the Cultural Revolution. Both of them were engaged with a unique space between city and village. For Wu Wenguang this was the urban-rural fringe 城乡结合部 in Beijing, and for Cao Fei it was the village-in-the-city 城中村 in the Pearl River Delta region. In the subchapter on Wu Wenguang, I examined how he documented blind floating artists as well as peasant workers, whose life trajectories became entangled. I also explored how Wu Wenguang's esthetic of *xianchang*（being on the scene）is in accordance with his self-identification as a blind floating artist who lived in communities with blind floating peasant workers. The collaborative piece *Dance with Farm Workers* provides a reflection on the utilization of peasant workers in performance art. In the subchapter on Cao Fei, I analyzed how she, as a native of metropolitan Guangzhou, observed the village-in-the-city enclave and the peasant workers differently from Wu Wenguang in his *xianchang* esthetics.

Chapter 3

In the last chapter, I focused on the current phenomenon of artists returning to the

countryside and launching rurally engaged site-specific projects, a phenomenon that has been occurring since the beginning of the new millennium and can be seen as a response to the decline of the countryside in the process of drastic urbanization. The direction of movement of the artists is from the city back to the countryside. The two artists I chose for case studies in this chapter were Jin Le and Zhang Mengqi. Jin Le gave up the opportunity to become a professional artist in Beijing, the center of contemporary art, and chose to return to Shijiezi Village 石节子村, a small, unknown village in Gansu Province where he was born and raised. He has transformed his village into an art museum and invited artists to carry out collaborative projects together with the villagers. In his subchapter, I investigated the development of the Shijiezi Art Museum as an alternative space and the way in which Jin Le has built links between the contemporary art world in major cities and his remote village and put innovative ideas into practice. The changing relationship between participating artists and Shijiezi villagers during collaborative projects was also analyzed. The second artist on whom I focused in this chapter and also the last case study in this dissertation is Zhang Mengqi. She has been involved with Diaoyutai Village 钓鱼台村 in Hubei Province as part of the Folk Memory Project initiated by Wu Wenguang. In this subchapter, I examined how Zhang Mengqi (who epitomizes the post-1980s generation) engaged with the countryside differently from the generation of sent-down educated youth, epitomized by Xu Bing and Wu Wenguang. Through an analysis of Zhang Mengqi's documentary films on elderly villagers' memories of the Great Famine (1959–1961) and her series of village community-based projects, I discussed the multiple roles of the artist in rurally engaged projects and also the effectiveness and problems of currently prevalent, site-specific artistic practices.

Chapter 1

From City to Village and Back: The Cultural Return of Educated Youth in the 1980s

1.1. Landscaped Village: Xu Bing's Early Woodcuts, Millet, and Gu Yuan

As a Chinese artist actively participating in the global art world, Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955) is renowned for his experimental installations focusing on the transformation of texts and images and interactive projects. His work first drew international attention in the late 1980s, with his *Book from the Sky* 天书 (1987-1991) serving as a milestone in his artistic career. Interestingly, although he is one of the most renowned artists at home and abroad nowadays, he was never a key figure of any of the art groups formed during the new artistic movement in the mid-1980s known as the '85 New Wave '85 美术新潮. The young artists in this movement with an academic background drastically broke from the socialist tradition and embraced Western modern art from Impressionism to Dadaism and reintroduced this art to China after the Cultural Revolution. Unlike his contemporaries actively engaged in the '85 New Wave, he traveled back to the village in which he had resided during the Down to the Countryside Movement 上山下乡运动 and to other remote rural areas across China, making small woodcuts depicting rural scenes. These works were not included in the Rustic Realist Art (a term coined by Chinese art historians), which prevailed in the early 1980s. His small

woodcuts, though treasured by the artist himself, have so far not been much addressed by researchers or included in publications on the general history of contemporary Chinese art.

Raised in an intellectual family dishonored during the Cultural Revolution, Xu Bing was sent to the countryside at the age of nineteen in accordance with Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 call that "Educated urban youth receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants" 知识青年接受贫下中农再教育. His four years' stay in the small Shoulianggou Village 收粮沟村 in Hebei Province 河北省 near his hometown of Beijing and his more than ten years of training and working in the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, one of the most prestigious art academies in China with a strong socialist tradition, had a long-lasting influence on his early and later works. One important influence was his teacher Gu Yuan 古元, one of the most distinguished printmakers of the Yan'an period 延安时期. Xu Bing had admired Gu Yuan's work since childhood and often mentions it in his writings and interviews even today. In this subchapter, I investigate Xu Bing's early woodcut prints and his early and later writings to see how he, as one of millions of educated urban youths who returned to the city after spending years in the countryside, views and depicts the village and the complexities of his relations with the countryside. By making comparisons between the works of Xu Bing and Gu Yuan, I also attempt to analyze Xu Bing's affinity with Gu Yuan's art practices in rural areas within the intellectual and cultural contexts of the early and mid-1980s in China. More importantly, I explore his concealed departure from the socialist

realist tradition[31] within academic institutions, which can be seen as the starting point of his artistic experiments in the late 1980s.

Xu Bing was admitted as a student to the Printmaking Department of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1977. He started to make small woodblock prints that usually depicted everyday rural life. He continued this practice until the mid-1980s and named the series *Shattered Jade* 玉碎集. In 1986, a small book entitled *Xu Bing: Small Woodcuts* 徐冰木刻小品（Fig. 1.1.1） showing 128 woodblock prints was published by the Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House;[32] it was the first official publication showing Xu Bing's works. In an article published in *Fine Art* 美术，the most significant official art journal in China, he recalled the time he spent with a group of high school graduates and local peasants and how he cherished his life experiences in the small, impoverished village. He wrote,

> I do not know how historians would evaluate the Down to the Countryside Movement, but I, at least, cannot say it is bad. If I had not experienced rural life then, I cannot

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[31] Socialist Realism is highly idealized and artificial manner required by Stalin in the USSR following the First Congress of Writers in 1934. It was introduced in China in the following year and spread in leftist art and literature circles. In 1939, Mao Zedong's inscription at the ceremony of the 1st anniversary of Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy 鲁迅艺术文学院 "Anti-Japanese Realism; Revolutionary Romanticism" 抗日的现实主义，革命的浪漫主义 was considered as the Chinese Communist Party's affirmation of Socialist realism as the guideline of art and literature creation by some scholars. It was in the mid-1950s that Socialist Realism was established as the official artistic doctrine in China, marked by soviet artist Maksimov's oil painting class held between 1955-1957 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Socialist realist painting is characterized by rendering an idealized vision of the greatness of national leaders and the people's prosperity and happiness under Communism. It was worth noting that as the Sino-Soviet relation worsened in the late 1950s, some Chinese artists attempted to sinicize oil painting. However, socialist realism remained the mainstream, even the soviet model was no longer acknowledged openly. The Soviet socialist realist orthodox was replaced by a more Maoist statement "a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism"革命现实主义与革命浪漫主义相结合 in 1958, which could be traced back to cultural policy in the Yan'an period. In the late 1970s, soviet artists and writers gradually abandoned this doctrine, simultaneously, criticism of Socialist Realism also appeared among the Chinese intelligentsia. See Julia Andrews, Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979 (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994). Zhang Xudong, "The Power of Rewriting: Postrevolutionary Discourse on Chinese Socialist Realism," in Socialist Realism Without Shores, eds.Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 282-309.

[32] Xu Bing, *Xu Bing: Small Woodcuts* 徐冰木刻小品 (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1986).

> imagine what I would have liked to draw … After I left, I started to yearn for the life in that small village. I missed the people there. Sometimes during the holidays I go back and stay for a couple of days. The millstones, the dirt roads, the haystacks … all these ordinary scenes make me feel very much welcomed. Everything is so plain, so real, and so beautiful. My heart beats fast every time I think of these things. It is life. When the past calls to you, the life experiences you had in the past become more poetic, and your feelings about them get stronger.[33]

In the book, *Xu Bing: Small Woodcuts*, Xu Bing included an excerpt from the article quoted above as the preface. In the series shown, most of the woodcuts are works less than ten centimeters square. In the piece titled *Warmth* 暖 (1980, Fig. 1.1.2), the artist shows a mother pig lying on hay with eyes closed, breastfeeding little piglets. The dark hay accentuates the lovely bodies of the small creatures peacefully drinking their mother's milk. The rounded contour of the mother pig and the square of hay as the backdrop together build a stable and complete configuration. As in the excerpt from Xu Bing's article quoted above, he has focused on a familiar scene in rural life. Titling the work *Warmth* has given it a symbolic meaning; the title not only signifies the tenderness of maternal love but also references the harmonious relations among villagers that Xu Bing missed. Another work from the same series is *Farmhouse* 农家 (1979, Fig. 1.1.3), in which the artist captures the moment when dinner is ready in a farmer's house, but no family member has taken a seat at the table. An unadorned wooden dining table with four stools beside it is the only objects depicted in the work. On the table is simple food such as steamed bread on a bamboo plate; the food has reminded the artist of the modest life in the village. Noodles in a large bowl with the steam rising from them highlighted imply the liveliness of farm life.

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[33] Xu Bing, "I draw what I love" 我画自己爱的东西, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 5 (May 1981): 18.

From these two examples, we can see that the artist focuses his attention mainly on small scenes of everyday rural life, especially easily ignored moments that exemplify the plain beauty of country life to the artist. Another piece entitled *Gourd Trellis* 瓜棚 (1979, Fig. 1.1.4) displays various kinds of vegetables growing vigorously on a trellis. Pumpkins, squash, and wax gourds are seen; this single trellis shows the prosperity and vividness of the agrarian life. *Guinea Corn* 苞米 (1980, Fig. 1.1.5), produced in the following year, is a close-up of a bunch of dried cobs of guinea corn, something that is often seen hanging on the front walls of farmhouses in northern China. The leaves and corn kernels are so well delineated that the viewer might sense that the artist wanted to immerse himself in this food, not only seeing it as a subject with which he could refine his printmaking skills but also as an object that could allow him entry into a reminiscence on his four years of rustic life in an unknown village. As Xu mentioned in his essay "I Draw What I Love," one of his schoolmates said to him, "Your eyes are only on the Kang[34] and stove." Xu admitted that was the case. He said, "A small stove is not worthy as the subject matter of a whole oil painting. But for me, it is worthy of effort because it is a symbol of life."[35] From what he expressed in the article and the woodcuts shown here, we can see that he was greatly obsessed with local scenes and people even though he had left the village.

Interestingly, at the same time, he offhandedly revealed his unwillingness to be a peasant and spend the rest of his life in the countryside. He said in "I Draw What I Love" that although he misses the time he spent in Shoulianggou Village, he knows that "fighting for food against the harsh climate should not be the mission of my generation." He also implied

[34] Kang 炕 is an earthen heatable platform for sitting and sleeping in rural areas in northern China, where it is cold in winter.

[35] Xu Bing, "I draw what I love," 19.

in another essay published around the same period that rustic life was hard and unbearable: "We (the educated urban youth—author's note) left the village, but they (the peasants—author's note) have to remain." In a short memoir written in 2008 included in *The Seventies* 七十年代 (2008), an anthology of reminiscences of a group of celebrated intellectuals from many fields recalling their youths in the 1970s, Xu Bing wrote about the eagerness he had felt to leave the small village and enter the Central Academy of Fine Arts to fulfill his childhood dream of becoming an artist. His heart sank when his acceptance at the prestigious school was slow in arriving, and when he finally received his admission, he could not wait to pack his belongings and leave, even though he felt that the local peasants had considered him a member of their village.[36]

At this point, one might wonder why Xu Bing was obsessed with making small woodcuts depicting everyday rural scenes. Why did he keep going back to the small village after returning to the city and entering the art school he had dreamt of since childhood?

Xu Bing and the Rustic Realist School

If we look at Xu Bing in terms of the cultural context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, we can see that he was not alone. Right after the end of the Cultural Revolution, there arose a new generation of artists who had had experiences similar to those of Xu Bing. They had been educated youths who had been sent to the countryside for years and had returned to the city and entered art school. Some of them created works that showed how endless political movement during the Cultural Revolution had caused long-lasting wounds to

[36] Xu Bing, " Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment"愚昧作为一种养料, in *The seventies* 七十年代，eds. Bei Dao 北岛 and Li Tuo 李陀 (Beijing: Sanlian Book Store, 2009), 25-26. For the English translation of the essay, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment," see Xu Bing, *Xu Bing Prints* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2009), 220-237

innocent young people like them. Chen Conglin's 程丛林 (b. 1954) large-scale oil painting *X, X, 1968, Snowy* 1968年X月X日雪 (1979) and the comic strip *Maples* 枫 (1979) by Chen Yiming 陈宜明 (b. 1950), Liu Yulian 刘宇廉 (1948-1997), and Li Bin 李斌 (b. 1949) were the most representative ones. Both depict violent conflicts between different youthful political groups during the early stage of the Cultural Revolution and are known as Scar Art 伤痕美术.[37] Other artists used a naturalistic style in depicting villages to which they were sent during the Cultural Revolution and recalled their life experiences with and feelings about the local peasants; this is known as Rustic Realist Art. The most representative piece is Luo Zhongli's 罗中立's *Father* 父亲 (1980), a portrait of an ordinary old farmer. The large scale of the piece and the careful representation of details in it are features that had only been employed in portraits of political leaders. The peasant who is the subject belonged to a class of people who had long been neglected in mainstream discourse, and the piece was a sensation when it was exhibited. Other representative works of Rustic Realist Art include Wang Hai's 王亥 (b. 1955) *Spring* 春 (1979, Fig. 1.1.6)，Wang Chuan's 王川 (b. 1953) *Goodbye, Small Road* 再见吧，小路 (1980, Fig. 1.1.7)，and He Duoling's *Spring Breeze Comes Around* 春风已经苏醒 (1982, Fig. 1.1.8). In an artist's statement published in 1982, the same year that *Spring Breeze Comes Around* was produced, He Duoling expressed feelings for the countryside that were similar to those of Xu Bing，

> Like many of my contemporaries, I left that rural world long ago, but it has not disappeared from my heart. On the contrary, every time I feel like drawing something,

[37] See Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Art Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, 54-64.

> it becomes clear in front of my eyes. It was an infertile place with barren hills and a desolate river bank; nothing was beautiful …. Some people say that I beautified the objects. They misunderstood because I had no intention of beautifying anything. Maybe it was because people do not feel comfortable when they are surprised by the beauty that has been ignored but is suddenly found. Or was it because I was so moved by the object that I lost control of myself?[38]

From He Duoling's statement, we can see that, like Xu Bing, he had strong feelings of nostalgia for the impoverished village and became absorbed in the neglected beauty of the rural scene.

One of the aspects that distinguishes Xu's works from those of the Rustic Realist School is that his woodcuts do not convey much about the sentimental moods of lost youth; for educated rusticated young people, there might have been regrets for the time wasted in the countryside that could have been spent on a better life. In Wang Hai's *Spring*, for example, a girl who is apparently an educated youth, as indicated by her humble yet delicate dress, has a comb in her hand and stands against the earthen wall of a farmhouse, gazing into the distance. The flowers are blooming, and the swallows are returning; spring is beginning, and a new year is starting. She seems to ask, How long am I going to stay in this place? Another difference is that in Xu's works, we cannot find a sense of the loss of and alienation from the future. These aspects are evident in works such as Wang Chuan's *Goodbye, Small Road*, which depicts an educated girl in the foreground with a winding country road behind her and a sunset as a backdrop. For an educated youth, this scene could indicate a feeling of disillusionment. If the Cultural Revolution was officially defined as a mistaken movement

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[38] He Duoling 何多苓, "Correspondence on *Spring Breeze Comes Around*," 关于《春风已经苏醒》的通信 *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 4 (April 1982): 6.

after it ended, the efforts of the zealous yet anonymous participants would be considered invalid. What would be the next step? As Wang Chuan wrote about *Goodbye, Small Road*,

> What I saw was a lonely spirit walking back and forth. She has no courage to say goodbye to the past. She expects the future to come calling. She was tortured by both the past and the present. She cannot find happiness and joy. I feel responsible for defending the youths who pursued good deeds but, unfortunately, suffered a lot.[39]

He saw the girl as a representative of his whole generation. An educated youth who had had a similar experience would resonate with the painting. Wang wanted the audience to see the beauty of sadness and sacrifice in the painting, defend the girl, and feel sorry for her wasted youth spent on this small road.[40]

These artists of the Rustic Realist School rendered the rustic life with strong, vivid emotions, either anger or sadness, in order to commemorate a time of life that had just passed by as a collective memory. By emphasizing the loss of the generation as a whole, the Rustic Realist artists tried to legitimize their young days that had withered in the Down to the Countryside Movement, which was negated in mainstream discourse along with the whole Cultural Revolution. Xu Bing, however, did not show an explicit attitude or sentiment toward his life experiences in the countryside as the Rustic Realist artists did. Actually, many of the works in his small woodcut series have no figures in them, so we cannot find much of a narrative of his own life story in Shoulianggou Village or any renderings of his educated youth contemporaries as subjects. His writings contain almost nothing about feeling betrayed

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[39] Wang Chuan 王川, "I Hope She Is on the Great Road " 期望她走在大路上, *Fine Arts* 美术, no.1 (January 1981): 46.

[40] Ibid.

by the Party for sending him to the countryside for the sake of revolution or any disillusionment, resentment, or bitterness for the misspent years.

Because Xu Bing came from a high-ranking intellectual's family that was degraded during the Cultural Revolution,[41] he learned to protect himself by suppressing his emotions, being cautious about expressing his thoughts and, at the same time, working as hard as possible to prove himself a useful person. He reminisced about his childhood in the article "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment." As a child of a rightist 右派 family, he "had a subconscious instinct, a habit of adhering to the correct line" and often "felt guilty for obstructing the revolutionary process because of [my] problematic family." When he was in high school, his artistic abilities motivated him to work for the school on propaganda projects such as big-character posters, typography on the blackboard, and hand-cut mimeograph stencils for newspapers. He constantly worked late at night and even damaged his health.[42] Although he felt that being sent down to the countryside, settling in a small village, and doing farm work should not have been the duty of his generation, he also said that he felt much more welcome in the village than he did in Beijing because the peasants did not judge him by his family's status. Xu Bing recalled, "The peasants were good to me as long as I worked hard and showed them respect."[43] The village, for Xu Bing, was like a peaceful harbor in which he could take refuge from the turbulent political movement and prejudice against his "polluted" bloodline that he experienced in his hometown of Beijing.

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41 Xu Bing recalled in his essay "Fragmentary Recollections" 琐记 how his father, as a high-ranking official in Peking University, one of the top universities in China, was purged, and his family was persecuted by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, see Xu Bing official website, accessed December 12, 2018, http://www.xubing.com/cn/database/writing/356.

42 Reiko Tomii, "The Slow Formation of Ice in Fourteen Phases: An Art-Historical Biography of Xu Bing," in *Xu Bing*, eds. Reiko Tomii et al. (London: Albion Books, 2011), 62.

43 Ibid., 62.

The four years he stayed in Soulianggou Village was seen as a period of practicing self-cultivation and discipline. Xu Bing worked as the art designer for the village blackboard newspaper and then a mimeographed print periodical called *Brilliant Mountain Flowers* 山花烂漫, which was edited by the peasants and educated youths. He was absorbed with typefaces and focused on changing trends in typefaces used by state-run newspapers such as the *People's Daily* 人民日报. He recollected years later that it was a period of complete concentration: "Each person in their lifetime has but one period of true and utter focus. I used it up early, used it in the painstaking design of a mimeograph publication…"[44] He also worked part time as a forester, watching over fruit trees that were the collective property of the villagers; he would also climb up to a mountain and stay for the whole day, reading a book or sketching. This daily routine caused him to concentrate on the details of everyday life at the moment, his surroundings, and changes in nature and the seasons throughout the year. He practiced self-discipline in efforts such as keeping away from cigarettes as a promise to himself and did not go back to Beijing to visit his family as long he felt calm and settled in the village.

Unsettled Nostalgia, the Return of Humanism, and Millet

After he moved back to Beijing and entered the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xu Bing kept going back to Shoulianggou Village and other rural places in northern China, making landscape sketches and searching for materials for his graduation project. Like his small woodcuts, the sketches delineate the everydayness of rural scenes. Unlike his small

[44] Xu Bing, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment", in *Xu Bing Prints* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2009), 230.

woodcuts, which are either close-ups of a small rural subject, such as a piggery or one cob of corn, or rather general full views from above, the sketches depict scenes and objects in great detail. Most use a socialist realist style, which Xu practiced during his years at the art academy. Socialist realism had been the dominant style introduced from the Soviet Union since the mid-1950s. He used everyday scenes in several works made in preparation for his bachelor's degree project, such as *Cave Dwelling, Handan* 窑洞，邯郸 (1980, Fig. 1.1.9) and *Kitchen, Handan* 厨房，邯郸 (1980, Fig. 1.1.10), and they show his deep absorption in the living arrangements of peasants in northern China. There is the smooth painted wall of a cave dwelling, earthen cooking stove, wooden pot lid, broken brick wall, coarse bamboo baskets, and dried cobs of corn hanging on a wall. All of these objects are also seen in his small woodcuts, and all reveal his great interest in the different textures of objects and foods found in farmhouses and the simplicity and peacefulness of country life.

At the time, the art academy was located in the very center of the capital; it later moved to a suburban area, only a few blocks from Wangfujing, the most famous shopping street in China. More than twenty years after his student days, Xu recalled,

> The old Central Academy campus was located in Wangfujing, and I could not stand the noise and bustle there. Just walking around a department store gives me a headache. Apart from the sustenance I found in the "problems of sketching," my affections remained in Shoulianggou. I could not understand why, but I missed the place so. Every time I recalled that dirt road running by the village, that millstone, and those haystacks, my pulse quickened. I should have focused the attachment I felt to Shoulianggou on some girl instead.[45]

[45] Ibid., 235

Xu Bing remembered that a teacher once commented on his work, "Xu Bing's feeling for the village is a kind of love."[46] A similar confession can be found in the above-mentioned preface of the book showing the collection of his small woodcuts.

As one of the millions of educated youth who had been sent down and then had returned to the city, Xu's recollections show his difficulties in adapting to busy urban life after four years in Shoulianggou Village. At the time, the reform and opening-up policies had just started to transform the capital city into a metropolis and sharpen the differences between it and the rural areas. Xu Bing's continued trips back to Shoulianggou Village and other rural areas in neighboring provinces indicate his lack of a sense of belonging, a phenomenon often seen among educated youth. As Michel Bonnin argued, "after a few years in the countryside, the educated youth felt they belonged nowhere and were strangers everywhere … As a result of their lowly status and the feeling of being rejected everywhere, many educated youth felt they had been abandoned by society and were part of a new kind of lumpenproletariat."[47] Though Xu felt that he was treated much better in Shoulianggou Village than in Beijing because no one in the village judged him by his family's social status, his eagerness to attend the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts and his exhilaration when approval was eventually given for him to leave the village show that he did not actually feel he belonged there.

Although he was lucky enough to be enrolled in one of the top art colleges in China, he was not as valued as students who had a rather unproblematic family background or younger students whose education was not affected or postponed by the Cultural Revolution.

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968-1980)*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), 295.

This was because of his group identity first as an educated youth and also as a worker-peasant-soldier student 工农兵学员,[48] who had wasted his youth doing farm work and had been admitted to college through recommendations rather than passing the college entrance examination. Xu Bing was eventually included in the class of new students recruited through the examination in 1977, but he still perceived himself to be different from his classmates: My university classmates were a very different group from my high school ones, whose families all had problems. My university classmates were all "upright red seedlings," and it seemed that I had managed to successfully blend into their revolutionary ranks …[49] His craving for an escape from the countryside and his frequent returns to it after realizing his dream of studying at the art academy show his confusion about his identity. His taking refuge in the countryside indicates he was attempting to settle his mind and grasp the feeling of belonging. From a distance, the countryside in which he no longer lived seemed like a distant island, his idealized spiritual utopia.

At a conference commemorating the 40th anniversary of the publication of Mao Zedong's *Yan'an Talks* 延安讲话 in 1982, Xu Bing classified young art students and artists into two groups. One group had life experience in the country or working experience in a factory, had been through hardships with local people, and was emotionally attached to the

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[48] During the Cultural Revolution, universities had to recruit students directly from factories, farms, and troops. These students were labeled work-peasant-soldier students. In 1970, the Central Committee approved the "Report on Student Recruitment" by Beijing University and Tsinghua University. The universities suggested the matriculation examination be abolished. Student selection should be based on recommendations by the masses, approvals by the leading cadres, and background investigations conducted by the university. In 1977, the Ministry of Education decided to discontinue the practice of recruiting worker-worker-peasant-soldier students and restore the college entrance examination in December that year. See Li Kwok-sing, *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China*, trans. Mary Lok. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), 124-125. Xu Bing belonged to the last class of Worker-peasant-soldier students. As Xu Bing recalls, with the restoration of the college entrance examination, some students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts wrote a big character poster 大字报 addressing the disqualification of the last class of worker-peasant-soldier students and organization of new examinations. Xu Bing, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment," 232.

[49] Xu Bing, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment," 233.

people. These artists usually had a good understanding of Mao's *Yan'an Talks*, in which the main theme was why and how to make art and literature serve peasants, workers, and soldiers. The other group lacked experience with the people and was likely to be limited in some ways or immersed in their own little circle and missing the bigger picture. Apparently, Xu categorized himself as part of the first group.[50] For him, his life experience in a rural area was what distinguished him from his classmates. As he, himself, put it, it had been his destiny and "nourishment."[51]

During his years at the art academy, he was most interested in the Chinese artist Gu Yuan and the French artist Jean-François Millet, both of whom were renowned for their depictions of the country and peasants. In the spring of 1978, the year Xu entered the academy, an exhibition entitled *French 19th Century Rustic Landscape Painting* 十九世纪法国农村风景画展 was held at the National Gallery of China 中国美术馆 (now called the National Art Museum of China). It was the first foreign exhibition held since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The cooperation between the Ministries of Culture of France and China demonstrated that China was opening the door to Western art again, just as it was opening doors with its reform and opening-up policies that year. The exhibition had a great impact on the Chinese art world, and it was followed by a series of foreign exhibitions at the National Gallery.[52] The exhibition consisted of 88 paintings created between 1820 and 1905,

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[50] Xu Bing, et al., "Adhere to the Spirits of Yan'an Talks; Promote the Development of Fine Arts" 坚持《在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话》的根本精神，促进美术的繁荣发展, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 5 (May 1982): 9.

[51] Xu Bing, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment," 220.

[52] The show also parallels an increasing number of publications on western art, including *Translated Essays on Fine Arts* 美术译丛 by Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts established in 1980 and World Art 世界美术 by Central Academy of Fine Arts established in 1979. Gao Minglu, et al., *Inside Out*: New Chinese Art (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998), 197.

in a wide variety of styles.[53] Among the works were some by artists of the Barbizon school, including Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875); realist artist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877); impressionist artists Claude Monet (1840–1926), Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919); the post-impressionist master Paul Gauguin (1848–1903); and the early 20th century fauvists André Derain (1889–1954) and Louis Valtat (1869–1952).[54] Though the exhibition displayed a wide range of styles from 19th-century France, the paintings in the naturalist and realist styles, such as Léon Augustin Lhermitte's（1844–1925) *Payment of the Harvesters* (1892) and Jules Bastien-Lepage's (1848–1884) *Haymaking* (1877), which had similarities to the then-dominant socialist realist style in China, were no doubt especially appealing to the Chinese audience.

One highlight of the exhibition was a group of four pieces by Jean-François Millet, one of Xu Bing's two favorite artists at the time. Special attention was paid to *The Spinner, Goatherd of the Auvergne* (1868–1869, Fig. 1.1.11) from the Musée d'Orsay and *Feeding the Young* (1850) from the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille. In *The Spinner, Goatherd of the Auvergne,* a young girl is spinning in the foreground. She is depicted from below, sitting in a relaxed pose on a riverbank, holding a spindle in her right hand. She is humbly dressed and is spinning wool and minding goats at the same time. A cloudy sky covers two thirds of the background, and the goats are only partially visible, half hidden behind the riverbank. The

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[53] Reports and discussions about this exhibition: *Collected Writings on Fine Arts* 美术丛刊, no.4 und no.5 (1978); Liu Ruli 刘汝醴, "Naturalism/Realism: on French 19th Century Rustic Landscape Painting Exhibition" 自然主义-现实主义——记法国十九世纪农村风景画展, Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts 南京艺术学院学报, no.2 (1978): 45-48.

[54] See National Art Museum of China, ed., *French 19th Century Rustic Landscape Painting Exhibition* 法国十九世纪农村风景画展, exhibition catalog (Beijing: National Art Museum of China, 1978), and a more comprehensive one published in the same year, see Wei Lan 维兰 ed., *French 19th Century Rustic Landscape Painting* 十九世纪法国农村风景画 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1978).

bold contrast between light and shade caused by the backlighting effect, the floating clouds in the sky, and the hand movements of the girl give the painting a sense of dynamics. At the same time, the young spinner's contemplative facial expression (though it seems she is looking directly at the viewer), the half-open mouth (which suggests she is probably humming a folk melody), and the muted colors give the painting a melancholy mood. The piece was painted in Barbizon based on a series of sketches Millet made while he was in Auvergne and Allier with his wife.

In his article "Millet Reconsidered," Robert Herbert situated Millet's depiction of peasants in the socioeconomic context of the first half of the 19th century in Europe. The rise of peasant art developed out of the drastic effects of the urban-industrial revolution, especially the dramatic shift of the rural population toward major cities. Depicting the peasant, rather than the modern city and urban life, was among the most important techniques artists used to embody their attitudes toward the urban-industrial revolution and modernity. A spinner such as the one in *The Spinner, Goatherd of the Auvergne* was one of Millet's commonest subjects. Spinning had been a rural profession, and its practitioners became some of the chief victims of the industrial revolution as factory production of modern textiles developed. Eugène Bonnemère wrote in 1856,

> It is rigorously true to say that the most skillful spinner does not earn ten centimes a day: she earns nothing. The city has taken from the country this precious resource: it is toward the city that the peasant turns his face, in order to follow with his regrets this richness which has forever flown, in order to contemplate these powerful machines which have broken under the first turn of their wheels the distaff of all the peasants.[55]

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[55] Robert Herbert, "City vs. Country: The Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin," in Robert Herbert, *From Millet to Léger: essays in social art history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 37.

The young girl's relaxed hand, with which she is spinning, and the innocent look on her face reveal Millet's nostalgic feelings for the rural past, a way of life that was in fact at stake during the first half of the 19th century. A longing for the pre-industrial past was an indirect way of resisting irresistible modernization. As Robert Herbert put it,

> The depiction of the rural past became the perfect expression of contemporary urban sensibilities … The rural subjects embodied present aspirations, with the virtue of being aloof from the most obvious contemporary polemics and therefore endowed with greater permanence.[56]

In the early 1980s, when rural reform and agricultural industrialization, important aspects of the reform and opening-up policy, were underway, Xu Bing was absorbed in the details and textures of daily rural objects. *Stable in a Rural Dwelling, Handan* (1980) is a drawing he made as part of his preparation for his graduation project. Like the above-mentioned *Cave Dwelling, Handan* (1980) and *Kitchen, Handan* (1980), it portrays the front door of a stable and different kinds of bridles hanging on a fence and saddles sitting on the ground. I tried to imagine how the artist, squatting in front of an old, dark, shabby stable for hours and perhaps also enduring unpleasant smells from the horses inside the stable, sketched the old-fashioned rural tools with absolute patience and concentration. In Xu Bing's series of small woodcuts, one titled *Stone Roller* 石碾子 (1980, Fig. 1.1.12) is a close-up view of a farmyard; it shows a worn stone roller and headgear, but the donkey that is supposed to rotate the millstone is missing. The heavy shading techniques used in this woodcut, akin to the ones

[56] Ibid.

in *Stable in a Rural Dwelling, Handan* 农家马厩，邯郸 (1980, Fig. 1.1.13), accentuate the worn-out state of the outdated agricultural implements. Xu Bing, like Millet, was striving to record images of the symbols of a vanishing agrarian society. They had been utilized for thousands of years but were becoming obsolete due to the development of agricultural mechanization. He wanted to produce a comprehensive record of them.

Moreover, his feeling of isolation from the downtown area of the capital city and his special identity as an educated youth and later a worker-peasant-soldier student, distinct from most of his classmates, led him to flee the city: *Nanmantuo Village, Southern Hebei* 南漫驼村，河北南部 (1980, Fig. 1.1.14), produced in the same year as the above-mentioned two sketches, depicts a small village scene at the foot of the Taihang Mountains in southern Hebei Province, five hundred kilometers from Beijing. The heavily worked shading of the mountains in the background and the terraced fields in the foreground gives the work a sense of seclusion; only the white smoke from kitchen chimneys in the middle, highlighted with a white crayon to contrast with the dark houses, suggests human habitation. The spiraling smoke indicates the tranquility of life in this remote village. It is like a Peach Blossom Land 世外桃源,[57] seemingly untouched by either the continual radical social and political movements or the speedily growing economy. Similar moods of solitude and escapism can also be easily found in Millet's work: One of his common subjects is the shepherd. In *The Spinner, Goatherd of the Auvergne,* the piece Xu Bing definitely saw at the French exhibition, the young spinner is also a goatherd, which is one type of shepherdess. The shepherd has long been a main subject of idyllic literature, going back to the ancient Roman poet Virgil,

[57] A Chinese expression of a fictitious land of idyllic peace and beauty, escaping from the turmoil of the outside world, originally from the Peach Blossom Spring 桃花源记, a fable written by Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (ca. 365-427), who is a writer in the Eastern Jin and Liu Song Dynasties.

whose works were favorites of Millet (next to the Bible) throughout his life.[58] In analyzing another work by Millet, *Shepherdess Leaning Against a Tree* (1857), which has subject matter similar to that of *The Spinner, Goatherd of the Auvergne,* Robert Herbert argues that the drawing "reflects Millet's feelings of a brooding isolation."[59]

As I mentioned above, another of Millet's paintings that was highlighted in the French exhibition was *Feeding the Young* (1850, Fig. 1.1.15), in which Millet depicted a loving family scene in front of a farmer's house. Three children are sitting side by side at the front door of their house, and their mother is feeding the youngest girl, sitting in the middle, with a spoon. At this sentimental moment, the little girl has opened her mouth to receive the food, and the two older sisters are looking at her so that her face is the focal point of the painting. The mother, though in the center of the foreground, is largely in shadow. A chicken somewhat behind the mother suggests the analogy to a mother hen feeding chicks. In a narrow section of the painting showing a field behind the house, a farmer can be seen at work, laboring to earn bread for the family.

Some scholars argue that Millet's depiction of peasant life exemplified socialist ideas and challenged the established institutions of mid-19th-century France, as his contemporary, Courbet, often did. For example, in his book *The Absolute Bourgeois*, T. J. Clark stresses,

> In the late 1850s, Millet took on Courbet's mantle. He was the socialist troublemaker, however much he protested to the contrary … In the course of a decade, Millet's subject matter became dangerous, the one bone left in the gullet of the Empire, the one

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[58] Millet was taught Latin classics by his grandfather and his uncle, who are both steeped in Virgil. Throughout his life, Millet remained an accomplished Latinist who would recite from memory the Bucolics and the Georgics (Virgil's most famous pastoral poems). When he moved to Barbizon and turned to rural subjects, he rediscovered Virgil. Robert L. Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, vol. 1 (1996): 29.

[59] Robert L. Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 37.

> class not to get its pickings from the economic boom …[60] Millet's woodcutter … is not the peasant of 1660 but the proletarian of 1859.[61]

When socialist radicals saw Millet's work as a weapon against the dominant values and institutions, Millet clarified his view of this in a letter to a friend in 1851:

> I will avow to you, at the risk of passing for still more of a socialist, that it is the human side, the frankly human side, which touches me most in art … I am especially touched by the man who from birth is wedded to the great labor of the soil, in the sense of the terrible Biblical verse, "You will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow.[62]

Like Millet, some scholars assert a less politicized interpretation of Millet's peasant paintings. Robert Herbert believes that Millet's work grants great dignity to his peasants and gives the human figure "the triumph of the common man"[63] as he quotes the French critic Castagnary on the artist's "monumentality." Herbert asserts that Millet is "no social reformer"; his work rather reveals "a nostalgia for the past," as well as "an instinctive humanitarianism."[64]

It is indeed the "human side," as Millet himself puts it, that impresses Xu Bing the most. After being immersed in highly political socialist realism for so long, not only Xu Bing but also many artists of his generation were excited about 19th-century French realism, which

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60 The woodcutter refers to Millet's *Death and the Woodcutter* (1859), collected in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

61 T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 81.

62 Robert L. Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 49.

63 Ibid., 33.

64 Robert Herbert, "City vs. Country: The Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin," 34.

displayed the life and emotions of the "common man." Chen Danqing 陈丹青 (b. 1953), considered a representative of the life flow trend 生活流[65] in early 1980s Chinese art, recalled that seeing the works by Millet in the French exhibition directly motivated him to create his *Tibet Series* 西藏组画 (1980), which caused a sensation in the Chinese art world of his time.[66] Robert Herbert set Millet's portraits of peasants in the bigger cultural context of early 19th-century Europe, and he found that starting in the early 1830s, not just in France but throughout Europe, painters and writers were concerned with ordinary human beings. In England, these writers included Dickens and George Eliot, and in France, Balzac and Georges Sand.[67]

Interestingly, in the early 1980s in China, such 19th-century European critical realist literature became popular, along with a heated debate on humanism. This debate was disparaged as a bourgeois conceit by Chinese Communist ideologists in the overall intellectual circle. The debate was provoked by an article entitled "Defense of Humanism" 为人道主义辩护 written by Wang Ruoshui 王若水 (1926-2002), then the debut editor in chief of the Communist Party's premier newspaper, the *People's Daily* 人民日报. Wang argued that the Cultural Revolution and the cruel class struggle caused "socialist alienation" 社会主

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65 Life flow is an art trend in 1980s China. The term is to define artworks that depict ordinary people's lives and feelings with realist or naturalist style, as resistance to propaganda and political art during Mao's period. See Chen Danqing's statement on *Tibet Series*, Chen Danqing 陈丹青, "On Seven Paintings of Mine" 我的七张画, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 4 (1981): 49-53. Yi Ying 易英, "Some Thoughts on the Life Flow Trend" 生活流断想, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 7（1985): 66-68.

66 Chen Danqing 陈丹青 and Wang Duanting王端庭, "Chen Danqing Talks about His *Tibet Series*," 陈丹青谈《西藏组画》, in *Interviews with Artists and Critics of the People's Republic of China 1949-2009* 新中国美术访谈录 1949-2009, ed. Shao Dazhen 邵大箴 (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2009), 297-303.

67 Robert L. Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," 42.

义异化, a term that was an adaptation of Karl Marx's concept of the alienation of the people in a capitalist society. Wang claimed that humanism could help China recover from a total dictatorship.[68] To begin his article, Wang adapted the opening sentence of *The Communist Manifesto*: "A specter is haunting the Chinese intellectual world, the specter of humanism."[69] The manifestation of humanism in 19th-century art and literature coincided with a public desire to break free from the suppression of normal human feelings people had to endure during the Cultural Revolution and to heal their inner emotional wounds after a traumatic decade. He Guimei 贺桂梅 (b. 1970), a literary scholar and critic, focusing on intellectual history, also adapted the opening statement of *The Communist Manifesto* and referred to Wang Ruoshui's article, stressing that there was also a haunting 19th-century specter in 1980s China, and it included "the humanistic discourse of the young Karl Marx, the 19th-century European and Russian novels, and the humanistic and humanitarian discourse of classical German philosophy, in particular, the works of Kant."[70]

Millet's sentimental depictions of the pure idyllic life of the spinning girl and the simple but genuine maternal love of the female peasant were appealing to the Chinese artists of Xu Bing's generation; in comparison, people were tired of the propaganda expressed in state-commissioned art.[71] In his talk at the conference for the 40th anniversary of Mao's *Talks*

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[68] Wang Ruoshui was purged from his post at the *People's Daily* during the Anti-Spiritual Campaign 反精神污染运动 launched in late1983. The campaign was led by the Communist Party ideologues, such as Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木and Deng Liqun邓力群. See Gloria Davies, "Discursive Heat: Humanism in 1980s China," in *A New Literary History of Modern China,* ed. David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 758-764.

[69] Wang Ruoshui 王若水, "Defense of Humanism"为人道主义辩护, *Wenhui Daily* 文汇报, January 17, 1983.

[70] He Guimei 贺桂梅, "A Specter of the Nineteenth Century: Humanism in the 1980s Revisited"十九世纪的幽灵：八十年代人道主义思潮重读, *Shanghai Literature*上海文学, no.1 (2009): 89.

[71] Xu Bing, et al., "jianchi zai yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua de genben jingshen, cujin meishu de fanrong fazhan," 9.

at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Xu Bing expressed his dislike for the idea that art should serve politics. He said, people become fed up with the tedious propaganda art that was simply a mouthpiece for politics….People hate dry presentations, bureaucratic behavior, lies, and high-flown words. Artworks produced during the Cultural Revolution are like these things. They are disconnected from the people.[72] Xu Bing recalled that his small woodcuts were much welcomed by artistic circles when they were published because everyone liked them: "Perhaps we had a great need to retrieve some sense of authenticity after the experience of the Cultural Revolution …"[73]

However, interestingly, at this official conference, Xu also expressed his disagreement with the trend of self-expression among artists of the younger generation. Xu said, they were seeking something remote and eternal, something about life decisions, something mysterious and indefinable, something about their inner self that others cannot understand, and they believe that they are doing something really advanced.[74] Because of his four years' stay in the countryside, he felt he was qualified to criticize those who lacked rural life experiences and confined themselves to their own spiritual selves. From Xu's perspective, artists focusing on self-expression had limited life experiences and isolated themselves from the people. Like the propaganda artists during the Cultural Revolution, they deviated from Mao's thoughts on the proper relationship between art/artists and the people: Artists should blend in with the people; art must represent people's lives and feelings. Here, the word *people* referred to the majority of the Chinese population, the peasants. Xu's understanding of humanism, at least in his statement on this official occasion, was more associated with Mao's socialist esthetic

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[72] Ibid., 9.

[73] Xu Bing, "Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment,", 236.

[74] Xu Bing, et al., "Adhere to the Spirits of Yan'an Talks; Promote the Development of Fine Arts," 9.

thoughts than with the trend of individualized self-expression among the new generation. In this sense, although the way in which Xu's favorite artist, Millet, portrays rural life and people resonates with the intellectual trend of humanism that brought normal human life and emotions back in early 1980s China, for Xu Bing, it is on a collective rather than an individual basis. As a model for him, Millet's work could even be seen as an excellent illustration of Mao's aesthetic theory about the close relationship between art/artists and the people, which Xu defended publicly in the conference.

If we compare the above-mentioned works of Xu Bing and Millet, there is actually an obvious difference between the two: Xu Bing was never devoted to figurative representation. Apparently, Xu was fascinated with peasant life because he spent hours sketching tiny details of well-worn earthen cooking stoves or a piece of horse gear. His small woodcuts and sketches were seldom pure landscapes of the wilderness with some depictions of farming equipment and activities. Even in the most secluded scenes in his sketch entitled *Nanmantuo Village, Southern Hebei*, white smoke from a chimney suggests peasant inhabitance. As I made comparisons between Xu Bing and the Rustic Realism School artists in the foregoing section, I was aware that explicit depictions of human figures rarely appear in Xu Bing's work. Here arises a question: Is there humanistic expression without figurative representation? In other words, is there a paradox in Xu Bing's artworks and written works? To answer these questions, I would like to move on to the next section and discuss Xu Bing's relationship to Gu Yuan and the socialist realist tradition.

The Second Text, the Discovery of Landscape, and a Deviation from Gu Yuan

In 1996, two months after Gu Yuan's death, Xu Bing wrote an essay commemorating the artist, who was the one he most admired besides Millet in the 1980s and had been one of the most prominent printmakers during the Yan'an period. In this essay, Xu Bing expressed how much he had appreciated Gu Yuan's work since childhood and how he had attempted for years to understand the secret of Gu Yuan's greatness. In 1990, Xu Bing moved to the United States because he wanted to see what was happening in the world's center of contemporary art. After six years away from China, at his studio in the East Village in New York City, he finally began to understand Gu Yuan and found "a real spirit of the avant-garde" in the teacher's work. The Yan'an artists' socially engaged art practices, as Xu put it, demonstrated "the sensitivity to social and cultural circumstances and the methodological innovation of past artistic practices."[75] Coming originally from a peasant family in Guangdong, Gu Yuan went to Yan'an at the age of nineteen in 1938. After one year of training at *Luyi* 鲁艺 (short for Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy 鲁迅艺术文学院),[76] he was sent to Nian Village 碾庄 in 1940 to become a clerk in the local government. This was in accordance with Mao Zedong's call that artists should leave the "small *Luyi*" 小鲁艺 and embrace the "big *Luyi*" 大鲁艺.[77] In his later years, Gu Yuan repeatedly recalled that the one year he spent in Nian Village was valuable for his artistic career. Clerical work gave him a chance to learn about real peasant life and helped him make his artwork more appealing to the tastes of local

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[75] Xu Bing, "Gu Yuan in My Heart" 我心中的古元, *Art Research* 美术研究, no. 1 (1997): 17.

[76] Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy is established in the communist capital Yan'an in 1938, aimed at training art workers for the purpose of art propaganda during wartime. The school consists of four departments: literature, theatre, fine art, and music.

[77] Gu Yuan, "Study at the Big *Luyi*" 到"大鲁艺"去学习, *Fine Arts* 美术, no. 3 (1962): 9. Going to "The big Luyi" basically means that artists should leave their small intellectual circles and blend into local peasants' life.

people.[78] Looking through Gu Yuan's early works from 1940 to 1942, I indeed find similarities between the teacher and the student, though Xu Bing was seldom directly taught by Gu Yuan during his years at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. They both were interested in depicting ordinary rural life. Gu Yuan's very first individual works, such as *Fetch Water* 挑水 (1940), *Transport Straw* 运草 (1940), *A Flock of Sheep* 羊群 (1940), *Cutting the Straw* 铡草 (1940, Fig. 1.1.16), and *Rural Scenery* 农村小景 (1940), were mainly portrayals of peasants' everyday agricultural activities. Unlike his more well known later works, the style of these works was characterized by heavy shading and dense lines and was more associated with the artists who produced Leftist New Woodcuts 左翼新兴木刻[79] in the 1930s. The figures in the prints by Gu Yuan are either viewed in profile or from behind so that there is little opportunity to see their facial expressions. The peasants are simply doing the same farm work day after day. It is as if they have been integrated into the background scenery that has existed for years. The works have a tranquil and nostalgic mood yet, at the same time, a sense of detachment and coldness. The peaceful but isolated atmosphere in Gu Yuan's early works looks comparable to that in Xu Bing's rural woodcuts and sketches of the 1980s, which, as I have mentioned before, contain few figures. In the preface of a retrospective catalog, *Xu Bing's Prints,* Xu Bing reminisces that during the Cultural Revolution, a time when it was extremely hard to gain access to diverse books, he was a teenager, and he fortunately received

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[78] See Gu Yuan, "Cradle" 摇篮, in *The Yan'an Years: a Memoir of Revolutionary Artistic Practices in the Yan'an Period* 延安岁月：延安时期革命美术活动回忆录, eds. Sun Xinyuan 孙新元 and Shang Dezhou 尚德周（Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Fine Arts Publishing Press, 1985), 67-71.

[79] Leftist New Woodcuts or New Prints Movement 新兴木刻运动 is led by the renowned writer Lu Xun, aiming to use prints as a weapon to promote the Chinese revolution. Lu introduced Western printmakers, organized worships to train young printmakers, and curated exhibitions. The New Prints are heavily influenced by works by Western printmakers such as Käthe Köllwitz, Frans Masereel, and also woodcut prints from the Soviet Union. See Tang Xiaobing, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Moment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

a collection of books from Zhao Baoxu 赵宝煦, an art enthusiast and a colleague of Xu's father. One of the books was *Northern Wood Engravings* 北方木刻 (Fig. 1.1.17),[80] which had Gu Yuan's *Rural Scenery* 农村小景 (1940) on the cover, and this book became one of the main sources of Xu's self-artistic cultivation.[81] This compilation included twenty-three works by Gu Yuan, among which were the above-mentioned early pieces *Fetch Water*, *Transport Straw*, *A Flock of Sheep*, *Cutting the Straw*, and *Rural Scenery*. It also contained Gu Yuan's most mature works, including the prints in the Yan'an school style for which he is known.[82] Xu Bing attempted to learn from these works for years but was unable to do so. As Xu Bing commented, Gu Yuan's woodcuts were deeply engaged with the social and political changes. It is not only in terms of the modifications of style that made the prints more appealing to the local peasants of the Communist jurisdictions but also in the choice of the subject matter.

If we review the most successful works created by Gu Yuan from 1942 to 1944, the peak of the Yan'an prints school, it is not hard to find clues to his preferred motifs. Even though most of his works during this time of war were for use as propaganda, essentially to promote the military recruitment campaign and boost the soldiers' morale, he avoided brutal battle scenes that would have incited a collective hatred against the Japanese invaders. Instead, he concentrated on delineating the warmth and harmony of the relationship between

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[80] Guo Moruo 郭沫若, ed., *Northern Wood-engravings* 北方木刻 (Shanghai: Gaoyuan Bookstore, 1947), 125 pages. The compilation includes 122 pieces created during wartime by 28 printmakers from northern and northwestern China. Many of them come from the Communist-held Yan'an.

[81] Xu Bing, "Foreword: The Path of Repetition and the Imprint," in *Xu Bing Prints*, 13.

[82] Felicity Lufkin describes the Yan'an prints school style as "bold, uncluttered outline-and-silhouette," largely developed by Yan'an printmakers Gu Yuan, Yan Han 彦涵, and Hu Yichuan胡一川. The style draws on the folk style of popular prints as a response to peasants' criticism of the New Prints style. The style of the Yan'an prints school is in accordance with Mao Zedong's *Yan'an Talks* (1942) that artists should meet the taste and needs of local people. Felicity Lufkin, Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China (Lanham: Lexington Books), 143-163.

the Communist army and the peasants. For example, *New Year's Chorus* 秧歌队拜年 (1941) depicts a group of military musicians visiting a local family and playing new year's music for them. *A New Party for the Troops* 请士兵吃年酒 (1941) shows troops that have been invited to a farmer's house to celebrate the new year together. *A Soldier Returns on Home Leave* 哥哥的假期 (1941, Fig. 1.1.18) portrays a family gathering to welcome a young soldier returning home. While the soldier is busy telling his parents and relatives news from the army, his younger sister is curiously looking at his armband, and his younger brother is trying on his army cap; the scene implies that the younger generation is the army reserve force of the Communist Party. The promotion of recruitment, which is the actual theme of the work, is hidden behind the joyful family atmosphere that is being protected by the troops fighting on the front lines. As Chang-Tai Hung put it, Gu Yuan's work "presents the party line not with tired slogans but with warmth and intimacy."[83] Other works propagandizing the social political reforms carried out by the Communist Party in the Yan'an base areas have similar characteristics. Take *Marriage Registration* 结婚登记 (1942) and *An Appeal for Divorce* 离婚诉 (1943, Fig. 1.1.19), for example; even though both are aimed at promoting the new marriage policy, the artist intentionally softens the intervention of the administration in personal and domestic issues by situating the government official in a secondary position. In contrast, highlighting the married couple, family, and fellow villagers shows that the artist is attempting to mesh the will of the Party with rural conventions, individual emotions, and community life. As I discussed in the previous section, this apparently coincided with the

83 Chang-Tai Hung, "Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* vol. 39, no. 1 (January 1997): 50.

trend of depoliticalization and the return of humanism in the early 1980s after the Cultural Revolution, events for which Xu Bing was longing.

Felicity Lufkin compares Gu Yuan's early works *Cutting Straw* and *An Appeal for Divorce*, and she asserts that there is a shift not only in technique but also in mood. The latter sets the figures in a dynamic drama, illustrating a specific instance of social change, whereas the former presents farmers performing a task that has been done for centuries.[84] This shift in Gu Yuan's art practices could be roughly applied in describing the differences between works by Xu Bing and Gu Yuan (despite the fact that there are few figures in Xu's works): One is static, and the other is in motion.

There are several other dissimilarities between the two, as well. Take a group of small woodcuts by Xu Bing made between 1980 and 1982, for example: *Field* 田 (1980, Fig. 1.1.20), *Stone Roller* 石碾子 (1980), *Sounds of Spring* 春鸣 (1982), *Garden Patch* 园圃 (1982, Fig. 1.1.21), *Winter Courtyard Scene* 小院冬景 (1982, Fig. 1.1.22), and *Pond* 野塘 (1980). We can find a commonality of perspective in all of these works; the village scene in each piece is restricted to a closed space, either a courtyard, garden, or poultry farm, enclosed by a fence. The shape is either round or square. One explanation for this characteristic could be that the artist wanted to fit the image into the shape of the woodblock and make full use of limited space. In the foreword of *Xu Bing's Prints,* Xu Bing explains why the print is the most suitable medium for his art. One reason is that printmaking, especially woodblock printmaking, brings "an organic sense of completeness."[85] An enclosed space that fully covers the surface of the woodblock can be seen as a desire to portray "completeness."

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[84] Felicity Lufkin, "Folk Art in Modern China, 1930-1945," 318.

[85] Xu Bing, *Xu Bing Prints*, 14.

Although almost all of these prints depict rural scenes in an outdoor setting, the scenes are separate from their surroundings. Each print constructs an independent, self-contained world enclosed by fencing, indicating private ownership of the area.

In comparison with Xu's enclosed spaces, Gu Yuan extends the spaces in his representative works; for instance, in *An Appeal for Divorce,* even though the print is set in the interior of a house, the interaction between the figures opens up the space they inhabit. In this woodcut, curious neighbors and little children at the door of a house connect the interior space with the exterior one, and the figures can be seen as forming a symbol of community life. They could not only intervene in an individual person's life in a traditional rural society, but they might also serve as a bridge between a private situation, as when a wife is appealing for divorce, and a public administrative official, creating a semi-open space. Another example could be *Celebrating the Birthday of an Army Cook* 给伙夫同志祝寿 (1944, Fig. 1.1.23). A birthday celebration is usually a personal ceremony with friends and family. However, in this print, there are people in silhouette sitting in the foreground as an audience, and the army cook, the main character, is standing in the center, receiving birthday gifts from people on the right side who are coming in from the outside. Among this group of people are both local farmers and army officials. On the left side, several people playing musical instruments add a joyful atmosphere to the party. The compositional arrangement makes the army cook's birthday celebration a stage show. Though the party largely takes place in an enclosed indoor space, the artist has connected an individual with a group and expanded a personal ceremony into a semi-public gathering.

Some other prints created at the same period, such as *A Soldier Returns on Home Leave* and *Winter School* 冬学 (1941, Fig. 1.1.24), are set in the courtyard of a farmhouse, a

space that lies between public and private. *A Soldier Returns on Home Leave*, as mentioned above, depicts a family gathering, with some guests from the neighborhood included, who want to share in the happiness of a family reunion. *Winter School* portrays a group of illiterate farmers learning how to read and write. A man in the middle of the background is using the exterior wall of a farmhouse as a blackboard and is writing Chinese characters on it. Two old farmers in front of a stone roller are discussing their learning material. All these rural scenes depicted by Gu Yuan are about interpersonal relationships and the overlapping spaces between individual and collective life.

One could argue that the closed spaces in Xu Bing's prints can be seen as a reflection of the socialist land planning that had gone through changes back and forth. The land, which once belonged to the people's communes during the process of socialization, was given to the peasants again after the end of the Cultural Revolution. This gave farmers more freedom from collectivity and fewer restrictions.[86] However, at the time when Xu Bing was sent down to the countryside, owning private property and doing farm work independently were still impossible. In the interpretation of *Series of Repetitions: Ziliudi* 复数系列：自留地 (1987, Fig. 1.1.25), a series of works that marked the beginning of Xu Bing's personal experiments with printmaking, Shelagh Vainker connects the word *Ziliudi* (meaning land kept by an individual) with the changing land ownership arrangements. Peasants working in a people's commune were allowed to have a small piece of land and keep what the land produced. This policy was abolished in the 1960s, when it was seen as the final manifestation of capitalism, but it was revitalized in the 1980s, when the process of restoring private land ownership was

[86] See Huayin Li, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948-2008* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

underway.[87] Xu Bing's deliberate choice of *Ziliudi*, a historical term that was part of the dramatic shifts caused by the Party's land ownership policy, as his subject matter probably shows his longing for ownership of an individual physical space as well as a spiritual space. In this sense, the use of closed and alienated spaces in his small woodcut series, compared with Gu Yuan's semi-open and public spaces, indicates that Xu Bing is silently deviating from the collectivist tradition of his teacher's generation, in pursuit of building a private realm independent from the external world.

Another difference is that all of Xu's prints discussed above have an overhead viewpoint as if the artist is looking down at a village from a mountain top. This allows the artist to observe an entire landscape without anything blocking his view. For instance, in *Sounds of Spring*, all the chicks are positioned so that they do not overlap. At the same time, they are depicted reductively, with only a black silhouette suggesting their different shapes and movements. Similarly, in *Garden Patch*, all of the three patches in which different vegetables are growing are fully represented, as are the laundry hanging on a fence and the three chicks in front of the fence. However, the rural scenes in these prints are not panoramic. Each piece in this series shows only one fragmentary scene of rural life, such as a plot of land, small pond, or vegetable garden. In addition, the bird eye view causes everything to look foreshortened. For example, in *Stone Roller*, the stone roller and horse gear are widened and flattened as if seen through a wide-angle lens. What is more, in *Field*, the foreshortened crops have lost all of their volume and have been reduced to tiny two-dimensional dots and lines. Like the vegetable garden in *Garden Patch*, the various field patches are well arranged in their horizontal and vertical dimensions. A well is reduced to a geometrical shape, with

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[87] Shelagh Vainker, et al., *Landscape / Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2013), 111.

only a few details indicating what it actually is. The simplified style of depiction makes the print abstract, like a diagrammatical map.

The overhead viewpoint empowers Xu Bing to have an all-seeing eye and situates him in a dominant position. Because of their extreme foreshortening, the rural scenes, by contrast, look dramatically small and squat. The artist's omniscience (like a god looking down at the world) makes him sober and self-aware, and this helps separate him from the objects he depicts. This is quite different from Gu Yuan's prints, in which the artist's viewpoint is usually on the level with or slightly below his subject. For instance, in *Celebrating the Birthday of an Army Cook*, even though the perspective is somewhat distorted (i.e., it is not a standard single-point perspective), placing the audience in the low-lying foreground implies that the artist is viewing them from below. The army cook, who is the protagonist, and the military officials and peasants holding the birthday gifts are situated on an elevated stage. Likewise, in *A Soldier Returns on Home Leave*, an old peasant squatting at the bottom left with his back toward the viewer indicates that the artist is taking a slightly low viewpoint. The peasant becomes an actor as well as a viewer, inviting viewers outside the picture to join in the happy rural family gathering.

Compared with Xu Bing's overhead viewpoint, Gu Yuan's moderately low viewpoint positions the depicted objects under a spotlight, making them look important and powerful. Because the protagonists on stage and their audience in the picture invite the viewing audience into the picture, the barrier between viewers and subjects vanishes. Because the viewing audience is easily integrated into the action of the picture, the eye of the artist is not noticeable. In other examples, such as *Marriage Registration* and *An Appeal for Divorce*, Gu Yuan has a rather eye-level viewpoint, and this brings the viewing audience even more

readily into the scenario and causes the artist to retreat even further behind the scenes. By contrast, in Xu Bing's prints, his dramatic perspective causes the existence of the artist to be noticed at the first glimpse. His controlling eye impacts all of the depicted rural scenes and even turns them into his autonomous realm. When looking at these prints, the viewer is intruding in Xu's world. Because of the fencing guarding the artist's private sphere, the viewer cannot go through the door. In this sense, the representation of rural scenes shows the artist's overwhelming self-awareness and individuality. Therefore, Xu Bing has moved a long way away from his teacher Gu Yuan and the socialist realist convention.

Interestingly, Xu Bing's writings about art in the 1980s are actually closely associated with the basic dogma of socialist esthetics, that is, the close relationships between art and the people. By 1996, Xu had exiled himself from the Chinese art world and the socialist tradition for six years. His interpretation and appraisal of Gu Yuan's work (though he uses the term *avant-garde* in describing it, a term derived from the West) are still in accordance with the main tenets of Mao's *Yan'an Talks*; art must be engaged with social change, and artists must integrate with the people. Therefore, there is a contradiction between his statements *about* art and his visual expressions *in* his art.

In order to address this contradiction, I would like to borrow the concept of symptomatic reading put forward by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–1990) in the book *Reading Capital* (English Version 1970, co-authored by Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière), which is a rereading of Karl Marx's monumental *Capital.* In this book*,* Althusser asserted that Karl Marx uses two types of reading. The first type is the standard one, which focuses on the immediately visible text, and

the second type is symptomatic reading, which focuses on the invisible text, which is "excluded" and "forbidden." As Althusser put it,

> The invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, or forbidden, vision: The invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), or the outer darkness of exclusion, but rather the inner darkness of exclusion inside the visible itself because it is defined by its structure.[88]

Althusser asserted that symptomatic reading is

> a reading that might well be called "symptomatic" (symptomale), insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text being read, and at the same time it relates the text to a different text, which is present as a necessary absence in the first reading. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of two texts, and the measurement of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one, the second text is articulated with lapses in the first text.[89]

That is to say, though absent, the invisible and unreadable part of the text does leave traceable symptoms. With the symptomatic reading strategy, this repressed aspect of the text can be brought to light by the reader.

I would argue that in Xu Bing's case, the first text (the visible) and the second text (the forbidden) are somehow separate. His writings that are mostly in accordance with socialist esthetic thought can be seen as the first text, and his small woodcuts and sketches are the second text. In his artistic statements published in official art journals, especially those

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[88] Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970), 27.

[89] Ibid., 29.

written in the early 1980s right after the Cultural Revolution, he is writing as a young man from a disgraced intellectual family who has been lucky enough to be selected as a worker-peasant-soldier student, enter a prestigious art college, and have a stable position in an academic institution. Therefore, Xu Bing is fully aware of what he is expected to say in public, and he actually uses publication as a chance to declare where he stands: He stands with the people (especially the peasant), collectivity, and the socialist realist convention. However, when it comes to pictorial expression, which is more ambiguous than textual expression, he lets down his guard and unwittingly reveals signs of his inner emotions and thoughts, which have been silenced by ideological convictions. The repressed signs, camouflaged by rather conventional motifs and socialist realist techniques, are Xu Bing's longings for individuality and self-awareness as an independent artist.

The sense of isolation in Xu Bing's work sets up a distance between the viewer and the picture, and also the artist's inner self and the outer world. In his article "The Discovery of Landscape," the Japanese philosopher and literary critic Karatani Kōjin 柄谷 行人(b. 1941) argued that there is "a link between a landscape and an introverted, solitary situation."[90] In a novel entitled *Unforgettable People* by Kunikida Doppo 国木田 独歩 (1871–1908), the protagonist is on a steamer traveling from Osaka across the Inland Sea and is looking at the seascape and some people on a remote island. He feels peace, liberation, and sympathy toward all things and has a sense of connection with the people he sees but does not know. After ten years have gone by, he remains deeply touched by the memories of the trip and still cannot forget the people on the island. It would not matter whether he forgot these people or not, unlike the more significant people in his life, such as friends,

[90] Karatani Kōjin, "The Discovery of Landscape," in *The Origin of Modern Japanese Literature*, trans. and ed. Brett de Bary (Durham: Duke University, 1993), 25.

acquaintances, teachers, and mentors. Nonetheless, they are "unforgettable people." Karatani asserted that "it is only within the inner man, who appears to be indifferent to his external surroundings, that landscape is discovered. It is perceived by those who do not look outside."[91] In other words, only when people turn to their inner selves do they begin to appreciate the outside world.

Karatani's arguments seem a bit paradoxical at first glimpse. How could those obsessed with their internal world uncover beautiful surroundings around them? How could they have a close attachment to those for whom they have no concern? Karatani argued that in order for a landscape to emerge in a person's consciousness, a change in the person's way of perceiving, "a fundamental inversion,"[92] is necessary.

In Xu Bing's case, his overhead viewpoint in his small woodcuts is similar to the man who was on the deck of a steamer looking at the sea in that he is both viewing things from a distance and viewing things from a point above them. The rural scenery is at a distance but at the same time internalized, becoming part of the artist's spiritual and emotional territory. Only when Xu Bing finally left the countryside and was residing again in the city, only when his daily bond with the small, impoverished Shoulianggou Village was permanently ended, and only when the village was no longer an aspect of his external surroundings did it become important and relevant to him. He started to miss the village and its people and developed a strong poetic affection and sense of nostalgia toward the rural landscape.

In the novel *Unforgettable People*, the lonely narrator feels that the people on the island are invisible to him because they are figures in the background of a much larger

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[91] Ibid., 25.

[92] Ibid., 24.

setting, as part of their surroundings, and he enters a no-self-no-other realm. According to Karatani, it is precisely because the island locals are of no consequence to him that the boundary between the protagonist's self and others disappears.[93] The people recede into the landscape in the background and become part of it, a phenomenon that Karatani describes as an eccentric "people-as-landscapes."[94] In Xu Bing's small woodcuts, the villagers are largely invisible and have almost completely disappeared in their rural setting; their presence is suggested only by the presence of farming implements and domestic utensils. Even in *The First Lunar Month* 正月 (1982, Fig. 1.1.26) and *Harvest's End* 完场 (1982, Fig. 1.1.27), two of Xu Bing's few woodcuts with figures, the depiction is not different from the woodcuts without figures analyzed above; the artist also takes a bird's-eye view and sets the gathering scene in a closed space. The villagers in *The First Lunar Month* have congregated in a circle and are watching a lion dance performance, but the overhead viewpoint of the artist indicates that the artist is observing the scene from above and looking at the whole scene as a landscape. Similarly, in *Harvest's End*, the haystacks around the crowd form a semi-circle, suggesting that the grain has been harvested and the peasants have free time to watch an open-air movie. All the villagers, including the movie projectionist, have their backs toward the audience and are attentively watching the movie, projected on a curtain in the far background. Only the artist, with a panoramic view, absorbs everything, the stars, the moon, the haystacks, and the people in his own yard. The faceless peasants are blending into the artist's self, joining his internalized landscape that was already present, not the other way around.

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[93] Ibid., 25.

[94] Ibid., 24.

The people as romantic landscape are obviously different from "the people" in Gu Yuan's work, who are both the artist's subject matter as well as the receivers of propaganda. One thing is for sure: In the works of both Xu Bing and Gu Yuan, the people (the peasants) are delineated as a whole; the difference is that Gu Yuan attempts to select "typical characters under typical circumstances"[95] (a basic rule of socialist realism) to represent the whole peasant population and remains absent himself, and he draws the viewing audience into the depicted scene. By contrast, in Xu Bing's works, such a*s The First Lunar Month*, the composition is completely decentralized. No main figure or minor figure is present. All the figures are unseen, obscured, or integrated into the landscape. The artist's presence stands out.

Coda

In 1980, Xu Bing created two prints that depicted white birches. One is included in his small woodcut print series *Shattered Jade* with the title *White Birch Tune* 白桦小唱 (Fig. 1.1.28), and the other is a mixed media print entitled *White Birch Forest* 白桦林 (Fig. 1.1.29). In the woodcut print, as in many other pieces in this series, the artist shows a rural scene. One white birch is situated in the middle of the foreground with its trunk in focus; the other one is placed subordinately in the background. Though no human figure is involved, a haystack and fencing suggest farm work and the potential presence of the peasant, as in some pieces aforementioned. The fencing creates distance between the haystack, which occupies the largest area in the print, and the white birch in front. The title *White Birches Tune* conveys

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95 "Realism, to my mind, implies, besides the truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances." Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness, Beginning of April 1888", in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*, eds. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 1973), 114.

a nostalgic feeling for rural life. Like the first print, the second one has the same subject matter and is a depiction of a fragmented scene. In this mixed media print, the artist is more concerned with visual language issues. He put a huge effort into the arrangement of the overlapping tree trunks and the placement of the snowy ground as a negative space. The artist is also keen on mimicking the grain of the bark of white birches with the special effect of the mixed media. The surface of each tree trunk, with its irregular patterns, is like an abstract painting. Though the dark stump and a string of footprints in the snow indicate the activities of human beings (maybe a woodcutter), there is no explicit hint of peasant life. The traces left behind and the actual absence of unknown passersby give this piece a sense of detachment stronger than that in *White Birches Tune.* Similar concerns with form are also shown in Xu Bing's large (compared with the small woodcut series) graduate project *Young Women Threshing Rice* 打稻子的姑娘们 (1981, Fig. 1.1.30). Interestingly, this time, Xu chose to depict laboring peasant figures because it was apparently less risky for him to follow the socialist realist tradition of representing working people. Also, it was easier to impress the rather canonical professors at the art academy by demonstrating his proficient techniques for complex portrayals of a group of characters. However, even though a rural scene is the subject, the artist did not pay much attention to illustrating how the women are threshing rice. Four of the six women have their backs to the viewer, and only one woman, in profile, is actually working. Because all of them have wrapped their heads with a headscarf, the viewer cannot see any of their facial expressions, and this distances the female figures from the beholder. Although it is difficult to ascertain that Xu Bing intentionally downplayed the portrayal of working women peasants, he was obviously focused on the arrangement of the six figures and their surroundings and the placement of the black and white areas. The

depiction also reveals a slight influence of Western modernism, which had been newly introduced to China after the Cultural Revolution. Another representative individual piece is a colored print entitled *Still Life with Flowers and a Pencil* 花和铅笔的静物 (1984, Fig. 1.1.31). It is a mixed media experiment, and it won Second Prize at the *Exhibition of Works by International Youths* 国际青年美术展览. The brief depiction of the still life and simplicity of use of color give the print a minimalist quality. The artist's main interest is in working on the formalist contrast between the subtle grain of the wood in the table, the pattern in the pale curtain, and the large black form of the flowerpot. In this sense, Xu Bing divorced himself from socialist realist orthodoxy in terms not only of subject matter but also of the way of dealing with it.

Xu's individual shift is associated with the seminal debates on the relations of content and form that were circulated in the most influential Chinese art journals.[96] The debate was evoked by an article on "The Formal Beauty of Painting" 绘画的形式美 (1979) written by the artist Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中 (1919–2010).[97] Wu asserted that the content of an artwork usually comes from politics or literature and that only the form of a work belongs to art itself. By emphasizing the essential position of form in artistic creation, Wu challenged socialist realism, which is in most cases a tool for conveying political propaganda. Though Wu Guanzhong and his proponents were accused of deviating from Marxist materialistic esthetics (in which content dictates form), the continuous debate coincided with, and to some extent

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96 Huang Zhuan 黄专's "Bashi niandai yilai meishu lilun fazhan zongshu "八十年代以来美术理论发展综述 [An Overview of the Development of Art Theory since the 1980s] is a comprehensive review of this debate, in Huang Zhuan，*Dangdai yishu wenti* 当代艺术问题 [Issues of Contemporary Art](Chengdu: Sichuan Fine Art Press, 1992), 4-21. The essay was initially published in *Meishu sichao* 美术思潮 [Trends of Thought on Fine Arts], no. 4 (1985).

97 Wu Guanzhong, "Huihua de xingshi mei," 绘画的形式美 [The Formal Beauty of Painting], *Meishu*, no. 5 (1979): 33-35, 44.

promoted, the younger generation's experiment with multiple Western modernist styles and their efforts to break free from the bonds of a doctrinal understanding of the art of the previous time.

Though Xu Bing was not actively engaged in the '85 New Wave, his modest deviation from the socialist realist tradition demonstrates his innovative endeavors within the official art institution. It is this modest innovation that gained him success at almost every national art exhibition and made him a representative of Chinese printmakers in the era following the Cultural Revolution.[98] *Freedom on the Moat* 自由的护城河 included in the series entitled *Youth and the Forbidden City* 青年与紫禁城, portrays six young people skating on the moat of the Forbidden City. The use of triangles and diagonal lines shows the artist's great concern about visual composition. The stability and heaviness of the geometrically shaped houses along the moat contrast with the gracefulness and liveliness of the skaters on the frozen moat. The dull grey color and the sharp contours of the houses are juxtaposed with the rather bright, many-colored, swaying silhouettes of the skaters. This can be seen as a metaphor for the young generation's yearning for freedom of expression. However, placing the figures within the immobile triangle of the surrounding solid old houses also indicates that the act of breaking free from conventions was encountering walls. Xu Bing's ground-breaking *Five Series of Repetitions* 五个负数系列 in 1987 and *Book from the Sky* 天书 in the following year show that with the inclination toward a visual language, Xu

98 For example, *Young Women Threshing Rice* was displayed in an exhibition of works by China Artists Association members at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1982. The piece was also included in the exhibition "Prints of Central Academy of Fine arts, Beijing" at the Palais des Etudes in 1985 and "Modern Chinese Prints of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Peking" at the British Museum in London in 1986. *Still Life with Flowers and a Pencil* and *Freedom on the Moat* were shown in a Chinese print exhibition held in Japan in 1986.

Bing's attention was drawn to the essential issues of the printmaking process. It marked the beginning of the experimentation he undertook in the art of his later years.

1.2. From Folk to Modern: Lü Shengzhong's Paper Cutting Experimentation

In October 1988, the National Art Gallery of China put on a double solo exhibition featuring Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* 天书 (originally entitled *Xishijian* 析世鉴) and works by a fellow alumnus of and lecturer at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Lü Shengzhong 吕胜中. Xu's work set the viewer in a labyrinth of unreadable yet familiar characters, offering a metaphor for the breakdown of language and communication; it struck a chord with Chinese intellectuals who had been thirsting for Western art and philosophy during the Cultural Fever 文化热 of the 1980s but suffered from misinterpretation through translation. Similarly, Lü Shengzhong's little red figures in his paper cutting installations initially disoriented many critics and artists. However, folk artists from the rural northern Shaanxi Province, termed Mama Paper Cutters 剪花娘娘 by Lü, from whom he gained great inspiration, faced no obstacles in comprehending the information that the artist wanted to convey.

Like Xu Bing, Lü Shengzhong was never a significant figure during the few years of the '85 New Wave, which was heavily impacted by Western modernist art. While Xu Bing was working on his small woodcuts depicting rural scenes at the peak of the new art movement, Lü Shengzhong made his way to the countryside in northeastern China, to Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province) 陕北. The region had a rich folk culture and was the location of Yan'an延安, the Chinese Communist Party capital during the Sino-Japanese War. Interestingly, at the time of the Xu Bing–Lü Shengzhong double solo exhibition, as the '85

New Wave gradually quieted down, critics shifted their attention to these two self-isolated artists. Like Xu's exhibition of *Book from the Sky*, Lü's solo exhibition stimulated heated discussion in art circles in China soon after it opened. The *China Art Newspaper*中国美术报, the most radical art medium at the time, took a whole page to cover the exhibition, including a review of the symposium on Lü Shengzhong's work held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The title of the review, "Paper Cutting Goes from Folk to Modern," succinctly summarized the opinion of Lü held by some of the most important contemporaneous art critics. The art historian and critic Yi Ying 易英 (b. 1953) argued that Lü Shengzhong had a profound concept and understanding of modern consciousness. With a comprehensive study of folk art in northern China, Lü's artistic practices marked a maturity of Chinese modern art. The veteran oil painter Du Jian 杜键 (b. 1933) asserted that Lü Shengzhong had created a modernism with genuine Chinese characteristics.[99]

Obviously, the compliments were exaggerated to some extent, and this was somewhat common in Chinese art circles. However, the critics did raise an important issue: the transformation of folk art into modern art. How did this process happen? Why did Lü Shengzhong make journeys to villages in northern Shaanxi, become fascinated by the folk art there, and humbly learn paper cutting techniques from the local masters? Another critical point I would like to address, though it was left out by the attendees of the symposium at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, is the popular religious, specifically shamanist element in his works. Why did Lü Shengzhong want to add popular religious elements so extensively in his

[99] Chen Cunrui 陈存瑞, "Paper Cutting Goes from Folk to Modern" 剪纸艺术从民间走向现代, *China Art Newspaper* 中国美术报, no. 52, 1988.

work when popular religion in the countryside had been devalued and even considered superstitious by the Communist government since the Yan'an period?

The Point of Departure: The New *Nianhua*

Born and raised in a farmer's family in Shandong 山东 Province in northern China, Lü Shengzhong developed an interest in folk art that was largely associated with his rural family background. However, his encounter with folk art did not begin early in his life. Unlike Xu Bing and other urban educated youth, Lü Shengzhong did not have the experience of being sent down. In 1969, before finishing high school, he joined the army; this was an honorable way for young adults to make a living during the Cultural Revolution. Lü served as a film projectionist in the army for more than six years and received rewards for his excellence in making transparencies for use as propaganda. In 1976, he left the army and returned to his home village. He became a college student in the same year at Shangdong Normal University after being nominated for enrollment by the local commune. Like Xu Bing, Lü Shengzhong was in the last class of worker–peasant–soldier students 工农兵大学生, one year before the long-suspended college entrance examination was reinstated in 1977. Though he was mostly interested in writing, Lü accepted the local commune official's order and enrolled in the Fine Art Department because he did not want to miss a rare opportunity that could change his future. The official said that he would improve his transparency-making skills and meet revolutionary demands.[100]

[100] Lü Shengzhong, "No Second Choice" 别无选择, in Lü Shengzhong, *A Story of Soul Searching* 觅魂记 (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Press, 1996), 2.

During his three years of art training, a time when the Soviet style of socialist realism was still dominant at art schools all over China, Lü mainly focused on refining his painting techniques. Meanwhile, he was also influenced by his teacher Zhang Hongbin 张宏宾 (b. 1942), who was the director of the Fine Art Department at the time. Zhang was known for painting with a fine brush and heavy color 工笔重彩画, one of the main reference points for the new *nianhua* (new year's prints) 新年画 promoted by the government after the founding of the People's Republic of China. However, it was not until Lü Shengzhong finished university in 1978 and joined the teaching staff of Shangdong Normal University that his interest began to shift toward folk art. As Lü recalled, he was impressed by the folk art collection of his university teacher Bai Yiru 白逸如 (b. 1932), who was born in Beijing and graduated from the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou before the Cultural Revolution.[101] In the early 1960s, Bai Yiru was one of the key members of the provincial *nianhua* work team 年画工作队 in Shandong, which had the aim of reforming the old *nianhua* and creating new *nianhua* for the peasants' use.

One of Lü Shengzhong's very first *nianhua* experimentations was *Flower Umbrella* 花伞 (1981, Fig. 1.2.1), which portrays a young school teacher protecting her children with a flower umbrella on a rainy day. The single black outline, flat, bright color, and decorative quality clearly reflect the typical style of the new *nianhua*. Prevailing in the 1950s and early 1960s, the new *nianhua* imitated to some extent the woodcut print effect of traditional *nianhua*, but it was painted primarily with water-based pigments on Chinese or Western-style paper. Despite the modern clothing and haircuts of the children, their faces and hand gestures,

[101] Lü Shengzhong, "My Experience of Studying Art"学步三题, *Art Research* 美术研究, no. 4 (1987): 31.

as well as the arrangement of the figures, reveal a latent impact of traditional Yangjiabu *nianhua* 杨家埠年画,[102] as seen in the iconic *Five Sons Pass the Imperial Examination*五子夺魁 (the Qing dynasty, Fig. 1.2.2). The barefoot little boy at the bottom middle of *Flower Umbrella* could be associated with the chubby boy imagery of the traditional Yangjiabu *nianhua*, which had commonly been used to decorate bedrooms to convey New Year's wishes for more children and good fortune (e.g., *Kid and Fish* 儿童得鱼 [the Qing dynasty, Fig. 1.2.3]). The title *Flower Umbrella* conveys a clear intention of promoting virtue. It says, "A thousand flowers, ten thousand flowers, the unfolded umbrella is like a big flower on a rainy day. Class is over, the road is slippery, and the teacher walks us home. The students respect the teacher, and the teacher protects the students. Good virtue makes flowers bloom." A similarly succinct inscription with the same calligraphic style clerical script 隶书 can also be found in the representative work of Lü's teacher Bai Yiru: *Sister Takes the Red Flag as a Wedding Gift* 妹把红旗当嫁妆 (1961, Fig. 1.2.4). It depicts a group of women congratulating a young woman who is receiving a red flag as a reward for her excellent work. The inscription on the flag, "woman flag bearer" 三八红旗手, indicates that women are encouraged to work rather than be restricted to the family because they have been liberated in the newly founded nation. Compared with Lü Shengzhong's *Flower Umbrella*, which has a less exaggerated use of color and depiction of figures, Bai Yiru's work is more of a realistic representation.

[102] Yangjiabu (in Weifang 潍坊, Shandong 山东) has been one of the four centers of *nianhua* production in China since the Ming and Qing dynasties. Yangjiabu *nianhua* is not only popular in local areas but also sold in neighboring provinces.

As scholar Chang-Tai Hung argued in his comprehensive investigation into the reception of the new *nianhua* in the early years of the People's Republic of China, the new *nianhua* produced by professional artists from the city was not well received in the countryside. They were not only less visually appealing than the old prints because of their realistic style, but they also did not resonate thematically because the socialist ideals they conveyed replaced the auspicious domains of religion and mythology. Therefore, in Hung's opinion, the new *nianhua* campaign as part of the nationwide ideological campaign was a failure. According to Hung's research, one of the main problems of the *nianhua* work team was that these reformers had an "urban bias" against the old prints, denouncing them as "backward."[103] Such arguments can be justified to some extent, for instance, by Bai Yiru's statement regarding her two pieces of new *nianhua* created for the *4th National Art Exhibition* 第四届全国美展. In order to demonstrate the image of a new vibrant peasantry and their capable village Party secretary in *The Party Secretary Is Back from the Meeting* 书记开会回来了 (1964), Bai abandoned the traditional methods of face depiction used in the old *nianhua* because they were not suitable for depicting the laboring people of her day. In the past, they had been used to portray delicate ladies and gentlemen. She proclaimed, "I would not add a feudal and backward tail to a revolutionary figure."[104]

Putting aside Chang-Tai Hung's rather strong conclusion, the statistics he presented proved that the new *nianhua* turned out to be unpopular as a commodity. Therefore, instead of being circulated commercially in the countryside, the new *nianhua* gradually became a

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[103] Chang-tai Hung, "Repainting China: New Year Prints (Nianhua) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People's Republic," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 42, no. 4 (October 2000): 796.

[104] Bai Yiru 白逸如, "Be Unconventional, Be Creative" 突破框子，大胆创新, in *Experience of Nianhua Making in Shandong* 山东年画创作经验 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Press, 1965), 37.

painting genre created mainly for national and regional exhibitions. *Dragon and Lion Dance* 龙狮欢舞 (1980, Fig. 1.2.5), another early work by Lü Shengzhong, was an official commission for a cultural exchange exhibition held in Paris, France. Like the aforementioned *Flower Umbrella* 花伞 (1981), this work takes children as its subject matter. Because children had long been a well-liked motif in the old *nianhua*, generally symbolizing hope and prosperity, the motif naturally became an important target of reform in the new *nianhua* campaign. Cai Ruohong 蔡若虹, a senior official at the Bureau of Art in the Ministry of Culture during the early 1950s, was commissioned to carry out the new *nianhua* campaign. He wrote in a directive article on *nianhua* reform, "The chubby boys do not have to be removed. If you combine them with themes such as maternity and hygiene, the works can still have the effect of educating people."[105] Bai Yiru's *Have Good Hygiene* 讲卫生 (1960) follows Cai's guidelines well because it portrays chubby boys and girls in pairs helping each other cut their fingernails and wash towels.

However, Lü Shengzhong's *Dragon and Lion Dance* does not contain explicit propaganda or have an educational purpose. Instead, it embraces the tradition of auspicious themes found in the old *nianhua.* Visually, it borrows the symmetrical format of the old *nianhua* door deities 门神, which were often posted on the front door of a peasant's house around the new year to protect the family from evil spirits. A common combination was Qinqiong 秦琼 and Jingde 敬德 (Fig. 1.2.6), both of whom were great generals in the early Tang dynasty (617–907). Lü Shengzhong replaced the solemnly armored generals with a boy and girl dressed in a local style of clothing and replaced the sword in the general's hand with

[105] Cai Ruohong 蔡若虹, "Several Important Issue in New Nianhua Making" 论新年画创作中的几个主要问题, in *Collected Works of Cai Ruohong* 蔡若虹文集 (Beijing: People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1995), 37.

a stick in the boy's hand and a ribbon in the girl's hand. The dragon and lion dance is a New Year's ritual performed to drive away demons and invite good fortune to arrive in the coming year, so the two highly decorative, auspicious creatures can be seen as substitutes for the door deities.

Replacing old themes but maintaining the composition of the door deities, however, was not Lü Shengzhong's invention. During the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s, the art workers in Shaanbei (the Communist-occupied area) had already transformed this popular subject matter into a tool of military mobilization. One example of this is *Unite the Army and the People, Win the Resistance War* 军民合作，抗战胜利 (1944, Fig. 1.2.7) by Yan Han 彦涵 (1916–2011). Using a naïve but realistic style, the artist replaced Qinqiong and Jingde with a Communist soldier and a farmer, who are characterized by their clothing; this clearly conveyed propaganda about strengthening the relationship between the Communist troops and the peasantry. In this sense, the Japanese invaders became the evil spirits that the solider–peasant allies aimed to resist. What distinguished Lü Shengzhong's displacement of door deities from Yan Han's piece is that Lü not only removed the intent to provide propaganda but he also replaced the usual old theme with another old theme. Instead of bringing back the old door deities in the agrarian world, an act that had been seen as one of feudal superstition and backwardness, he circumvented this condemned subject and chose to depict the New Year's celebration, a less problematic and more popular theme. As a folk custom, the dragon and lion dance became popular again in the wake of the revival of Chinese tradition after the iconoclasm of the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution.

Many years later, Lü Shengzhong recalled his experience with *Dragon and Lion Dance.* Even though he had already developed an interest in folk art, he felt unmotivated

when he received the official commission for the first time, " from my impression of nianhua, I do not view it as "art." You cannot say it is technically difficult. I even felt a bit ashamed of accepting such a commission. I had been a farmer until not long before. Now I had to make this stuff for the New Year in the countryside. How could I show my ability as an art university graduate?"[106] Such a statement reveals what Chang-Tai Hung calls "urban bias" against *nianhua* far more explicitly than Bai Yiru's previously cited comment. Unlike his teacher, Lü actually had a rural background. It is likely that his honorable identity as a university student and then as an art lecturer in the capital city of the province made him feel detached from his home village and led him to develop a feeling of superiority toward his local culture. Nevertheless, it is also clear that from the very beginning of his experimentation with *nianhua*, he employed a style similar to that of the old *nianhua* and attempted to maintain a distance from the direct propaganda and educational function of the new *nianhua.*

Paper Cutting in Shaanbei: Research and Practice

In 1982, Lü Shengzhong was admitted to the newly founded Department of *Nianhua* and Comics 年画和连环画系 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.[107] He was a visiting student for the first two years before going on to spend three years there as a master's student. Setting up the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics was the first project the director, Jiang Feng 江丰 (1918–1982), wanted to carry out at the Central Academy of Fine Arts after the

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[106] Lü Shengzhong, "*1980 Dragon and Lion Dance*" 1980 龙狮欢舞, Lü Shengzhong's blog, accessed September 12, 2019, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c3b5af7010008h2.html.

[107] The department was initially named as the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics in 1980 and then renamed as Department of Folk Art in 1986.

Cultural Revolution. In accordance with the government's art policy of promoting Soviet-style oil painting and reviving *guohua* (traditional Chinese painting),[108] many art workers involved in the new *nianhua* campaign redirected their enthusiasm for *nianhua* elsewhere. Reflecting a policy shift from popularization to specialization and emphasizing systematic academic training for specific media,[109] the creation of *nianhua* gradually declined by the late 1950s, despite the fact that *nianhua* had been used as a mass propaganda tool. Jiang Feng was an active figure in the New Woodcut Movement 新兴木刻运动 led by the great author Lu Xun 鲁迅 in the 1930s and later became a senior official of art affairs in the Communist government and director of the Department of Fine Arts at the Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy in the Yan'an period.[110] He was thus well aware of the effectiveness of art media—such as woodcut prints and *nianhua*—in educating the masses. After he was rehabilitated in 1979, having been purged from his position as director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts during the Anti-Rightist Campaign 反右运动 in 1957, he wanted to emphasize the issue of popularization again by founding a Department of *Nianhua* and Comics at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, a dream he had postponed for more than twenty years.

Jiang Feng's sudden death in 1982, which occurred only two years after the founding of the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics, was one reason why his original aim of reviving the new *nianhua* and comics as educational tools stopped being a guiding force for the department. It was at this time that Lü Shengzhong joined the Department of *Nianhua* and

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[108] Chang-tai Hung, "Repainting China: New Year Prints (*Nianhua*) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People's Republic," 796.

[109] See Julia Andrews, "From Popularization to Specialization," in Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 1949-1979 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1995), 110-175.

[110] Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy was the headquarters of woodcut and new *nianhua* practices for war propaganda in the Yan'an period.

Comics. Yang Xianrang 杨先让 (b. 1930), a former lecturer at the Department of Prints who belonged to the first generation of artists trained at the Central Academy of Fine Arts after the founding of the People's Republic of China, had been commissioned by Jiang Feng to found the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics, a task Yang reluctantly accepted. Yang Xianrang's opinion of *nianhua* and folk art was barely any different from the "urban bias" that Chang-Tai Hun ascribed to the *nianhua*. Yang described *nianhua* as "vulgar" and said, "I never think highly of *nianhua*, and I took over this new department only out of respect for Jiang Feng."[111] In 1983, Yang Xianrang traveled to the United States to visit his father, whom he had not seen for almost forty years, and closely observed the American art scene. After he returned home, he had the idea of changing the name of the department to the Department of Folk Art, and this finally took place officially in 1986. He took the students in his small department to investigate folk art in the villages along the Yellow River many times, and Lü Shengzhong was one of the students whom Yang Xianrang saw as being persistently and tenaciously devoted to folk art, attributes that were rare in the younger generation.[112]

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the department's shift in direction affected Lü's own artistic interests and practices. However, it is known that he encountered Shaanbei paper cuttings during his excursions for the department. During his three-year master's program, he traveled to his home province of Shandong, as well as to Henan 河南, Sichuan 四川, and Shaanxi 陕西. It was during this time that he found himself particularly fascinated by paper cutting in Shaanbei. In 1985 and early 1986, he took two two-month-long

[111] Zhu Yongmei 朱永梅, "From Department of *Nianhua* and Comics to Department of Folk Art" 从年画连环画系到民间美术系, *Arts Guide* 美术向导, no. 1 (2015): 49-63.

[112] Yang Xianrang 杨先让, "Lü Shengzhong: A Seeker of Folk Art" 吕胜中：民间美术的导源者, in *Collected Works of Yang Xianrang: Waves in Dreams* 杨先让文集：梦底波涛 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2016), 115.

trips to the most remote villages in Shaanbei, meeting the local paper cutting masters and collecting visual materials of the local folk art. After the trips, he published an article entitled "On Shaanbei Folk Art," which was the basis of his master's thesis "Outline of Folk Art."[113] Additionally, he created two paper cuttings: *Harmonize Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*天地合，万物生 (1985, Figs. 1.2.8, 1.2.9, and 1.2.10) and *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream* 醒幻梦 (1985, Figs. 1.2.11, 1.2.12, 1.2.13, and 1.2.14).

In the article, Lü analyzed the subject matter and, more importantly, the esthetics and styles of folk art in Shaanbei. He summarized ten characteristics of folk artists' practices:

1) *Xintianyou* 信天游 [114] (rambling in the sky): following the stream of consciousness. The artist first creates the main figure and then creates subordinate figures based on free association.
2) Including objects in all aspects: objects from different spaces and times are situated in one work.
3) Creating new work with ready-made materials, sometimes even waste.
4) Emphasizing the inside rather than the outside. For example, the artist depicts a baby tiger inside its mother's womb. Common sense would suggest that this should not be seen.
5) Typifying and exaggerating: the artist does not portray one specific object; rather, the artist typifies and idealizes.
6) Using metaphors and symbols: this is a method long used by peasant artists that is also associated with homophones and auspicious meanings.
7) Analogizing and personifying: for example, the artist depicts patterns of spots on sika deer as plum flowers.

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[113] The essential of the article was published in *Art Research* 美术研究, no. 1 (1994): 56-58.

[114] Xintianyou is an improv folk music style in Northwestern China. Most of the songs are about love, marriage, and everyday life.

8) Shifting the point of view: sometimes the artist is within the work, and sometimes the artist is an outsider.

9) Assembling ready-made individual figures into a complete work: this implies that the artist can create different works with similar components.

10) Standardizing: the artist employs widely accepted ways of rendering common objects such as clouds, waves, and flames.[115]

On the whole, these ten points of Lü Shengzhong were generalized from his observations of folk art and, especially, paper cutting, and they cannot strictly be considered scholarly research. Although some of the points, such as 5, 6, 7, and 10, are about general characteristics of style, the other points are more an analysis of the folk artists' ways of seeing and representing the world, and they are apparently different from the training in the realistic painting technique that Lü received at the art academy. His main interest was in the concrete visual mechanism of the folk artists' work at a technical and methodological level rather than a theoretical level, and this revealed that he intended to learn and acquire the folk artists' visual mechanism, which was new to him, and then apply it to his own artistic practice.

The two pieces, *Harmonize Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers* and *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream*, are evidently distinct from his previous experiments in visual language with the *nianhua*, and they can be seen as visual exercises for employing the rules he had formulated in the article. For example, in *Harmonize Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*, the middle section depicts a mother with an infant visible in her belly, and the mother's face is shown both in a frontal view and in profile. These two methods exemplify, respectively, the fourth rule on "emphasizing the inside rather than the outside"

[115] Lü Shengzhong, "On Shaanbei Folk Art" 试谈陕北民间美术, *Art Research* 美术研究, no.3 (1986): 69.

and the second rule on "including everything in every aspect." As has already been mentioned, fertility is a common motif of paper cuttings in Shaanbei, and it conveys the peasant's aspiration for more offspring in the family. However, the title of Lü Shengzhong's piece, *Harmonize the Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*—a quotation from the Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子,[116] who lived during the Warring States period 战国时代—lifts the aim of Lü's work to a metaphysical level, surpassing the pragmatism of the peasant artists' practices. The mother can be seen as a symbol of human fertility or, more broadly, of all living creatures on earth. The two circles strongly supported by her arms can be interpreted as the sun and the moon in the sky. With her sturdy legs fused to the earth, the mother's body serves as a bridge between the sky and the earth. In both the left and right parts of the triptych, a man and a woman stand in pairs; they are the grownup versions of the baby in the mother's belly. Together with the plants in the middle, they symbolize the vitality and endlessness of life.

The other work, *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream*, is also a triptych. Similar to *Harmonize the Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*, this work has a symmetrical composition. The sitting figure in the center of the middle section is explicitly in the iconic style of the distinguished paper cutting master Ku Shulan 库淑兰 (1920–2004). However, unlike *Harmonize the Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*, this work does not have a clear narrative structure. Instead, it is more associated with the aforementioned first rule of "demonstrating the flow of the artist's mind," and this is also in accordance with the title of the piece. Although each rectangular section is not explicitly connected with the others, the upside-down figure in the middle of the left part with outstretched arms and legs in the air is

[116] *Xunzi* 荀子, annotated by Fang Da 方达 (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2016), 344.

accompanied by two figures on each side with a symbol of Ying and Yang 太极阴阳图 above their heads, evoking the pose of the mother with the sun and earth in *Harmonize the Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*. In the right part, the two figures are energetically blowing a *suona* 唢呐, a folk music instrument frequently used at wedding or funeral ceremonies in northwestern China, the sound of which is highly emotionally expressive. Together with the running patterns around and within the figures, the pictures demonstrate a sense of vigor and freedom of life.

The use of the Ying and Yang symbol in *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream* functions like the extract from the Confucian classic *Xunzi* by adding a philosophical dimension to the paper cutting that, to some extent, juxtaposes the elite and folk cultures. One side is the traditional Chinese philosophical discourse of the world view, and the other side is the folk art creation mostly based on real peasant life, as well as historical legends and myths.[117] Although the Yin and Yang symbol can be interpreted as a metaphor for the transformation between different states of consciousness (awakeness, dreaming, and illusion), the extract from *Xunzi* presents a paradox between the text and image. The image, as analyzed above, is a celebration of the vitality and fertility of all beings in nature. At first, the image does seem to correspond literally to the text. However, when viewed in the context of the chapter titled "On Ritual" in *Xunzi*, one can see that the sentence actually emphasizes the importance of ritual in moral development, despite the fact that, as *Xunzi* admitted, human nature cannot be repressed.[118] It is difficult, and perhaps not even essential, to understand Lü Shengzhong's initial intention when using this extract from *Xunzi*, and whether he misinterpreted the

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[117] Lü Shengzhong, "On Shaanbei Folk Art," 68.

[118] *Xunzi*, 344.

context or deliberately reinterpreted its meaning. However, it is evident that he touched on a significant issue: vitality and human nature in folk culture versus traditional Confucian thought. It also shows that in the early stage of his encounter with paper cuttings by local masters in Shaanbei, he was conscious of the gap between the elite and folk cultures and intentionally attempted to combine the two cultures in one piece of work in a harmonious way.

Searching for Roots: Tradition and Modernism, City and Village

In 1987, the year Lü Shengzhong graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he published a book entitled *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings* 中国民间剪纸 (Fig. 1.2.15). It featured works from peasant masters of the technique in Shaanbei, as well as other parts of the country, such as Shandong, Shanxi, and Gansu. The book also included an article by Lü, essentially a short version of his master's thesis, which summarized his observations on folk paper cuttings during his long field trips to Shaanbei.

It is important to note, however, that this was not the first attempt to collect and publish folk paper cuttings. In 1946, in the late Yan'an period, Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996) and Jiang Feng, both of whom were top cultural leaders in the Communist government,[119] co-edited a collection of folk paper cuttings entitled *Folk Paper Cuttings* 民间剪纸. Additionally, they published a more comprehensive version with the title *Northwestern Chinese Paper Cuttings* 西北剪纸集 (Fig. 1.2.16), which includes not only the works of local peasants but also "new paper cuttings" created by Yan'an artists such as Gu Yuan 古元

[119] Ai Qing was vice-director of the Literature and Arts college at the North China United Revolutionary University 晋察冀华北联合大学. Jiang Feng was an instructor at the Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy.

(1919–1996) and Li Qun 力群 (1912–2012). As Jiang Feng said, this volume was one of the first collections of folk paper cuttings ever published in China.[120] In the preface, Ai Qing pointed out the aim of collecting and doing research on folk paper cuttings:

> We can understand the local peasants' simple and pure attitude toward things from the tools and materials they use; we can understand their esthetic taste. Based on this, we can reform this art form to depict the new life, and thus we will create not only new paper cuttings and window flowers but also new paintings, new woodcuts, and new decorative art.[121]

Ai Qing's statement shows how the Yan'an intellectuals' aim of collecting folk art material reflected the main idea of Mao Zedong's *Yan'an Talks*, namely, "to pursue the challenging goals of communicating with the broader masses through acceptable cultural forms and inventing a modern socialist art form without reference to traditional content."[122] The "traditional content" Ai Qing mentions in the preface refers to the "decadent taste of the scholar-official class 士大夫阶级" in traditional China, which should be replaced by the "virtue, healthiness, and happiness of the peasant."[123] Evidently, the Communist discourse

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[120] Jiang Feng 江丰, "I love Yan'an Paper Cuttings" 我爱延安剪纸, in *Yan'an Paper Cuttings* 延安剪纸, ed. Jiang Feng (Beijing: People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1981), unpaginated. The book is the catalog of the exhibition "Folk Paper cuttings in Yan'an" 延安地区民间剪纸展览 held at the National Art Museum of China in 1980, with a preface by Jiang Feng.

[121] Ai Qing 艾青, "Paper Cuttings for Window Decoration: Preface to *Northwestern Chinese Paper Cuttings*" 窗花剪纸：《西北剪纸集》代序, in *Northwestern Chinese Paper Cuttings* 西北剪纸集, eds. Jiang Feng and Ai Qing, collected by the Department of Fine Arts, Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy, Yan'an (Shanghai: Chenguang Publishing House, 1949), unpaginated.

[122] Wu Ka-ming, *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism* (Urbana, Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 60.

[123] Ai Qing, "Paper Cuttings for Window Decoration: Preface to *Northwestern Chinese Paper Cuttings*," unpaginated.

contained a proletarian consciousness and a sense of class struggle. At the same time, one can recognize a continuation of the intellectual pursuit to popularize art and literature, as seen in the May Fourth–New Culture Movement 五四新文化运动. The basic goal of this movement was to overthrow the aristocratic and scholarly-official culture, which represented the dominant high culture of Confucianism, and instead promote the culture of the common people as part of a blueprint for creating a new Chinese culture. This zeitgeist led a group of intellectuals to the countryside to gather folklore, legends, and folk songs.[124]

Interestingly, half a century later, this zeitgeist resonated in Lü Shengzhong's endeavor to gather and experiment with folk art and, in particular, with paper cuttings. His awareness and negotiation of the Confucian high culture and the rural folk culture were epitomized in *Harmonize the Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers* and *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream*, as examined above. Both were created in the 1980s, a time comparable to the May Fourth period in terms of its confrontation between traditional Chinese culture and modern Western culture.[125] After the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution, traditional culture came back into the picture, being promoted and attacked at the same time.

Simultaneously, modern Western culture, after having been removed from the cultural environment during the Mao period, was reintroduced to China and eagerly embraced by young students and intellectuals.[126] In the realm of the fine arts, the so-called '85 New Wave,

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[124] For the May Fourth intellectuals' engagement with folk literature, see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature*, 1918-1937 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 1986).

[125] See He Guimei 贺桂梅, "Literature in the 1980s and the "May Fourth Tradition" 八十年代文学与"五四"传统", in *Imagination of Humanities*人文学的想象力 (Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2005), 34-53.

[126] For the cultural movement in the 1980s intelligentsia, see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press); Chen Fong-Ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997).

as mentioned in the previous subchapter, took place in big cities as well as provincial regions throughout the country. Although the academicism-dominated Central Academy of Fine Arts was not the best hotbed for experimental art, the overall innovative atmosphere throughout the country did affect the rather conservative academy. A groundbreaking work by two senior students, Zhang Qun 张群 (b. 1963) and Meng Luding 孟碌丁 (b. 1962), *In the New Era: Revelation from Adam and Eve* 在新时代：亚当夏娃的启示 (1985, Fig. 1.2.17) marked the beginning of the '85 New Wave. First shown in the exhibition *Young Art of the Progressive China* 前进中的中国青年美展 at the National Art Museum in 1985, the painting in a surrealist style depicts a young man and woman, both whom of are large figures in the foreground, naked, and holding an apple. Behind their naked bodies are the open doors of the Forbidden City. Underneath the woman's feet is the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, which is extremely small compared with the two naked bodies. On the other side, below the naked man's feet, is a modern young man sitting in profile with an empty plate in front of him. In the middle of the background, a woman holding a plate of apples is breaking through endless frames of glass that extend from the horizon of the sea to the viewer. Clearly inspired by the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the work represents how young Chinese individuals break free from numerous barriers, try the "forbidden fruit," and receive enlightenment from the outside world. It ushered in a new, or re-enlightenment, period after the May Fourth period. The work directly juxtaposes the traditional (i.e., the Mogao Caves and Forbidden City) and the modern (i.e., the young man, opened gates, remote horizon, and new sunlight). Also, the contrast between the wide swath of blue color in the background (which takes in the sea, the sky, and the sitting young man) and the yellow color in the middle (which takes in the Mogao Cave, the frames, and the gate) could easily be associated with a metaphor from the

controversial TV documentary series *River Elegy* 河殇 (1988).[127] Transforming the yellow culture of the earth (China) into the blue culture of the ocean (the West) symbolized many intellectuals' calls to employ the advanced Western culture in rebuilding the Chinese spirit "in the new era," as in the title of the work by Zhang Qun and Meng Luding.

When the work caused a heated discussion in art circles—because it was considered to have marked the beginning of the '85 New Wave[128]—Lü Shengzhong was immersed in the folk art world in Shaanbei, where the theme song of *River Elegy*, "Ninety-nine Bends of the Yellow River" 天下黄河九十九道弯, originated. The folk song was based on a folk melody and composed by a local boatman, Li Siming 李思命 (1891–1963), in the 1920s. It was discovered during the Yan'an period (the early 1940s) by the Music Department of the Lu Xun Literature and Arts Academy and became popular in the Communist revolutionary base area afterward.[129] As a representative piece of Shaanbei folk music, with the Yellow River, the well-recognized emblem of Chinese culture, as its subject matter, the song served as a metaphor for the conservatism of the land-based civilization. When Lü Shengzhong devoted himself to doing research on paper cuttings, he had the same ambition as the authors of *River Elegy*. The difference is that he chose the opposite direction: Instead of the seashore, he went

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127 For the TV documentary series *River Elegy*, see Su Xiaokang 苏晓康 and Wang Luxiang 王鲁湘, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*. Introduced, trans. Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (New York: Cornell University, East Asia Program, 1991). Chen Fong-Ching 陈方正 and Jin Guantao 金观涛, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997), 215-226.

128 For the work, see Zhang Qun 张群 and Meng Luding 孟碌丁, "Enlightenment of the New Era: the Creation Process of *In the New Era: Revelation from Adam and Eve*" 新时代的启示：《在新时代》创作谈, *Fine Arts* 美术, no.7 (1985): 47-48; Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 105-106.

129 See China Folk Culture Research Association and Folk Music Institute of the China Central Academy of Music eds., *Selected Folk Songs from Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia Border Regions* 陕甘宁老根据地民歌选 (Shanghai: New Music Press, 1953).

to the inland Loess Plateau, where the Yellow River flows; it is the birthplace of Shaanbei folk music and art, as well as one of the most important areas in which pre-modern Chinese civilization originated.

The *China Art Newspaper,* one of the most radical art media, with its comprehensive reports and reviews of the modernist ’85 New Wave from 1985 to 1989, occasionally also featured topics related to folk art.[130] On the front page of Issue 11, 1988, the concluding part of the preface to Lü’s book *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings* appeared as a separate article with a new title, “Folk Art and National Art Now,”[131] which emphasized the connection between folk art in a particular region and the art of the nation as a whole. He wrote:

> Our national culture is strongly impacted by foreign cultures. By welcoming this challenge, we are able to understand the world comprehensively. Also, we realize that only when the nation’s culture does not follow other cultures can it be recognized and acknowledged by others. Therefore, it is significant and urgent to gain a new understanding of our nation’s culture. When looking back to the earth we stand on and searching for the position in the art world that actually belongs to us, many artists turn their attention to folk art. Surprisingly, they find that in the deepest layer of our nation is buried a whole new world.[132]

The excerpt shows Lü Shengzhong’s ambition to regenerate the subjectivity of China’s national art with rediscovered folk art and place it in a global context. This was a different

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[130] The China Art Newspaper not only features urban artists’ experimentation with folk art but also reports on peasant artists and peasant painting events.

[131] Lü Shengzhong, “Folk Art and National Art Now”民间美术与民族艺术的今天, *China Art Newspaper* 中国美术馆, no. 11, 1988.

[132] Lü Shengzhong, ed., *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings* 中国民间剪纸 (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Press, 1987), 25.

path than the one chosen by the ’85 New Wave artists, who were much influenced by Western modernist and contemporary art. Lü’s statement contained deep anxiety about losing one’s own art because of the “invasion” of foreign art. The discussion of the dichotomy of Chinese and foreign cultures has a tinge of nationalism. It is noteworthy that Lü Shengzhong was not the only one who sought inspiration from folk art. As mentioned above, his teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Yang Xianrang, founder and director of the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics, changed the name of the department to the Department of Folk Art after his encounter with the U.S. art scene. Yang wrote in his memoir,

> So-called folk art, they (Americans—note by the author) call it primitivism. We Chinese have such a long history of primitivism, from ancient times to the recent period, that our folk art has not disappeared. Old grannies are still doing these things … When I went to the countryside in the past, when I first visited Yan’an for a commissioned work in 1956, I could not see the folk art there, even though the works were displayed in front of my eyes. I did not understand it, nor did I like it … When I went to the United States and saw how American artists pursued folk art, even transnationally, I was greatly inspired. When I turned back and looked at our own folk stuff, I gradually saw it.[133]

It seems ironic that Yang discovered the folk art of Yan’an in the United States and that this experience directly led him to reorient his department. It is also noteworthy that he mentions primitivism because during the time he visited the United States, the significant exhibition *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* was on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from September 27, 1984, to January 15, 1985. This

133 Zhu Yongmei, “From Department of *Nianhua* and Comics to Department of Folk Art,” 53.

exhibition included works by modern artists such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, and Constantin Brancusi, as well as tribal artworks from Africa, Oceania, and regions of North America, and it provoked a heated debate on the repressive and exploitative gaze of primitive and tribal art.[134] Yang Xianrang's writings, however, do not contain any notes on this controversial exhibition or the far-reaching debate in the American art scene. It is interesting that he somehow equated primitivism with folk art. In the American context, the definition of *primitive* is associated with the distinction between Western modern art and art created in "less civilized" parts of the world, such as Africa and Oceania, and in past Native American cultures. In the Chinese context, the definition of *folk art* is more associated with intellectual/ elite art (generally in the city) and art created in less developed areas (generally in the countryside). Also, even though he discovered the value of folk art after having been inspired by American artists' appreciation of primitive art, Yang overlooked the key point of the whole issue: the relation between primitive/folk art and Western modern art, as well as its resonance in the 1980s Chinese art scene. This is exactly the issue of which Lü Shengzhong was aware.

A representative piece at this time by Lü Shengzhong entitled *The Scheme of Yellow River series no. 1* 河图系列 之一 (1988, Fig. 1.2.18) borrowed its title from ancient Chinese mythology and philosophy. *The Scheme of Yellow River*, together with the *Inscription of Luo River* 洛书, concerned auspicious signs awarded by the heavenly god to legitimize the authority of the ruler when the government is benevolent. First recorded in classics in the pre-Qin period, the two signs are subject to different interpretations by Confucians and Daoists throughout history. One of the most influential theories developed by Han Confucians refers

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134 For the Exhibition, see William Rubin et al., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984); for the debate, see Jack Flam and Miriam Deutsch, eds. *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

to the two signs as number arrangement patterns associated with Chinese astrology and geomancy, which are also interpreted as one of the origins of the *Book of Changes* 易经 (the Zhou dynasty).[135] Even though Lü Shengzhong's series used the old *Scheme of Yellow River* as a title, the central part of this piece is more like a pictorial explanation of the literal meaning of the two Chinese characters.

Surprisingly similar in composition and style to the aforementioned *In the New Era: Revelation from Adam and Eva* by Zhangqun and Meng Luding, Lü's work also has an exaggerated surrealistic style. A huge, flaming U-shape connects the foreground, middle ground, and background and resembles the curving path of the Yellow River, as shown on the map of China. The small, rounded, mushroom-shaped earth hummocks in the middle ground are in a red/yellow hue. The parallel folds caused by water erosion are typical topographical features in the area of the Loess Plateau. A man plowing a field with an ox is depicted on one of the hummocks in the central part of the middle ground, and this is a common motif in paper cuttings in Shaanbei (Fig. 1.2.19). More strikingly, the figure of a little child (whose gender is hard to determine) with outstretched arms and legs is reflected in the water in front; this is the only area of blue color and is surrounded by the red hue in the foreground and middle ground; it resonates only with the dark blue sky (or the sea) in the far background. The child with outstretched arms and legs is taken from *zhuaji wawa* 抓髻娃娃 (a baby with braided hair buns, Fig. 1.2.20), a typical image in Shaanbei paper cuttings used for exorcism. It is believed by the locals that a child's soul can be taken away by ghosts, causing the child to suffer from a disease. When a child is sick, the parents cut out a paper *zhuaji wawa,* put it

[135] Shi Shangang 史善刚, "The Scheme of Yellow River and the Inscription of Luo River and the Origin of the Eight Diagrams" 论河图洛书与八卦起源, *Historiography Monthly* 史学月刊, no. 8 (2007): 79-88.

on the child's body, and burn the *zhuaji wawa* while saying the child's name. As a god connecting life and death, the *zhuaji wawa* is able to drive off ghosts, bring the soul back, and heal the child.[136] By taking the imagery out of its original folk religious context and situating it in an anthropogeographical setting with the symbolic images of the Yellow River and Loess Plateau, Lü Shengzhong endowed the little *zhuaji wawa* with a broader cultural meaning.

According to Ka-ming Wu's research, around the same period in which Lü Shengzhong created the *Scheme of Yellow River* series, some scholars were also investigating the iconography of paper cuttings in Shaanbei. For example, the motif of ox plowing was connected to stone engravings of the Han dynasty (25–220 CE), and the *zhuaji wawa* was believed to bear a resemblance to a jade ornament in the Shang dynasty (1700–1100 BCE).[137] Another example can be found in the work and thought of Jin Zhilin, Lü Shengzhong's teacher at the Department of *Nianhua* and Comics, who was also devoted to paper cutting preservation and regeneration in Shaanbei. He argued that the Yellow River region was the cradle of Chinese civilization and the home of ancient civilizations such as the Yangshao civilization 仰韶文化 (5000–3000 BCE) and Longshan civilization 龙山文化 (2900–2100 BCE), as well as the thriving culture of the Qin and Han dynasties.[138] Wu argued that "the urban intellectuals and artists struggled to put the paper cutting in its rightful place in the folk canon by establishing its relationship with ancient art forms and civilization frameworks."[139]

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[136] Jin Zhilin 靳之林, *Zhuaji wawa* and Primitive Thoughts of the Human Kind 抓髻娃娃和人类群体的原始观念（Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2001), 3-4.

[137] Wu Ka-ming, *Reinventing Chinese Tradition*, 45-46.

[138] Jin Zhilin 靳之林, "An Overview of Yan'an Paper Cuttings" 延安地区民间剪纸简介, in *Yan'an Paper Cuttings* 延安剪纸, ed. Jiang Feng (Beijing: People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1981), 193.

[139] Wu Ka-ming, *Reinventing Chinese Tradition*, 47.

It is difficult to say whether or not Lü Shengzhong's visual practices and writings were influenced by these investigations. It is certain, however, that although some contemporaneous scholars attempted to connect folk paper cuttings with artifacts from the remote past in order to prove that paper cuttings contained the origin and essence of Chinese culture, Lü's approach was different. He thought that the issue should be put in a broader cultural context, more associated with the root-searching trend of thought among the intelligentsia (especially in literature), who were faced with the same dilemma facing the art scene that Wang Jing described as "the question of Western influence and Chinese mimicry."[140] The root-searching theorists laid more emphasis on marginalized cultures, attempting to absorb energy from those cultures which are "outside the norm" and, more importantly, regenerate cultural subjectivity and march toward the stage of world literature.[141] As Wang Jing argued, for root-searching intellectuals, there was "a dual critique of tradition and modernity."[142] The "question of Western influence and Chinese mimicry relentlessly touched the nerve of the nationwide inferiority complex," and "the historical contribution of the root-searching movement resided in its simultaneous challenge to and containment of modernism."[143] Wang's arguments, which found resonance in Lü's aforementioned article, can also be used to some degree to interpret Lü's discourse of experimentation with folk art. The difference is that some root-searching intellectuals attempted to highlight undervalued cultures, which were prosperous in the remote past but became overshadowed by the unifying

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[140] Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 214.

[141] For an in-depth discussion on the root-searching movement, see Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, 213-224.

[142] Ibid., 217.

[143] Ibid., 214-215.

power of the orthodox Confucian culture (e.g., the Xiangchu culture 湘楚文化 in the Hubei and Hunan Provinces, or the Wuyue culture 吴越文化 in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces), whereas Lü Shengzhong transcended regional boundaries. Even though he mostly dealt with folk art in the region of Shaanbei, he actually went beyond regional boundaries and positioned paper cuttings within a broader and more general perspective, not in terms of the central and the regional, but rather in terms of the urban and the rural.

Returning to the *Scheme of Yellow River* series, Lü's appropriation of the surrealist style and the employment of oil painting instead of paper cutting as a medium show that he did not shut his eyes to Western modernism; rather, he confronted it, as well as applied it, in an active way. The blue hue in the background and the red/yellow in the foreground and middle ground create a metaphorical juxtaposition that seems to be a visual interpretation of the China-West binary theory in *River Elegy.* However, the Yellow River and the Loess Plateau appear not as symbols of conservativism and backwardness in terms of their juxtaposition against Western symbols (something that is explicitly addressed in *In the New Era: Revelation from Adam and Eva* and later in *River Elegy*) but rather as physical habitats in which the style as well as the customary and folk religious meanings of the Shaanbei paper cuttings developed. In *The Scheme of Yellow River series no. 1*, the Yellow River and the Loess Plateau serve as the background of the *zhuaji wawa*, who, with all four limbs outstretched, is reflected in the blue pool. The mirror stage theory of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) states that when an infant sees its own image in a mirror, the vision marks a decisive turning point in the mental development of the child. The mirror stage describes the formation of the ego via the process of identification, and the ego is the result of identifying with one's own unique image. This primary identification with the counterpart is what forms

the ego. It is not only "simply a moment in the life of the infant" but also "a permanent structure of subjectivity."[144] *Zhuaji wawa*, the representative of Shaanbei paper cuttings, backed by the surrealistic, suspended Yellow River and the Loess Plateau (i.e., traditional Chinese culture), identifies itself in the mirror-like blue pool (i.e., Western modernist culture). The paper cutting in the rural region of Shaanbei is, in this way, brought onto the world stage, and its cultural subjectivity is awoken through the play with its counterpart of Western modernism.

The other piece in the series of *Scheme of Yellow River* (Fig. 1.2.21) depicts a fountain of water that looks like a fire gushing vertically from underground through an opening, together with fish swimming in the same direction. A woman with a peach in her hand is standing in the right corner of the foreground with three little figures floating across her stomach, indicating that she can be identified as the mother of the earth. The woman, especially her face, is depicted in a style similar to the mother in *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream,* inspired by the Shaanbei paper cutting master Ku Shulan. The same contrast in hues of red/yellow and dark blue used in *The Scheme of Yellow River series no. 1* recurs in this painting. On the left side of the opening, a child with its body upside down is a variation of the *zhuaji wawa*. The little red figures underground, with a similar posture of a stretched-out arm, also can be seen as variations of the *zhuaji wawa.* The vertical composition exposing the profile of the underground area can be seen as a visualization of Lü Shengzhong's appeal for folk art made at the end of his article "Folk Art and National Art Now": "in the deepest layer of our nation is buried a whole new world."[145] Folk art is the underground treasure that needs

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[144] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 117-119

[145] Lü Shengzhong, ed., *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings*, 25.

to be excavated. Noteworthily, a similar analogy can be found in the writings of the intellectuals of the root-searching movement. In "The Root of Literature" (1985), an article serving as a manifesto in the movement by Han Shaogong 韩少功 (b. 1953), the author writes: "The culture outside the norm is like the boiling fluid hidden under the earth's crust … It is not the earth's crust but the magma underneath that is worthy of attention." In Lü Shengzhong's picture, the flame-like gushing water can be seen as a metaphor for vigorous folk art, which has an incredible energy that needs to be unearthed.

Lü Shengzhong's work for his master's degree, *Life: Transience and Eternity* 生命：瞬间与永恒 (1987, Fig. 1.2.22), is a huge project consisting of three sections. According to Lü's later recollection, this massive work was initially inspired by the *xintianyou,* the improvisational folk music style in Shaanbei. He wrote:

> The *xintianyou* songs do not have a start or an end. Whenever the desire to create something arises in anyone, no matter who, a young man or a woman, a grown-up or a child, the lyrics well up like a fountain, from genuine feelings and varying feelings. Those folk artists do not prepare a draft or a sketch for the final work. They make whatever comes to mind at the moment. They are capable of arranging it well. Is it not like a *xintianyou* in art?[146]

Apparently, the *xintianyou* way of working was very different from his previous working process, in which he first made a sketch, then made a line drawing based on the sketch, and finally colored the drawing. He wanted to keep the "passion," "impulse," and "improvisation" from beginning to end. However, he also argued that in order to master the

[146] Lü Shengzhong, "Life: Transience and Eternity" 1987: 生命-瞬间与永恒, Lü Shengzhong's blog, accessed November 30, 2019, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c3b5af7010008gp.html.

essence of folk art, it would not be good to limit oneself to a certain way of making art. It is the initiative to make art that matters, to have energy running throughout the process of art creation. This energy is not only revealed in the initiative and improvisation of art making but also directly in the work itself. Such energy had already been revealed in his early experiments with paper cutting, such as *Harmonize Sky and Earth, Everything on Earth Prospers*. It is a eulogy for futility and prosperity derived from the cult of nature. As the title of the triptych, *Life: Transience and Eternity*, indicates, the work is about the transiency and infinity of life. Colored in a red hue with a dark blue background, the three parts are filled with different variants of *zhuanji wawa*. Some are large and depicted in detail, whereas others are like small signs and stand in a row. Decorative flowers showing a profound influence of Shaanbei paper cuttings make the three parts seem like a fantastic dream. As in Lü's early paper cutting *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream*, the improvisational figures coming from the artist's stream of consciousness suggest an association with Western Dadaism and Surrealism. Though in his writings, Lü Shengzhong encouraged Chinese artists to dig up the underground treasure of folk art against the new art movement profoundly indebted to Western modernism, he could not avoid his cultural context. Lü's emphasis on improvisation and intuition is in accordance with the concept of "vital impetus" of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose thoughts were closely related to those of the surrealists. Bergson's philosophy of life had been introduced in China much earlier. There are even debates on his thoughts in 1920s China.[147] It was during the '85 New Wave that his theories drew attention

[147] See Joseph Claudo, "Bergson's 'Intuition' in China and its Confucian Fate (1915-1923): Some Remarks on *zhijue* in Modern Chinese Philosophy," *Problemos, Supplement* (2016): 35-50.

again.[148] It is likely that Lü Shengzhong attempted to situate his understanding of Shaanbei paper cutting, the *xintianyou* of art creation, and the cult of nature and life in the broader context of the ’85 New Wave art movement, which was profoundly indebted to modern Western philosophy. In this way, he not only found theoretical legitimacy for his experiential knowledge but also put paper cuttings originating from certain regions in China on the international stage.

A Modern Shaman? A Medium Between Two Worlds

The double solo exhibition of Lü Shengzhong and Xu Bing at the National Art Gallery of China in 1988 caused a huge sensation on the art scene. Whereas Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* immersed the audience in a puzzle of unrecognizable characters, Lü Shengzhong turned the exhibition space into a mysterious island. The most striking piece is *Wandering: The Way to the Labyrinth* 彳亍: 通过迷宫的路 (1988, Fig. 1.2.23), a paper cutting installation inspired by the Nine Curves labyrinth 九曲迷宫; this is a labyrinth lighted by lanterns through which people can stroll that is usually installed during the Spring Lantern Festival 元宵节. Lü borrowed the square labyrinth pattern consisting of nine parts and made it a huge black paper installation hanging on the wall of the exhibition hall; it extended to the floor and connected with a black path twenty meters long that led the viewer to the labyrinth. On the surface of the paper road and labyrinth are footprints with human faces on them

148 The curator and critic Fei Dawei was one of those who first researched Bergson’s work in 1980s China. In 1984, when he was a senior student at the Central Academy of Fine Art, he published one of the earliest articles introducing Bergson’s aesthetics of irrationalism. See Fei Dawei 费大为, “The Notion of Duration in Bergson’s Aesthetics of Irrationality” 柏格森非理性主义美学中的绵延说, *Art Research* 美术研究, no. 2, (1984): 84-88. See also Weng Zijian and Jane Debevoise, “An Interview with Fei Dawei,” Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990, accessed December 20, 2019, http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/fdwft_201106291514225050.pdf.

orienting the way for the viewer. There are two columns on each side of the labyrinth. On one of them is a huge red *zhuaji wawa*; on the other is a black ghost.

Lü Shengzhong recalled that this installation was inspired by his experience on a dark night during the Nine Curves labyrinth lantern festival in Miaodian Village in Ansai County 安塞县苗店村 in 1986 (Fig. 1.2.24). Following the crowd, he wandered in the labyrinth, trying to find the way to the exit. He did not know how much time he spent in the labyrinth, until he finally found the exit. To his surprise, it was in exactly the same place as the entrance. Early the following morning, he went back to the empty labyrinth and looked at the numerous footprints left by visitors the night before, which were overlaid with one another and would become invisible due to wind and rain.[149] He recalled, "nobody knows how many roads he/she has walked; nobody can walk on all the roads in the world. However, I did walk on a divine road. On the narrow path I took as I looked for the essence of art, I came deep into the old culture."[150] The quotation is from Lü Shengzhong's article "Wandering on the Divine Road" 神路上的彳亍, written at the same time. It is interesting that Lü described his road as a divine one. In fact, the whole installation is theatrically arranged. The divine road refers to the two-way path toward the hanging Nine Curves labyrinth. The columns on each side and the color combination of black and red also create an atmosphere of a religious ritual.

Looking back at the works analyzed thus far, it becomes apparent that there was already a share of folk religious elements present in early works such as *Harmonize Sky and Earth*, *Everything on Earth Prospers* and *Awakening, Illusion, and Dream*. The

[149] Liu Xiaochun 刘骁纯, "The Divine Road: The Modern Transformation of Traditional Culture" 神路：简论传统文化的现代突变, in *Artworks of Lü Shengzhong* 吕胜中作品 (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Press, 1991), 9

[150] Lü Shengzhong, *A Story of Soul Searching*, 176-177.

transformative status of awakening and dreaming is a crucial part of shamanism. In the *Scheme of Yellow River* series, the factor of folk religion became more obvious. The repeatedly appearing *zhuanji wawa* is an important symbol still in use today in the practice of exorcism in Shaanbei local customs. However, it was not until the double solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Art that the feature of folk religion was significantly emphasized. Lü Shengzhong also named his anthology of writings *The Story of Soul Searching* 觅魂记. Here arises a question: Why did folk religious elements become a significant part of Lü's practices?

In his article "Wandering on the Divine Road," Lü Shengzhong says, "We are at the dead end of the turn of the century. Today the god is dead. The road is broken."[151] Lü's words reveal anxiety about not knowing where to go at the turn of the millennium. He continues:

> I try to get away from the noisy city and look for a lonely quiet road that has been forgotten. With confusion and expectation, I am looking for the human nature that has been drained away by civilization. I want to call back the soul that has been lost in the filthy air. I want to explore the original spirit of humankind. I try to bring the local and the global together. I try to nurture an empty soul damaged and distorted by the modern civilization with the pure blood of the old civilization.[152]

Lü Shengzhong attempted to seek refuge in the "old civilization," specifically folk culture, and heal the soul damaged by "modern civilization." However, he apparently was not only focused on regional folk culture. He sought communication between the local and the global and acted himself as the mediator. He was like a shaman, acting as a medium between the old

[151] Ibid., 176-178.

[152] Ibid., 179.

and the modern civilizations, as well as the local folk art and the modern Western art, practicing exorcism and magical healing. In this regard, he can be seen as an incarnation of *zhuaji wawa,* the symbol recurring in the aforementioned works.

It is noteworthy that in his early experimentation with *nianhua* (e.g., *Dragon and Lion Dance* from 1980), he intentionally avoided the original motif of the door gods, just as the reformers of *nianhua* in the Yan'an period did. The Yan'an folk art reformers largely viewed folk religion and customs as feudal superstitions, and their judgment influenced the further reform of *nianhua* practiced by the teachers of Lü Shengzhong's generation, such as Bai Yiru and, later, Yang Xianrang. In Lü's book *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings,* he categorizes four common themes of paper cuttings: 1) festivals, 2) etiquette and customs, 3) magic and religion, and 4) clothing decoration. He then comes to a rather politically correct conclusion: "The paper cutting with the theme of magic and religion reveals how people resisted natural disasters with their subjective perceptions in the age of barbarism."[153] This sentence reads like an excerpt from a book about the trajectory of historical development from the perspective of historical materialism, which had been the dominant view of history since the Communist Party came to power. Magical belief and practice had long been associated with negative values and was considered a "false science" that conflicted with dialectical materialism and historical materialism and had harmful effects on all levels of well-being, whether economic, political, or personal. Magic is placed in the same category as gambling, prostitution, drug trafficking, and other crimes.[154] In terms of art creation, folk religion and magical beliefs had never been motifs of the dominant socialist realism school in art and

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[153] Lü Shengzhong, ed., *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings*, 14.

[154] See Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 211-212.

literature. Ironically, Lü's comments on the magical and religious motifs in folk paper cuttings are in accordance with the official attitude toward folk religion, despite being apparently contradictory to his practices and the textual statements of his work. It is likely that he had to avoid saying something inappropriate in his article in *Chinese Folk Paper Cuttings,* which was based on his master's thesis and had been examined by the state-run art academy. Consequently, few paper cuttings with magical and religious themes by local masters were included in this collection.

A revival of folk religious activities did, in fact, occur after the Cultural Revolution because the reform-era socialist state was willing to give popular religious activities a space that had been closed off in the past, a place belonging to the current regime's "zones of indifference."[155] However, the struggle for the legitimacy of folk religion did not end, and there were always negotiations between the state and local religious communities because the state periodically made its power visible by exerting brute force. After all, magic and folk religions were still considered threats to the socialist ideology. Some scholars even treated the resurgence of folk religion as proof of a communal power resisting the state.[156] Broadly speaking, the element of folk religion in Lü Shengzhong's work and writings was related to the revival of folk religion, as well as the culture and customs in the Shaanbei region. However, as analyzed above, his own role is more like that of a spiritual medium: a shaman with the ability to penetrate two worlds, who believed that he could magically heal a dysfunctional culture. He acts as the one leading people through the labyrinth with the guidance of footprints. This emphasis on the magical capacity of the individual creates a

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[155] Adam Yuet Chau, "The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China," *Modern China*, vol. 31, no. 2 (April 2005): 240.

[156] Ibid., 241.

sense of charismatic authority, which can be, to some extent, politically read as a latently provocative act confronting the hegemonic power.[157]

Two years after the exhibition at the National Gallery, Lü Shengzhong went further with his magic. In his installation, *The Hall of Evocation* 招魂堂 (Fig. 1.2.25), which was shown at an event in his studio on Chinese New Year's Eve in 1990, thousands of little red figures, based on the prototype of *zhuaji wawa*, covered the whole inner space of his studio. In the center of the room, there were strings of *zhuaji wawa* hanging from the ceiling. The big ones were one inch tall, and the small ones were one centimeter tall. The floor was covered with the fragments of red paper that remained after the figures were cut out. When spectators entered the studio, they felt overwhelmed by the red color and the density and number of small figures. Also, they probably identified themselves as one of the countless red figures. With the power of repetition, Lü Shengzhong finally made *zhuaji wawa* into an icon: a simplified, symbolic little red child with stretched-out limbs and a big head. In the poem "Song of Evocation" 招魂词, which he wrote on that Chinese New Year's Eve, he says:

> I am not an immortal or a wizard. I am not a god, who makes holy decrees. I am only a nobody in this mundane world, but my scissors can tear Yin and Yang apart. Because immortals are secluded from the secular world, wizards are not reliable any more. God is dead. My ten-inch studio is the center of the world. My heart becomes the infinite universe. At this moment, I am the immortal, the shaman, and the god.[158]

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[157] Ann S. Anagnost, "Politics and Magic in Contemporary China," *Modern China*, vol. 13, no. 1, Symposium on Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies, Part I (January 1987): 43.

[158] Lü Shengzhong, *A Story of Soul Searching*, 199.

The “Yin and Yang” in the poem refer literally to the little red figures hanging on the walls and the ceiling that had been cut from paper (the positive form, or Yang) and the paper fragments remaining that were left on the floor (the negative form, or Yin). Because Lü had the ability to tear them apart, he potentially also had the ability to put them back together. In a symbolic sense, he was performing as a shaman, a medium between two worlds.

However, his magic scissors were not confined to this ten-inch studio. In the following year, he began to situate these little red figures in different places: from the modern art gallery to the old alleys in Beijing; from a city park in the northeast to a historical site in the northwest; from Shaoshan 韶山, the birthplace of Mao Zedong, in Hunan, to the earthquake ruins in Tangshan 唐山. In every place, Lü cut out little red figures and performed evocations. In 1992, a continuation of *The Hall of Evocation* was realized in Germany. Lü Shengzhong was invited to participate in an art project called *The Red Train* 红色列车 (Fig. 1.2.26), curated by the German curator Alexander Ochs.[159] The project took place in three old train carriages that were repurposed as art spaces. The carriages were connected to a train that departed from Emden, stopped in Berlin and Wiesbaden, and finally arrived in Hamburg. During the train’s ten-day journey, Lü spent most of his time in the carriages making paper cuttings (Fig. 1.2.27). His little red figures were posted both inside and outside the carriages. At every stop, the local people were invited to interact with this on-the-road project. Lü invited them to take away one or two little red figures and encouraged them to make their own paper cuttings. In an interview with Ochs, Lü conveyed his belief that his little red figures originating from *zhuaji wawa* could be understood by people throughout the world.

[159] Alexander Ochs is a curator and gallerist based in Berlin. In 1997, he opened the Asian Fine Arts factory in Berlin, which is the first gallery focusing on Asian artists in Europe. Its Beijing branch White Space was founded in 2004.

Their symmetrical and concise qualities and their outstretched limbs made every part of their bodies visible to the viewer. This powerful method of depiction could be seen in other parts of the world,[160] and this explains why his project was so well received by the local people during his journey.[161] The little red figure that he borrowed and developed from folk religion was like an archetype of the collective unconscious in a theory proposed by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875–1961).[162] Not only are the motifs of birth, death, and healing common to all humanity, but so is the image that is as simple as an icon. In this way, and by employing the form of contemporary Western art—whether in an installation such as *Wandering: The Way to the Labyrinth* or a performance such as *The Hall of Evocation* or the *Red Train* project—Lü Shengzhong was able to play the role of shaman, transplanting Chinese regional folk culture into the contemporary Western art scene.

It is hard to say whether his ambition to seek his own roots in the soil of folk culture, and his experimentation with *nianhua* and paper cutting justify some critics' appraisal that "he created modernism with real Chinese characteristics."[163] However, it is clear that he, an outsider in the world of the '85 New Wave, found an alternative way to connect with and become known in the Western art world. In 1992, besides the *Red Train* project, Lü Shengzhong also participated in the exhibition *Begegnung mit dem Anderen* (*Encountering*

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[160] Lü Shengzhong even came across a frog-shaped human figure sculpture at the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, which resembles his little red figure. See Lü Shengzhong, *A Story of Soul Searching*, 229.

[161] Lü Shengzhong, "Interview on the Red Train Project" 红色列车访谈, in *Walk and See* 走着瞧 (Beijing, Sanlian Book Store, 2003), 294-296.

[162] See Anthony Stevens, "Archetypes," *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology: Theory, Practice and Applications*, ed. Renos K. Papadopoulos (East Sussex: Routledge, 2006), 74-93.

[163] See Chen Cunrui, "Paper Cutting Goes from Folk to Modern," 1988.

the Other),[164] a parallel exhibition of the *Documenta IX* in Kassel, Germany, in which artists from Asia, Latin America, and Africa were invited to participate. After he returned to China, Lü recalled in an article that he felt as though he were a peasant coming from remote farmland at the *Documenta*.[165] Given that he was an artist whose home country was largely marginalized from the global art scene at that time, it is understandable that he might have felt as if he were from a backward region. Nonetheless, he was a "peasant" who attempted to bring folk art experimentation to the global contemporary art scene.

In the solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery of China in 1988, in addition to the overwhelming *Wandering: The Way to the Labyrinth*, there is also a small collage of photos and paper cuttings entitled *Record of Folk Cultural Material Collecting: Shaanbei* 采风录——陕北篇 (Fig. 1.2.28). The two pieces are photo collages，each in the shape of a cereal container, and they juxtapose the packaging of local cigarettes and alcohol, posters of film stars, reproductions of Western masterpieces, and even posters from the Cultural Revolution. From the perspective of art history, the photo collage is an idea that arose from modern Western art. Lü Shengzhong once recalled that he was impressed by the collages and installations of American contemporary artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), whose solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1985 caused a huge sensation and had a

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[164] The exhibition "*Begegnung mit dem Anderen*" was curated by Hamdi el Attar, professor for product design at the *Gesamthochschule* Kassel (GHK, now called Universität Kassel since 2003) and his group "*Stoffwechsel*" (Metabolism) at GHK. More than 100 artists from nineteen countries participated in the exhibition, which was called by the German press as the "Documenta of the Third World" and was comparable to the exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" in Paris in 1989. See Michael Nungesser, "Begegnung mit dem Anderen," *Kritische Berichte*, no.1 (1993): 61-72.

[165] Lü Shengzhong, *A Story of Soul Searching*, 232-233.

massive influence on the whole generation of artists in the ’85 New Wave.[166] However, this “artistic language” had also been used by impoverished local peasants, who decorated cereal jars with old newspapers and other kinds of waste paper and packaging. When Rauschenberg traveled to China and other non-Western countries seeking inspiration and using local materials to make works of art, Lü Shengzhong was doing more or less the same thing in a different context. On a global level, for Rauschenberg, China and other non-Western countries were the underground treasure that needed to be excavated. They were the “countryside,” a reserve of folk art, compared with their Western counterparts. Lü Shengzhong, however, faced a multi-layered situation; he had to excavate and transform the folk treasure on a domestic level while also transporting it to a global audience.

[166] Robert Rauschenberg is the first living Western artist who held a solo exhibition in China after the Culture Revolution. The exhibition is part of his international project “Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange” (ROCI). Between 1985 and 1990, the project was carried out in Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Japan, Cuba, the USSR, Malaysia, and East Germany. The final exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. See Rosetta Brooks et al., *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1991).

Chapter 2: Between City and Village: Artists and the Urban-Rural Fringe Zone in the 1990s and Early 2000s

2.1. *Mangliu* 盲流 on Film: Wu Wenguang and the Beijing Blind Floaters

One day in the mid-1990s, documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang 吴文光 (b. 1956) was waiting for a friend in the vicinity of the Fourth Ring Road in Beijing. His attention was drawn to the noise coming from a big top tent on the open ground nearby. Out of curiosity, he approached the shabby big top, spent five RMB for a ticket, and went inside. Years later, Wu remembered the crude voice of the singer and expressionless faces and clumsy performances of the dancing girls inside the tent. He sat on a simply assembled wooden bench among an audience that he thought was made up of peasant workers, many of whom were naked to the waist. Smoking and laughing, few of them paid attention to the performance. The ground was full of used plastic bags and cigarette ends. It was Wu's first encounter with a big top in suburban Beijing. He recalled having an odd feeling while watching the performance, which he described as a "pigsty version" of the CCTV (China Central Television) Spring Festival Gala.[167] This first chance encounter with a big top left a lasting impression on him. Several years later, together with his cameraman, Su Ming 苏明, Wu traveled for nearly a year with a

[167] Wu Wenguang, "Film the Big Top Troupe" 拍摄大棚, in *Camera Lens Is My Eye* 镜头像自己的眼睛一样 (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2001), 228. The CCTV Spring Festival Gala is annually broadcast on the Chinese new year's eve and is the most-watched TV program in China. The gala features a variety of shows, including pop music, comedy, dance, acrobatic performance, and Chinese opera.

similar troupe that he found in the suburbs of Beijing. He turned the camera's recordings of the aimless big top life into his third documentary, *Jianghu: Life on the Road* 江湖 (1999). Today, now that twenty years have passed, the suburban area around the Fourth Ring Road where Wu met the big top performers has been turned into a new Central Business District of Beijing.

With his groundbreaking documentary *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* 流浪北京——最后的梦想者 (1990), Wu Wenguang became known as one of the founding figures of the so-called New Documentary Movement, which emerged in the early 1990s.[168] *Bumming in Beijing,* which featured five young artists from the provinces who went to Beijing to pursue their artistic dreams, is usually considered the first documentary film that was distinct from the state-sanctioned documentaries. Besides producing films independently, outside of the state-run media system, Wu and his peers in documentary filmmaking also attempted to provide an alternative view of reality in China by choosing subjects who were often overlooked by mainstream documentaries and depicting them as they were.[169] Their

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[168] For an overview of the new documentary in the 1990s, see Chris Berry, "Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism" 面对现实：中国的纪录片，中国的后社会主义，in *The First Guangzhou Triennial- Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)* 首届广州当代艺术三年展/重新解读：中国实验艺术十年(1990-2000), eds. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi (Macau: Macau Press, 2002), 121–131. Lü Xinyu 吕新雨 formulated the concept of "China New Documentary Movement" and further discussed the topic in her essay "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Society". See Lü Xinyu, *Record China: The Documentary Movement in Contemporary China* 纪录中国：当代中国纪录片运动 (Beijing: Sanlian Book Store, 2003). For an English version of the essay, see Lü Xinyu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social," trans. Tan Jia and Lisa Rofel, in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: for the Public Record*, eds. Lisa Rofel and Chris Berry (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 15-48.

[169] For an elaborate discussion on the complex relationship between the new documentary filmmakers and the state media system, see Matthew David Johnson, "'A Scene beyond Our Line of Sight': Wu Wenguang and New Documentary Cinema's Politics of Independence," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 47-76. Chris Berry, "Independently Chinese: Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue and Chinese Documentary," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, 109-122.

independence and realistic rhetoric were considered to be different interpretations of the *status quo* in China and as having the potential for dissidence.[170] In this subchapter, putting aside the labels of "independent" and "underground " I will discuss Wu Wenguang's three early documentaries, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), *Jianghu: Life on the Road* (1999), and *Dance with Farm Workers* 与民工一起跳舞 (2001, co-authored by Wen Hui 文慧 [b. 1960]，Song Dong 宋冬[b. 1966]，and Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍 [b. 1963]) in the context of the changing urban-rural relationship and the socioeconomic reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s in China. Although the main characters in the films (migrant artists in *Bumming in Beijing,* big top players in *Jianghu,* and peasant workers in *Dance with Farm Workers*) are from different social groups, they would have encountered each other casually in the rapidly developing cities (in this case, Beijing), just as Wu had encountered the big top troupe. The social groups faced similar issues in life owing to the extensive urban-rural transformation and much social mobility. They also shared similar living spaces, which became known collectively as the urban-rural fringe zone 城乡结合部. Through Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing*, I will explore the relationship between two kinds of *mangliu* (literally, blind floaters), migrant artists as well as peasant workers, whose life trajectories became entangled. With an examination of his visual documentary *Jianghu* and textual documentary *Xianchang* book series, I will discuss how Wu Wenguang's aesthetic of *xianchang*（being on the scene）was in accordance with his self-identification as a blind floating artist who attempted to integrate into the community of peasants-turned-blind-

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[170] See Bérénice Reynaud, "Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera: The Emotional Vagabonds of China's New Documentary," *Senses of Cinema 28* (October 2003), accessed May 11, 2020, http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/chinas_new_documentary/. Charles Leary, "Performing the Documentary, or Making It To the Other Bank," *Senses of Cinema 27* (July 2003), accessed May 11, 2020, http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/performing_documentary/.

floaters and distance himself from documentary making itself. Based on art historian and critic Claire Bishop's concept of *delegated performance*, an analysis of the collaborative piece *Dance with Farm Workers* will shed light upon the relationship between *mangliu* artists and peasant workers in the collaborative performance project. On the surface, this relationship seemed harmonious and the peasants seemed to be collaborative performers in the artists' works. In reality, however, the relationship still followed the hierarchy of the free labour market.

Two Types of *Mangliu*: Migrant Artists and Peasant Workers

In the winter of 1988, the *China Art Newspaper* 中国美术报, the most significant art publication tracing the new art scene in 1980s China, published a special report on migrant artists living in Beijing. Written by Chen Weihe 陈卫和, an art critic and then editor of the newspaper, the article was entitled "Story of Beijing *Mangliu* Artists." (Fig. 2.1.1) It was the first article on *mangliu* artists that emerged on the Chinese art scene in the late 1980s. Most of these artists were originally from the provinces and had graduated from art colleges in Beijing, such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, and the Art Department of Beijing Normal University. They refused to accept a job with the government because they did not want to return to their home provinces as they would have been required to do after graduation. For them, remaining in Beijing meant having more opportunities to fulfill their artistic dreams. However, breaking away from the state system deprived these artists of a stable income, housing, and health insurance. Chen Weihe equated these young Chinese artists, who lived in the northwestern suburbs near the Haidian District, with their counterparts living in the SoHo District in New York. Chen decided that *mangliu,*

which means blind floaters, was a more appropriate term than *artist* to describe the floating state of these Chinese Bohemians. According to Chen, the appellation *mangliu* was first used by Wen Pulin 温普林 (b. 1957). As a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Wen himself was a *mangliu* and the "leader" of the *mangliu* artist group.[171] Unlike in New York's SoHo, where artists could rent abandoned industrial buildings and live a relatively cosmopolitan existence, in the "Beijing SoHo," an urban-rural fringe zone, peasants offered accommodations to poor artists for low rents. This shared renting and living situation generated a bond between the Beijing *mangliu* artists and their peasant landlords and neighbors.

Interestingly, Wen Pulin was not the first one to use the term *mangliu*. It was an abbreviation of the term *mangmu liudong* 盲目流动 (meaning blindly floating) that first appeared in an official order issued by the Government Administration Council in 1953 to control the blind rush of peasants into the city.[172] The word *mangliu* described peasants who flocked to the city in search of better economic opportunities but did not have living or work permits. The *hukou* system (Household Registration System) was gradually established during the first decade after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Under this strict system, rural residents with an agricultural *hukou* were less favored by state welfare than urban residents with a non-agricultural *hukou.* Transferring the *hukou* was rigorously

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[171] Chen Weihe, "Beijing *Mangliu* Artists," 北京盲流艺术家印象, *China Art Newspaper* 中国美术报, no. 44, 1988. A more detailed report on the life *mangliu* artists in the early 1990s, see Wang Jifang 汪继芳, *Last Romance of the Twentieth Century: Life of Freelance Artists in Beijing* 二十世纪最后的浪漫——北京自由艺术家生活实录(Harbin: Northern Art and Literature Press, 1999).

[172] Government Administration Council, "Directions Regarding Dissuading Peasants from Flowing Blindly into the Cities," in Jason Young, *China's Hukou System: Markets, Migrants and Institutional Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 37.

restricted, and the domestic movements of people were highly controlled.[173] Therefore, the existence of *mangliu* can be seen as a consequence of the inferior status of rural residents in the urban-rural binary *hukou* system. Ironically, in the late 1980s, nearly thirty years after the establishment of the *hukou* system, the term *mangliu* again became extensively used in social and political discourse. With the loosened restrictions on movements from the rural to the urban sectors, peasants were allowed to obtain temporary residency and work permits in the city. However, despite the gradually loosened *hukou* system, peasant workers with an agricultural *hukou* status could not gain access to the same benefits that urbanites had. Because the residency and work permits were quite limited, a number of rural migrants who had rushed to the city drifted around illegally in the suburbs. Jobless and sometimes even homeless, they were regarded as *mangliu*, or blind floaters; the term had become a discriminatory appellation associated with beggars, gangsters, and vagrants.[174]

Simultaneously with the peasant-worker rush in big cities such as Beijing, some artists from the provinces abandoned their stable but tedious jobs and drifted in Beijing. Like the art graduates who did not want to return to provincial cities, these provincial artists labeled themselves *mangliu* to distinguish themselves from artists who worked in the state system and made compromises with the *status quo*. This self-identification reveals the apparent connection between the two migrant groups of peasant workers and drifting artists. The label had different connotations for each group, however. When it was used to describe

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[173] For an overview of the *hukou* system in China, see Jason Young, *China's Hukou System: Markets, Migrants and Institutional Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27-64. For the gap between people living in the city and the countryside in Mao's China, see Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[174] For extensive reports on the so-called peasant worker rush and *mangliu* which emerged in the late 1980s, see Ge Xiangxian 葛象贤 and Qu Weiying 屈维英, *The Peasant Worker Rush in China: Truth about Mangliu* 中国民工潮：盲流真相录 (Beijing: China Foreign Trade Press, 1990); Dong Jie 董杰, *Mangliu, Mangliu* 盲流盲流 (Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1990).

the peasant workers, it was a label of discrimination, but for the artists, who used the term to describe themselves with a sense of pride and some self-mockery, it was a way of distinguishing themselves from artists in the state system and displaying their bond with their peasant worker neighbors. In *Bumming in Beijing*, photographer Gao Bo expressed pride in being a *mangliu* artist. He said,

> I enjoy being a *mangliu* because I can photograph what I like. A better word for *mangliu* in English is freelancer. *Mangliu* is the official term, but I prefer being called a freelancer. I hope I can always be a freelancer photographer, photographing what I like and care. A *mangliu* is someone who tries to do what he or she wants.[175]

It is worth noting that, in *Bumming in Beijing*, peasant workers looked for temporary employment in the regular labour market, whereas self-employed *mangliu* artists (Gao Bo and Zhang Dali in particular) sought opportunities to hold exhibitions in the private apartments of foreign diplomats and sell works to foreign collectors who sympathised with the artists' difficult situation (Debevoise 2014). Both the *mangliu* peasant workers and the *mangliu* artists were subject to the vagaries of commercialisation and the market economy.[176]

Two of the artists featured in Chen Weihe's article were Zhang Dali 张大力 (b. 1963) and Mou Sen 牟森 (b. 1963), and they were also among the five dreamers in Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing.* After Zhang Dali graduated from the Department of Book Design at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, he rented a place in a northeastern suburb of Beijing and began his experimentation with ink painting (Fig. 2.1.2 and Fig. 2.1.3). He shared the small

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[175] Wu Wenguang, "Bumming in Beijing" 流浪北京, *October* 十月, no. 2 (1994): 84.

[176] For a comprehensive analysis of artists' negotiation with the market, see Jane Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014).

room with Mou Sen, a graduate of the Chinese Department of Beijing Normal University, who was fascinated with modern Western theater and planned to organize the first avant-garde theatrical troupe in China. According to the official policy at the time, college graduates were supposed to go back to the place from which they had come and take a job designated by the local government. Graduates like Zhang Dali and Mou Sen, who remained in big cities like Beijing, could not have a Beijing *hukou,* which meant they would face difficulties in finding a job and accommodations. Neither Zhang nor Mou had a "decent" job or stable salary, and their bohemian lifestyle and friend circles made the locals suspicious. Most inner-city landlords were reluctant to rent houses to *mangliu* artists. As Wu Wenguang recounted in showing *mangliu* artists' experiences in and strategies for renting a living space in his notes on *Bumming in Beijing*, "Peasants are eager for money. When they see money, they lose their morals. Only peasants are willing to rent a place to you without checking your identity card."[177]

One can easily associate these disparaging comments on the nature of the peasant with Lu Xun's reflections on the national character in the wake of the New Cultural Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, which I mentioned in the introduction. In his early short stories about the tragic situation in the countryside, peasants epitomized the weakness of the Chinese national character and needed to be awakened by the elite intellectuals who wanted to enlighten the nation.[178] Ironically, the *mangliu* artists' critique on the weaknesses of the peasant was not intended to help the peasant combat ignorance. Instead, the artists took

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[177] Wu Wenguang, "Bumming in Beijing," 87.

[178] Lu Xun's most renowned short novels on peasantry and countryside include *Medicine* 药 (1919), *Hometown* 故乡 (1921), *The True Story of Ah Q* 阿Q正传 (1921), and *Blessing* 祝福 (1924), see Lu Xun, *Call to Arms* 呐喊 (Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1973); Lu Xun, *Wandering* 彷徨 (Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1973).

advantage of the peasant's shortcomings. Suburban peasants were the main ones who gave floating artists a chance to stay at the edge of the big city. In the documentary *Bumming in Beijing*, photographer Gao Bo 高波 (b. 1964, Fig. 2.1.4), one of the five featured artists, talked about his secret ways of gaining the trust of a landlord and landlady, such as being polite and respectful to the landlord's family and sharing fruits and snacks with the landlord's grandchildren. Gao said, "you should be down to earth and think of yourself as the same kind of person….When you have a good relationship with the landlord, he will save you from trouble. If the landlord is willing to say nice things about you, the police will not bother to check your identity card and residential permit."[179] In order to survive, the highbrow *mangliu* artists had to put aside sarcastic words and enlightenment projects and learn how to get along well with the suburban peasants.

The communities on the northwestern edge of the city where *mangliu* artists resided were also occupied by another social group, the peasant workers. They were shoemakers, babysitters, cotton fluffers, night market vendors, and scavengers, who had left the land for the city and pushed themselves into the free labor market.[180] In *Bumming in Beijing*, the woman writer Zhang Ci 张慈 (b. 1962, Fig. 2.1.5), who abandoned her job as the editor of a literary magazine, shared a courtyard with some *mangliu* peasants from Anhui Province. They treated her well, and she even developed a sisterhood relationship with a fourteen-year-old girl who had come to Beijing to help her brother, a cotton fluffer, take care of his baby. Zhang said, "these people's occupations are degraded by Beijingers, but I get along with them pretty well. They helped me a lot, bringing me hot water and helping me do laundry.

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[179] Wu Wenguang, "Bumming in Beijing," 88.

[180] Ibid., 83.

They are honest and thoughtful. These are virtues I hardly ever see in my intellectual friends.[181] Zhang viewed the *mangliu* peasant workers as morally superior to the elite intellectuals she knew. The two divergent social groups, which would not have been likely to mingle with each other under different circumstances, shared not only the same appellation (though the connotations were different) but also physical living space and entangled life experiences.

Being on the Scene: *Jianghu: Life on the Road*

The story I mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter is included in Wu Wenguang's book *Jianghu Report*, based on the documentary *Jianghu: Life on the Road.* [182] From the summer of 1998 to the spring of 1999, Wu traveled with a big top group led by a father-and-son duo, Old Liu and Young Liu, who had persuaded fellow villagers from Henan Province to join their troupe. Wu filmed their shows, which were usually put on in city suburbs in northern China, as well as the events of their everyday lives (Fig. 2.1.6). Wu's first encounter with the troupe was a chance meeting, but his decision to film the troupe's existence several years later was somehow inevitable. Wu was a veteran *mangliu*, living as such since the mid-1980s, so life on the road was not new to him. After he graduated from Yunnan University (Chinese Literature Department), Wu taught at a junior high school in Kunming. In 1983, Wu abandoned his job and went to the northwestern province of Xinjiang. He thought that a romantic, adventurous grand tour would refine his writing, and he chose Xinjiang, in the desolate borderland, as the best place to distance himself from the restraints

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[181] Ibid., 89.

[182] Wu Wenguang, *Janghu Report: A Field Research on A Big Top Troupe* 江湖报告：一个以大棚为个案而展开的田野调查 (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2001).

of the state system. The sudden leave-taking astonished the leaders and Wu's colleagues at the high school because it was uncommon at that time to completely give up an official work contract before finding an alternative way to make a living.[183] Wu stayed in Xinjiang for two years and then returned to Kunming in 1985. There he joined a television network and worked as a TV news journalist, a job that could be seen as a temporary return to the state system. In the spring of 1988, he again pushed himself into an uncertain existence and settled in suburban Beijing. It was in this year that he started the *Bumming in Beijing* project.

The filming of his peers, the young provincial artists struggling in the capital city, was a reflection of his experience as a *mangliu* artist, whereas the tracking of the lives of big top performers was a record of a group of young *mangliu* with rural backgrounds. Most of the peasants who flocked to big cities ended up being peasant workers. However, big top performers like the ones Wu found near the Fourth Ring Road in Beijing wandered from city to city and set up a tent at the margin of each new city they visited. They performed mostly for peasant workers who resided in the area. Despite the constant mobility of their lives, these big top performances were no different from peasant workers. The title of Wu's documentary, *Jianghu,* is the most appropriate term for describing the space in which these people all lived. Wu chose this title because it was frequently used in conversations among the big top troupe members.[184] The two Chinese characters mean "river" and "lake," respectively, but metaphorically they refer to a social space outside the established system, a grey zone that is chaotic yet has its own rules. As Wu Wenguang wrote, people often come across this word in martial arts fiction, but in reality, 'going into *Jianghu*' indicates an alternative from the

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[183] Zhu Xiaoyang 朱晓阳, "*Mangliu* China" 盲流中国, *Chinese Writers* 中国作家, no. 4 (1987): 156-157.

[184] Wu Wenguang, "Film the Big Top Troupe," 236.

orthodox lifestyle. [185] (Fig. 2.1.7) In this sense, both Wu, as a *mangliu* artist, and the big top troupe, as wandering performers, were living in the same *Jianghu,* so it was likely that they would meet.

Years after completing *Bumming in Beijing*, Wu Wenguang began to reflect on the way he made documentaries. He felt embarrassed to admit that even though the film, to a large extent, documented the actual lives of five *mangliu* artists, some of the scenes had been "directed" (i.e., set up) by Wu himself. For example, Wu had asked Zhang Ci to act out a normal day in her life in Beijing, washing her face, brushing her teeth, and doing laundry(Fig. 2.1.8). By the time he was thinking about doing the *Jianghu* project, Wu had realized that asking the protagonists to "pose" for him resulted in a reenactment of life rather than a life in progress. He also found that although he had broken away from the official television network and was making his own documentaries, he was still subconsciously tied to the conventional methods employed in TV documentaries (*dianshi zhuantipian* 电视专题片). He regretted that he had missed a number of spontaneous yet exciting scenes because he was not prepared to capture them.[186]

When Wu filmed Old Liu's big top troupe, he changed the methods of documentation he had used in *Bumming in Beijing.* Instead of organizing a team and distributing tasks to his assistants, he and his only assistant, Su Ming, took turns filming the troupe, and this meant there was only one person involved with the troupe at a time. Wu lived with the troupe, ate

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[185] Wu Wenguang, "Record the Big Top Troupe: Live in *Jianghu*," 纪录大棚：活在江湖, *Book Town* 书城, no. 7 (1999): 30.

[186] Wu Wenguang, "A Review of My Previous Documentaries" 我看我以前的纪录片, in *Camera Lens Is My Eye*, 223.

with them, traveled with them, and slept at night in the big top as they did.[187] Instead of asking the protagonists to act out their lives in front of the camera and making them answer questions framed in advance, he recorded events as they were happening and held the camera in hand whenever possible. That is to say, Wu prepared himself for the life stories that happened spontaneously rather than recreating stories that had already taken place. Having abandoned heavy professional equipment, he and Su Ming used only a small portable camera, which was less visible and intrusive. To Wu Wenguang, filming a documentary was now no longer an undertaking for which he would choose a topic like a hunter looking for prey. Instead, Wu considered his portal camera a pen with which he made a visual diary.[188] He wandered around and immersed himself in the big top troupe, not as a cameraman or film director but as a *mangliu*, or blind floater.

As time went on, it was not important to Wu whether footage could be edited into a complete documentary after the filming was done. It *was* important that he or his assistant be on location during the whole process. As Zhang Zhen stated, Wu's method of documentation exemplified the concept of *xianchang,* or being on the scene in terms of both time and space. It is a characteristic that can also be found in many other artworks created in 1990s China by underground artists in the Yuanmingyuan area and the Beijing East Village,[189] who emerged

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[187] Wu Wenguang, "Record the Big Top Troupe: How I Started" 纪录大棚：拍摄是怎么开始的, *Book Town* 书城, no.6 (1999): 28.

[188] Wu Wenguang, "DV: Individual Filmmaking" DV: 一个人的影像，in *Camera Lens Is My Eye*, 260. For an English translation of the essay, see Wu Wenguang, "DV: Individual Filmmaking," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: for the Public Record*, eds. Lisa Rofel and Chris Berry (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 49-54.

[189] Zhang Zhen, "Transfiguring the Postsocialist City: Experimental Image-Making in Contemporary China," in *Cinema at the City's Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*, eds. Yomi Braester and James Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 108. A detailed analysis of the concept *Xianchang* in film practices in 1990s China, see Luke Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private': Chinese Documentary and the Logic of Xianchang," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record,* eds. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 177-194.

several years after the immigrant artists featured in *Bumming in Beijing.*[190] Wu not only put emphasis on being on the scene in his documentary practice, but he also created an anthology of writings about being on the scene in a series of books entitled *Xianchang* (three volumes in total). In the postscript of the first volume, Wu Wenguang wrote,

> The series of books is about what is happening in the fields of art, literature, theater, film, and music at present in China. It is about the authors, their projects, and the events of their lives. The title, *Xianchang,* means "in the present tense" and "on the scene." In this work, *xianchang* consists of the backgrounds of the documentaries; the textual materials, work logs, and photos used during filming; and interviews of the filmmakers. All these materials are sorted out and archived, as one would do in post-production editing, and presented as Archive I, Archive II, and so on … in the series.[191]

The authors included in the *Xianchang* series were mostly underground visual artists, playwrights, musicians, and writers. For example, the first volume includes performance pieces of the East Village artist Zhu Ming 朱冥 (b. 1972) and the script for the film *Xiao Wu* 小武 (1998) by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 (b. 1970), who emerged as an underground filmmaker. The second volume contains an interview with the independent documentary maker Du Haibin 杜海滨 (b. 1972).[192] Most of these artists were *mangliu*, like Wu Wenguang himself. The *Xianchang* series is like a documentary in words and forms an archive of the *mangliu* art

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[190] For practices of East Village artists, see Wu Hung, *Rong Rong's East Village* (New York: Chambers Fine Arts, 2003).

[191] Wu Wenguang, "Xianchang: A Book Series about the Way of Documenting" 现场：和纪录方式有关的书, in *Xianchang* 现场, vol. 1, ed. Wu Wenguang (Tianjin: Tianjin Social Science Press, 2000), 274-275.

[192] The book series includes three volumes in total. See Wu Wenguang, ed., *Xianchang*, vol. 2 (Tianjin: Tianjin Social Science Press, 2000). Wu Wenguang, ed., *Xianchang*, vol.3 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005).

scene. It can also be seen as a complement to Wu Wenguang's own documentary film practices.

The first and second volumes were published around the time at which *Jianghu* was released. The first volume includes a chapter containing statements from eight people in the big top troupe who were responsible for different tasks. The statements were transcribed and edited by Wu Wenguang from interviews that he conducted. The performers and gofers talked about their families, what they did before joining the troupe, and their work and experiences in the troupe, including a great many details and short anecdotes. (Fig. 2.1.9) All these statements, together with Wu's production log, were included in *Jianghu Report*. Wu called it a fieldwork report or a case study of the big top troupe.

Interestingly, the archive with the troupe members' statements is set off from the other archives in the series (most of the others concern *mangliu* artists' practices), but it does not seem to be inharmonious with the other archives. For instance, in the second volume, Archive 10 features independent documentary maker Du Haibin. It includes a review of Du's *Along the Railway* 铁路沿线 (2000), which is about peasant vagrants living along the railway tracks in Baoji, Shaaxin Province; a script based on the documentary; footage not included in the documentary; and an interview with Du Haibin conducted by Wu Wenguang. This archive can be seen as a documentary of a *mangliu* documentary maker. Wu's deliberate arrangement of the archive indicates that he wanted to find the characteristics shared by the person documenting the *mangliu* and the *mangliu* that were being documented, which would reveal the similarities between them.

Showing the similarities between the poor but elite *mangliu* artists and the peasant wanderers would be in parallel with Wu's attempt to be present with his grassroots *mangliu*

counterparts as closely as possible. In his manifesto-like essay "DV: Individual Filmmaking," Wu wrote about his experience of filming the big top troupe. One evening, after three days of negotiation with the local government, the troupe was finally allowed to set up their tent and perform in a small town in Shanxi Province, so they decided to have a celebration. Wu bought pork from a market and cooked his best dish, braised pork, for the troupe. The stove and cooking pot were set up close to the stage, where the singers and dancers were performing vigorously to please the local peasants (Fig. 2.1.10). Loud singing and laughing mixed with the delicious aroma of the pork dish. With a spoon in one hand and a camera in the other, Wu experienced a most incredible moment: He was both the cameraman of a documentary team and a participant in the troupe, both documenter and documented.[193]

During his long journey with the troupe, Wu Wenguang frequently reflected on his identity in the troupe. As time went on, he felt less and less as if were carrying out a documentary project. He became more and more distant from the documentary making itself.[194] This development resulted from his endeavor to stay "in the present tense" and "on the scene." The state of *xianchang* motivated him to put aside the explicit goal of making a documentary and focus mainly on documenting as an action. His resistance to the so-called professional method of documentation and his insistence on using "amateur" methods show Wu's inclination to de-intellectualize his documentary practices.[195] Staying with the troupe

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[193] In his introductory essay on Wu Wenguang's documentary practice, Chris Berry also mentioned this cooking scene. He writes, "Through the DV practice Wu becomes one with his subjects, and they become one with him. He cooks for them, and they eat what he cooks, incorporating it into their very bodies as they come on- and offstage from their performances. At the same time, as he hands food around, Wu also hands his camera around, and the subjects become the filmmakers, and the filmmaker becomes the subject." See Chris Berry, "Wu Wenguang: An Introduction," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1 (Autumn, 2006): 133-136.

[194] Wu Wenguang, "DV: Individual Filmmaking," 260.

[195] For discussion on the amateur quality in Wu Wenguang and his contemporaries' practices, see Yiman Wang, "The Amateur's Lightning Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist China," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 58, no.4 (Summer 2005): 16-26.

also distanced Wu from the circle of elite *mangliu* artists. During the day, he was surrounded by the troupe members' coarse Henan dialects, and at night, he was surrounded by the smells of wild grass and sweaty feet of the young men sleeping next to him. He wrote, "Beijing is so remote. Those art objects are so far away."[196]

Cooperative Performer or Wage Laborer? *Dance with Farm Workers*

On the east side of the Fourth Ring Road, there is a place called Dongbalizhuang 东八里庄. The name means a village eight *li* (*li* is a unit of length; one *li* equals five hundred meters) from Chaoyang Gate 朝阳门, which was formerly the east city gate of Beijing. The village was in an ordinary rural area outside the capital city before the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s, the Dongbalizhuang area became the site of the Beijing No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3 Cotton Factories, which formed one of the largest state-owned textile factories in China. Building the mills was part of the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957), an economic policy carried out by the Chinese government with the goal of establishing an industrial base for a new era. In addition to the factory buildings, residential homes, leisure facilities, and health clinics were built for approximately 10,000 textile workers.

Forty years after making room for national industrialization, in the 1990s, in the wake of a massive wave of urbanization, a plan was drawn up to make this area part of the new Beijing Central Business District. The cotton factories were incorporated into the Beijing Cotton Textile Group in 1997 and had to move to the Shunyi District, a more remote

196 Wu Wenguang, "DV: Individual Filmmaking," 257-258.

suburban area in northeastern Beijing.[197] The land on which the buildings of the No. 3 Cotton Factory had been built was sold to a real estate company affiliated with the state-run China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and was called COSRED (COSCO Real Estate Development). The real estate company intended to demolish the old cotton factory buildings and develop commodity housing branded Ocean Paradise 远洋天地 to meet the increasing demands of new white-collar urbanites. At the suggestion of the HOK architectural firm, the Ocean Paradise planners decided that instead of tearing down the last Cotton Factory building remaining, they would transform it into a non-profit art space (Fig. 2.1.11). It became the East Modern Art Center 远洋艺术中心 and was intended to give promising but unknown artists opportunities to display their works. This charitable move would definitely improve COSRED's public image and enrich its company culture. Also, urban white-collar professionals would be attracted to art events held at the center, and this might encourage them to buy housing nearby.[198]

The idea of transforming an abandoned factory building into an art space was then new in China; the East Modern Art Center can be seen as a precursor of the art spaces in the 798 Art District. The COSRED planners decided to invite artists and journalists to a salon in the partially reconstructed factory space to discuss how to run such a space and show them the blueprint for reconstruction by the American-trained architect Yung Ho Chang 张永和 (b. 1956). Among the invited artists were Wu Wenguang and his wife, avant-garde

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[197] For the historical change of Dongbalizhuang, see Hou Xiaochen 侯晓晨, "The History of Dongbalizhuang" 东八里庄的前世今生, *Chaoyang History* 朝阳兰台, no. 8 (2017).

[198] See Li Ming 李明 and Xu Qian 许谦, *Ocean Ideal: A Review of East Modern Art Center* 远洋理想：远洋艺术中心回顾集（Beijing: Writers' Publishing House, 2004), 19. This book is an elaborate archive of the development of the East Modern Art Center. Also see Sasha Su-Ling Welland, "Ocean Paradise," *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2007): 419-435.

choreographer Wen Hui, and artist couple Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen. After seeing the rough plans for the reconstructed interior floor and walls, the four artists proposed that a collective art project be exhibited in the building before the interior furnishing was completed. The project, entitled *Dance with Farm Workers* 和民工跳舞, was a cooperative work between professional dancers from the Living Dance Studio Beijing 北京生活舞蹈工作室, which was established by Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang in 1994, and peasant workers working in Beijing. Wen Hui was mainly responsible for the choreography, and Song Dong and Xin Xiuzhen for the installations. Wu filmed the nine days of rehearsal and the final performance, which was open to the public. Wu's first documentary, as discussed above, was *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers,* a film about the entanglement of the *mangliu* artists who were his peers with the urban-rural fringe zone and its *mangliu* peasant workers. His second documentary, *Jianghu: Life on the Road,* was a live recording of Wu's involvement in the wandering life of a group of *mangliu* peasants. The documentary *Dance with Farm Workers* (2001), which was shown at the 52nd Berlin International Film Festival, recorded the collaboration between peasant workers and contemporary artists in a live performance.

During the nine days of rehearsal, Wu asked the COSRED staff to recruit thirty peasant construction workers who were originally from impoverished villages in Sichuan Province. He paid them 30 RMB a day for performing for four hours in the afternoon. In the beginning, the peasant workers and the professional dancers were asked to stand in a circle holding hands and introduce themselves. Each of them shouted out his or her name, and the others repeated it (Fig. 2.1.12). Wu also asked them to play children's games and run through the empty, dusty industrial space. When Wu and Wen Hui found that one of the participating workers could sing Sichuan folk songs well, they let him sing, and the others join in after

him. The peasant workers were also instructed to perform more complex movements in pairs. For example, two members were asked to lean against each other's backs and lift each other's weight.(Fig. 2.1.13) All of these sharing activities helped the participants to become comfortable and relaxed with each other gradually.

In the following days, they were asked to march together and, at the same time, push their way forward through the crowd as if they were hustling along to catch a train or bus. They also ran together from one side of the building to the other, looking up in the same direction as if a train were arriving at a station (Fig. 2.1.14). These movements alluded to the migrant workers' floating state of life. This was especially the case with the hectic scene at a big city train station during the Chinese New Year when peasant workers rushed to return to their home villages for family reunions. Other movements choreographed by Wu and Wen included rolling used oil drums and throwing bricks, as peasant workers usually did at a construction site. As Wen Hui said in an interview after the final performance,

> There is something special about their bodies; they have a unique energy that is natural but powerful. They ran and rolled the oil drums, showing their everyday status. I believe these movements can also be considered to be choreographic performances, which have the ability to move an audience.[199]

[199] "Dance with Farmer Workers" 与民工跳舞, an interview with Wen Hui by the TV program *Oriental Horizon* 东方时空 of China Central Television, accessed June 5, 2020, www.cctv.com/oriental/skzx/wdjm/20010916/1.html.

In the documentary, Wen Hui expressed a similar idea at the end of the first day of rehearsals. She thanked the peasant workers and praised them for their excellent performances. She said, "These are all your own movements. I cannot do them on my own."[200]

The emphasis on the uniqueness of the peasant workers' bodies and performances exemplifies Claire Bishop's definition of a *delegated performance* in the contemporary art world. A delegated performance is different from a performance by nonprofessionals in a theatrical and cinematic context in which hired performers act on the director's behalf. In a delegated performance, artists tend to "hire people to perform their own socioeconomic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) profession."[201] The intent is to draw the public's attention to specific, usually marginalized, social groups and address the sociopolitical issues that affect these people. The thirty peasant workers in Wu and Wen's group represented migrant construction workers in Beijing and, broadly speaking, this newly rising social group throughout China. Although it is unclear to what Wen Hui was referring when she spoke of "unique energy," it is clear that Wen had observed the group extensively; it was a special group who, with their hard physical labor, contributed greatly to the construction of a rapidly expanding metropolis. As Wu Wenguang said in an interview,

> The old factory, which will soon be transformed into an art center, is a quintessential symbol of a shift taking place in China. An old factory is being abandoned, and a new

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[200] Online stream of the documentary *Dance with Farm Workers*, accessed June 6, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV125411b7CG

[201] Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 219. The article was first published in *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 91–112.

> art space is moving in. This process reminds us that the peasant workers are the people who are actually the doers of the transformation.[202]

To Wu, peasant workers were the actually maker of the urbanization of the capital city. These people who constructed the renovated art center but were left usually behind the scenes should be invited to be the protagonists in the performance that would be put on in the art center.

Besides the rehearsal scenes, Wu also documented the breaks between scenes, when the peasant workers and the professional dancers, including several foreign exchange students, squatted next to each other and made small talk. The breaks had been set up deliberately to give the two distinct groups an opportunity to exchange life experiences with each other. In addition, after the afternoon rehearsals, Wu went with the participant workers to their living quarters. Wu filmed them catching the bus (an echo of the shoving movements in the performance), making fun of one other, joking about the foreign dancers, and eating dinner together at a small restaurant. The scenes were reminiscent of those from *Jianghu: Life on the Road* in that they were characterized by shaky camera movements, noisy streets, and unscripted live conversation. They showed Wu's desire to blend into the authenticity of the social group. Wu's *Dance with Farm Workers*, as Zhang Zhen put it,

> encapsulates Wu's attempt to close the gap between subject and object. Rather than posing as a disembodied voyeur, the filmmaker and his cameras here literally dance with the workers. The project tries to reconnect the intellectual and the masses, art,

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202 "Dance with Farm Workers," an interview with Wu Wenguang by the TV program *Oriental Horizon* of China Central Television, accessed June 5, 2020, www.cctv.com/oriental/skzx/wdjm/20010916/1.html.

> and life, for the purpose of forming a new alliance between these "opposites" to counter the hegemonic forces of globalization.[203]

One might ask whether these two "opposites" were really true allies that were "counter[ing] the hegemonic forces of globalization." One feature of a delegated performance is the employment relationship between artist and delegated performer. Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui had asked COSRED to recruit thirty peasant workers from the construction site. The pay they received was slightly higher than the amount they would have earned from doing construction work. In this employment relationship, the artistic team was the employer, COSRED was the human resource manager and sponsor, and the peasant workers were the employees. What made this employment relationship distinct from one between the typical construction worker and the real estate company was that the labor force had not been hired to make a profit for the employer but, rather, to fulfill the employer's (artist's) discursive demands. Also, as mentioned before, the peasant workers' job with the artistic team was not to perform what they did but who they were.

Indeed, the artistic team also wanted to address their moral concerns. In the documentary, when Wen Hui asked about the intentions in recruiting peasant workers to perform, she answered,

> We got interested in this old factory. Then we began to realize that it is related to our current environment. It has an intimate relationship with migrant workers in the city. Now so many houses are being built in Beijing. They all involve farmer construction workers. We never had a chance to come so close to you guys, to talk to you, to work

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[203] Zhang Zhen, "Transfiguring the Postsocialist City: Experimental Image-Making in Contemporary China," 109.

> with you. We asked all of you to come here because we felt that you guys were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but you are important to the changes taking place in Beijing. Without your work, the city could not be like it is. Therefore, we are trying to express what you want to express or want to say. We will only perform for one night, and there will be no tickets for sale. You can give us advice and tell us what you want to express so that more people will understand what you want. This is our goal.

As Wu Wenguang had done, Wen Hui was acknowledging the significant contribution the peasant workers had made to the urbanization of the capital city. She also aimed to make a public performance a platform on which participating workers could speak for themselves. However, her consistent use of "we" and "you" reinforced the distinction between the two groups, a distinction that this performance project had attempted to blur. If peasant workers were, as Wen stated, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, where was the artist group supposed to be? Were they able to make peasant workers' social demands seen and heard? After the long, passionate speech by Wen Hui, one young participating worker raised two questions:

> We work to make money, but some people do not want to pay us after we finish the work. Would this performance help us get the unpaid wages? We are required to get a residential certificate in Beijing. We all got it, but when the cops caught us, we showed him our certificates, but he tore them apart and told us to take the train and go home. What should we do when we have to deal with things like that? Beijing has already won the bid for the Olympics, so it will need more construction and more people like us. Why do they treat us so badly like this?[204]

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[204] The English translation of the conversation between Wen Hui and the young peasant worker is excerpted from the original subtitle of the documentary *Dance with Farm Workers*.

When the peasant worker addressed the crucial questions with which almost every migrant worker in Beijing was faced, Wen Hui had to respond honestly that she was not able to resolve these problems for the workers. Ironically, as a *mangliu* artist, Wen herself could not circumvent the second question the young peasant worker raised, which was the issue of residential permits in Beijing. When the peasant workers found that the artistic team could not change reality, the performance was no different for them than construction work. For the workers, the only concern left was whether they would be paid or not. In the documentary, some of the peasant workers expressed anxiety and even anger because they thought they might gain nothing after ten days' work. Wu Wenguang had to calm them down by increasing the daily payment by two RMB and promising that everyone would receive the agreed-upon payment.

In this sense, the artist was no different from the taskmaster. The relationship between the artists and the peasant workers was similar to any other relationship in the labor market. As Claire Bishop stated, the tendency toward delegated performances in the contemporary art world paralleled the managerial changes in the economy in the 1990s. With the growth of globalization, some companies began outsourcing non-core activities to other companies, especially to companies in developing countries. With the huge difference in wages, outsourcing served as a tool for maximizing profit.[205] In China, with the loosened household registration restrictions and the growth of urbanization, the domestic peasant workers were flocking to the big cities and were put into a position similar to that of precarious outsourced workers, doing dirty laborious jobs for minimum wages. For the workers in the *Dance with Farm Workers* project, the performance initially purported to address the socio-economic

[205] Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," 231.

issues affecting the peasant worker group; however, when the performers realized the performance could not bring them real change, the project was more like an outsourcing project arranged by the artistic team and the real estate company. For the artistic team, the collective presence of the peasant worker group, as the incarnation of the drastically developing urbanization, guaranteed the authenticity of the socioeconomic issues the artists aimed to explore. In this sense, the artistic team complied with the business logic of the outsourcing arrangement rather than challenged it. Consequently, the peasant workers were subject to double exploitation: economic exploitation, because they were working for the minimum wage, and symbolic exploitation, because the hiring of their bodies signified their humiliating socioeconomic status.

The final performance turned out to be a success and became a hot topic in art and press circles. Interestingly, the peasant workers seemed unaware of the power imbalance between the artistic team and themselves. In a TV show in which they appeared together with the artistic team, the participating workers revealed that they had great fun participating in the art project. Some of them even displayed newspaper and magazine articles on the project in a prominent position in their living rooms. This indicated that it was an honor for them to be part of the cultural event, which was a sensation in the capital city.[206] Ironically, in the work *Bumming in Beijing, mangliu* artists, who broke free from the state system and struggled to find opportunities in the inceptive art market, had empathy for peasant workers who were vulnerable to the unpredictability of the free labour market. In *Dance with Farm Workers*, however, the artists went along with the real estate company's rules of outsourcing

[206] Lu Yinyin 陆茵茵，"What is Art for? Dance with Farmer Workers and the Third Granny" 艺术到底有什么用？和民工，和三奶奶跳舞, in the official website of *Southern Weekly* 南方周末, accessed June 11, 2020. http://www.infzm.com/content/109934.

management to which the peasant workers were subject and, at the same time, were on guard against the latent exploitation in their relationship with COSRED. Wu Wengguang and Wen Hui believed that COSRED had attempted to promote its public image in the name of art and felt that they had been exploited by the real estate company as vehicles for advertising. In the memoir, the then deputy general manager of COSRED and executive planning director of the East Modern Art Center condemned Wu Wenguang and his team for refusing to use the name of the real estate company as a sponsor, though the company had paid the wages for the peasant workers.[207]

Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui led the main performance, and the other couple, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, who seldom appeared during rehearsals, contributed installations to the project. For example, in the final public show, Song Dong situated a number of old-fashioned sewing machines in the middle of the factory space and asked the peasant workers to sew on old newspapers (Fig. 2.1.15). The sewing machines might have been a metaphor for the abandoned textile factory and the fading era of industrialization. However, the peasant workers treated the sewing simply as a job because the information the artist wanted to convey was too difficult to comprehend and not necessarily relevant to their life experiences. Song Dong, as a pioneer of video art in 1990s China, also projected his newly created video *Broken Mirror* 砸碎镜子（1999, Fig. 2.1.16）on a wall, and this might have been a reference to the pulling down of old houses and building of new ones during the growth of urbanization. Yin Xiuzhen installed a ladder by which the performers could reach the crossbeam of the building. It might have implied a further occupation of the interior space and strengthened the visual effect of the performance, but it was not embraced by the peasant

207 See Li Ming and Xu Qian, *Ocean Ideal: A Review of East Modern Art Center*, 33.

workers involved in the project. Compared with Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's distance from the peasant workers could be somehow explained by their different backgrounds. Unlike Wu and Wen, who were both *mangliu* artists, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen were Beijing natives. They could observe the peasant worker rush as a socioeconomic issue and attempt to bring the topic into their art practices. However, the lack of mutual life experiences made them more like outsiders to the peasant worker group. In his later projects, such as *Watching Films with Peasant Workers* (National Agricultural Museum, Beijing, 2003) and *Taking Photographs with Peasant Workers* (Guangdong Art Museum, 2003), Song Dong continued similar engagements with peasant workers. The underprivileged social group was more like a living installation inserted into the exhibition space than a group viewed by the artist as a real collaborator.[208]

To conclude, with the loosening of restrictions for Household Registration in the late 1980s and early 1990s in China, peasants flocked to major cities and became peasant workers in the free labor market. Meanwhile, some provincial artists, dissatisfied with their government-assigned jobs, moved to the art capital of Beijing to pursue their artistic careers as freelancers. The two different social groups shared the designation of *mangliu* (blind floaters) because of their similar floating situations in life. In *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers*, Wu Wenguang's contemporary *mangliu* artists' self-identification with the peasants-turned-blind-floaters differentiated them from their peers working in the state system. The two *mangliu* groups, both subject to precarious living and working conditions,

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[208] For an elaborate analysis of Song Dong's engagement with peasant workers, see Qian Gangnan 钱岗南, "One Can Only Liberate Oneself by Liberating Others: An Analysis of Peasant-Themed Artworks" 只有解放他者，才能最后解放自己：农民题材创作倾向的一种分析, *Literature and Art Studies* 文艺研究, no.7 (2007): 117-128. Gu Yi, "The 'Peasant Problem' and Time in Contemporary Chinese ArtAuthor(s)," *Representations*, no. 136 (Fall 2016): 54-76.

intermingled with each other and had empathy for each other. By the time Wu Wenguang had embraced his aesthetic of *xianchang* (being on the scene) in *Jianghu: Life on the Road*, he had become so immersed in the lives of his blind floater subjects that the filming process was not documentary making but rather part of his own life. For Wu, being present with the peasant wanderers also deintellectualized his documentary practices and even distanced him from the circles of elite *mangliu* artists. However, in the wake of neoliberal managerial reforms in the 1990s and 2000s in China, *mangliu* artists and *mangliu* peasants could not be true allies. *Dance with Farm Workers* provides a reflection on the utilization of peasant workers in a collaborative performance between artists and peasant workers. Wu Wenguang's recording of the project revealed the limits of artistic intervention in the peasant workers' real concerns and their compliance with the business logic of the labor market. In the guise of collaborative performers, peasant workers were nevertheless caught in a power relationship similar to the one between employer and wage laborer.

After the performance of *Dance with Farm Workers*, Wu Wenguang reflected on the cooperation between artists and peasants in this work. He felt a rupture between the artistic group and the peasant workers. The artist could neither help alleviate the peasant workers' crucial concerns nor convey ideas of social engagement to the participating peasant workers. Wu did not want to lose contact with the Sichuan peasant workers once the performance was over. Instead, he went to their home village and continued to film; this could be seen as a continuation of the *xianchang* esthetics deployed in *Jianghu: Life on the Road.* In 2005, Wu initiated the Village Documentary Project 村民影像计划, in which ten peasants were given a DV camera and invited to record the public and political life in their home villages. It was the first time that village life in China could be seen through the lens of the peasant rather than an

outsider artist. While continuing this project, Wu started the Folk Memory Project in 2010. He recruited amateur documentary filmmakers of the younger generation to go back to the countryside and investigate the Great Famine, a tragic event in the Mao period. The aim of the Project was to connect urbanized young people with the country's rural past in the new post-socialist period. I will examine this effort in the third chapter.

2.2. Whose Utopia: Cao Fei, the Village-in-the-City, and the Factory Fairytale in the Pearl River Delta

Cao Fei 曹斐 (b. 1978), one of the most prominent Chinese artists active on the global art scene, is known for her digital media art involving the urban youth culture of contemporary China. Her best-known works include the *COSPlayers* 角色系列 (2004),[209] which explores the anime subculture popular among urban youth in metropolitan Guangzhou, the city where she was born and raised, and *RMB City* 人民城寨 (2008),[210] an online virtual world inspired by the online video game *Second Life*. As one of the leading representatives of the young artist generation growing up after the Cultural Revolution, Cao did not experience rural life as Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong did. Wu Wenguang's blind floating life from a provincial city in the hinterland to the Beijing urban-rural fringe at the time of the peasant worker rush was also foreign to her. However, like her contemporaries, Cao Fei had witnessed the drastic urban transformation since her childhood. Located at the heart of the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone 珠江三角洲经济区, Cao's home city of Guangzhou has been on the front lines of the foreign trade and labor-intensive industries that have arisen since the reform and opening-up policies were put into place. It can be considered a good example of the Chinese urbanization process.

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[209] For an overview of Cao Fei's *COSPlayer* series, see Maya Kóvskaya, "Heroes of the Mundane: The Syncretic Imagination of Cao Fei," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 5, no. 4 (December 2006): 82-85.

[210] See Hu Fang and Cao Fei, eds., *RMB City: Cao Fei/ SL Avatar: China Tracy* (Guangzhou: Vitamin Creative Space, 2008) and the official website of RMB City project: http://rmbcity.com/

With her early piece *Imbalance 257* 失调257 (1999), made when she was still in her early years at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, she caught the attention of the Chinese curator Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 (b. 1963), who was based in France.[211] Her video piece is a semi-surrealistic documentary about her friends and classmates at the academy. It is made in a bold style inspired by Hong Kong commercial films and music for television. In Hou Hanru's eyes, Cao Fei's video represents "the life and imagination of her generation, who strive to create and promote a new identity in an effort to produce individual, original, and innovative thoughts and ways of life."[212] Hou brought Cao Fei to overseas art exhibitions and made her known as the representative of China's New New Human Beings 新新人类.[213]

Cao Fei's later projects after *Imbalance 257*, such as *San Yuan Li* 三元里 (2003, co-authored with Ou Ning 欧宁 [b. 1969]) and *Whose Utopia?* 谁的乌托邦 (2006), show that she was not satisfied with being labeled as the youth culture representative. *San Yuan Li* features the village-in-the-city 城中村, a unique urban pattern in Guangzhou, and *Whose Utopia?* is an investigative project about peasant workers in a light-bulb factory in Foshan 佛山, a provincial city adjacent to Guangzhou. The two pieces show that she makes attempts to step out of her own cultural circle and encounter what is behind the rapid growth of urbanization and industrialization in the Pearl River Delta. In this section, I will take these two works as examples to explore how Cao Fei, as a city-born-and-raised New New Human

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211 Hou Hanru 侯瀚如, "Cao Fei: A Cosplayer Recounts Alternative Histories" 曹斐：一个讲述另类历史的角色扮演者, *Contemporary Art and Investment* 当代艺术与投资, no. 12, (2007): 34-35.

212 Hou Hanru, "Private Politics: On Cao Fei's Works," 私：政治学：论曹斐的作品, *Art Archives* 美术文献, no. 2 (2013): 28.

213 Ibid.

Being, observes and understands the urban-rural context in her home city through lenses and texts.

San Yuan Li: Parallel Self-Organizing, Symphony of Village-in-the-City, and (Anti) Spectacle

San Yuan Li is a well-known site in the modern history of China. In 1841, the second year of the First Opium War, in a small village near Guangzhou city, the San Yuan Li incident occurred; it was a conflict between British troops, a local militia, and local residents. It was regarded in official history as the first triumph over imperialism in modern China. Today, north of the site, is located a memorial hall commemorating the victory of the local people at San Yuan Li. The site also serves as a patriotic educational base for primary and secondary school students in Guangzhou.[214] In the past thirty to forty years, the urban area of Guangzhou has sprawled extensively, and the villages on the fringes of the city have been swallowed up. Although the government has requisitioned farmland to build industrial complexes and new residential districts for the ever-growing population and masses of migrants, some of the residential areas of the villages have remained in place owing to unsuccessful negotiations between the government and the local villagers. One of the main reasons for this is that the government cannot afford to pay the high compensation required by the villagers. The main consequence of this is a unique, dual rural-urban context known as a village-in-the-city, a village physically surrounded by a city.[215] Deprived of their farmland

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[214] See Li Suimei李穗梅, ed., *Resistance to British Troops: the San Yuan Li Incident Memorial Hall* 三星旗下誓抗英：三元里抗英斗争纪念馆 (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1998).

[215] For a deep interpretation of village-in-the-city in China and its difference from "urban village" in the western context, see Him Chung, "Building an image of Villages-in-the-City: A Clarification of China's Distinct Urban Spaces," vol. 33, no. 2 (2010): 421-437.

and rural livelihood, residents (mostly peasants) of the village-in-the-city have to look for other ways to make a living. Many have chosen to rent their houses to migrant workers, most of whom also have a rural background. To maximize their profits, villagers in the village-in-the-city illegally extend the height and width of their houses, and this contributes to overcrowding. The distance between buildings can be less one meter[216] (Fig. 2.2.1).

This unique dual urban-rural phenomenon in Guangzhou is somewhat like the urban-rural fringe in Beijing, which I have discussed in the previous subchapter on Wu Wenguang. However, the difference between the two is obvious. Beijing's urban-rural fringe is inhabited by migrant artists as well as peasant workers, and both groups have similar living conditions and a comparable mindset of blind floating. Conversely, the village-in-the-city in Guangzhou is more an enclave for local village residents and peasant workers caught up in the mass migration. They are largely isolated from the life of ordinary Guangzhou citizens, let alone from involvement with the life of local New New Human Beings such as Cao Fei. It is interesting to speculate that Cao Fei's interest in subcultural groups revealed in her early works could somehow explain why she co-organized the *San Yuan Li* project with the cooperation of the U-thèque Organization 缘影会. The project was commissioned for the exhibition *Zone of Urgency* 紧急地带 (ZOU for short, curated by Hou Hanru). It was a group exhibition focusing on urban development in the Far East, held at the Arsenale, as part of the *50th Venice Biennale*. As an example of artistic field research on the village-in-the-city, the *San Yuan Li* project consists of a photo book and an experimental film with the same name.

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216 See Yanliu Lin, Bruno de Meulder and Shifu Wang, "Understanding the 'Village-in-the-city' in Guangzhou: Economic Integration and Development Issue and their Implications for the Urban Migrant," *Urban Studies*, vol. 48, no. 16 (2011): 3583-3598.

As Hou Hanru stated in the *San Yuan Li* book, to outsiders, the San Yuan Li enclave the place was a "shadowed zone of the brightly developing city."[217] The poorly constructed houses and illegal extensions made the place look ugly and gloomy. The low rent not only attracted migrant workers working in factories in Guangzhou but also drug dealers and addicts, prostitutes, and criminals, people on the fringes of society. The worrying law-and-order situation, poor infrastructure, and poor sanitation conditions made San Yuan Li a sticky subject for the government. For some time, local police even turned a blind eye toward wrongful acts in the village-in-the-city.[218]

The semi-unregulated place became more or less a small, separate realm with its own chaotic but self-contained system. It was precisely the uniqueness of the place that attracted local artists such as Cao Fei and the Guangzhou-born, transnational curator Hou Hanru. The main curatorial theme of the exhibition *Zone of Urgency* was to explore how certain communities deal with social conflict and urgency in urban development.[219] The unique village-in-the-city arrangement of San Yuan Li indicated that in order to survive the crisis resulting from urban sprawl, as Hou Hanru points out, locals were "forced to invent and promote alternative forms of activities in order to organize their own social structure."[220] Hou praised San Yuan Li as an innovative reaction to an urgent life situation, which was beyond the realm of normal urban and rural life. U-thèque, with Ou Ning and Cao Fei as its core members, was an independent organization for screening and producing films based in

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[217] Hou Hanru, "Introduction," in *The San Yuan Li Project in Z.O.U, the 50th Venice Biennale*, eds. Ou Ning and Cao Fei (Shenzhen: U-thèque Organization, 2003), 26.

[218] For a theoretical analysis and case studies of the village-in-the-city in Guangdong, see Stefan Al, ed., *Village in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press/ Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

[219] See Thomas Wulffen, "Zone der Dringlichkeit," *Kunstforum International*, no. 166 (2003): 146-165.

[220] Hou Hanru, "Introduction," 27.

Shenzhen and Guangzhou. It attracted digital video and photography enthusiasts, who formed a community for making videos and exchanging ideas; many of them later became involved in the *San Yuan Li* project.

Hou Hanru tries to associate this self-motivated social system of the village-in-the-city with contemporary Chinese artists' tendency to organize themselves. In the early stage of contemporary artistic life, institutions and markets for art had not yet been established. In this sense, U-thèque, under whose name the *San Yuan Li* project was undertaken, was analogous to the semi-independent village-in-the-city, as Hou Hanru emphasizes. This analog could also explain why Ou Ning and Cao Fei included a comprehensive "biography" of U-thèque at the end of the final book of photos of the *San Yuan Li* project, juxtaposing the group against the village-in-the-city.[221] In the previous subchapter, I analyzed the analogies between migrant artists like Wu Wenguang and migrant/peasant workers, who were faced with similar material circumstances. The association between the film group U-thèque and the village-in-the-city was more on a metaphorical level; as Hou Hanru pointed out, both entities were characterized by a spirit of "do-it-yourself."[222]

In the documentary, the camera focuses first on peasants working in a paddy in a village near Guangzhou and then moves to a newly built high-rise building along the bank of the Pearl River. (Figs. 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) Next, the urban railway is featured by views of the San Yuan Li station, and the camera then takes in the main street and back alley of the village-in-the-city. As the British film scholar Chris Berry argued, the *San Yuan Li* documentary

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[221] Ou Ning also mentioned the traditions of 社学 (literally, community schools) in San Yuan Li, an embodiment of the age-old spirit of cherishing the freedom and autonomy of San Yuan Li. See Ou Ning, "Shadows of Times," in *The San Yuan Li Project in Z.O.U, the 50th Venice Biennale*, eds. Ou Ning and Cao Fei (Shenzhen: U-thèque Organization, 2003), 41.

[222] Hou Hanru, "Introduction," 27.

intentionally stays distant from the esthetics of the New Documentary Movement, with Wu Wenguang as its representative figure. This indicates that the *San Yuan Li* team deviated from the realistic theory of the French film theorist André Bazin (1918–1958) and works by world-leading documentary makers such as Joris Ivens (1898–1989), Shinsuke Ogawa (1935–1992), and Frederick Wiseman (b. 1930). All of their ideas were taken as guiding principles by exponents of the New Documentary Movement.[223] Instead, the *San Yuan Li* team drew inspiration from another genre of documentaries, the City Symphonies films of the early 20th century. The genre is exemplified by films such as the groundbreaking *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by the great Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov (1896–1954) and *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) by the German director Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941).[224] In the book of photos of the *San Yuan Li* project, Ou Ning mentioned Dziga Vertov's influence on the *San Yuan Li* documentary:

> Early in the 20th century, when the first socialist megalopolises appeared, Dziga Vertov made the film *Man With a Movie Camera*, which takes one to all corners of the city of Moscow, immersing the audience in a deluge of life through the "Kino Eye," spontaneously chronicling the change of times in situ and showcasing an unrehearsed and impromptu documentary classic with great immediacy. [225]

The association between *Man with a Movie Camera* and the *San Yuan Li* documentary is prominent. The Kino Eye was a term for the mechanism of the movie camera and the novel

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[223] See Wu Wenguang's essays on the theorists and documentarists to whom he is indebted in *Camera Lens Is My Eye* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art and Literature Press, 2001).

[224] Chris Berry, "Imagining the Globalized City: Rem Koolhaas, U-thèque, and the Pearl River Delta," in *Cinema at the City's Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asian*, Yomi Braester and James Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 162.

[225] See Ou Ning, "Shadows of Times," 43.

editing techniques used for films, which expand the eye, or visual field, of human beings; it can be easily found in the *San Yuan Li* documentary. While Dziga Vertov observed newly built, socialist metropolitan Moscow, the *San Yuan Li* filmmakers investigated the shadow of the emerging megacity Guangzhou, which was the remnant of the vanishing village struggling against the fast development of urbanization. If Dziga Vertov, in *Man with a Movie Camera,* reveals his fascination with the liveliness and speed of metropolitan life, the *San Yuan Li* team is fascinated by the undercurrent of vitality and diversity flowing in the village-in-the-city.

Choosing the genre of City Symphonies, as Chris Berry pointed out, meant choosing a filmmaking tradition that was different from the realistic genre of Wu Wenguang and the New Documentary Movement. Wu Wenguang's esthetic sensibility of being on the scene 现场 is characterized by his direct involvement in his protagonist's life and the conversations taking place simultaneously between him (the cameraperson) and the protagonist. Wu's documentaries are loud and lively, and Wu (the cameraperson) is present in the scene. Conversely, the cameraperson for the experimental film of *San Yuan Li* avoids being involved in the life of the person being photographed. The cameraperson is silent and hidden behind the camera. Whereas in Wu Wenguang's documentaries, the camera is like an extension of Wu's body, in the *San Yuan Li* project the camera is more like a telescope, zooming away in distant scenes and skipping from one detail to another. A continuous narrative and conversation do not exist; instead, the viewer is immersed in a fast-paced montage of clipped scenes.

Choosing a different documentary-making tradition also indicated two different attitudes toward rural life in their time. The realist tradition used full-length shots to narrate a

complete story, whereas the City Symphonies genre used strings of snapshots, concentrating on the surface of life and the changes taking place. Wu Wenguang practiced his esthetics of being on the scene and trying to integrate himself into photography. Along with the people he photographed, he shared a life experience as a blind floater, be it a peasant turned big top singer or a peasant worker working as a movie extra. Conversely, although they had no life experiences that overlapped with their subjects, the emerging New New Human Being was attracted to the novelty of the life in the village-in-the-city epitomized by San Yuan Li. The place also had an alternative community life unfamiliar to ordinary urban people. As Cao Fei wrote in an essay included in the book of photos of the *San Yuan Li* project,

> This quaint village precinct has been likened to a hidden closet of the city. Its dank, seamy sidewalks and dark back lanes present an abstruse appearance, as if to remind the onlooker that [the village] holds age-old secrets known to very few burghers of the present day. The village has dissolved into obscurity because few people pause from their buzzing daily preoccupations to contemplate its significance or to savor its cultural heritage.[226]

The *San Yuan Li* team members were like a group of *flâneur* of the village-in-the-city, curiously wandering along main streets and back lanes, observing the texture of the newly extended historical buildings, and capturing the postures and facial expressions of passersby, but keeping a distance from the story behind the windows (Fig. 2.2.4). Cao Fei described the team's first observations in San Yuan Li in the same essay, and her words can be seen as literal descriptions of some of the scenes captured in the documentary:

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[226] Cao Fei, "A Wild Side of Guangzhou," in *The San Yuan Li Project in Z.O.U, the 50th Venice Biennale*, eds. Ou Ning and Cao Fei (Shenzhen: U-thèque Organization, 2003), 49.

> For just one day, we put on the hat of a temporary denizen and begin our sojourn into this ancient labyrinth, shrouded in misty fog. During our walk in the narrow back lanes and tight passages of the village, we sniffed the strong aroma of garlic and hot spicy soup and listened to the bellows of stall vendors peddling their wares, accompanied by wailing babies sitting close by. We gaped at the scampering rats and sneered at sewage dripping down the sides of the portico walls. Then there was the moment when we became aware of the inverse relationship between the availability of discount bargains and the shortage of space, between the galling brazenness of the place and a matching vitality.[227]

The first trip to the filthy back streets of San Yuan Li is described as an adventurous visit to a forgotten sensual world (Fig. 2.2.5). Cao Fei somehow dramatizes the looks, smells, and sounds of this miraculous place. Everything in it is so attractive to the team members that the scenery in the village-in-the-city of San Yuan Li becomes a spectacle. Nevertheless, the down-to-earth life of the area is nothing out of the ordinary. It looks extraordinary only because the diversity of this little enclave is so different from the environment with which Cao Fei and the other urbane team members are familiar. The surroundings in which the New New Human Beings have been immersed since childhood is epitomized by fast-growing commercialization and mass media technologies.[228] The ever-accumulating number of commercials, video games, and animations has caused them to become detached from the real state of everyday life.[229] Borrowing Guy Debord's term, we can say that the New New

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[227] Ibid., 49.

[228] See, Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Cao Fei in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist," in *Cao Fei: I Watch the Worlds Pass by*, ed. Daimler Art Collection (Cologne: Snoeck, 2015), 228.

[229] Jordan Strom's interview with Cao Fei, "Your Utopia Is Ours," accessed August 20, 2020, https://fillip.ca/content/your-utopia-is-ours.

Human Beings are living in a "society of the spectacle," in which authentic life is overwhelmed by commodities and the mass media.[230] Their living and visual experiences in this society of spectacle have largely shaped their visual language. When they confront the backwardness of the village-in-the-city, they are inclined to spectacularize and exoticize the subtle sensuality they experience in this place. Therefore, in their documentary, the captured scenes are like quick snapshots of a fragmented spectacle. They also form, in a sense, a paradoxical format with which to view the low life of the village-in-the-city, and this gives the documentary an atmosphere of alienation.

Whose Utopia: Factory Reality, the Peasant Worker Fairytale, and Portraits of Groups and Individuals

After the collective effort of the *San Yuan Li* project, Cao Fei continued to show interest in hybrid districts such as the village-in-the-city in her home city of Guangzhou and the broader Pearl River Delta. She also paid attention to the masses of peasant workers who were mostly invisible from the public eye yet were becoming the fundamental workforce of the rapidly developing, labor-intense processing industry in this region. In 2006, Cao Fei was invited to join in making the series What Are They Doing Here", sponsored by the Siemens Arts Program. Among the other participating artists were Yang Fudong 杨福东 (b. 1971), Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍 (b. 1963), and Chu Yun 储云 (b. 1966). Because the Siemens Arts Program emphasizes social engagement in contemporary art, the commissioned artists were asked to make artwork related to the Siemens' factories in the artists' residential cities in mainland China. Unlike the other participating artists, whose output videos for the project were

230 See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005).

conceptually charged,[231] Cao Fei chose to make a video that was more of a documentary because of the experience she had gained from the *San Yuan Li* project and to form a close connection with the factory on which her artwork was based.

The factory Cao Fei chose was Osram China Lighting Ltd. in Foshan, Guangdong Province, a subsidiary of Siemens. During the first stage of the project, Cao Fei asked the factory leader to distribute questionnaires to approximately five hundred workers, asking about their favorite song or their leisure activities, as a way to get to know the peasant workers. Because it was difficult to include all the workers in the project, Cao Fei chose twenty to thirty people based on their answers on the questionnaire. They were people she thought would be the most interesting collaborators and would make a close circle for the project. For the following half-year, Cao Fei organized workshops with her collaborators in the factory every one or two weeks. She first let the members of the interim group get to know each other better, and then she introduced contemporary artworks to them and even encouraged them to make their own artworks with materials from their everyday lives.[232] For example, she divided the thirty peasant workers into five groups and asked each group to make a collective work with a specific theme. The five themes were dream, ideal, hometown, reality, and future, all of which were relevant to the participants and could help the artist understand their inner worlds. As Cao Fei recalls,

> I thought hometown was very relevant since they were all migrant workers who had come from the countryside. The members of each [group] had to work together and

[231] For example, Yang Fudong's piece titled *Siemens "S10"* is an eight-minute single-channel video that features two female white-collar workers, whose uniforms are zipped together. The piece calls into question the concept of "subject" and the relationship between individuals under contemporary office working conditions.

[232] Cao Fei, "M+Stories, Cao Fei Interview," accessed August 24, 2020, https://stories.mplus.org.hk/en/transcript-cao-fei-interview/

> chose to use very different materials and methods. The dream group created a bed covered by a mosquito net, on top of which an employee who was good at painting did a traditional landscape picture; then they added a ladder extending upward to symbolize that dreams come from above. The reality group decided to do a five-minute performance in which they staged an act of daily life, including dialogues based around a computer and using a phone. The future group brought in boxes and bulbs and made a time machine. They also formed a musical band, the seven members of which had printed on their T-shirts the characters forming the sentence and song title "My Future Is Not a Dream."[233]

In this long process, the artist had a chance to understand each worker as an individual and could take in information about their rural backgrounds and unfulfilled dreams.[234]

Unlike the working method of the *San Yuan Li* project, Cao Fei did not start the filming process until the end of the six-month project. By that time, she had gradually developed an emotional connection with the peasant workers. She was allowed by the factory leader to film on the factory floor, which was rare, while the employees were working on the assembly line. Unlike the photographer in the *San Yuan Li* project, who acted like a *flâneur*, wandering through the dark lanes of the village-in-the-city and capturing fleeting novel scenes, the photographer for *Whose Utopia* worked in an unhurried manner. The three sections of the video, Imagination of Product, Factory Fairytale, and My Future Is Not a Dream, tell a story of the realities of and dreams of peasant workers in a multinational factory.

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[233] Cao Fei, "Whose Utopia," *Tate Etc*, Issue 33 (Spring 2015), accessed August 22, 2020, https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-33-spring-2015/whose-utopia.

[234] Cao Fei, "M+Stories, Cao Fei Interview."

The first section, Imagination of Product, shows the whole process of lighting production and distribution, from manufacturing and assembling tiny components to inspecting the quality of the product and, finally, packaging and dispatching the goods. The whole assembly line is conducted by numerous peasant workers. The fast pace used in this section could remind the viewer of the beginning of the *San Yuan Li* documentary. However, in *Whose Utopia* the footage is calmer because Cao Fei intentionally emphasizes the geometrical forms in the factory, framing the conveyor belts and shelves for goods in the warehouse in a detached manner (Figs. 2.2.6 and 2.2.7). The accompanying background sounds were collected from the factory work areas by musician Zhang Anding 张安定 (b. 1979), who was responsible for the music of this video, and they bring a poetic rhythm to the flowing abstract patterns of the machine shapes, conveyor belts, and shelves in the factory. The peasant workers mingle with and are overwhelmed by the running machines, silently concentrating on their jobs. The close-ups of their faces and hands show that each individual is absorbed in his or her work, in coordination with the machines in cool silver colors. The coordination has even turned the peasant workers into machines. The relationship between the human being and the machine could be easily associated with Karl Marx's (1818–1883) classical theory of alienation,[235] which sounds obsolete in the 21st Century post-industrial world but is still relevant in today's China, which could be seen as the world's factory. As Chinese scholar Wang Hui 汪 晖 (b. 1959) pointed out in his article "Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future,"

235 See Monica Merlin, "Cao Fei: Rethinking the Global/Local Discourse," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018): 50. Merlin also mentions the not enough attention paid to human alienation in the Chinese Marxist discourse.

> In the large coastal industries in the present period, with the assembly-line model of production, the model of housing segregated from urban society, the condition of existence in which one merely moves back and forth between the dormitory and the workshop, "human relationships" have been reduced to a minimum … Every worker as an isolated worker forms individual relations with the same capital.[236]

These peasant workers are pushed into the world's factory under the influence of urban-rural differences and a crisis of the rural economy.

The second section, Factory Fairytale, features several peasant workers performing in the factory in silence while other employees continue their regular jobs with the machines. Dressed in a white costume, a young woman performs a ballet, while another woman in a traditional Dai costume dances a peacock dance, a folk dance genre of the Dai people, a minority ethnic group in southwestern China (Figs. 2.2.8, 2.2.9, and 2.2.10). Following them is a middle-aged man showing his martial arts skills in a space between rows of machines. The last performers are two young men playing electronic guitars, but their music is replaced by the noise of the machines. The strong contrast between the first and second sections is a contrast between reality and dreams. The reality that forms the workers' daily lives and earns them a living does not allow the fulfillment of their individual dreams. If we borrow the thoughts of German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) on the categorization of labor, work, and action, the divergence between the first and second sections can also be seen as

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[236] Wang Hui, "Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future: The Decline and Reconfiguration of Class Politics and the Politics of the New Poor," trans. Saul Thomas, in *East-Asian Marxisms and Their Trajectories*, eds. Joyce. C. H. Liu and Viren Murthy (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2017), 60. The original Chinese version of the essay see, Wang Hui 汪晖, "Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future: The Decline and Reconfiguration of Class Politics and the Politics of the New Poor" 两种新穷人及其未来：阶级政治的衰落，再形成与新穷人的尊严政治, in *The Short 20th Century: The Logics of Chinese Revolution and Politics* 短二十世纪：中国革命与政治的逻辑 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2015), 329-370.

that between labor and work. In her seminal book *The Human Condition*, Arendt differentiated labor and work as follows:

> Labor is the activity that corresponds to the biological processes of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself. Work is the activity that corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.[237]

That is to say, labor is what a person does to survive; work is what a person does to create. The peasant workers in the first section are laborers whose job at hand provides their means of living, which deprives them of freedom in both physical and mental terms. Conversely, in the second section, the peasant workers are portrayed as breaking free from the constraints of the machine and creating a little self-contained space in which they can freely develop their interests in music and dance. Their bodies are no longer imprisoned in the cramped factory but are media of self-expression. Their minds are no longer shackled by existential problems but are occupied by spiritual and emotional pursuits.

In the second section of *Whose Utopia* all of the protagonists are in frontal positions in the foreground, with their working colleagues and the machines in the background. As Cao Fei revealed, she wanted to give these peasant workers with unfulfilled artistic dreams a stage

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[237] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.

on which they could present themselves.[238] Ironically, the stage provided for them is within their working space, in which they are locked. The last scene of this section shows a woman peasant worker lying on an upper bunk in her employee dormitory, looking out of the window. She sees the bleak sky and rows of factory buildings not far from her dormitory (Fig. 2.2.11). A delivery van drives away from the factory, a scene that suggests that unlike the van, the woman is locked into the building. Like the village-in-the-city and the urban-rural fringe, where masses of peasant workers live because of the low rents, the factory itself has become a new residence of the peasant-turned-migrant worker. It is a place of solitude that is neither in the city nor the country. As Wang Hui stated,

> Migrants work, reside, and live their lives in the cities, but the village "home" in their hearts (or at least its symbol) cannot support their actual existence or provide their children with a future. Held at both the periphery of the cities and the periphery of the villages, migrants are "lost between the cities and the countryside."[239]

At the end of the section, an epigraph is shown on the screen: You cry and say, a fairytale is a lie. It iterates the temporality of the peasant worker's self-fulfillment, which is only realized with the help of the artist.

The last section is a collection of full-length frontal shots of the participating peasant workers in their workshop. They are from different branches, from the assembly line to the packaging area, from the accounting office to the transport area. The work in which they are engaged, and their background surroundings indicate the various types of work they do (Figs. 2.2.12 and 2.2.13). Portraits of people in different occupations also appear at the end of the

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[238] Cao Fei, "M+Stories, Cao Fei Interview."

[239] Wang Hui, "Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future," 57.

San Yuan Li documentary. The frontal portrait can be easily associated with the tradition of portrait photography of the 20th century. The work of the German photographer August Sander (1876–1964) is its embodiment. Sander's life-long project, *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the 20th Century*) contains portraits of Germans categorized by social class and profession.[240] His typological and universal approach to portraying German citizens reverberates in the *San Yuan Li* documentary, which at the end presents portraits of different professional groups in uniforms in the village-in-the-city (Figs. 2.2.14 and 2.2.15). For example, it includes a group of young waitresses standing around a table in their small restaurant, a group of chefs in a line in their kitchen area, a team of hairdressers in a barbershop, two doctors in white uniforms and masks (it was filmed during the SARS epidemic) in front of their clinic, and a number of room attendants sitting on a hotel room bed. All of these group portraits as a whole formulate a social image of the San Yuan Li community. The coordination of the setting and the objective observations of the various social groups of people in the *San Yuan Li* documentary resonate with the portrait photographs by Sander.

Conversely, the portraits of the peasant workers in *Whose Utopia* are mostly portraits of individuals, with just a few pairs of individuals. In some cases, they are close-ups of the faces of the protagonists. Compared with the *San Yuan Li* documentary, the portrayals of the peasant workers in *Whose Utopia* are more emotionally charged. The emotional dimension is strengthened by the background music of Zhang Anding, entitled "Empty Room Waltz," with its poetic lyrics:

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[240] See Graham Clarke, "Public Faces, Private Lives: August Sander and the Social Typology of the Portrait Photograph," in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clark (London: Reaction Books, 1992), 71-93.

Real dusk would arrive,
But the flood of summer light had begun to ebb.
The air had grown mellow,
The shadows were long upon
The smooth and dense turf.
Part of your life had waned and waned,
But to whom do you beautifully belong?
Part of your life had waned and waned,
But to whom do you beautifully belong?

The lyrics convey a sense of melancholy, which is intensified by the repeated questions at the end, indicating the floating state of life of the peasant workers. They belong neither to the city, where their labor is consumed, nor to the countryside, where their roots are, but their physical existence is not present. The final scene of this section, and also of the whole video within it, is a group portrait of seven young male peasant workers, all wearing a white T-shirt, each with a different Chinese character on it (Fig. 2.2.16). The seven characters form the sentence “My Future Is Not a Dream” 我的未来不是梦, which was initially the title of a 1988 song by the Taiwanese pop singer Zhang Yusheng 张雨生 (1966–1997). It became popular in mainland China in the 1990s among young people. The inspiring song expresses the determination and persistence of young people in pursuing their individual dreams, and it gives frustrated people hope and strength. My Future Is Not a Dream is also the name of the musical band formed by the seven peasant workers. As mentioned above, at the beginning of the project, Cao Fei divided the participants into groups and asked each group to make an artwork based on a certain theme. The musical band My Future Is Not a Dream is the artwork

of this group.[241] The sentence makes a statement that conveys a strong will to pursue one's dream and is also shown in the determined facial expressions of the group members. However, at the same time, there is an ironic sense of skepticism; like the title of the video, *Whose Utopia,* it has a questioning feel. Cao Fei believed that it was not necessary to add a question mark at the end of the title to emphasize the questioning tone. She knew that the word *whose* conveyed that fact that even though these peasant workers made up the fundamental force behind the labor-intense manufacturing industry, they were not the beneficiaries of the economic boom it was engendering.

241 Cao Fei, "M+Stories, Cao Fei Interview."

Chapter 3: Back to the Village: Artists and Village-based Projects after 2000

3.1. An Alternative Space in the Village: Jin Le and His Shijiezi Art Museum

Shijiezi 石节子 is a village fifty kilometers north of Tianshui 天水 in Gansu Province 甘肃省 and fifteen hundred kilometers from the capital, Beijing. Affected by an extremely dry climate, the village has long suffered from a lack of water, and this has resulted in infertile soil and poor harvests. The village sits at an altitude of thirteen hundred kilometers. The thirteen households of Shijiezi Village are scattered along a clifftop one hundred meters high. From a distance, the layered positioning of the households has the look of a five-story building facing a deep valley. Due to the poor infrastructure within the village and limited access to public transportation, most of the villagers are isolated from Qin'an 秦安, the nearest county town, though it is only seven kilometers away (Fig. 3.1.1). In every sense, the small Shijiezi Village was as ordinary as any of the other villages in remote northwestern China. Its inhabitants certainly would not have had much contact with the hectic scene of art circles in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which are mostly in the eastern region of the country.

Jin Le 靳勒 (1966-2021) was an artist born and raised in Shijiezi Village, and he attempted to connect the village with contemporary art practices. In 1986, the twenty-year-

old Jin was admitted to the Department of Sculpture at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, the only art college in northwestern China, and this made him the first one in the village to attend college. Before he left for college, Jin Le not only attended the village school but also helped his family with farm work, such as fetching water from the valley below and herding sheep in the mountains. Jin Le's father, Jin Hailu 靳海禄, was then the only Communist Party member in the village and one of the few villagers who had a formal job within the state system. As a railway worker in Lanzhou 兰州, the capital city of Gansu Province and a major railway hub in western China, Jin Hailu bridged the gap between his family and the outside world. His position could be seen in some ways as a precondition for Jin Le to become the first college student from the village and one who could officially leave his rural identity behind.[242]

When he graduated from college after five years of training, Jin Le was offered jobs in two places if he wanted to stay in the state system, Dunhuang 敦煌 and Maijishan麦积山, both of which are renowned Buddhist grottoes in Gansu Province. However, he refused both of them. For him, "working in Dunhuang or Maijishan in the desolate mountain area would be no different from returning to Shijiezi."[243] Instead of going back to his home province and working as a heritage conservator, Jin Le chose to go to Shenzhen, a young coastal city in the southeast, which was designated as one of the first Special Economic Zones to experiment with a market economy following the reform and opening-up policies of the early 1980s.[244]

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[242] The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 29, 2018.

[243] Li Xing 李行, "The Shijiezi Museum: An Experiment of Rural Reconstruction Through Art"石节子美术馆：艺术改造中国乡村的实验之路, *China News Weekly* 中国新闻周刊, no. 21 (2017): unpaginated.

[244] Since the 1980s, there has been a growing trend of leaving jobs in the state system, especially in coastal areas. This phenomenon was known as *xiahai* 下海, which literally means to venture into the sea. See Bruce J. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 4-5.

There, Jin Le joined a handicraft company at a salary of one thousand RMB a month, which was approximately ten times more than he could earn within the state system. With his salary, Jin Le bought his parents a color TV set, the first one in Shijiezi Village. Eventually, his longing for his village and family drew him back to his home region. In 1992, he joined the faculty of the Department of Art at the Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou, the city in which his father had worked. After escaping the job distribution system and embracing the commercial world, this move was not only a retreat for Jin Le to the state system but also a return to the place where he belonged geographically and emotionally.

In the following years, apart from teaching, Jin Le tried to make a career in sculpture, the field in which he had specialized in college, by participating in local and national art exhibitions. Because of its location in the far northwest of the country, Gansu was an economic and cultural backwater. Even the capital city of Lanzhou offered no soil in which contemporary art could grow. In 2000, when he was about to complete his studies for a master's degree at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, Jin Le's work *Flocks of Mouse Man* (2000) 群鼠人 (Fig. 3.1.2) was featured at the contemporary art exhibition *Fuck Off* 不合作方式, held at the Eastlink Gallery 东廊艺术 in Shanghai and co-curated by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957) and Feng Boyi 冯博一 (b. 1960). It caused a huge sensation and much controversy.[245] At this time, Jin Le started to think about whether to stay in Beijing, where he would have more opportunities for working as a professional artist, exhibiting his work, and selling it, or return to his provincial university. As he recalled many years later, even when he

[245] Jin Le's *Flocks of Mouse Man* is a group resin-made sculpture of metamorphic creatures constituted of a human head and a mouse body. The exhibition is initially a counter-exhibition to the 1st Shanghai Biennial as a statement of the anti-institutionalization gesture of underground Chinese artists emerging in the 1990s. The local Cultural affairs bureau censored "inappropriate" art pieces and forced the exhibition to close earlier than planned. See Ai Weiwei 艾未未, Feng Boyi 冯博一, and Hua Tianxue 华天雪, eds., *Fuck off* 不合作方式 (Shanghai: Eastlink Gallery, 2000).

was involved in the lively contemporary art scene in metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, he could not stop his thoughts from flashing back to his Shijiezi Village, which seemed extremely far away.[246] What could contemporary art do for a village? This question became the starting point for his establishment of a village art museum, which was realized eight years later. His ideas for the museum brought him back to the place from which he had come. In this subchapter, I investigate the development of Jin Le's Shijiezi Art Museum and the projects he initiated in this space and examine how contemporary museum practices can engage with rural life.

From Kassel to Shijiezi: The Shijiezi Art Museum from Vision to Reality

Among an array of rural-based artistic projects that have been undertaken since the beginning of the new millennium, Jin Le's Shijiezi Art Museum is undoubtedly unique. His natural identification with his fellow villagers made his involvement with the village different from that of elite urban artists who intruded on rural life as outsiders and imposed their utopian thoughts on villagers.[247] As Jin Le said, for me, the question of artists-go-to-the-countryside does not exist because that is my home, where I was born and raised, where my parent, siblings, and neighbors live.[248]

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[246] The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 30, 2018.

[247] This could be exemplified by a widely-known online debate between Ou Ning and Zhou Yun. The former is the co-initiator of Bishan Commune Project carried out in Bishan Village, Anhui Province; the latter was then a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology, Harvard University. See Zhou Yun 周韵, "Whose Village? Whose Community?" 谁的乡村? 谁的共同体? accessed August 10, 2020, http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/news-9359.html.
Ou, Ning 欧宁, "Response to Zhou Yun's critique on Bishan Project" 回应周韵对碧山计划的质疑, accessed August 10, 2020, http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/news-9360.html.

[248] Jin Le 靳勒, Art Village 艺术村庄 (Lanzhou: Gansu People's Fine Art Press, 2009), 112.

His regular trips between Lanzhou and Shijiezi Village caused Jin Le to think further about the questions he had had when he was about to leave Beijing in 2000. The idea of bringing together contemporary art and Shijiezi Village was, in the first place, a way of extending his own artistic practices. During the first few years of the 2000s, Jin Le constantly made videos, took photographs, and gave performances in the village, trying to find an appropriate way to integrate his art with his village. In 2002, when portable video cameras became easy to get in China, Jin Le bought one to document the life and scenes of the village and of Lanzhou, his residential city. Jin Le wanted his village to become known to urbanites, and, at the same time, he was willing to bring what he saw and felt in the city to his fellow villagers. In his performance piece *Cover with Gold Leaf* 贴金 (2005, Fig. 3.1.3), Jin Le coated farm tools, such as iron shovels and harrows, and the plum trees outside the courtyard of his parents' house with a gold leaf. The shining coating endowed the dated agrarian objects with a brand-new look; however, it also ironically implicated that nothing had changed underneath. The title *Tiejin* in Chinese, which means to coat something with gold leaf, is also a metaphor for superficiality; it might allude to the ineffectiveness of the rural reconstruction programs run by the government. This performance piece can be considered a watershed in Jin Le's rurally engaged artistic practices because it was his first work with a real physical connection with Shijiezi Village. Jin Le also saw it as the starting point for the link between Shijiezi Village and his own artistic practices.[249]

In 2007, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei initiated a gigantic project entitled *Fairytale* 童话 for *Documenta 12* in Kassel, Germany. One thousand and one people from mainland China

[249] Chen Tingting 陈亭亭, "Jie Le's Ten Years, Shijiezi's Ten Years: Cui Cancan's Interview with Jin Le," 靳勒的十年，石节子的十年——崔灿灿和靳勒对谈, White Box Museum of Art official accounts, accessed May 20, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TpdxlaVc6natiba-oSyM4A.

would be offered a free six-day group trip to Kassel during the opening period of the exhibition. In February 2007, Ai Weiwei posted on his blog a call for participants to which anyone, regardless of occupation, gender, or age, could apply; the opportunity was likely to be given to those who had not been to Germany and hardly had had a chance to go abroad.[250] As an acquaintance of Ai Weiwei and a regular reader of Ai's blog, Jin Le asked Ai if he could take part in this program together with some of his fellow villagers. Ai Weiwei soon promised to reserve five slots for Shijiezi villagers (Jin Le, Jin Nünü 靳女女, Jin Maolin 靳茂林, Sun Baolin 孙保林, and Li Baoyuan 李保元).

The trip to Kassel in the summer of 2007 was indeed a fairytale for the participants from Shijiezi, who had not even dreamt of traveling to another country, visiting a foreign city, or being part of an international mega-exhibition. Before their departure, a camera team from the Ai Weiwei Studio traveled to Shijiezi and documented village life and the tedious process of applying for a passport and visa. The camera team also accompanied the Shijiezi group while they were in Kassel. The resulting footage was edited into a documentary film that recorded the whole course of the project.[251] In the documentary, elderly farmer Jin Nünü was asked by a German journalist why he was staring at the heavy rain outside the exhibition hall window. Jin replied that it was because his village had not received a single drop of rain for a long time and rain was so crucial for the harvest. In response to the journalist's next question,

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[250] The development of the idea of the Fairytale project, see "A Fairytale Becomes an Artwork" in *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, ed. and trans. Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 120-125. The full archive of the Fairytale project, see Ai Weiwei, Daniel Birnbaum, and Lionel Bovier, *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale: A Reader* (Zürich: JRP Ringe, 2012).

[251] *Fairytale* (2010), a film by Ai Weiwei, accessed June 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3dIiVfgt-I.

Which one is more important, art or rain? Jin Nünü gave a shrewd answer: Art is important, but rain is more important (Fig. 3.1.4). [252]

As an attempt to bring together a prestigious international exhibition and a provisionally formed Chinese community, most of whose members had no prior knowledge of contemporary art, Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* project can be seen as a predecessor of Jin Le's Shijiezi Art Museum project. The trip to Kassel had a long-lasting impact on the villagers, and this was in accordance with Ai Weiwei's expectations.[253] Even though the participating villagers still could not fully comprehend the intent of the project, encountering the foreign community and culture made the villagers more confident, less introverted, and more open to the outside world, according to Jin Le. The trip was also a constant topic of conversation in the village, and thus, all of the other villagers were also affected by the four participants' experiences in the German city.[254]

In the winter of 2008, Jin Le's friend artist Zhao Bandi 赵半狄 (b. 1966), who made a name for himself in a series of performances featuring China's national icon, the panda, came to Shijiezi. Zhao Bandi, together with his panda performance team, presented for the Shijiezi villagers a Spring Festival show. Each wearing a plush panda hat, the performers sang and danced for the villagers. Zhao called the show *Panda Down to the Countryside* 熊猫下乡 (Fig. 3.1.5). Obviously, it was a parody of the *Spring Festival Gala*, a live annual TV show presented on the eve of Chinese New Year and organized by state-run China Central Television. Compared with the big-budget gala, which attracted millions of Chinese all over

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[252] Jin Le, *Art Village*, 96.

[253] See Hu Jianqiang胡建强, "Peasants, Fairytale, and Documenta Kasse" 农民、童话和卡塞尔文献展, *Science and Education* 科教文汇, no. 23, (December 2007): 216.

[254] Chen Tingting, "Jie Le's Ten Years, Shijiezi's Ten Years: Cui Cancan's Interview with Jin Le."

the world, Zhao's panda show had a much smaller audience of only thirteen households but delivered the spectacle directly to the villagers' doors. The title, *Panda Down to Countryside*, also alluded to the so-called heart-warming project organized by the government, in which a local official visited needy families and offered them subsidies and food to celebrate traditional festivals. As an artist, Zhao Bandi wanted to "warm" the villagers' hearts in an alternative way. Besides presenting the show, the panda team members also gave gift money to the children, styled hair for the villagers, wrote Spring Festival couplets for each household, and even prepared a feast for the whole village.[255] It was the first time that Shijiezi had played host to a renowned artist and his team. Even though the team brought only ephemeral joy and happiness, the peasants were deeply impressed by the effort. In addition, they began to take a new look at Jin Le, who had not resided in the village since he left for college and was not, strictly speaking, part of Shijiezi Village. This first college student from the village was not only capable of taking his fellow villagers abroad but also of bringing in famous artists from Beijing. Jin Le gradually gained a high level of prestige among the thirteen households because people believed that he was able to bring hope to the backward village.

In the same year as the visit of the panda team, Jin Le was nominated as village head through a direct election process in his village.[256] At first, he hesitated to accept the nomination because he had a full-time job in the provincial capital and could not spare much time for village management. Also, he was afraid that he could not handle the administrative

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[255] Jin Le, *Art Village*, 106.

[256] The Chinese central government has promoted direct election for village head and committee since 1998. The election takes place every three years. See Robert A. Pastor and Qingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections," *The China Quarterly*, no. 162, Special Issue: Elections and Democracy in Greater China (June 2000): 490-512.

affairs of the village after being away for such a long time. However, the Shijiezi villagers' expectations caused Jin Le to accept the position finally. Several years before, he had been thinking about how to connect his artistic practices with his home village. After being nominated as village head, he began to think more about what he could do for the benefit of the village. Inspired by Ai Weiwei's idea of bringing the ordinary people and contemporary art together, and also his own experience of accompanying the villagers to the *Documenta*, Jin Le decided that instead of reconstructing the village by adding art, he would blur the boundary between the village and contemporary art.[257] In 2008, Jin Le decided to establish the Shijiezi Art Museum.(Fig. 3.1.6) The museum would be in the village and would be the village itself. He wanted the whole village to be turned into a museum. The basic idea was that "the villagers did not even need to go to a museum to appreciate art because art would be in their homes and in their surroundings."[258]

When asked about the uniqueness of his idea of rurally based practice, compared with the other so-called artistic rural reconstructions that had prevailed in recent years, Jin Le said,

> At least I am from this village, so I am part of it. I identify myself as a peasant, and I am doing my own business. Either I run a museum in the village or work as a village head; both are my own business. It is not about transforming anything or anybody else, but about transforming oneself.[259]

Jin Le wanted the Shijiezi Art Museum to be built by the villagers and serve as a place of self-education. Every household had its own house and enclosed courtyard, so every

257 The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 29, 2018.

258 Ibid.

259 Chen Tingting, "Jie Le's Ten Years, Shijiezi's Ten Years: Cui Cancan's Interview with Jin Le."

courtyard was turned into a branch museum named after its host or hostess. For instance, Jin Nünü's house was named *Nünü Guan* 女女馆 (Nünü Museum). The signboard for each branch museum, made of twigs, was hanging on the front gate of each courtyard. Jin Le raised money and bought many of the picture frames, which were distributed to each household. The villagers were asked to post photos of artistic activities in which they had previously been involved (e.g., photos taken in Kassel by the four visitors from Shijiezi and photos of the panda team show). As more and more artistic events took place in the Shijiezi Art Museum, more photos would be added. Jin Le saw it as a way of blending art into the villagers' everyday lives, increasing the villagers' interest in art, and extending the influence of previous artistic events on every person in the village.[260]

Jin Le also organized a calligraphy campaign. Everyone in the village wrote the six Chinese characters that spelled the words Shijiezi Art Museum, 石节子美术馆, on a piece of paper. The person who won the most votes for the best calligraphy would make the sign for the Shijiezi Art Museum. Interestingly, the calligraphy of Jin Le's illiterate mother, He Chunchun 何蠢蠢, was the one liked best by the villagers. Soon Granny He's crooked Chinese characters were carved into the loess cliff at the entrance to Shijiezi Village. Below the inscription was the English name of the museum made of peach tree branches.[261]

In addition, some of Jin Le's sculptures were transported to the village to become the first batch of collections and first exhibits of the Shijiezi Art Museum. The sculptures were placed in vacant lots all over the village. When people from outside pass through the cliff at the village entrance and walk along the rugged narrow path leading to the village houses, the

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[260] The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 30, 2018.

[261] Jin Le, *Art Village*, 112.

first exhibit they see is Jin Le's *Fish Man* 鱼人 (Fig. 3.1.7). Supported by a thin woody rod, the sculpture is a giant black fish with a human head; it is based on Jin Le's own appearance, having round convex eyes, a short nose with anteverted nostrils, and a wide-open mouth. It is as if the fish had been dehydrated in the dry soil of the Loess Plateau. This sculpture, which was created during the time when Jin Le was in Beijing, is now a landmark of the Shijiezi Art Museum. Two nude sculptures were positioned on the top of a bluff, where few people would visit. Because people in the village were still conservative, Jin Le said that he did not want the elderly to feel embarrassed.[262]

Even in its initial stage, the Shijiezi Art Museum already had the essential functions of a modern museum: to educate, to collect, and to exhibit.[263] Increasing the villagers' interest in contemporary art was one of Jin Le's first goals in establishing the museum. However, it became more of a self-education process. No one in the village, including Jin Le, the museum director himself, had any experience in running a museum or had any precedents from which to learn this task. As Jin Le said, the process was like "wading across the river by feeling for the stones."[264] The villagers and Jin Le were the educated and the educators at the same time. As for the exhibits and collections, the village as a whole was both an exhibition space and a museum storeroom. The collections were not kept in the dark basement of the museum but rather in the open air in the village. The exhibits blended into the rural surroundings and, at the same time, created a sense of contradiction and confusion. On the one hand, the exhibits

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[262] Jiang Xue 江雪 and Xue Fang 雪访, "Shijiezi: the Narrative and Invitation of a Village" 石节子：一个村庄的叙述与邀请, in *Folk History*民间历史, sponsored by Service Center for China Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, accessed July 15, 2020, http://mjlsh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/Book.aspx?cid=4&tid=3343.

[263] An introductory discussion on functions of today's museum, see Edward P. Alexander, Mary Alexander, and Julie Decker, *Museum in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, 3rd edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 193-251.

[264] Chen Tingting, "Jie Le's Ten Years, Shijiezi's Ten Years: Cui Cancan's Interview with Jin Le."

were accessible to all of the villagers, who were the viewers, and on the other hand, the villagers were also the caretakers of the collections.

Soon after the inauguration of the Shijiezi Art Museum, Jin Le organized the Shijiezi Film Festival, during which six films were screened. Five were independent Chinese films: Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale*, Li Peifeng's 李沛峰 *Baiyin* 白银, Meng Xiaowei's 孟小为 *Departure* 去兮去兮, Wang Dongsheng's 汪东升 *Demand Payment Barefoot* 赤脚讨薪, and Zhao Bandi's 赵半狄 *One Spring Night in a Small Village Without Disappointment* 春天的夜晚在那小山村没有遗憾. One foreign film, *Gadjo dilo,* by French director Tony Gatlif, was also shown. All of the films were relevant to country life. For the villagers, it was the first time they had seen films screened in their village. The villagers voluntarily helped with the preparations for the ribbon-cutting ceremony and even paved the path with red clay as a substitute for a red carpet. As Jin Le said, "It was the smallest film festival in the world, and also the most environmentally friendly and most economical one."[265] Co-organized by the villagers, the Shijiezi Film Festival was the first artistic event held in the Shijiezi Art Museum. It attracted reporters from the local TV station and newspaper, and this not only made the overlooked village known but also brought it material benefit. The township government allocated funds to surface the village road with cement after one reporter slipped on the muddy road on a rainy day.[266] In 2013, following an investment by a private entrepreneur, water from the valley was drawn uphill, and tap water eventually became

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[265] Lu Mingjun 鲁明军, "A Contemporary Art Experiment in a Village: Lu Mengjun in Dialogue with Jie Le" 当代艺术的一个乡村实验：鲁明军与靳勒对话, accessed July 25, 2020, http://news.99ys.com/news/2010/0603/9_43380_1.shtml.

[266] Li Jingtao 李静涛, "Villages' Life has become Better Since the Museum Was Built," 村里开了美术馆，村民日子好起来, *Global People* 环球人物, no. 32 (2012): 43.

available in the village. Since then, the villagers have not had to collect rainwater or fetch water from below.[267]

Fly Together : A Dialogical Experiment in a Village

Artistic events in the little-known village attracted not only the local media but also attention from contemporary art circles. Metropolitan artists and even artists from overseas continuously came to Shijiezi Village. The most influential project was *Fly Together* 一起飞 (2015-2016), a site-specific project in the village, co-organized by Jin Le, as head of the Shijiezi Art Museum, Zong Ning 宗宁 (b. 1984), a member of a Beijing-based art group called No One Survives 无人生还小组, and Qin Ga 琴嘎 (b. 1971), an artist and the director of *Zaospace* 造空间 in 2015.[268] The project organizers invited twenty-five artists to Shijiezi, and each of them formed a random partnership with a villager. Except for the villagers who were working as migrant workers away from the village, almost all the remaining residents took part in the *Fly Together* project. Each pair would work on a collaborative artwork for a year, from May 16, 2015, to May 16, 2016. The partners were chosen by drawing lots. Each villager participant's name was written on a potato, a staple food in many regions in northwestern China, such as Shijiezi. Then, each artist chose one of the potatoes from a basket and paired up with the peasant named.(Figs. 3.1.8 and 3.1.9) The idea of using a potato as a lot was associated with the grassroots election method in areas occupied by the Communist Party. During the Yan'an period, the so-called bean election was launched, in

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[267] The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 29, 2018.

[268] Founded by artist Qin Ga in 2011, Zaospace is a nomadic art space, which does not have a fixed physical space. The aim of Zaospace is to initial art projects in a variety of social spaces and investigate the relationship between contemporary art and social realities.

which a soybean served as a ballot.[269] A peasant would put a bean into a china bowl behind the back of the cadre candidate for whom he or she wanted to vote. The Yan'an artist Yan Han 彦涵 (1916–2011) made a renowned woodcut titled *Bean Election* 豆选 (1948, Fig. 3.1.10) illustrating a bean election in a rural area in northern China.[270]

The partnership between the artist and the peasant was a parody of *jieduizi* 结对子, which means pairing. *Jieduizi* were usually conducted between a cadre from the local government and an impoverished peasant, commonly in the poverty alleviation project launched by the government. In a two-person team, the hardship and need of the peasant could be more accurately assessed, and the aid from the government could more efficiently reach the needy peasant. The method was also used between an urban school and a rural one; students from the urban school formed pairs with those from the rural school as a way of poverty alleviation in the educational domain.[271] However, in the organizer's initial opinion, the partnership in *Fly Together* was something different. As Qin Ga, one of the co-organizers of the project, pointed out, "The intent of this project is obvious. It is neither rural reconstruction nor a state-run program. We are not going to do poverty alleviation. We do not even have the ability to do that."[272] Before the *Fly Together* project, Jin Le had invited some artists to Shijiezi to make artworks, but their art did not receive much notice in the art world.

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[269] Emerson Niou 牛铭实 and Youlu Mi 米有录, *Bean Voting* 豆选 (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2014), 65-78

[270] Sichuan Artist Association 四川省美术家协会 and Shenzhou Prints Museum神州版画博物馆, eds., *War Years: Chinese Prints in the Sino-Japanese War* 烽火岁月：中国抗战版画集（Chengdu: Sichuan Fine Arts Press, 2015), 179.

[271] See Hong Gao and Adam Tyson, "Poverty Relief in China: A Comparative Analysis of Kinship Contracts in Four Provinces," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, Issue 126 (2020): 901-915.

[272] Luan Zhichao 栾志超, "Fly Together: Site-Specific Art in a Village of Northwestern China" 一起飞：西北乡村的在地性艺术实践, *Art World* 艺术世界, no. 4 (2018): 47.

When Jin Le asked Qin Ga to create an artwork in Shijiezi, Qin was not satisfied with simply making an artwork in a rural setting. Qin believed that the reason why Jin Le's previous projects of inviting artists to Shijiezi had been unsuccessful was that they were not relevant to the villagers' life. For Qin Ga, "Although the outputs are something contemporary, it is no different from the old-fashioned sketching-from-life course. The point is, the villager serves as the material in the art-making process instead of the subject."[273]

The sketching-from-life course 写生课 Qin Ga mentioned had long been one of the foundational programs in art colleges since Western painting had been introduced to China in the late Qing Dynasty. It had been continuously given top priority after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Official cultural policies prescribed that artists should venture deep into reality, especially that of the countryside, to observe and experience real life.[274] However, given the fast urbanization process, for artists long immersed in urban life, the drawing-from-life course had become merely an idyllic interlude for enjoying pastoral scenery and rural customs during the spring or autumn semester break. The village and villager had become objectified as an alienated and fanciful other. In Qin Ga's tentative idea for the project, forming paired teams between an artist and a villager and then making a cooperative artwork meant that villagers would no longer be material but part of a collaborative subject. This idea was in accordance with Qin Ga's initiative for the nomadic space Zaospace, which was not a physical space but various social spaces in which different cooperative art projects could be developed.

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[273] Ibid.

[274] For a comprehensive discussion of the sketching-from-life movement in the early People's Republic of China, see Christine I. Ho, *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

For the twenty-five paired teams, accomplishing a cooperative artwork was not always easy. To many of the artists, it was the first time they had been put into such an unfamiliar situation. At first, the artist tended to take the lead, and the villager was in a subordinate position. As time went on, the villager gradually articulated his or her opinions and began to express his or her agreement or disagreement with the artist's goals.[275] The results of the cooperation also differed among pairs. Some of the cooperations were successful, but some were not. For example, artist Feng Lin 冯琳 (b. 1984) and villager Sun Yingzhong 孙应忠 chatted on WeChat for one year but still could not bring forward a proposal because neither of them came up with anything both of them were willing to do. At last, they agreed to sing a pop song together and recorded the song as their artwork. Feng Lin said ironically that she had never chatted with anyone as boring as Sun Yingzhong, but she also admitted that Sun slowly became used to voicing his opinions on art and the other artists involved in the project.[276]

Other cooperative projects were concerned more with how to bring material benefit to Shijiezi and its villagers with the resources at hand in the village. They included *Investment Project of a Family Hotel* 家庭旅馆投资计划 (artist Zhang Zhaohong 张兆宏 [b. 1943] and villager Jin Hailu 靳海禄), *Exchange* 交换 (artist Xia Xing 夏星 [b. 1958] and villager Ye Yufang 叶玉芳), *Small Business* 小生意 (artist Liang Shuo 梁硕 [b. 1976] and villager Wang Jiaonü 王娇女), *Scheme* 方案 (artist Ge Lei 葛磊 [b. 1982] and villager Luo Fan'er 雒反儿), and *Jiao Clay* 娇泥 (artist Jin Le 靳勒 and villager Wang Jiaolian 王娇莲).

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[275] Luan Zhichao, "Fly Together: Site-Specific Art in a Village of Northwestern China," 55.

[276] The author's interview with Sun Yingzhong, conducted on March 30, 2018.

For instance, the *Investment Project of a Family Hotel* (Fig. 3.1.11) was a preliminary plan to reconstruct Jin Le's father's house and transform part of it into a family hotel, which could host visitors coming to Shijiezi Village. In the reconstruction process, Zhang Zhaohong was responsible for the design and reconstruction work, and Jin Hailu, the father, was responsible for running the hotel after the reconstruction was complete. The project was filmed in a documentary. The two parties signed a contract stipulating each party's responsibilities and rights. In the project *Exchange*, artist Xia Xing developed a formula for making sugar from Ren 忍, a crop grown in Shijiezi. He would teach Ye Yufang the formula and help her with the making and selling of the sugar products. Similarly, Jin Le helped villager Wang Jiaolian develop Jiao Clay from clay dug in the mountains near Shijiezi Village; it was a material appropriate for making sculptures and porcelain products. "Jiao" was a pun on the second character of Wang Jiaolian's name and on *jiaoni*, the Chinese characters for "clay."[277] Liang Shuo and Wang Jiaonü's *Small Business* was a commercialization scheme of Liang Shuo's installation *Little Twigs* 小丫 (2014, Fig. 3.1.12), which was made up of seventy-four twigs. While visiting Shijiezi Village, Liang found many piles of twigs in front of each courtyard. He thought it might be a good idea to help the villagers produce handicrafts from which they could make a profit. Liang Shuo gave Wang Jiaonü the authority to reproduce *Little Twigs*. He also gave Wang a brochure showing the

277 The author's interview with Wang Jiaolian, conducted on March 31, 2018.

handicraft art he had collected over the years as a gift. In return, it was agreed that Liang Shuo would be paid a commission on sales.(Fig. 3.1.13)[278]

In the above-mentioned paired team projects, even though each villager was an active participant, he or she became more of an executor carrying out a plan developed by the artist. Also, in the cooperative relationship, the artist usually served more or less as a benefactor, with the villager being the beneficiary, despite the fact that the artist also had a commission in the profit-making process. Due to the lack of financial support, most of the projects were never fully realized. Thus, the plans and contract turned out to be empty promises, and the benefactor–beneficiary relationship between artist and villager stayed on the symbolic level. This imbalanced symbolic relationship somehow reinforced the disparity between the two groups in all respects.

Some other groups sought a much different way of collaboration, a deeper intervention between the two parties. For example, in *A Night of One-and-a-Half Men's Height* 一人半身高的夜晚 (artist Li Songhua 李颂华 [b. 1969] and villager Jin Shilin 靳世林, Fig. 3.1.14), Li Songhua, carrying the seventy-kilogram Jin Shilin on his back, climbed the mountains near Shijiezi Village. Both wearing only a pair of underpants, the pair walked the rugged mountain road in darkness.[279] Li Songhua bore the weight of Jin Shilin while Jin Shilin helped to illuminate the path with a flashlight. The whole journey lasted six hours, from midnight until six o'clock in the morning of the next day when the pair reached the top

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[278] Liang Shuo's installation *Little Twigs* is a commissioned project for the exhibition *Ten Exhibitions* held at Beijing Inside-out Art Museum in 2014. The installation consisted of seventy-three little twigs with ink paint on the surface. See Liang Shuo's statement on the project collaborated with Wang Jiaonü, Liang Shuo, "Statement on the Collaborative Project with Wang Jiaonü" 我与王娇女合作的作品陈述, accessed July 30, 2020, http://www.art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=89639&forumId=8.

[279] See the documentary clips of *A Night of One and A Half Men's Height*, accessed August 10, 2020, https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTM0MzQwODgyOA==.html?spm=a2h1n.8251843.playList.5~5~A&f=26097126&o=1

of the mountain and saw the sunrise. A work between artist Dan'er 旦儿 (b. 1983) and villager Gao Yonggui 高永贵 was named *Shijiezi Village* 石节子村 (Fig. 3.1.15). In this project, Gao Yonggui walked Dan'er around Shijiezi Village and showed Dan'er the border of the village in her point of view, and Dan'er spread the red clay and white immature soil commonly found in the village along the border. The result was a red and white circle on the ground. This borderline, mainly based on a community's common consensus, was not necessarily consistent with the borderline of the village in the view of the government. Artist Gao Feng 高峰 (b. 1977) and villager Jin Caiqin 靳彩琴, in *Yours Is Also Mine* 你的也是我的 (Fig. 3.1.16), based their work on a legend passed down from generation to generation in Shijiezi Village. The legend was that once a golden horse had galloped into the village and brought the villagers good luck. Gao Feng invited Jin Caiqin to draw an illustration of the legend, and then Gao carved a relief based on Jin Caiqin's drawing on an earthen cliff in the village.[280]

Compared with *Small Business* by Liang Shuo and Wang Jiaonü, in which the peasant played the role of reproducer of the artist's concepts, the cooperation between the artist and villager in *Yours Is Also Mine* was conducted in a more balanced way. Both of the participants contributed equally to the final output of the project, the concept of which was rooted in the collective memory of Shijiezi Village. It was not only a dialogue between the two parties but also a dialogical act associated with the village community and its history. Similarly, in *A Night of One-and-a-Half Men's Height*, although it was Li Songhua who made the mountain journey, the tension and coordination between the carrier and the carried formulated the essence of the performance, together with the spatial surroundings and

[280]The author's interview with Jin Caiqin, conducted on March 30, 2018.

temporal day-night change in the village. Likewise, the teamwork for *Shijiezi Village* not only showed an intimate conversational moment between the artist and villager but also brought up the issue of the disparity between a village at the administrative level and a village at the customary level, calling into question the inconsistency between the so-called natural village 自然村 and administrative village 行政村 in village governance in contemporary China.[281]

Concerning the cooperative work in *Investment Project of a Family Hotel*, *Small Business,* and *Scheme*, the artist and villager still played their established social and cultural roles in the provisionally formed partnership. The dialogue between the two parties and with the village surroundings centered on a concept that had been complete before the cooperative project took place, be it a reconstruction plan for a family hotel, an art piece by the collaborating artist and villager, or a formula for sugar products. By contrast, the artist and the villager in *A Night of One-and-a-Half Men's Height* and *Shijiezi Village* detached themselves from their fixed social roles and statuses, integrating themselves into the provisional partnership and framework of the project. Art historian Grant Kester has defined the dialogical characteristic in some socially engaged art projects: "In those projects, the conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself. It is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identity and official discourse."[282]

More interestingly, some other paired teams' projects went even further as the dialogue between artist and villager was brought to a broader social space. For example,

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[281] For the development of a village from a natural settlement to an administrative organization in the post-Mao period, see Dan Mao, *Change of China's Rural Community: A Case Study of Zhejiang's Jianshanxia Village* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2019), 27–114.

[282] Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 78.

when artist Li Binyuan 厉槟源 (b. 1985) visited Shijiezi Village, he noticed the village lacked an outdoor space for gatherings and cultural activities. Born and raised in the countryside, Li saw it as a common issue in villages compared with cities from his life experiences. The project he collaborated on with villager Han Diaoming 韩调明 was entitled *Square* 广场 (Fig. 3.1.17). It was a 123-square-meter space for outdoor activities near the main path in the village. The area was the total sum of the area of Han Diaoming's courtyard in Shijiezi Village and that of Li Binyuan's studio in Beijing. As Li Binyuan said, "It is a place to sing, to dance, to communicate. People can do whatever they like."[283] After the square was established, Li Binyuan and Han Diaoming led the village adults and children to dance to music in the square. Another project exemplifying broader dialogical practices was the long-term effort of artist Liu Weiwei 刘伟伟 (b. 1988) and villager Sun Liancheng 孙连成, *Villager Meeting Day* 村民会议日 (Fig. 3.1.18). After much discussion, Liu Wei and Sun Liancheng made an agreement that every year, on January 3, there would be a villager meeting in Shijiezi Village. All villagers were welcome at the meeting and could discuss any issues concerning their life and work in the village. Liu Wiewei would participate in the meeting every year until his life came to an end, or the village no longer existed. Apart from participation in the meeting, Liu Weiwei also constructed textual archives of the village in three categories, land, people, and life. He also made visual records of conversations between villagers before and during the village meeting. The issues discussed in the meeting were those that had concerned the villagers most over the past year. For example, the meeting in

283 See a documentary clip of the inauguration of the square: accessed August 2, 2020, https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzMwMTM5NTc4MA==.html?spm=a2hbt.13141534.1_2.d_1_4&f=26097126.

2018 addressed topics such as rural medical insurance, children left behind in the village by migrant worker parents, and restorations of unsafe buildings.[284]

Like Li Binyuan and Han Diaoming's tangible village square, the yearly villager meeting opened a conversational public space, which allowed the villagers one day in a year to discuss issues of their village outside the local government system. As time went by, the artistic project gradually became a routine activity and nurtured the public life of the villagers. As Qin Ga said, "Some of our projects were developing in village life. The autonomous character of the village indicates the politics of art. *Fly Together* reveals the politics of everyday life."[285] Qin Ga co-founded a project called *We Are All Artists: The Civil Road* 我们都是艺术家——公民之路 with villager Li Baoyuan. The team launched a fundraiser through an online crowdfunding platform for a sixty-meter village road in Shijiezi. Ultimately, they raised nearly thirty thousand RMB and surfaced the dirt road with cement and gravel. In return, the donors were given apples grown by the villagers. The fundraiser brought a wider public into the project, and the public engagement differentiated the project from the poverty alleviation project launched by the government. As discussed above, Qin Ga intentionally wanted *Fly Together* to be distinct from the government effort.

Reciprocal Museums Between City and Village

Jin Le's museum practices were not limited to Shijiezi Village. He not only invited artists to the village to create and display artworks for the Shijiezi Art Museum but also took villagers to the city to participate in exhibitions. Soon after the trip to Kassel, Jin Le held a

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[284] For a detailed report on the annual village meeting in 2018, accessed August 5, 2020, https://www.arthing.org/archives/2018/01/post085217.html.

[285] Luan Zhichao, "Fly Together: Site-Specific Art in a Village of Northwestern China," 55.

solo exhibition titled *Masters* in the 798 Art District in Beijing in 2008, where he displayed the *Worm Man series* 虫人系列 (2007) made of porcelain. At the opening of the exhibition, Jin Le conducted a performance accompanying a group of villagers from Shijiezi. They dressed the worm men in old clothes brought from Shijiezi. In the introduction to the exhibition, Jin Le wrote, "In the era of reform, do peasants, those who are excluded from the mainstream society, become the masters of the country?"[286] The dressing action made the metamorphic sculptures uncannier. The transformation between human and worm is not only a metaphor for alienation in general but also a symbolic representation of the villagers, who were impoverished and rooted at the bottom of society. In 2015, Jin Le volunteered as a barber to cut the villagers' hair and trim their beards, and he collected all the hair and beard trimmings. Together with the villagers, he mixed the hair and beard trimmings with water and the red mud commonly found in the village and molded the mixture into three hundred mud staffs. The installation series was entitled *Genetic Staff* 基因棒 and was displayed at the opening exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art Yin Chuan 银川, the most important museum focused on contemporary art in remote northwestern China. For Jin Le, the mud and hair symbolized the bloodline of his village, something one could not get rid of even if one left for the city. For the villagers, it was fascinating that they were paid fifty RMB for each mud staff. They realized that even household waste and natural materials costing nothing could be made into artworks and felt proud of it.[287] In this sense, they gradually saw artistic activities not only from a positivist point of view but also from an esthetic one.

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[286] The author's interview with Jin Caiqin, conducted on March 30, 2018.

[287] The author's interview with Jin Le, conducted on March 29, 2018.

In recent years, as the Shijiezi Art Museum and its events attracted more and more attention in contemporary art circles, Jin Le and his fellow villagers were invited to participate in group as well as solo exhibitions held in urban art museums. For example, the *Fly Together* project was part of the exhibition *This Future of Ours* 我们的未来 held in the Red Brick Art Museum in Beijing in 2016. The display included video clips recording the performance, sketches of the plans, and even soil brought from Shijiezi Village. Li Baoyuan and Sun Yingzhong, representing the other villager participants of the *Fly Together* project, came to Beijing and participated in the opening of the exhibition. It was the first time that *Fly Together*, a site-specific project based in an alternative village museum, had been shown in a standard art museum. In 2018, the Shijiezi Art Museum co-organized a project named *Village Code* 乡村密码 with a number of art colleges in China. College students, especially those specializing in sculpture, were invited to reside in the villager's homes (each a branch of the Shijiezi Art Museum), help the host or hostess with housework and farm work, and create public art pieces for the Shijiezi Art Museum. The outputs were first exhibited in the open air of Shijiezi and then displayed in an archival exhibition of the *Village Code* project in the Museum of Contemporary Art Xi'an.[288]

In 2019, when the Shijiezi Art Museum turned ten years old, a retrospective archival exhibition was held in the White Box Museum in the 798 Art District in Beijing. The exhibition comprehensively showed the development of the Shijiezi Art Museum with textual and visual archives, as well as artworks created in projects carried out at the Shijiezi Art Museum. They included the above-mentioned collaborative work *Yours Is Also Mine* by artist Gao Feng and villager Jin Caiqin. This display of an existing museum's practices in another

[288] See Mia Yu, "Going to the Country: Reconsidering Chinese Art Practices and Participation in the Rural Context: A Panel Discussion," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 14, no.2 (2015): 25.

museum created an interesting dynamic of a "double museum," the ordinary and the alternative, the urban and the rural. It provoked questions such as how to show exhibits closely connected to the original rural site in a normal museum and how to keep the legitimacy and effectiveness of interactions between alternative museums such as the Shijiezi Art Museum and typical museums. For example, the piece *Yours Is Also Mine,* co-created by Gao Feng and Jin Caiqin, was originally a relief of a horse carved on a mud cliff in Shijiezi Village. It took inspiration from a local legend and fitted well in the village environment. When the relief was cut from the mud cliff and relocated in a white cubic museum in an urban environment, it became an analogy for cultural relics detached from their original surroundings and displayed in a foreign museum. Cui Cancan 崔灿灿 (b. 1987), curator of the exhibition, saw Jin Le's Shijiezi Art Museum as the most effective sample of artistic rural reconstruction.[289] However, as mentioned above, Jin Le objected to labelling his museum practices in his home village as a reconstruction of the village by means of art. For him, the Shijiezi Art Museum was a lifelong project. The ideal was that his career as an artist and his career as the village head were combined into one, and "the art project and the village's development are not separate but integrated into one."[290]

[289] See Cui Cancan's curatorial statement on the retrospective exhibition of Shijiezi Art Museum, accessed on August 15, 2020, http://www.artda.cn/pinglundangan-c-11059.html.

[290] Mia Yu, "Going to the Country," 25.

3.2. History and Site: Zhang Mengqi and the Folk Memory Project Reconsidered

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Folk Memory Project 民间记忆计划 is an ongoing group film Project initiated by the renowned filmmaker Wu Wenguang 吴文光 in 2010. As a pioneer of the New Documentary Movement in the early 1990s, most of his subjects are people who are marginalized in society. In the Folk Memory Project, Wu asks a group of young filmmakers to go back to a village once a year, stay there for several months, interview and film the villagers, and then make the footage into a documentary film. In the past ten years, Wu and his group members have shown their films, both domestically and overseas. Because Chinese authorities almost entirely banned the public screening of independent films around 2014,[291] the Folk Memory Project group only displays their new works at universities and other art spaces outside China. Recently, some scholars have carried out extensive research on the Project from different perspectives. Some investigated the Project as a whole, and the others worked on case studies of individual filmmakers in the group. Most of the articles focused on the documentary films produced by the group

[291] The two most important independent film festivals in China, Beijing Independent Film Festival and China Independent Film Festival, have been banned since 2014.

members with an analysis of these works in the historical context of Chinese independent documentary films.[292]

However, the group's continuous engagement with the village and villagers goes beyond film recordings. Even though the major outcomes of this Project are documentary films, the Project participants' roles in the villages extend beyond filmmaker. In recent years, there has been a trend of going back to the countryside among Chinese artists. The trend is well exemplified by rurally based art projects such as the Bishan Project of Ou Ning 欧宁and Zuojing 左靖 in Anhui, Mao Chenyu's Paddy Film Project 稻电影 in Hunan, Qu Yan's Xu Village Project in Shanxi, and Jin Le's Shijiezi Art Museum in Gansu, which I investigated in the previous section of this chapter. All of these projects took place around the same time as the Folk Memory Project. Thus, if we contextualize the Folk Memory Project into this recent trend, I would broadly categorize it as rurally engaged art. In this subchapter, I reexamine the Folk Memory Project from the perspective of the artists' social rural engagement. What is their role in the village? How do they interact with villagers through interviews and other activities? Because each group member's individual work is based in a particular village, I also discuss the Project in the realm of site-specific art. Though the filming is carried out in the village, the post-production of the films is mostly undertaken in the Caochangdi Workstation 草场地工作站 in Beijing, which is the headquarters of the entire Project headed by Wu Wenguang. The dissemination of the films also takes place outside the village, which

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292 An early essay written by Judith Pernin discusses the performative aspect in the documentary films by the Folk Memory Project participants. See Judith Pernin, "Performance, Documentary, and the Transmission of Memories of Great Leap Famine in the Folk Memory Project," *China Perspective*, no. 4 (2014): 17-26. A recent article by Meng Jin investigates the Performativity in the Memory Project, see Meng Jin, "Documenting the Past: Performativity and Inter-Subjectivity in the Memory Project," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2016): 265–82. The book *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China* includes several articles on the social and aesthetic issues of the Folk Memory Project, see Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

causes geographical tension between the village and the city. In this subchapter, I take Zhang Mengqi's 章梦奇 (b. 1987) work as a case study. Because she has been one of the few group members actively involved in the Folk Memory Project since the very beginning, I chose her as a representative of the young filmmakers in the Project. Zhang returned to Diaoyutai Village 钓鱼台村 near her birthplace, Suzhou 随州, a city in Hubei Province. So far, she has completed nine documentary films in the Folk Memory Project.

The Act of Returning and the Search for Connection Among Three Generations

Zhang Mengqi joined the Caochangdi Workstation after she graduated from the Dance Department of the Central University of Nationalities in 2008. As a dance graduate who wanted to have a platform on which she could realize her theatrical works, she was first attracted to the Caochangdi Workstation because it provided art practitioners opportunities not only for filmmaking but also for theater performances. In 2010, with the support of Wu Wenguang, she joined the Folk Memory Project together with a group of young people, most of whom were born in the 1980s, the so-called Post-80s Generation (*balinghou* 八零后). Their main task was to interview senior villagers about their experiences during the Great Famine三年饥荒 (1959–1961) in China. As Wu Wenguang proclaimed, this period of time has been largely left out of the official history books, and few people know how many people suffered in this short period. He wants the young generation to preserve the stories of the famine survivors with their cameras; otherwise, the elders' memories will be totally lost when

they die.[293] According to Wu Wenguang, the participants should choose a village closely related to themselves. Diaoyutai Village, Zhang Mengqi's destination, was where her father was born. She chose this village because it was the only rural place to which she could relate personally. Her father left the village and his family to teach in a nearby town in the early 1980s and seldom had gone back since then. For Zhang Mengqi, who was born and raised in the city, the village was totally unfamiliar, except as a fragmented memory of a few family reunions in her early childhood. After her parents divorced when she was very young, Zhang lived with her mother. Consequently, her father's home village became even more distant from her life.

Generally speaking, the main concept of the Folk Memory Project was framed by its initiator, Wu Wenguang. As a veteran freelance filmmaker, he acted as a mentor for the young participants, most of whom had only limited knowledge about making a documentary film by the time they joined the Project. As a person of their fathers' generation, Wu "sent" the young people to the village to discover a historical memory unknown to them. In a dialogue with Wu, film researcher Naoki Yamamoto pointed out the link between Wu's own "sent-down" experience during the Cultural Revolution and his "sending down" of the young participants in the Folk Memory Project.[294] In response, Wu argued that during the Down to the Countryside Movement, a generation of educated youth were "forced" to go to the countryside and be reeducated by peasants; in the Folk Memory Project, his young

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293 Wu Wenguang, "Opening the Door of Memory with a Camera Lens: The Folk Memory Project and Documentary Production," trans. Stacy Mosher, *China Perspective,* no. 4 (2014): 37. The original text in Chinese was published under the title "Documentary Films about the Great Famine in the Folk Memory Project" "民间记忆计划"中的大饥荒纪录片, *Twenty-first Century*二十一世纪, no. 2 (2014): 104-117.

294 Michael Berry et al., "In Dialogue with Wu Wenguang's Memory Project," in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China*, eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 175.

collaborators all "enjoyed" their rural experience.[295] As Wu stated, there was indeed a clear difference between the two types of send-downs. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two are also noticeable. The pedagogical nature of the experiences and the age of the young students who made up the majority of the participants.

Other scholars, such as Angie Chau, associated the young filmmakers' return to the countryside with the root-searching 寻根 movement in 1980s China, which I discuss in Chapter 1. As Chau argued, neither the root-searching authors in the 1980s nor the young participants of the Folk Memory Project visited their real hometowns in the countryside. The root-searching authors (most of whom were Wu Wenguang's contemporaries, the *zhiqing* generation) had nativist imaginations derived from their sent-down experiences during the Cultural Revolution. However, most of the participants in the Folk Memory Project did not have any rural living experiences before joining the Project. Angie Chau views post-1980s filmmakers "as a new generation of rusticated youth sent to an unfamiliar countryside to summon forth a narrative of roots."[296] The root-searching authors attempted to reconsider national history and culture by unearthing unorthodox traditions and customs concealed in the countryside. The post-1980s generation, compared with their fathers' generation, "lacked historical attachment," according to Angie Chau.[297] That is to say, even though their initial assignment was to rediscover a tragic period in modern Chinese history, the young participants of the Folk Memory Project were not inclined to construct a grand narrative for Chinese culture and history in the first place.

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[295] Ibid.

[296] Angie Chau, "From Root-Searching to Grassroots: Returning to the Countryside in Contemporary Chinese Fictions and Independent Documentary Film," in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China*, eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 57.

[297] Ibid., 59.

For Zhang Mengqi the first challenge in completing the assignment was to merge with the village people. Her grandfather and her father's brother and family were the only relatives she had who still lived in a village. Her uncle's house is where she stayed every time she went back to the village. When she made her first documentary, *Self-Portrait: 47 KM* 自画像：47公里 (2011), in Diaoyutai Village, she was not able to conduct interviews because she was almost a stranger to the villagers. Except for her grandfather and her uncle's family, she did not know anyone. In addition, she could not understand the dialect. Her uncle helped her and acted as both "guide" and "interpreter."[298] In the works she made in the following years, such as *Self-Portrait: Dancing at 47KM* 自画像：47公里跳舞 (2012), *Self-Portrait: Dreaming at 47 KM* 自画像：47公里做梦 (2013), and *Self-Portrait: Building the Bridge at 47 KM* 自画像：47公里搭桥 (2014), she included plentiful footage of her everyday life with her grandfather until he died in 2016. In the film, she took care of her grandfather, such as bringing food to him when he was sick in bed or holding him in her arms because he was too weak to walk on his own. Zhang also included sweet family scenes in the films. For instance, she and her grandfather had a chat about her life in Beijing while sitting by the fireplace on a cold winter night. Thus, Zhang Mengqi's increasingly close relationship with the Diaoyutai Village was first demonstrated in her connections with her patrilineal family remaining in the village (Fig. 3.2.1).

With the help of her uncle's family, Zhang integrated with the village smoothly. By the time she made her second documentary, she was able to conduct interviews with the

[298] Zhang Mengqi, "Come to 47KM: My Story with a Village (no. 1)" 走进47公里：我和一个村子的故事之一 . This article is published on January 4 2017 on the WeChat Official Accounts of the Caochangdi Workstation, accessed April 30, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9U7-jWGGbXgOVNSJxBTEVQ.

elderly on her own. She also made friends with children and teenagers younger than she. However, the absence of her father made her bond with the village somewhat difficult the first few times she returned. Her father, who had seldom gone back to the village, represented those who had left their rural origins behind and blended into the city. Her absent father was the key figure who predetermined her relations with the village. On the one hand, Zhang's father was a tie between the young generation (Zhang and other young people in the village) and the elderly generation (Zhang's grandfather and others who had experienced the Great Famine). On the other hand, because Zhang's father had left Diaoyutai Village and established a family in Suizhou, where Zhang was born and raised, he was also the bridge between the city (Suizhou) and the village (Diaoyutai).[299] *Self-Portrait: 47 KM*, besides being her first attempt at interviewing the elderly, was also the work in which she thought about her relations with the village through her father In the documentary, Zhang put on her father's clothes, which he had left to his brother, and she even dressed a scarecrow in her father's clothes (Fig. 3.2.2). What if her father had remained in Diaoyutai Village? She would probably have had a life path no different from that of her cousins, either staying in the village doing farm work for a living or becoming a migrant worker at a factory in a coastal area. Consequently, the act of returning to her patrilineal village would be a completely different story.[300]

At the end of *Self-Portrait: 47 KM*, Zhang Mengqi gave a monologue in the wilderness. Wearing her father's oversized woolen vest, she expressed her fear of becoming a

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[299] The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on January 5, 2020.

[300] The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on March 26, 2020. Zhang Mengqi's ambivalence over her position in the village is also addressed in Lidan Hu's recent analysis of Zhang Mengqi's two early works of her *Self-Portrait Series*, see Lidan Hu, "Self-Portraiture and Historical Memory: Zhang Mengqi's Documentary Practice," *Critical Arts*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2019): 29-41.

different version of herself, that is, a young village woman. This scenario could have been real if her father had remained in the village, just like the clothes he left behind. In the same film, Zhang included footage of a collaborative theater piece she had produced in the Caochangdi Workstation, in which she acted like a woman who was confused about her self-identity. She ran alone in panic through a group of people who were standing still, trying to get rid of her village self (Fig. 3.2.3). In the monologue, she articulated that sometimes she felt reluctant to tell people about her relationship with her father's village because her father had left his family in the village, then Zhang and her mother. For Zhang Mengqi, the act of returning to her father's village was, in the first place, an atonement for her father's long absence. It was also an attempt to reconnect the three generations of her patrilineal family.

Oral History and the Artist's Role in the Development of the Village Community

As mentioned in the previous section, the main task for the young practitioners was to interview famine survivors in the villages because their traumatic memories of starvation had never been recorded before. As Wu Wenguang claimed, like most people of the young generation, the Project participants' knowledge about the past was restricted by the official history textbooks. They not only knew almost nothing about the Great Famine but also had limited knowledge of history after the founding of the People's Republic of China.[301] Interviewing witnesses to history in the villages gave them a chance to learn about tragic times. Furthermore, because the Great Famine is usually omitted in official history textbooks, the participants' interviews can be seen as oral histories, supplements to the official written history. Oral history has been increasingly popular among contemporary artists who deal with

301 Wu Wenguang, "Opening the Door of Memory with a Camera Lens," 37.

issues regarding socially and culturally marginalized groups whose voices are normally neglected in the public sphere.[302] Oral history helps marginalized groups transform their hidden personal stories into public ones.[303] In cooperation with Duke University, the Folk Memory Project has established an archive that contains more than two hundred interview clips and full transcriptions from eleven interviewers. As part of the digital collections of Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the archive is freely accessible online. Zhang Mengqi has contributed forty interviews to it that she conducted between 2010 and 2016. Most of these clips are also included in her documentary films.[304]

In the interviews conducted by Zhang Mengqi and the other participants, one finds that the most common questions asked of the old villagers were their name, their experiences of starvation during the Great Famine, and how they survived. The interviewers also asked about villagers who died. Some of the elderly did not want to share their experiences because they were afraid that their stories of misery would be spread and seen as a critique of the Chinese Communist Party and government. Some of the older villagers had severe hearing problems, which made interviewing even more difficult. Take Zhang Mengqi's *Self-Portrait: 47 KM* as an example. In the film, Zhang documented her interview with an older man named Guo Chuanfu 郭传付, one of her first interviewees in Diaoyutai Village. Because Zhang could not speak the local dialect and Guo was almost completely deaf, Zhang's uncle had to

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302 For the theory and practice of oral history in contemporary art, see Mattew Partington and Linda Sandino, eds., *Oral History in Visual Arts* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

303 Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, "Introduction," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), ix.

304 See the Folk Memory Project interviews, accessed 30 April 2020, https://repository.duke.edu/dc/memoryproject.

translate her questions into the local dialect. Then, Guo's grandson shouted the words into Guo's ear. After trying more than ten times, Guo's grandson finally made himself heard and understood by his grandpa. Guo began to tell how he and his family had suffered from starvation (Fig. 3.2.4). Several years later, Zhang recalled this interview:

> I can never forget the moment when Mr Guo's "gate of memory" was opened by the shouts….His blank face was replaced by an expressive face with agony and anger. A deaf older man living in his own silent world suddenly spoke out about the sufferings he had kept inside for decades. At that moment, seeing his face full of pain, I realized that history needs to be shouted out.[305]

Oral history, as Ronald J. Grele argues, is "a conversational narrative."[306] A face-to-face interview enabled Zhang Mengqi to perceive how an individual went through an extreme time. It revealed the interviewee's own emotions and understanding of a historical event and the interactive human relationship between the interviewee and interviewer. These features made the Folk Memory Project's oral history distinct from the general written history. Going through the interviews by Zhang and other participants in the Folk Memory Project, spectators were overwhelmed by the bitter memories of hunger. Some questions remained unasked and unanswered: What caused the Great Famine? How was the Great Famine handled? What happened after the Famine? Guo Rui 郭睿 (b. 1988), the only participant in the Folk Memory Project who had majored in history, wrote an article about her experience with the Project. She said that because the young participants knew little about the

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[305] Zhang Mengqi, "Come to 47KM: My Story with a Village (no. 1)."

[306] Ronald J. Grele, "Movement without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 44.

Great Famine, they all read a few books about disastrous events under the government of the Chinese Communist Party.[307] Among these books was *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine: 1958–1962*, written by the veteran journalist Yang Jisheng 杨继绳 (b. 1940).[308] In the book, Yang investigated the Great Famine and the deaths it caused all over the country. He also analyzed the political and economic causes of the tragedy. Published in Hong Kong, the controversial book was banned on the mainland but well received overseas. Compared with Yang's extensive investigation into the historical event, the Project interviews were more focused, as Paul G. Pickowicz pointed out, "exclusively to the topics of personal suffering, starvation, famine recipes, and death. The subjects of causes, responsibility, and accountability simply never come up."[309] Pickowicz reached this conclusion when he examined the work of Zou Xueping, a peer of Zhang Mengqi in the Folk Memory Project.

What prevented the young interviewers from inquiring into the causes of the Famine in a broader political and economic context? Pickowicz argued that it was because the Project's interviews were done and documentaries made in a "post-socialist" setting, a term he used to describe current political conditions in China. Under such circumstances, one had

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[307] Guo Rui 郭睿, "From Interview to Art Creation: the Oral History Making in the Folk Memory Project at the Caochangdi Workstation " 从记忆采访到艺术创作：草场地"民间记忆计划"口述历史实践, accessed April 30, 2020, http://www.evergreeneducation.org/itie2014/paperPPT/papers/theme1/%E9%83%AD%E7%9D%BF-%E4%BB%8E%E8%AE%B0%E5%BF%86%E9%87%87%E8%AE%BF%E5%88%B0%E8%89%BA%E6%9C%AF%E5%88%9B%E4%BD%9C.pdf

[308] Yang Jisheng 杨继绳, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine: 1958–1962.* 墓碑——中国六十年代大饥荒纪实 1958-1962 (Hong Kong: Cosmos Book, 2008).

[309] Paul G. Pickowicz, "Zou Xueping's Postsocialist Homecoming," in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China* , 78-79.

to be aware of the constraints in the political settings.[310] Indeed, political fears and also a lack of historical attachment and critical thinking could explain the young artists' cautiousness with their interviews. Nevertheless, the young artists' empirical method of oral history allowed them access to older villagers' individual stories and even helped the artists develop a personal relationship with the elders. This interpersonal relationship with individual villagers and the village community laid a concrete foundation for their long-term Project based in the village. Also, once visual recordings of oral testimonies have been edited into a documentary, they are not the same as those archived in the library's digital collection. In the final documentary, the spectator pays less attention to the factual and investigative features of the interview than to the emotional and psychological truths behind the scenes. As Alessandro Portelli claimed, "The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge."[311]

Wu Wenguang encouraged the young participants to become engaged with the broader village community in addition to the individuals they interviewed. In *Self-Portrait: Dancing at 47KM* and *Self-Portrait: Dreaming at 47 KM*, Zhang Mengqi documented how she and the villagers set up a gravestone in Diaoyutai Village for those who died during the Great Famine. The gravestone project, which was apparently inspired by the title of Yang Jisheng's book *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine: 1958–1962*, was also carried out by other participants in the Folk Memory Project in other parts of the country. To carry out the

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[310] According to Paul Pickowicz, "postsocialism" refers to the aftermath (both short- and long-term) of a lengthy but failed traditional state-socialist formation. The concept is especially useful if we appreciate the fact that the previous era was experienced as a socialist era by ordinary citizens. The post-socialist setting is one in which virtually no one believes in socialism/communism or looks forward in any serious way to a fully developed socialist and communist organization of society. Nevertheless, many of the institutions and legacies of the failed socialist era are still deeply entrenched and continue to have a profound impact on people's lives. See Paul G. Pickowicz, "Zou Xueping's Postsocialist Homecoming," 70.

[311] Alessandro Portelli, "What makes oral history different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 83

gravestone project, Zhang Mengqi visited every household in the village and asked people to donate money for it voluntarily. Zhang also collected information from older survivors about victims and asked an engraver to carve their names and years of birth and death on the gravestone. On the day the gravestone was set up, Zhang and the villagers had a small ceremony in commemoration of the victims of the Great Famine. At the end of the ceremony, Zhang and the villagers were photographed next to the gravestone to record the event (Fig. 3.2.5). Zhang, as the initiator and organizer and a participant in the gravestone project, had managed to form an unforgotten memory of the Diaoyutai villagers into a material entity. The collective funding campaign actively involved the villagers in the gravestone project and, in a way, also strengthened participatory democracy in the village community.

Following the gravestone project, Zhang Mengqi recorded in *Self-Portrait: Building the Bridge at 47 KM* two other projects she had launched in Diaoyutai Village: opening a small library for children and establishing a fund to help seniors in the village. Like the gravestone project, these two projects were common tasks launched by other participants in the Folk Memory Project in other parts of the country. If we consider these projects together with Zhang's documentaries in the realm of socially engaged art, one might ask, what is the role of the artist in the village? With Zhang's intense engagement with the village, did her role go beyond interviewer and rediscoverer of a long-forgotten historical trauma?

In her article "Toward a Digital Political Mimesis: Aesthetic of Affect and Activist Video," scholar Zheng Zhen 张真 claimed that the development of DV technology enables people to pursue individual social participation with the camera, which used to be a privilege of the state-run media. Zhang Zhen coined it an "activist turn" in recently independent documentary films in China, which is characterized as "pointing to a sympathetic *inter-active*

relation and a *pro-active stance* in the production of affective knowledge and the aspiration for social change."[312] In her article, Zhang Zhen also used the Folk Memory Project to exemplify this "activist turn." In terms of active social engagement, the Folk Memory Project and Zhang Mengqi's practices fit, to some extent, in this category. However, Wu Wenguang and his collaborators focused more on social changes in the village community on a much smaller scale. Their participatory actions were on a more everyday basis. Compared with other documentary practices featured in Zhang Zhen's article, such as practices of Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957) and Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明 (b. 1953), who took participatory, confrontational action in highly political public events, the artists of the Folk Memory Project were much less radical. Their aim was to merge with the village community and enlighten and educate the villagers.

For example, the gravestone project helped villagers to retrieve the memory of a dark time in Diaoyutai's history. Building a library in the village gave the rural children better access to knowledge of the outside world in addition to textbooks (Figs. 3.2.6 and 3.2.7). Zhang Mengqi also initiated some other smaller campaigns that were mainly carried out among the children. For example, collecting used plastic bags in the streets and fields helped raise environmental awareness among the younger generation (Fig. 3.2.8). Because she had trained as a dancer in college before she turned to documentary filmmaking and theatre, she used her expertise to teach the children as well as the adults to do basic body shape exercises in her spare time. In this sense, Zhang played more of a pedagogical role in Diaoyutai.

312 Zhang Zhen, "Toward a Digital Political Mimesis: Aesthetic of Affect and Activist Video," in *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film*, eds. Zhang Zhen and Angela Zito (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 324.

Especially for the younger generation, Zhang was the communicator between the village and the outside world.

As Grant H. Kester argued, the artist in community art serves as a catalyst for community development, a symbolic delegate who stands for the village as an alternative to the political delegate.[313] Interestingly, in her recent work *Self-Portrait: Window in 47KM* 自画像：47公里之窗 (2019), Zhang Mengqi included footage of a village meeting presided over by the secretary of the village committee. The aim of the meeting was to reach an agreement on collecting the water assessment from every household (Fig. 3.2.9). The footage exposed the bureaucratic and patronizing behavior of the village secretary. In contrast to delegating the government authority to collect money from the village, Zhang and the Folk Memory Project voluntarily contributed to community development in multiple aspects. As Matthew D. Johnson pointed out, there was an "NGO aesthetic" in Wu Wenguang's rural engagement,[314] which not only let the villagers' stories be heard as oral histories but also helped with the development of the village. As a symbolic delegate, the artist may help empower the unprivileged village community.

Even if it has been more than half a century since the Great Famine, some of the elderly in the village still live in extreme poverty. By starting a fund to help the seniors in the village (the so-called "senior funds" project), the Folk Memory Project participants became even more deeply involved in village community development. As Wu Wenguang said,

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313 Grant H. Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage,* vol. 22, no. 5 (January 1995): 5-11.

314 Matthew D. Johnson, "Bringing the Transnational Back into Documentary Cinema: Wu Wenguang's *China Village Documentary Project*, Participatory Video and the NGO Aesthetic," in *China's iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century*. eds. Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 257.

> These returnees find it difficult to be nothing more than "cool-eyed recorders" who can "keep their feet clean by standing outside the quagmire of the village's current reality." Each return to the village is not a one-time action but rather a multiply reiterated or even perpetual motion in which the returnee inevitably becomes a "participant in transforming present reality."[315]

In *Self-Portrait: Building the Bridge at 47 KM*, Zhang Mengqi recorded that she, accompanying some children, visited the elderly in the village, registered the elderly for the senior fund, and gave them food as a gift (Fig. 3.2.10). It is tempting to associate the Folk Memory Project's senior fund with the property relief programs run by the government. The apparent difference is that the senior fund came from private sponsors. What is the role of the artist in this property-relief-like effort? Are they similar to social workers? Grant H. Kester analyzed the similarities between an artist who carries out community art projects and a social worker. As he put it, "Both of them have a set of skills (bureaucratic, diagnostic, aesthetic/expressive, and so forth), and they both have access to public and private funding with the goal of bringing about some transformation in the conditions of individuals who are presumed to be in need."[316] In the case of the Folk Memory Project, it is different. With the camera in hand, the artist not only does what a social worker is supposed to do but also records it and later edits it into a publicly distributed documentary film. This whole act is endowed with an institutional as well as a moral authority. For example, in *Self-Portrait: Dreaming at 47 KM*, Zhang Mengqi filmed her failed attempt to help an old lady who suffered from terrible living conditions (no electricity or running water). With the money donated from people who supported the Folk Memory Project, Zhang Mengqi asked the old

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315 Wu Wenguang, "Opening the Door of Memory with a Camera Lens," 43.

316 See Grant H. Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists," 5-11.

lady's son to set up electrical wiring for his mother. However, he refused to do so. With a camera in hand, the artist is not only a social service provider but also a civilian journalist, whose moral authority contrasts with the failed state-sponsored poverty relief programs, as well as the old lady's unfilial son.

The artists' and private sponsors' beneficence provides, to some extent, a new possibility outside the existing state-run social relief system in rural areas. However, as revealed in *Self-Portrait: Dreaming at 47 KM*, a spontaneous and private charity highlights the individual morality of the artist. At the same time, it stops the artist and the spectator from questioning the systematic issues of the government's social aid policy in the countryside. Because of the great emphasis on the moral dimension of the artist's act, ethical judgments tend to overwhelm the esthetic output of the Folk Memory Project, which is the documentary film.[317] Furthermore, moral and institutional privilege can create an invisible barrier between the artist and the villagers. One might wonder to what extent the artist's act empowers the village community. These issues are discussed in the following section.

Site-Specific Art and Nomadic Artists and Their Problems

At the beginning of the Folk Memory Project, Wu Wenguang suggested that the participants view returning to a village as a long-term, ongoing activity and take root in the village. Wu said,

> Returning to the villages in this way was not merely for the purpose of documentary production or a one-time "material-gathering safari" or "helicopter-style field investigation" with "withdrawal upon achieving the objective"; it was a process of

317 About the overemphasis of the moral dimension of socially engaged art, see Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006): 178-183.

> planting their feet firmly on the ground, taking in the local essence, engaging in creation at the same time as participation, and combining their understanding of society with self-transformation. It was not only the documentary that was the work of art; the creator himself or herself was also a work in a constant state of self-training and self-molding.[318]

In this sense, the Folk Memory Project can be viewed as a site-specific art project in which the village is not a place where the participant collects visual material but a site where a project takes place. The site itself is part of the whole project. As the Folk Memory Project developed, the participants largely fulfilled Wu Wenguang's expectations. Take Zhang Mengqi as an example. Since 2010, she has spent ten winters in Diaoyutai Village, usually from December to April. Most of the time, Zhang's uncle provided accommodations for her.[319] As mentioned before, the participants not only carried out interviews with the elderly but also made efforts to become integrated with the village and contribute to the social and cultural development of the village community. The Folk Memory Project's emphasis on overall social engagement with the village rather than the individual artist's works downplayed the autonomy of the artist and put the site and the community at the forefront, which was also one of the common points of the site-specific art project.[320] Did the Folk Memory Project reject the authorship of the artist and empower the collaborative village community? As discussed in the preceding section, the artist's role as a symbolic delegate and educator in community development projects distinguished the artist from the villagers. The

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318 Wu Wenguang, "Opening the Door of Memory with a Camera Lens," 37.

319 The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on January 23, 2020.

320 For theoretical analysis and practices of site-specific art, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 2002) and Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

interviews gave the elderly a chance to speak out and make their stories heard by the public; nevertheless, there was still an unbalanced power dynamic between the interviewer (the artist) and the interviewee (the villager). Even though the older villagers contributed more during the storytelling process, it was the artist who formed the narrative and the discourse of the documentary film. As Dipti Desai argued,

> The control the narrator may have over the interview process, which can be empowering as it validates her/his life experiences, ends once the interview is over. The researcher, on her own, most often executes the transcription, analysis, and final document based on the oral history narratives.[321]

In Zhang Mengqi's case, every year, after the interview and shooting process in winter in Diaoyutai Village, she goes back to the Caochangdi Station, located in suburban Beijing, and spends the rest of the year (from May to November) editing the footage and making it into a film. On average, one film comes out every year. During the editing process, Zhang, like the other participants in the Folk Memory Project, works most of the time independently. The artists hold group meetings regularly, every month or every other month, to watch each participant's roughly edited footage and make comments and offer suggestions about it. Zhang Mengqi calls these meetings collective discussion workshops.[322] Combining her own ideas and the suggestions of her peers, Zhang makes several rough cuts and, eventually, the final cut.[323] Obviously, none of the villagers is involved in this editing and

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321 Dipti Desai, "Working with People to Make art: Oral History, Artistic Practice, and Art Education," *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, vol, 21 (2001): 75.

322 The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on January 23, 2020.

323 The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on April 1, 2020.

discussion process. As Zhang says, she does bring her films back to Diaoyutai Village, organizes screenings, and invites the villagers to watch the films in which they are featured. However, this only takes place after the final cut comes out, sometimes even after the film has been screened overseas. The role of the villagers, especially the elderly interviewees, changes abruptly from protagonist to audience member.

In Zhang Mengqi's case, during the whole production process of a film, which takes one year on average, she is actually engaged in two communities: one is the village community in Diaoyutai Village, Hubei Province, and the other is the Folk Memory Project community in the Caochangdi Workstation in Beijing. The artist is like a migrant bird flying between the two places and two communities on a yearly basis. Despite the fact that the artist is part of both communities, the two communities are not interwoven, and neither are the two phases of the documentary-making process, namely, the shooting phase and the editing phase. Even though Wu Wenguang, as mentioned before, discourages the participants from simply gathering material from the village, in reality, the village inevitably serves as a source of raw material for a documentary. One might argue that documentary shooting is only part of this rurally engaged Folk Memory Project. It is indeed the documentaries produced by the Project participants that make their activities known to the broader public.

During the editing and discussion phase of the year, the Folk Memory Project group is frequently invited to organize screenings and workshops by universities at home and abroad. In China, Wu Wenguang and his collaborators have held workshops in art schools, such as the China Academy of Fine Arts, Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, and Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts. The Folk Memory Project artists have close cooperation with the Department of Experimental Art at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in particular, where the key members,

including Zhang Mengqi, offer a yearly workshop, sharing their experiences of rural engagement and documentary making and instructing students in making their own documentaries. Despite educationally-based screenings and workshops, the Folk Memory Project members have few other opportunities to disseminate their work to the broader public in mainland China. Since the complete shutdown of several significant film festivals featuring low-budget, independently produced films around 2014, the Project members have been displaying their documentaries at film festivals exclusively outside China. They also undertake a screening tour every other year through universities in the United States, such as Duke University, Brown University, and the University of California at Los Angeles, displaying their new works and sharing their village stories with the American audience. In this way, the documentaries by the Project participants and their experiences of engagement with the villages are largely circulated in educational institutions and film festivals overseas.

The dissemination mode of the Folk Memory Project is, thus, different from site-specific art in a general sense. The audience does not need to travel to a specific place to see the artwork, which is supposed to be inseparable from the place in which the art is rooted. Instead, it is the artist who travels, showing the artwork to the audience in a place distinct from where the artwork is created. The site where discussion on the art piece occurs is not the site where it is produced. As Miwon Kwon argues,

> Although the site of action of intervention (physical) and the site of effects/reception (discursive) are conceived to be continuous, they are nonetheless pulled apart. The former clearly serves the latter as material source and "inspiration," yet does not sustain an indexical relationship to it.[324]

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[324] Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October*, vol. 80 (Spring, 1997): 94-95.

Thus, there is a geographical rupture in the Folk Memory Project. The participants' practices have obviously taken a different direction from the one that Wu Wenguang originally intended, which was that participants should plant their feet firmly on the ground and not see the village as a source of raw material.

One of the main issues behind this paradox is the artist's hold on authorship. The involvement of the Folk Memory Project's artists with the village community can be considered as the artists' attempts to rediscover and reconnect with repressed and marginalized social groups.,It is the presence of the artist rather than the villager, the actual protagonist in the documentaries, that ensures meaning production during the screening and discussion.[325] Take Zhang Mengqi as an example. She has presented her documentaries not only at every screening and workshop organized by the Folk Memory Project but also at prestigious international film festivals, such as the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (Japan), DMZ International Documentary Film Festival (South Korea), Taiwan International Documentary Festival, and Visions du Reel International Film Festival (Switzerland). In 2018, she won the White Goose Award at the 10th DMZ International Documentary Film Festival. In addition, Zhang's work has been collected by cultural institutions, such as the Duke University library and White Rabbit Gallery (Australia). Because the documentaries produced by the Folk Memory Project are not shown in commercial cinemas, sponsorship from film festivals and non-profit cultural institutions is significant to the participants.[326] As Zhang Mengqi says, the acknowledgment and reward

[325] Ibid., 98.

[326] The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on March 25, 2020.

from film festivals and museums not only support her own projects financially but also strengthen her self-confidence in further carrying on her projects.[327]

The close involvement with these institutions only reinforces the institutionalization of the Folk Memory Project, because access to the participants' work is exclusive to a small group of audiences on exceptional occasions. For research purposes, the only possible way to gain access to the documentaries of the Folk Memory Project is to ask the artist for viewing copies or links for online streaming secured with a password. As critic Sven Lütticken argues, "This economy of the rarified object becomes ever more exceptional, placing ever-greater stress on the viewing copy as a means of granting access to work beyond the 'official' limited editions and outside of the exhibition context."[328] The limitation of access to viewing the documentaries, as Sven Lütticken states, is like the film industry's strategy of constructing a cult surrounding a movie star by limiting the star's availability.[329] In this way, the emphasis on authorship and authenticity, to which site-specific art initially objects, comes back. The reinforcement of authorship and authenticity is not only due to the limited dissemination of the work, but it is also a self-aware move of the artist, which is revealed in the art piece itself. In an interview, Zhang Mengqi admitted that a sense of authorship had been increasingly highlighted in her recent works, such as *Self-Portrait: Sphinx in 47 KM* (2017) 自画像：47公里斯芬克斯 and *Self-Portrait: Window in 47 KM* (2019). The interview with the elderly in the village and the projects that she initiated regarding village community development are

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327 Yu Yaqin 余雅琴 and Xu Yuedong 徐悦东 interview with Zhang Mengqi, "How the Folk Memory Project Rebuilds the Civic Society" 章梦奇："民间记忆计划"如何重建公民主体， accessed April 20, 2020, http://www.bjnews.com.cn/culture/2019/10/25/641779.html.

328 Sven Lütticken, "Viewing Copies: On the Mobility of Moving Images," *e-flux*, no. 8 (September 2009), accessed on April 20, 2020. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/08/61380/viewing-copies-on-the-mobility-of-moving-images/

329 Ibid.

no longer the main subjects in her documentaries. Instead, she is becoming more interested in poetically expressing her personal feelings toward Diaoyutai Village rather than constructing a concrete narrative.[330]

The artist's recasting of authorship in a rurally engaged project weakens the artist's bond with the place and community. Furthermore, the nomadic status of the artist, which displaces the villager's story to a totally different geographical and cultural context, undermines the bond with the physical site in which the artwork originates. It is worth noting that Wu Wenguang and his collaborators are not blind to this predicament. On some occasions, besides film screenings, the Folk Memory Project participants also perform collective theater works with film clips of interviews with the Great Famine survivors running on a screen behind them. For example, at the 10th and 11th Taiwan International Documentary Festivals, the Folk Memory Project group performed, respectively, their newly produced theater pieces *Recollecting:Hunger* 回忆：饥饿（2016, Fig. 3.2.11.）and *Reading Hunger* 阅读饥饿（2018). Images of the village and villagers were partially projected on the performers' bodies, and the villagers' voices intertwined with the voices of the performers in the theater. It is a strategy also used in Zhang Mengqi's early work, such as the above-discussed *Self-Portrait: 47KM.* The juxtaposition of a live performance and moving images of the history witnesses can be considered an attempt to re-create the decontextualized site-specificity of a project in an institutional space. However, because some of the participants, such as Zhang Mengqi, have shifted their interest to a more individualized expression, the re-contextualization of the original site and the people is more of a deliberate endeavor to hold

330 Yu Yaqin and Xu Yuedong interview with Zhang Mengqi, "How the Folk Memory Project Rebuilds the Civic Society."

onto the Folk Memory Project's initial aim of taking root in the village and integrating with the village community.

In 2019, with the reward from the 10th DMZ International Documentary Film Festival and financial support from her family, Zhang built a house in Diaoyutai Village, which she named the Blue House 蓝房子 because the exterior is painted blue. In the ten years before 2019, Zhang's uncle hosted her whenever she went back to the village. With the newly built house, Zhang has her own place to live and work in the village. Zhang wants the house to be the permanent space for the village's library holdings. In the past few years, Zhang could not find an appropriate place for the books, and they were moved from one place to another. Zhang also plans to use the house as an art space where screenings, workshops, and exhibitions can be organized. What is more, the house is also designed to host artists in residence. For instance, Zhang Mengqi's peers in the Folk Memory Project can be invited to the village to show their films to the villagers. Artists, filmmakers, and researchers who have an interest in the Project and Diaoyutai Village can also apply for residency.[331] In return, the artist in residence will be asked to arrange workshops in their area of expertise for the village people, especially the children and teenagers. As Zhang says, she hopes the residency program will be a window that helps the children see a larger world. It is what she wants to give back to the village community.[332]

Similar to the theater pieces that attempted to re-contextualize the original site in an unfamiliar space, Zhang Mengqi's act of building a house can be viewed as an attempt to live up to the initial aim of the rural-rooted Project. With her blue house, Zhang has tried to

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[331] The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on March 31, 2020.

[332] The author's interview with Zhang Mengqi via email on March 23, 2020.

strengthen her bond with the village by transitioning the village from a source of raw material for art production to a space of art dissemination and reception. The village and villagers, the most substantial parts of the whole Folk Memory Project, will be less excluded from the post-production phase of the Project. The art residency space also connects the village, which is primarily isolated from the art world, with a broader artistic community, in both geographical and discursive dimensions. The idea of establishing an art residency space in a village also exemplifies the new direction of site-specificity. As Miwon Kwon points out, the artist constantly travels as a freelancer, working on a site-specific project "as a guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary in-house critic, or pseudo-ethnographer."[333] The new site-specific project is "ostensibly unsuitable for representation anywhere else without altering its meaning, partly because the commission is defined by a unique set of geographical and temporary circumstances and partly because the project is dependent on temporarily unpredictable and unprogrammable on-site relations."[334] This new trend can be seen as a return to the inceptive concept of site-specificity, which means an emphasis on the substantial space in a geographical and temporary aspect. With her concrete house rooted in the soil of Diaoyutai Village, Zhang seeks to balance her nomadic status as an artist and the site-specificity that she wants to maintain.

By interviewing the Great Famine survivors, the participating artists of the Folk Memory Project attempted to uncover oppressed traumatic memories of the village people. With rurally engaged projects, the young participants tried to make a contribution to the development of the village community. However, as Hal Foster claimed in the essay "The

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[333] Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," 101.

[334] Ibid., 102.

Artist as Ethnographer," even though site-specific work can "reoccupy lost cultural space and propose historical counter-memories," the authority of the artist is usually unquestioned. Thus, the site-specific project "strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a de-centering of the artists as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise."[335] That is to say, the artist is supposed to remain vigilant to the tension between community engagement and the moral and institutional authority of the artist. In the case of the Folk Memory Project, the constant mobility of the participants also calls into question the site-specificity of the Project. Nevertheless, the Folk Memory Project does provide a possible way for artists of the young generation to be engaged in rediscovering and reconstructing rural China.

335 Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 196-197.

Conclusion

The bidirectional movement patterns of artists between city and village in the past forty years (1980s-2010s) formed the basis for the structure of the dissertation, which was divided into three chapters. With the two artists that I choose as case studies in each chapter, I analyzed artists' relationships with rural China and their changes over time.

The six selected exemplars were both typical and unique. In the 1980s, Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong were not the only two artists who went back to the countryside, reversing the metropolitan trend of the '85 New Art Movement. Xu Bing's constant return to the village where he lived and worked during the Down to the Countryside Movement and his meticulous depictions of everyday rural scenes indicate that the *zhiqing* generation saw the countryside as their spiritual utopia when they faced difficulty in readapting to urban life. Besides, with depictions of everyday life in the countryside, they distanced themselves from the highly political art of the Cultural Revolution. The artist's emotional connection with the countryside was in accordance with the return of humanism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The other case study in the first chapter, Lü Shengzhong's painstaking research on Shaanbei folk art and his learning from local masters, exemplified the counter westernization trend in the intelligentsia, when artists and writers tried to achieve cultural identification through root searching in alternative traditions overshadowed by the Confucian mainstream culture. The countryside and its folk tradition were considered by the artist as a treasure mine to be discovered for artistic rejuvenation.

The uniqueness of Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong is that both of them associated their rural-related practices with a previous period and, at the same time, departed from their predecessors. In Xu Bing's case, his small woodcuts of rural scenes show, on the one hand, his identification with Gu Yuan's humanistic portrayal of rural life; on the other hand, Xu's standpoint and composition, which are distinct from those of Gu Yuan, reveal Xu's inner detachment from countryside life and growing interest in formal experimentation, which can be seen as a prelude to his later experimental practices with prints. In Lü Shengzhong's case, despite the educational and propagandistic functions of the new *nianhua*, his early connection with the New *Nianhua* Movement in Mao's period cultivated his initial interest in Shaanbei folk art. Encounters with Western modernism provided him with an impetus for the contemporary transformation of folk art. At the same time, the resurgent folk religious element, which had been repressed in the new *nianhua*, but was reinstated in Lü Shengzhong's paper cutting experiments, eventually inspired him to create his archetypical little red figure, which brought his folk art experiments to a global audience.

In the second chapter, which covers the early 1990s to early 2000s, I investigated the spaces at the edges of big cities, which emerged in this period as a consequence of the loosened household registration restrictions and resulting peasant worker rush. Even though both of the artists I chose, Wu Wenguang and Cai Fei, made video art while engaging with the enclave between city and village and its peasant workers, they had two different ways of involvement. For Wu Wenguang, as a representative provincial artist who lived in the urban-rural fringe of Beijing, his documentation of his contemporary blind floating artists is consistent with his recording of the peasant-turned-blind-floater. Though having different social and educational backgrounds, The two groups intermingled with each other and had

empathy for each other. Out of a self-identification with the blind floater community, Wu Wenguang's *xianchang* esthetics enabled him to blend with his subjects and make the filming process part of his own life.

In contrast, Cao Fei, as a spokesperson of the new artistic generation growing up during the era of the reform and opening-up policy, observed the village-in-the-city of her home city, Guangzhou, as an intruder. She found it a novel scene that was very different from the city life in which she had long been immersed. In her documentary, the urban-rural enclave was exoticized and delineated as a spectacle alienated from the reality of the city. Nevertheless, Cao Fei found vital energy in the chaotic, hybrid village-in-the-city, which she recognized as an alternative possibility to state-drive urban development. Her latent self-identification with the marginalized community is similar to that of Wu Wenguang.

As for the peasant worker, both of the artists involved this significant social group, which arose in their works in this time period. Wu Wenguang addressed social issues revolving around peasant workers by revealing their status of being exploited in the collaborative performance between artists and peasant workers. In the guise of collaborative performers, peasant workers were nevertheless caught in a power relationship similar to the one between employer and wage laborer. By refraining from a direct, intensive collaboration with the peasant workers, Cao Fei provided a stage for them to perform as individuals. This was unlike the factory "stage" on which they did laborious work that deprived them of self-fulfillment. However, both Wu Wenguang and Cao Fei's works also reveal the limits of artistic intervention in the peasant workers' real concerns.

The tendency of artists to go back to the countryside since the new millennium has caught researchers' attention in recent years. The two cases I chose among several ongoing

village-based art projects demonstrate artists' various approaches to rurally engaged practices. Jin Le's natural connection with Shijiezi Village enabled him to engage in the village community thoroughly, and this differentiated his work from that of the elitist artists involved in rural reconstruction efforts. His Shijiezi Museum is a unique village-based art museum that attempts to bring together a remote village and the contemporary art scene of metropolitan cities. The paired team projects that Jin Le launched in the Shijiezi Museum show the invited artists' multi-layered relationship with the villagers in the provisional partnership, in which the artist sometimes acts as a benefactor and sometimes as a collaborator.

As a representative of the post-1980s generation, Zhang Mengqi, together with other young participants in the Folk Memory Project, carried out a second wave of root searching in the countryside. Compared with her predecessors in the 1980s, who cared more about rediscovering and transforming marginal cultures in the service of a cultural revival on a national level, Zhang Mengqi dug up overlooked personal stories of voiceless villagers left behind in the grand historical narrative. By making an oral history with elderly inhabitants through interviews and documentaries in Diaoyutai Village, she had the opportunity to establish an emotional connection with her grandfather's village, as well as reflect on her paternal lineage. A series of small community-based projects that she carried out exemplifies the artist's role in a long-term engagement with the village and villagers. Most of the time, acting as a pedagogue, the artist's institutional and moral authority overwhelms the esthetic aspects of her documentary works. Furthermore, there is not only a paradox between the nomadic status of the artist and the site-specificity of a rurally engaged project, but there is also a geographical gap between the production and dissemination spaces of the output of the

project. As I write at the end of the third chapter, these are problems with which the artist tries to cope in her current practices.

When we go back to Lu Xun's concern for the peasantry and rural China that I mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, we see the deep impact of the bid for the enlightenment of the May Fourth period on the intellectual's (including the artist's) relationship with rural China. The artist's role as enlightener and educator is one crucial aspect of the relationship between the artist and rural China over the years. This aspect is especially clearly reflected in the collaborative projects between artists and villagers or peasant workers in the second chapter and the village community-based projects in the third chapter. However, the artist group's intention of empowering the unprivileged rural group is often hindered by the power imbalance between the two groups. Thus, real collaboration does not always happen. The other significant aspect is the artist's self-identification with the rural space, which explains the artist's continuous return to the countryside over the past forty years. Here, the artist finds either a spiritual utopia, a treasury of artistic inspiration, an enclave away from rapid urbanization, or a possible alternative to an established art institution and historical narrative.

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